

Downwinders and Edge/Bound Poems

by

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Abstract

I am attempting several different things in this collection of poems. First, for some of the poems, I have used photos as visual prompts. These poems employ ekphrasis; using poetry to comment on photographs I took with my Motorola Razor cell phone to capture sights of Kodak Park. Additionally, I have included “edge/bound” poems, which refers to a poetic form I invented in August 2006. The form of these poems is dictated by a strict constraint: the last letter of the first word, and each subsequent word, must be the same as the first letter of the next word. The collection of poems explores the idea of the *downwinder*, a word often used to describe an individual affected by radioactive or nuclear fallout. However, I have extended the definition to include other types of environmental hazards and have considered, in the poems, how downwinders often deal with issues of class. In creating a body of poetry, I have also had to consider my own bodily boundaries; living in a little room with low ceilings, being home-bound at night with a child as a single mother. In order to deal with such physical constraints, I have had to “move” through poetry. The poetry becomes a form of disclosure: it works within the constraints with which the body is faced and explodes restraint, even as the body is restrained.

These people live here.

–Muriel Rukeyser, “The Book of the Dead”

Photographs/Kodak

I am attempting several different things in this collection of poems. First, for some of the poems, I have used photographs as visual prompts. I took these photos while walking with my daughter on September 28, 2007. The photos capture sights of Kodak Park, on West Ridge Road and Lake Avenue, in Rochester, NY and were taken using the digital camera in my Motorola Razor cell phone. Initially, I wanted to get some shots of the buildings that were slated to be demolished in October 2007, to see the resulting photos of these buildings, which had been familiar sign posts for me as a child growing up in the area. The implosion of these building works as a powerful metaphor: Kodak's once solid technology park is now, partially at least, literally crumbling. My daughter and I shot many pictures that evening and three of these images I used for the "Kodak Park" narrative poems.

These three poems employ ekphrasis and use one medium, poetry, to comment on another medium, photography. Photographing the Kodak Park buildings with a digital camera did not seem ironic at the time. However, I quickly realized that these buildings were about to be demolished because of the impending obsolescence of film. In a similar fashion, Tacita Dean, a filmmaker and visual artist, filmed the inside of a "Kodak factory in Chalon-sur-Saône France...[her] 44-minute-long work Kodak constitutes a meditative elegy for the approaching demise of a medium specific to Dean's own practice." While my

main artistic practice is not film photography, using a film camera to take snapshots is something with which I am clearly familiar.

Think of the nostalgia of those little black, plastic canisters with the snap-on tops; of sending photos away to be developed by Clark in pre-paid, yellow-orange envelopes; of the notched strip of negatives, holding one up to the light. These practices are becoming nostalgic even as they still exist, as new technological practices are taking over. Buying my first cell phone in October 2006 gave me not only the power to call and receive calls wherever I was, but also equipped me with a digital camera. And suddenly, I had a camera with me nearly all the time. Having such at-hand technology influenced how I write and think about poetry. No longer did I have to form a mental snapshot in my mind to save for a poem. Now, I could save an actual, physical image to use later while writing a poem.

In the poems, I have focused on the personal implications of how closely tied Rochester is to Kodak: politically, economically, and environmentally. While working on this project, I began to realize how George Eastman's impact on Rochester extends even beyond Kodak. My daughter and I go to the Eastman Dental Center, which was initially funded by Eastman's philanthropy and desire to start a dental dispensary. Additionally, my daughter attends Eastman Community Music School, another outcropping of Eastman's philanthropic enterprises. Eastman Theatre, where my high school graduation was held, is currently undergoing renovations, some architectural plans of which I saw in October 2007.

Furthermore, the possible renaming of the soon-to-be refurbished theatre to “Kodak Hall,” (Towler 3), has recently incensed some Rochesterians. I admit that the assonance of long “e” sounds in “Eastman Theatre” sounds better than the flatter “a” sounds in “Kodak Hall.” I wonder if those bothered by the impending name change know that George Eastman created the word, *Kodak*, himself, which is, according to my linguistics textbook, “an often cited example of a word completely without associations with any existing words (a root creation)” (Algeo 245). While the politics of naming rights is indeed a significant concern, I wonder if Eastman would be opposed to renaming the theatre he funded to a word he invented. On the contrary, I think, as an inventor, he’d be okay with it.

The pervasiveness of Kodak’s reach, hit hardest while I was on vacation last summer in a small Canadian town outside of Ottawa. On July 1st, Canada Day, at the only open restaurant in town, the TV news silently showed the implosion of one of the Kodak Park buildings. The irony of it pushed me to the realization that I wouldn’t have to look hard to find connections: Kodak and Eastman were everywhere in my life; I’d just have to pay attention.

Location and architecture have intrigued me and were in the forefront of my mind after moving back to Greece, an inner-ring suburb of Rochester in June 2006, after living in the upscale suburb of Pittsford, where I had rented a house from my father. The move was one that put me only a few miles from the Kodak Park neighborhood I had left four years earlier. Being away from the neighborhood helped me step outside of it, helped me see things with greater

clarity, almost as if I was an outsider, but with the deep memories and impressions of an insider.

