After Labor Day

by

Cydni Thompson

Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York
May 2024

Sponsor: Monica Ferrell
Second Reader: Mehdi Okasi

After Labor Day

Contents

Introduction

Last summer, I worked at Gil-Blu Kindergarten and Nursery. I needed to make some money before I went back to school. I'd walk to that daycare every morning, get there by 10, and be swarmed by twenty children. I was changing diapers, serving food, and having some strange conversations with those kids, who called me "Simmy," and would point at every part of my body and ask, "What's that?" While they napped, I went on break and read *Stardust* by Frank Bidart. How absurd, to read this complex and completely inappropriate poetry while a gaggle of toddlers snored below. It was on one of these breaks that I wrote the poem "Against Murder Abuse Terror I Pray," saying of the kids: "It's noon and I know/ heartbreak will come like taxes daily/ hanging from the edges of their apple slices."

The owner of the daycare, Mrs. Webb, was retiring. She had kept the place running through the pandemic, and over time her only employees were her husband and daughter. The previous staff had gotten old, or their parents died, or they had children. She was tired. She was ready to go. But she had no idea what she was going to do with the rest of her life.

All the poems I wrote that summer are in this project. I was thinking about the choices people make, and why. Why open a daycare. Why close it. Why have kids. Why read poetry. Why spend all your free months working.

•

When I discovered Gwendolyn Brooks, I was entranced by her embrace of the populace over the personal and private. In "The Bean Eaters," she writes:

> Two who are Mostly Good. / Two who have lived their day, / But keep putting on their clothes / And putting things away. / And remembering.../ Remembering, with twinklings and twinges, / As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and / cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

The couple is old and "Mostly Good". Beans are cheap. They're not even in a house——they're renting a back room. That ending list of the detritus of middle-class life: beads, receipts, tobacco

crumbs. A black couple, forcibly satisfied, maybe near the ends of their lives. This is a poem made out of the unglamorous silence of ordinary people, of which I am a part, and I don't find it sad. Whole lives are in that little room. In what little room was I born? What objects exist there?

•

In my room: a basket of yarn. A nail clipper. My baptism certificate. A sticky coaster and a mug of cold coffee. In my house, constant evidence of labor—the wet edge of the sink, onion peels in the garbage, a creased metro card on the table. By 6:00 p.m., my parents unlocking the front door carrying their work files and lunchboxes, housing within them their histories of making ends meet. For this collection I interviewed my family in an exploration of the concept of work. One interviewee, in the poem "Punishment," used to be a funeral director. He spoke of his first time removing a corpse from a home, recalling that the widow had been hysterical. Advice from his teacher: "Listen, you gotta be a little forceful, tell her, ma'am we need to take this body." In the poem "Garbage," the speaker, having worked in food service, remembers searching through the dumpsters for a customer's lost phone. I was struck by the convergence of utility and humanitarianism; we must work, in a distant and clinical sense, to afford to live. But however cold, these jobs house the bulk of our lives. They brought the speakers into contact with the most frightening and visceral elements of life: decomposing matter, waste. Grief. Sacrifice.

In many ways I am praising the labor that keeps us alive. In other ways I disparage it. In my poem "Duty," I tried to convey through form the arbitrary and robotic feeling of managing a life while the big world, surrounding forces like the government, display shocking levels of moral corruption. A parent has taken their kids to school, gone to work, picked up their kids, contemplated finances, only to turn on the news and see that the U.S. military has blown up a corpse to test their roadside bombs. This is a true story. The corpse had been donated to science for Alzheimer's research. The last line of

the poem returns, as the parent must, to the task at hand: "Your oldest is pulling at your shirt. *Did you hear me?* He's hungry."