In the poems, I have tried to suggest how seemingly disparate parts become intimately tied together and also, how language can fail, its disconnections, dislocations. I have used different poetic forms—narrative, lyric, and some of the poems employ an invented form—which, I hope, work with and against each other to expose the unsaid, everyday thoughts I have as a result of what I encounter.

Edge/Bound Poems

“Edge/bound” refers to a poetic form I invented in August 2006. Edge-bound poems developed out of an idea I got at night while lying in bed. I wondered if it would be possible to write more than one line of words where the last letter of the first word written must be the first word of the next word written. I toyed with this idea but didn’t try a full poem using this technique until a few months later. The first edge-bound poems were written at night, after my daughter was asleep and, in a coffee-induced haze, I was still awake. It seems that they developed as kind of poetry of response, sort of imagining an interaction with someone I had talked to during the day or as a response to a particular word, which functioned as the poem’s prompt.

The form of these poems is dictated by a strict constraint: the last letter of the first word, and each subsequent word, must be the same as the first letter of the next word. The logical progression or revising of such poems is not easy

because to change one word is not a simple substitution. Each word is “bound” by the first and last letter of that word (its “edges”). Unless the substitution is, say, noun for noun with the same front and end letter, the meaning of the poem will shift based solely on that one word or based on the fact that changing the one word will force the changing of other words. Easily detectable meaning is not the goal of such poems. Rather, the edge/bound poems in the collection explore a word or subject within a very narrow form, to sense more of what a poem may be tending toward, rather than the actual “ah-ha” (ironically, an edge/bound phrase) moment that is the crux of many lyric and narrative-driven poems. For example, Marjorie Perloff argues that:

the “dominant” mode in poetry these days is “expressivist,” whereas experimental writing involves “constructivism”... the specific understanding that language, far from being a vehicle or conduit for thoughts or feelings outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning-making. (qtd. in Orr 9)

According to Perloff’s definition, the edge/bound poems fall in to the “constructivist” paradigm. Meaning is made by the association of words within the poem and within the context of the collection as a whole. The middle of each word is free, but also somewhat bound, which allows for mind to search out a word that fits, along the lines of the slot-filling linguistic theory. Sometimes a word cannot easily be found, so a word must be created for the poem (see “underwarm” in “Annihilation”). I am also reminded of kennings, as in “whale-road”

for “sea,” how the word does not indicate a definite meaning, but, instead, metaphorically suggests.

I imagine these edge/bound poems as a kind of linguistic resistance to what I call the “geode effect.” A geode is an ordinary-looking rock, whose outside whole belies its hidden, inner crystals. Often readers of poems attempt, as they have been taught, to crack open the poem, to find the hidden inner crystals. The edge/bound poems of the collection will work against the geode effect and, I hope, will offer a form to display the postmodern sensibility of words failing us, and yet, we keep on using them, rearranging them, ordering and disordering them as we see fit and as we feel necessary.

I am interested in the possibilities offered by a poetry which, in the words of Peter Larkin, “explores a way round both absence and excess.” To me, one form based on absence (edge/bound) and one based on potential excess (narrative) are needed to set up ideas of enclosure and exposure. Does the excess expose more? Is poetry based on notions of absence inherently more enclosed? Finding the “way round” such absence and excess is something I have tried to strive for in this collection.

I’ve also considered some historical examples of poetry: how did poetry work as a way of remembering (as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or Homer’s *Odyssey* or Dante’s *Inferno*) as well as storytelling? Can each form be a way both of remembering and of storytelling? It seems that the edge/bound poems function as a kind of hyper-mnemonic—as each word is connected to the next—maybe an

explosion of, say, first-letter only mnemonics (i.e. Every Good Boy Does Fine, for the notes associated with the musical staff).

What I hope to accomplish in this collection is interplay between both the severely restricted form and the free verse, narrative/lyric to add to the feeling of what must be found between and outside of the forms, the idea of a text that comes together from many different places, sources, and disciplines. Maybe the poems are a jumping off point. I want the poems to spur readers to go further, to look up a word, to look deeper into their own lives and environments. Maybe in the context of the poems and the collection, one word will carry more weight than anyone expected it could.

What I have found interesting about the process of creating a form is that the constraints associated with the form push the language in new and different directions. As Aimé Césaire offers, “the poet is the one who creates [her] language” (qtd. in Joris 154). I also associated these poems with the idea of a code: how language functions within barriers and limits. For example, I could find few words in my American English dictionary that begin with “l” and end with “b”: lamb, limb, lob, and lb. After writing a significant number of the edge/bound poems, I imagined starting my own dictionary with the entries in alphabetic order by first letter as well as according to last letter. Sometimes, in order to get a poem to “work,” one word can make a huge difference. An edge/bound dictionary would simplify word-hunting.