•

In keeping with a poetics of routine and work, I contemplated communities and philosophies. Part of our work is other people. Part of our work is developing a system of thinking that can keep us sane. The black community has historically turned to God when others may've put their faith in public policy, law enforcement, or human goodness. For them, these powers have proved exclusionary. For them, no life can be built on a human foundation——that entity which writhes against itself, that chews its foot to escape a cage of its own making.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus says: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." In church, we'd sing Donnie McClurkin's "Caribbean Medley." The second verse goes: "I am under the rock, the rock that's higher than I / Jehovah hide me, I am under the rock / Go tell my enemies, I am under the rock / Jehovah hide me, I am under the rock." In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, at the funeral of Chicken Little, the people "screamed, not to protest God's will, but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the hand of God is to get in it." In my poem "They Say," I wrote of the paper fans in my home church advertising "Crowe's / Funeral Home——*Serving the Community*, / they say, *For Over Fifty Years.*"

We labor to survive an oppressive world, to create a haven, to feed our faith, to starve our grief. This mental labor is paired with a physical one——someone must lay out the holy communion every first Sunday and vacuum the red carpet; someone must hook up the microphones and set up the electric keyboard. For a while, I directed the children's choir. They were uninterested and bratty, prone to outbursts mid-song. I forgave them always; I let them sit out and play in the basement, I

defended them against the elder members, saying they were young, they didn't know, they had no reason to believe. For this I was nicknamed Moses.

•

In Bidart's *Stardust*, I read the poem "Lament for the Makers" for the first time. It opens: "Not bird not badger not beaver not bee / Many creatures must / make, but only one must seek / within itself what to make." The making of poetry is a labor central to the collection. Constantly, I'm questioning the material I'm working with. The strangest work is the one that does not feed, house, or clothe——poetry cannot keep me alive. Yet there's nothing I can do to stop the poem coming on like a cold.

My poem "Stranger" contemplates such uncontrollable urges. In it, a man is touching himself in public. Someone has opened a fire hydrant for fun. Couples are loitering. King David makes an appearance, dancing as he did in II Samuel 6:14-22, "half-naked / and mad in praise of God." The speaker is kissed by a stranger. It ends with the question "What illness / sets a mouth on a chord?" In the poem, I am there, as the one who made it. The existence of the poem reinforces the point of the poem——that beyond eating, sleeping, bathing, and budgeting, there's something in us calling for...what? Pleasure? Fun? Love? Creation? Whatever it is, we must work for it.

•

On Gil-Blu's last day, Mrs. Webb gave me one hundred dollars and started to cry. I cried with her. It was 96 degrees, and the children were barefoot and sweating in the bouncy house. The buses slowed down as they passed so that the kids could run to the gate and wave. After this, they'd go home, eat dinner and bathe. In a few weeks I'd go back to college and finish my senior year. For Mrs. Webb, the possibilities were endless. When I asked her what she'd do, she said, "I don't know. Maybe travel the world."

•

What does it mean to live a fulfilling life? I can't write my way to the answer, but I can write to explore it. I look outside myself. Some work hard. Some start businesses. Some bake cakes or paint their nails. Some have children, some sing, some go door-to-door selling solar panels. Many go to church. I cook and I clean. I go walking at night. I work. I read. I write.

Fundraising for Baptists

There's a typo in the pamphlet: *In the beginning there was the worm.*
We'd gathered to sell what we could. I carried the case
of water for frail Steven, then dropped it on my foot.

The time is coming when all that is in your house shall be carried off to Babylon,
I read, then took cowboy boots from the basement.
How much to fix the air conditioner? How much for the lawn?

The spiders said there's more sodium in the canned stuff.
We sold the canned stuff, the cowboy boots, the waters.
Passerby paid for crosses. Complimented the purple tablecloth.

I'd picked the purple tablecloth. I'd laid the crosses out in order.
Cooing women. Fresh cooking. *Their widows more numerous than*
the sand of the sea——Yellow moon at noon spying

on the titled clothes rack, a painting of red concentric circles,
on me barefoot in the church yard frying drumsticks in a ten-gallon pot
on a gas burner in the grass while the lilies lay dead

even in July. *The Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all.* For five dollars
a young man bought the pamphlet and read it sitting on the cooler
with his wisdom shrunken and curious in his throat.

Then he had one question. *What became of the worm?*

Rats:

With hands on mouth you gossip
as the city council plots your death.
Geometers in brown fur coats, architects
of impossible spaces: the inch between
book and shelf, the black sliver under-stove,
or the un-swept corners
of the bakery, at night unabashed atop
the display cakes. Once my uncle stood
tip-toe on the kitchen table, afraid
he'd brush you with his foot. Once you crouched
in the bathroom and fought loud with
my dad, how Jacob wrestled in the dark
against God. On my birthday your gang
ran out from the dumpsters, sent my girls
downstreet in their six-inches and pretty
green dresses. A caricature of your face
in the paper: the article hangs plague
off your shoulders. Thuggish thing, who
but you could stand lax as the train tears
above? Who'd copulate even after the mazes,
the sticky traps and strawberry poisons?
No one wants you alive, so you live
wherever you can, eat
only what we leave behind:
ox bones, banana peels, pure human
guts, nose cartilage, eyes
straight from the sockets.

Insect

The light in my room, the last light.
There's a net in the window,
but the bugs arrive anyway:
lacewing and little fly latched
for the night. It's the end of Labor Day.
I called my mother while I trimmed fat
from chicken thighs. Home for once,
she shows me the cake she baked
from scratch, all blueberries and
powdered sugar. I have dinner.
I take a shower. I shave my legs.
I'm reminded of the amputee
on the train who scooted across
the floor with one hand, shook a cup
with the other. Bullet through
an underground tunnel.
The light in the car, the only light.
When I was young I thought
I owned all I had. I turn on
the Discovery Channel before bed:
Frog eggs are broken only
by tadpole teeth. Moths live, at most,
six months. In Russia even the dung
beetles are fighting for love.

INTERVIEW: PUNISHMENT

My first job was a punishment. My dad had me sanding bumpers.
There's a machine for that. He made me use sandpaper and a water bottle.
I don't remember what I did. Probably talked back. But he paid me $75 dollars a week.
This is boring. Don't you want to hear about the funeral home?

Everyone wants to hear about the funeral home. The first house call, there was this woman.
Her husband was dead on the living room floor. She was all over him. We couldn't get her off so I left the room. But my teacher, this old guy, Jerry, he said you gotta go back in there. Listen, you gotta be a little forceful, tell her, ma'am we need to take this body. Never forgot that. There was some sick shit, like I got called to Queen's General and there was this guy in a suitcase but he was cut in half. Like no legs. Smiling, but not quite. I got out and called my mother. She hung up on me. No one wants to hear that. I knew no one wanted to hear that, but

I had to tell somebody. I used to take my wife with me to the morgue so she could see.
This one guy—she remembers—I stuck my finger right through his chin, like up
through the bottom and out through his mouth. It was a bullet hole.
Too morbid for your poem? Just one more. By my son's high school,

there used to be a church. A tree fell on a van and killed seven kids. Our morgue got two.
Sisters, four years old and seven years old. When it was time to embalm them I tried to leave,
but Jerry: hey, where you going? Where you going? He dragged me back. He said, pick one.

All Over

The bananas turned black a week ago,
before the wildfires started & spread ash
across the roof of New York. Death jumps

from yellow to yellow like a child in a circle
of trampolines. Outside, Dad working
again, face turned to the funeral in the sky:

could it be God up there, flipping urns?
Last night we washed the dog together
in the tub, told him: You're lucky. Free

from the mill. He shivers in his cage
as I shut the windows and ignore
the spokesman for the solar company.

He's rung the bell four times in his crisp
uniform unprotected against the smog,
mouth to the doorbell speaker, saying Please

just consider these panels, they're cheaper,
thirty percent off your property taxes,
eleven thousand off your personal, they're

sleek & symmetrical, makeshift brakes
or brooms, shields against the invisible jury
that holds your whole species in contempt,

& I'm sure you don't want this mess forever,
& I'm sure you don't want this world gone.
He shifts from one foot to the other. I

can make no decisions.
I do not own this house.

Duty

Wednesday night. Tie the garbage bags.
Set alarm for 5:00 a.m. Next morning, watch news.
Election season. Turn TV off. Get kids up for school.
Spotted flag in the corner. Pledge through loudspeaker.

Go to work. Fingerprint on the clock.
Straighten your back at your desk. *Your* desk.
Smile. Some people are jobless. Your boss thinks
you're "valuable." Pick up kids. Teacher says,

"Budget cuts." No free lunch starting next month.
After rent/utility/water/car note/health insurance, set aside a little extra.
Christmas is coming. Shoes off at the door. News
on the TV. Arizonan Man Sues—his mother's corpse

was strapped to a chair and blown apart by the military. Roadside
bomb test. In life she had dementia. Well, what can you do?

Your oldest is pulling at your shirt. *Did you hear me?* He's hungry.