Additionally, in some of the edge/bound poems I use a non-English word or two to get around such limits. Some other poets using constraints employ foreign words as well; I was pleased to find an excerpt from Christian Bök's *Eunoia* online. In "Chapter E", the univocalic poem can only use the vowel *e*, so borrowing from French allowed him to extend his palette, so to speak, without breaking the constraint. Similarly, Pierre Joris, in his discussion about a nomadic poetics offers that such a poetry, "will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them" (153).

When I first started writing the edge/bound poems, I initially saw these poems as "exercises." Now, placing them in the scope of the collection, I sense the real driving potential behind them. In May 2007, while in Brockport's Drake Memorial Library, I passed the glass cases with books displayed and found a quote by Paul Muldoon, which, applies to my own poetry, "One has to learn to read these poems, just as one had to learn to read a three-line, little imagist poem, just as the writer has to learn to write it." Writing it down and taking it away with me, I can hear the defense in his voice, the attempt to uphold his own difficulty and inventiveness by the decisive alliteration of "little imagist." Inventiveness is risky, but in the words of Susan B. Anthony, "failure is impossible."

Downwinder

This collection also explores the idea of the *downwinder*, a word often used to describe a group of individuals affected by radioactive or nuclear fallout. However, I want to extend the definition to include other types of environmental

hazards and to consider how downwinders often deal with issues of class. I consider myself a downwinder and have, myself, been faced with the fact that location is often a default; there is often no choice for those whose poverty functions as an economic restraint, tethering them to a place they may want to escape. What effect has the chemical-laden air surrounding Kodak Park had on all under its cloud? I am interested in the way the form of the edge/bound poems can be related to the idea of downwinders as a group. How are they restricted by form (i.e. physical environment), how are their insides (mentally) free? I hope the collection works toward the goal of exposing, in a very enclosed form, the experience of a particular downwinder.

I feel that actual life constraints somehow led me to a poetic form of restraints, almost intuitively. The edge/bound form seems to have come out of a mental sense of restraints, of ways in which the body is limited. Language adopts some similar sense of limits while trying to break out of such bounds. It was also important that I was questioning what others gave me: men, society, definitions of what society says I should be, what kind of poetry I should write, how as a woman I should be bound by my edges without questioning or responding to such discourse. The poems are my attempt to engage with as well as distance myself from a world view that tends not to fit with my own individual experience.

I have borrowed some sense of models from both Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. For example, the edge/bound poems and several other poems in the collection proceed by indirection. Keller and Miller argue that such

indirection, in the cases of Bishop and Dickinson, “achieve[s] needed distance from such potentially overpowering experiences through the use of depersonalized speakers and through linguistic strategies that divert the full force of what they confront” (537). I relate to these poets and to the “overpowering” sense of life’s circumstances. Sometimes, these experiences are almost too much to bear. In order to deal with these challenges, I have tried baring these difficulties in a restrained, perhaps linguistically bare, form.

In creating a body of poetry, I have had to consider my own bodily boundaries; living in a little room with low ceilings, being home-bound at night with a child as a single mother. I feel bound, trying to simultaneously reject, while being forced into, as Samira Kawash offers, the “separation and enclosure [of] the house” (188). Such enclosure itself is a restraint on where I can go, is a restraint on bodily movement. In order to deal with this, I have had to “move” through poetry. The poetry becomes a form of disclosure: it works within the constraints with which the body is faced and explodes restraint, even as the body is restrained. For another attempt at articulating this, consider a journal entry I wrote on January 4, 2008:

Escape—not simple or clear, bound and mixed. Inseparable parts. I picked this room knowing, no sensing the difficulties that would come. Did I sense such erasure, such definitive inwardness? Like a caged animal who is let out once a week and soon walks back, willingly, into the cage. No, I am not that animal, though the cage is certainly an architectural

enclosure. How to make it out along an unmarked pathway? This question no sensitive, ill-prepared girl could bear. I must bear it now and keep on bearing. The old enclosures will be exposed.

Up in the air for a suspended moment—sled and rider after the ramp—time slows. Flight is possible. Risk is hard landings.

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Innocent

after Laura Newbern's "Pain"

The little girl
is walking.
It is dusk. It
is dusk
and the little girl is
walking, I see her
skip lightly
hum quietly
from the side of my
eye, which
is narrow. My

narrow eye the little girl
is walking in, out
in her white and pink
sneakers—did I say
it is February? February
and the little girl
is walking, and
three, there are three
mailboxes on this
house, and she
points to
the boxes
and counts them—

I love her
for this, love her
walking, in February,
for how she mimics my
“Hey, how’s it going?”

Is it
mundane, or odd
commenting on this,
when I sense
she’s talking to
invisible men? I did

say it is
dusk, and I
see her, and see
the ground,
void of snow, start
to place the little girl
on earth, an earth
dark with
mud, a mud
as gritty as if
she—

as if we
were, this February
evening, known.

Collecting Ourselves

Apart from me, at the sand box,
I watch you—
a little image that is me and not me—
flinging handfuls of sand into a purple bucket.

The dust rises, catching itself
on the space around you.
Your hair does not glow golden
but tarnishes to a powdery flatness.

Knees bent, I crawl
around the damp grass, singularly picking
black walnut husks out of the earth,
collecting them in the clear bag.

Perhaps you know this, know the almost
futility of it. The nuts have fallen for many years,
were left where they fell,
only the squirrels intervening.

So divided are we, human mother,
human child, from the life of light and rain
and outdoor immersion that we can only react by putting:
sand into bucket, nuts into bag.

Inside, we're pulled back to our plastic things—
keyboard, baby doll—
touchables from the land of buy.
Their scents mark us and then fade.

What remains are earthly reminders:
grains hidden in the grooves of your body, amber stain on my fingers.

En Route

With my left hand, fingers curled
 toward my palm, thumb extended,
 I form a lower-case *e*—
 the first letter of a word.
 Left-hand forms the letter,
 right-hand writes the words that signal.
Le signal means *beacon* in French, a sign
 of light, a point to come to.
 Like a beacon, someone once sang.

I make an *e*—
 a letter in second, minute, year—
 a letter in the word I long for.
 I come to the word alone on a boat of my own making.
 The water is too choppy,
 The shore too distant.
 Hardest is boarding the boat, knowing,
 continually, knowing I must go, clinging
 fast to the static land.

When I slip away from the shore, the peopled land,
 when I am surrounded by water,
 my mouth can taste the salt, as if I've swallowed the sea,
 as if I'm immersed in liquid that frees
 my left-hand to form an *e*,
 my right-hand to form a word
 shaped like action, a word
 shaped like my body in a boat on the open water,
 a word shaped like *escape*.

Downwinder

Rebels see exactingly. You
uncover rampant trials: shutting
government trunks, sealed documents,
silver residues. Sullen 1989 Ektachromes
spill. Lament—two oxygen-breathers
submitted death-prescient
tales: S. Reeves & S. Dailor. Reg. girls.
Solid downwinders. School lynch:
Hoover Drive. Essays so open now.
Worded: dead dears speak. Kodak.

Developing

Gender roles: shots,
shutter release. Early, yes. Snow-
walled day. Your raw window
wept. To open: negatives. Silly
young girls shop & pose.
Eager boys stand dapper,
rebel legs shuffle everywhere.
Elegant tags show well-dressed
devils, selves.

Crows

Swoop, pan near red
dusk. Kites soar, reach
high. How we elongate
easy yards. Short touches
swallow wonder. Real length,
height tastes sour, rough.

Absence

Eats strong ground.
Drab building gone. Even neat
towers spill limply. Yield. Dirt:
them, me. Each hard digging.
Goodbyes shutter rote ears.

Eyelash

Hide eyelets

so opening. Gashes

sewn nimble, even.

Naked darner-eyes see

every ____. Yes? Shading

grows staccato: *overt*

t'aperture.

Lens

Seeks sense: elephant, tusk, knee.

Easy, you untenor

reliable extreme.

Eschew white, ebb black.

King—grainy yearlines, shadow.

Will liquid digital let total

linger? Rememb() background doll(er).

L'eau

Undercarriage erodes, sure
& erases signs: shock.
Kodachrome, each heralded
do-wop process sinks. *Sí*. In.
Nod. Drop. Pop. Ping. Genesee.

“Contraband,”

dear, resolves sights
& sites—such held demarcations
slip, pollute entrenchment.
Touch, how?
We—ears, skin, noses—
surfaces. Shear—razor rupturing Gestalt
totality. Your reach hears
so onerous shield dissolves,
salt to odd drops.

Bend down

near regiment tabled divisions,
spy years so overlords shut—
terminated. Darling, great treble energies
shift—tempt toward dour
repetition. Nowhere evening grows—
silvering. *Grand-temps seulement.*
True eyes—sun new. We elevate
even now, when needy. You
underfund daughters, Superfund
done environment. Teach how—
welding & groom metal. Lapse
erratic causes shape.

Cashmere

entices—say, your raiment
touches soft, teasing giddily.
Young goats surrender robes
so you: unnaked, dressed.

Rabbit

tell lightly your route:
elliptical lingerings, stops & suburbanite energy.
You, unvocal, loose expectation—now we
each hear runic cadence erupt tones. Ebb
berries, sweet thorn nearby. You
unarm me, evening gallop pales.
Sidewalk knits sourly—yarn. New
worth: hop. Paths stymie enigmatic
colloquial *lapins*.

Dream me

evoking great tarantellas
& sharing gifts: shiraz, zinnias
succulent thick knowledge, earfuls.
Sir, rapture en nuanced, decadent
takeovers: sip postmodern nominatives
seductively. You undo & oust them.
My ying gnaws sharply, yang—
glib bone—evades soul lone. Everywhere
east to our reasoning
gyrations swear renunciation null.

Music

carries sub-byline elocutions:
solid, deep, precursor rhizomatic.
Come each heavy-yearred
dear, retract those ear-marked
denominations. Stiff friends
swallow water readily, yet
these elide eventuality.
Yearn now, weak-kneed
daring goes so one even
note ekes satisfaction
near receptive ears.

And darling,

great times steer
reductively your radiant touch,
hours so often near release.
Enmesh how we each hold down
new weighted dramas,
supposed diligent tricks,
sweet teeth hovering,
gigantic captures silent, tethered.
Down not this swill, liquefy
yet: them, me. Erase each
held dining glass so our
red dull lips sweat together.

Buildings

slump, pile. Excess
slub bricks slam metal
leeways, steel
lip pout: tumbled
dumps streetside.
Eastman nadir: realized
demolition. New world—
digital. Leitmotif:
financial loss.

Substitution

Nine-fingered dances.
Shift to other. Roof first.
Till later: red-eyed
drab basement. Top parching
glare elects sweat temporary
young governor. Rule evaporates.
Sink & knell lower.
(Ring)
Grant trials & subpoena—
Ad hoc crocodiles.

Candle

Enlighten new
walls. Show where enough
help & potential lives. Soft
tool—lest trouble envelop—
pass shadows so one escapes.

Snow + wind=dunes.

Swept tundra—

(a, b) broom missing grip.

Palettes say, “You unfold & dab—
bootstep paint.”

Troubadour

—reinvent—
troupe past them,
meager reactors.
Start the ear-raising
gap-parade.

Kitchens—

Spatulas sing.

Go on—nominatives swab.

Bathrooms—sit toilet.

To other rooms? Still, listen.

Numb breath holds slower: regularity.

You all lisp: *person, name*.

Every yelp pronounces surety.

Yes, sweetheart, touch & hint

to overthrow waxed, dull labels.

Test

Tethered down—now we experts
smirk: knowing gaps sweet.
To others—shut tightly your red
doors. Silence expected. Dear,
resist together. Relax—
Xanax & X-rays slip—paltry
yip-pups. Stand dogs. Shout
& train none: enclosure explodes
simple exposure.

Midtown

New: well, let's shift to
other realities: short-lived days.
Sixties so operable: ex nihilo
opportunities slack. Keel, lump
by year-end. Demolish hour.
Reveal little. Each hill loses
stores, shopping grind down.
Note: economy—you up please.
Elevator reach. High. How we
eliminators sleep.

The poetry

you understand
deals (sham!) meaning.
Go over—reap palpable
eggplants, salad
decorations, squash.
How eager—relish
hours sowing. Granted,
dozens seeds sprout
to only yield digging.
Grow—welcome earth.

Digital

lets saving
guard deletion. Now
we excuse each
hollow window—without
tie-up processing. Go
over—RIP—photo. Old.
Directories store
everything.

Sunset

takes sun. Nearness—
start trying grenadine:
ever red delivers sum
more even. No orange
eats sunrise. Elixir—repel
liquor. Repent tequila.

Architecture

exhilarates.

Small linger rooms.

Stiff fester

rooms—shut talking.

Grow wooden. Now, west

tries sale, equalize east. Town

north halts south. Hour

roofs seal: lids.

Skunk

Knight: tonight touch
& hug grass. Shock keen neighbor—
really, you? Umpire echo: *OUT!*
Threes, suited dancer—rub black,
know white. Evening's sword drawl: *Light!*

“Annihilation.”

No—operate ecstatically.
You understand duping, gentle exclaimer,
reduce every yell,
leach hips, sweat, tongue,
every young girl liquidated.
Dear, rhetorically, you under-warm
me, each horn nicks
shorn naked dramas—sob: beware.
Even now, wool lint
touches silent to our real
linings. *Shh*. How words slip—
parentheses shutting grand
doors—spit to open.

Sous-Chef

...and even then your ear will betray you.

—Thomas More, *Utopia*

I

On black granite, the white bowl
stands, waiting for a fill.
Its glazed, raised rim—
ceramic Braille—fruit
without taste: colorless cherries,
vineless grapes, treeless peaches.

II

Paring a pear, the knife sounds
little, cutting green or lighter if ripe
skin in someone else's cooled-air
kitchen. Sun-like, these half-moon
slices lend themselves
to a salad center.

III

Searching for salmon in the additional
fridge, the pulsing bulb of a garage sky
is circled by two brown-wing pairs—
insects innocent of sliced pears, paring knives
or the doubled sets of humans who will enter this home
clothed in a silence only the orbiters can hear.

Will

I'm not sure I can detach
from it, this life—
with its ardor of a stranger
rubbing me down with balletic assonance—
an intact glass so soon cracked.

And, bearing no outward
violence, the undertow pulls me toward:
an abandoned bank, hallways of dust,
a want for an earmarked man plucked
from the horned herd.

And, with the upcoming trip
to Italy, I'm reminded of Spain,
its hot drench, of the matador
I've foresworn for the straight
flavor of the bull.

In ten days, the shadows
of Roman women will point—
as he taught me
at the Vigée-LeBrun painting—
toward the light source,
toward the outline of my body,
toward his North.
And the glass will shatter.

How the light will catch
those shards.

Imagining Anne Sexton, as Grave Digger, Imagining a Lineage of Poets

Now, at this rectangle of depth
I go over what I've done
again and again—the spot for the body
now dead, the body one day
I'll take from this Earth, not the one
who robbed me of being first—
Sylvia, word-girl, had such a headstart.

I think of Muriel, the mother
of us all, and her fingers that turned
the cornfields turned burial
ground into “The Book of the Dead.”

Most times, the shovel cuts easily
into earth at morning as if daybreak
offered something solid
to get the job done. The heat grows
and my own fingers curl
in the unfortunate grasp of handle,
thicker than any pen.

As the flies rise, swerving
their complete winged selves through
air-arcs, the hole looks ready to swallow
only what it can, of motion.

Sweeping

In my room, I kneel down—
prepare for the elemental act—
which, contained,
fills a small-hulled boat.
The dust of a single *s* spills.

This is the Mistress Text

A mistress is not a whore.
 A mistress is not a whole.
 A mistress is a fit of in-between-ness.

A master is accomplished. A master knows
 so much. A mistress in the folds knows too.
 Too much. The words come back to her before
 she can erase the ones they'll displace. Woman.
 Mother. Her.

A mistress lines up dominoes. The numbers
 rarely match. They topple. Men bet on them.
 Women provide chips. Chips last little. They
 are plastic, potato, crisp, thin.

A mistress wears heels and sneakers.
 She laces the sneakers tightly. Undoes them.
 Most of the postmodernists are men. Or they
 are Denise Scott Brown. Tess Gallagher.

They are groupies, speakers. They cheat,
 they steal. They let men make them. A mistress
 unmakes men.

A mistress is a watcher. Someone has taught her.
 Someones have taught her.
 The teachers praise the combo of brains and beauty.
 Her education leeches, blood from a body.
 How little oxygen a mistress must live with.

A mistress is a choker: she collars
 the world. Not the round world. The world
 of neck laces, access or(g)ies.

A mistress confounds finances and compounds
 worth. A master wears sleeves, carries
 a trunk of labeled tools.
 Book. Hammer. Tape. Scale. -

A mistress carries shame-makers.
Molds. Hollows. Bird song. Hosts.

A mistress is a host. Hosts parties.
Holds napkins. Wipes liquids.

A mistress knows about erasure. The fine
rubbery filaments. They seem to go away.
Somewhere. Else.

Or else, unlabeled, the mistress has no name.
She gives it up. She drops it as
childhood toys. Banished.

A mistress is an exile. She knows no
home and so much pain. Nostalgia for past
points her body inhabited.

A mistress takes herself out
of the muse rôle, takes the caret off the *o*. Open-
mouthed, the mistress shifts words.

A mistress buys pills that hurt her liver. Delivers.
Relieves pain and lives plain.

A mistress twirls her hair, trims her wrists,
says I'm done with this.

One Word from a Day's Walk

A bird—
 the lift of the *r* like flight, the upward arc
 or is it fight: the hair wanting
 to be washed, yearning for
 the scalp's invitation—we will drink, no?
 From ceramic baths.

The fatuous, mirror-reflective *b & d*
 lower-cases to build: *build, body*
 first initial and last. Outwait
 the toothy urge to vent on nails
 continually stunted—we will clasp, no?
 The single branch.

The *i*'s dot, an eye dot
 the only cloud
 from which to view the horizon's
 invisible ink line, its thin wisp
 of unsettled hunger—we will eat, no?
 So many seeds.

A bird—
 a four letter
 waiting game: a scene spent
 like time's curtains—
 drawn.

Mendon Road

I like to walk down Mendon Road.
Everybody mows their long front lawns,

or has someone else do it, paid tenders.

I think of millions of individual blades,
Whitman's leaves, of riding mowers,

John Deere, a gas blower's decibel-heavy whine,

the house's screwed-on shutters, wishing they worked,
the bills my father gives the cargo-shorter crew; one 'scaper
eyes me with a side-long look that grows as grass uncut. I look away,

think of the hood's metal edges, the engine's
greasy sheen, a mirror's background glint.

I think those parts are meant to be mean. I see

the reeds in the *Koi* fish pond, waving
in their natural spring

and it's hard to grasp—the fish don't
die in the freeze of a Northeastern winter,

just hibernate,

along with the weed-whacker, the hedge
trimmer, both burrowed away in the garage, hidden
in the corner behind the bikes, solemn

as forgotten dollars.

Back in Mission Bay

Breezy was not yet two when we took her to that beach, the one in Mission Bay with the impossibly beautiful sand and the real ocean waves.

This was when we still loved the place, could almost function in that tiny house where mold grew on the wet walls.

We let the plentiful sun take us out of snow and SAD back in Upstate New York.

What we didn't expect

was that she'd hate the sand. The first time I set her toddling self down, her face drew inward to a point, and on it came,

the long crying haul. I remember, you said, "Try again, she'll learn to like it."

But our little Breezy girl, a stubborn sun-lover,

didn't learn to love the sand. "She must not like the texture," I said. But you

were convinced that the practically

backyard beach could be conquered, grittiness or not. It was you too, who after one of those long trips away,

the formal wear business booming, came back to me, with the solution.

And the next day, a sunny Monday,

if I remember correctly, when I set Breezy down in the sand, she stepped quietly in her little leather slippers.

What's at Stake

When you say what's at stake, I figure
 you mean what's on my
 slate and you want to peer
 over, peek at what chalk-written
 words I've been hiding.
 You'll be disappointed to discover
 its dark blankness: unchalked
 or washed. See, you'll never win

trying to figure what's behind
 the slate—it's a staring contest
 with a six months baby—
 her tiny eyes'll outlast
 your own eyes' openness
 every time. You'll want

the slate to have a picture, a crude
 profile—Joan of Arc. A long sweep
 of hair, maybe a few flames at her feet.
 Or, her hair chopped
 off. A horse nearby, a helmet.
 Here, you'll applaud her ability to steel
 herself against those who
 condemned her to die. There is

no sword though. No picture at all.
 Just a *stylo* my hand holds
 to steal myself away from a stage
 where I'm slated
 to play *Jeanne d'Arc*.

It is Easy to Make Poetry out of Chastising Words

You should buy the books. This one only
 10 dollars. *Only.* If I were rich, I would. In dollars.
 Instead, I spend time fighting back
 words, casual words
 that aren't so transient... The ones I make
 prolific because I am too poor to buy the *Selected
 Poems* of Robinson Jeffers at only 10 dollars.
 My borrowed library copy has a sharp
 black and white photo of the author
 on a rock, flask in hand. Its height eight times
 higher than the slim 10 dollar version
 out in the 70's. This is the new Stanford-
 backed edition, 2001. Inside, opposite the title,
 a second black and white rectangle, Robinson and Una
 Jeffers. Strangely and expectedly, Una sits at the desk,
 pencil clutched between index and middle
 fingers, the concentrated lines worn into
 her forehead. Here, in this edition, an 11 page introduction—
 the slim book lacks such biographical background: Una shacking
 up with Robin while still a married woman.
 I, though unmarried, have one daughter.
 You, have two. And the ten dollars,
 one book. $10 \times 10 = 100$, which is half
 the amount of tuition I pay for a semester's worth
 of music for my daughter: chorus, theory in motion,
 solfège and sound. Saturday mornings, she
 has the chance to mix with ones like
 yours, who go to the English-named
 suburb, implicit with proper
 meaning, while our west-side one
 can only name the Mediterranean, Greece,
 the place where old poets sang. My lone daughter sings
 songs on these mornings and I
 sing the only way I know how.

Playing the Game: Zeal

When my best deal

is dealt, I repeal.

When my best feel

is felt, I steal.

When my best meal

is melt, I congeal.

When my best kneel

is knelt, I wheel.

When my best peel

is pelt, I heal.

When my best reel

is rolled home, I

pale,

peal,

leap.

Apparent Paradise

Our new house, an old tenant house with no use—
the farm is gone—was 15 miles southeast from the chemical
smell our lives had been immersed in. Here, we could breathe,
leave the windows wide, throw them open. Green

surrounded us. On July 4th, a week after moving in, I stood
on the concrete cap of the old well, holding you up
so you could hear a few far-off fireworks. The main road
beyond the yard's bordering hedge—quiet—the cars coming

sporadically. And the people—the lack of inhabitants—I had never
sensed such an absence. You were still only three, so I told
you none of these tentative thoughts. The sky steadied
into a reliable background. I was somehow counting

on those fireworks, their intermittent blasts and crackles—
counting on you hearing them. *See*, I said pointing, *they're over there*.
Because if you weren't hearing, surely we were left, had been left behind
(and I wasn't sure how or why) in an apparent paradise—

solid grey sky and pleasantly-scented air. I kept standing, kept holding
you (though my arm was tiring), unwilling to go in,
past the round bush, past the sapling shorter than myself, unwilling
to open the red door. At the louder rolling of the distant finale,
you shuddered and pointed back.

Implosion

The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

—Aristotle, *Metaphysica*

I'm sorry Aristotle, but sometimes the whole
is no more than the sum of some parts.

For example, I'm reading the *NY Times*, and I come across
a word—Jack Loizeaux's "wife was the first to use"—(*use*, why not
invent?) Who can claim first use anyhow? The *Times* names Jack, the founder
of "Controlled Demolition, Inc" (which, to me, sounds strangely unbreakable, for
a company that takes apart, that blows buildings to pieces).

Aristotle's whole is no use for these imploders
who use "explosives to make a building crumble of its own weight."

Are we, clearly knowledgeable readers, supposed to just assume
his wife's name is Jill, the obvious complement? I want to know what creative
brain came up with *implosion*, who took the outward *ex-*
off the *-plosion* and added the softer *im-*. The article is about
the Loizeaux "Legacy, Built to Withstand

Dynamite." But what about The New Frontier Hotel
Casino in Las Vegas, how it "was stripped down to its bones,"
stripped down to a husk of a building, a building
that can become a pile only so definitely with a word,
a word whose softness betrays its intent
a name whose exactness cuts
as imperfectly as the oversight of the unnamed
namer cuts me?

Kodak Park: Photo #1

Behind, the mirrored window, its flash
back of stairs in levels—an angular
twist. Driving by as a child, being driven
by really, I'd watch the little individual
bulbs that lined the staircase. The beauty of such
an idea, its pulsing of possibility: at least one
bulb was always out: a cut in a straight white
paper trail. The point of the building—
its triangular corneredness—not brilliance
and at the time, not architecture. Why then
such a childish bulb design? Like new-fashioned
Christmas lights, the kind where one bulb blows
and the rest of the string still streams on. The tree
is not darkened.

In such gaps—a crack is sure to come.
And one has, these 20 years later. Walking
by, with the intention of photographing the piled
rubble of imploded buildings of this once solid
technology park, I spy the same window, closer
than I've ever been to it. Now, my child too
is closer and as she skips ahead I photograph
the crack, the window's paned reflection.
It is a cell phone photo—a picture I don't
recognize as the photo of my daughter
bounced back off the window, its sharp split
at eye level.

At home, scrolling through
the images: shots of building, road, cloud,
Verizon "Reliable" billboard, it is nowhere.
I believe, faithfully that in a low
battery moment, my phone's erased it.
I believe I've erased it, accidentally
as the two of us were caught up
in a 60 second hail storm
where the wind blew our yellow umbrella inside out
and the backs of our pants soaked with rain
from knees to heels.

On Saturday, scrolling again through the phone's
photos, only two hours after a 7:53 am
shock: a double, far-off, tremulous
rolling, a quaking thunder under
a sun-bright day—Kodak's contractors
imploded the buildings we'd photo-
graphed (but not the angular corner building
with the window crack)—I found it.

The photo is no reflection, or at least wasn't
over a week-long period of viewing. Now, I notice
at the lower left-hand corner, the thinnest
of scalene triangles, the building's concrete edge. What confused
me all along wasn't the seemingly straight-forward,
straight-on shot of wet road, speeding
cars, Tim Hortons, lamppost, and stubbled grass—
it was the step of the red wind-
panted daughter, the white ribbony lines
trailing back from her feet, hitting the sidewalk:
their flint-like seem sealing the seam.

Kodak Park: Photo #2

She encouraged me,
the eight-year old assistant,
to take this photo: In the foreground, of course,
there's a chain-link fence (We, I,
couldn't get the camera any closer.)
At the bottom, a grey straight hose
creeps on. It creeps and leaks—
a mid-shot water spray reaches up. Rocky
pieces, a pile of building components
rubbles into view from the background.

Oddly,
the spraying, its bubbly hissing
brought us up off the sidewalk.
It's not snake-like, animal-like, human-like.
The water's urge, sure. See, off-camera
the hose-drawn water led to arcs, the shooting
sprays the contractors aimed at the piled
building hills. To keep the dust down.
All Lake Avenue drivers-by would see them.
Even, in the farthest left lane
a faint hint of drops met my windshield.

The photo, though, is not
waterlogged. I, we looked
and saw just mist and hose. A little rising,
a little seeping. We had no trouble
walking away.

Kodak Park: Photo #3

Here is a photo of a sign—a small square yellow one
stuck into a black plastic holder, almost
like the kind that comes with a bouquet
of flowers to hold up the card
with its handwritten note, often signed *Love*.

Only this is a picture of a warning sign: DO NOT ENTER
topped by PESTICIDE APPLICATION.
The sign placer used to be called ChemLawn.
Now, two other words come together: True & Green—
TruGreen, a new portmanteau.

How much more Green can conjure.
That's why the corporate lingoists changed Chem to Tru. They knew
most people would think TruGreen lawns are healthy,
are truly green simply because Chem & Lawn have been replaced.
How easily the sign readers would fall for the substitution.

In Pittsford, that greeny bower of big lawns,
the yellow signs marking three corners of my rented lawn—
a necessity, my father/landlord said. Mendon Road,
its main thoroughfare, held all its lawns in view.
So many would see. Neighbors. Passersby.

These passersby see a warning sign become
a sign of goodness, a sign of a well-cared for lawn. Maybe they don't think
of the circular picture of a large person,
small person, and pet slashed through, over, across
from top left to bottom right. It means STAY OUT.

Stay out: pets (we can keep most pets off—the other animals? squirrels? birds?
woodchuck? deer?) Stay out: children (how hard to keep her tethered to blacktop
or inside in summer—24 hours for a child is surely an adult's week).
Stay out: adults (note: father/landlord, why won't you relent, why won't you
honor
my request to keep TruGreen out of my/your yard?)

I wonder how a sign of goodness can become
a stay out, a sign of danger. The florist-sent flowers with the note
aren't as true as even I first thought. I'm sure they're hot-house beauties, bought

for a woman whose worth in life is lowered and the someone signing
Love hopes to make up for it. I take that as a warning.