On Riots

Not my racks of infinity
scarves and hat-glove sets
Not my plastic model in the luxury
window with hand on hip
Not my frosted liquor bottles or
folded brown bags
Not my caution sign or spill
Not my shuttered metal grate
over the bakery that isn't
Mine, the tire but not the pothole
or the broom to sweep the porch
of the Walgreens,
Not my basket stools outside
the Walgreens—those belong to
the loiterers who aren't
Mine, neither is that ugly little Honda
in the garage and the garage isn't
Mine, not even the remote controls
and screen doors. They're not
Mine, the flyers flapping from the corkboard
like bark on a peeling tree
Not me inciting marches and ballots
or advertising exterminators:
Rats, Roaches, Termites
Not my rats or roaches, but
the infested house is
Mine, except the torn up fence
Not my squirrels running through
the torn up fence around the park,
Not my monkey bars and swings
Not my children but all children are
Mine, not my brother laid
streetside like a hare twisted
open but all brothers are
Mine, and if State kills me could State be
Mine, and if it isn't, why shouldn't I
break into the Gucci store and
carry that mannequin over
My shoulder?

Memorial Day

A parade marches in front of the Laundry Palace:

First,
the North High School Band
with their soft green raised
knees and drum sets.

Then girl/boy/cub scouts,
badged and vested
with a handwritten sign
they can't read.

The Civilian Patrol
drives through,
windows down
so, gracefully,

they may receive their
thank you, thank you's
from parents, elderly
women, young boys

who repeat all they hear.
My father beside me—
far from our own block
with its kids in cuffs—says,

that's what we need. Someone to protect us.
The military marches,
trumpets and black
feathered hats

in the hot mourning
of Monday. Women shout
the name of their church:
Sacrament.

Saved for last,
clothed in drama
and fanfare come
the county police cars,

lit up all over,
full to the brim
with sound.
All manner of men

hang out windows
and wave to the passerby
whose eyes are wet
with the heroics of it all,

the braving of Hell:
never Orpheus,
always Hercules
who must kill,

even after
the war's end,
his own wife
and child.

Little flags,
a million white stars
clenched in fists,
trampled underfoot

or airborne.
I feel nothing.
I know little.
I can't stop thinking

about the heat
in the dryer,
my one good sweater
getting smaller.

They Say

Unwed mothers, incarceration, drug abuse, lack
of faith: these are the afflictions arrayed
on a poster hung from the overpass outside
Little Caesars, prescribing prayer to avoid guns,
keep fathers. Inexplicable block—a baby pink
stroller left in the street. Years ago my mother
was a child here, weekly at the altar kneeling:
may God make tender the heart of the city.
Now men roll dice on the Baptist porch.
Inside, rows of us in wide brimmed hats
and white kitten heels. Which summer is this?
The paper fans advertise Crowe's
Funeral Home——*Serving the Community*,
they say, *For Over Fifty Years*.

Tomorrow's Weather

On Bedell Street the precinct and playground stand back
to back: red swings in light wind, policemen in t-shirts smoking
with ankles crossed. It was here I learned I'd changed for good:
sixth grade in that sprinkler, reflective skin, plastered clothes,
new chest sudden like a rash. I caught stares like roaches
in still water. Mom had warned me. Aunts had raised my shirt to assess
the damage——a mechanic under the hood of a cheap car. Today
on the corner the sun hits my knees. I'm wearing shorts.
I've gone to meet a friend. I rebel with my mind how the salt pillar
Bible woman rebelled with her body. There was a time before
this cross-walk. To the right, a power plant coughs black fog upwind.
To the left, a pedestrian signal counts down from ten. Some cars
won't stop for the light. Some girls aren't found until the moon thins
and the ducks vanish and the local news stations have begun, again, to report
tomorrow's weather.

Mold is Eating Clifton's Terrible Stories

Hard to believe it
was an accident, the hole

in the shower curtain after washing.
She wrote about the fox

on her porch and the fox in her dream.
I dreamt I cooked and ate myself

in a National Park. Water trapped
in a book will mutate. This is the story

of vampires and the like, foxes
split from the wolf.

I've never seen a National Park.
I'd prefer a field.

I prefer women without
fear or guilt or shame.

She wrote Audre into the room
when she was diagnosed.

Sick cells flowered like Rorschach
huddled in corners. When I bathe

I don't hide from whoever watches.
What is written in those blots?

Someone watches me poke my bruises.
Now I lock myself in marks until

something changes.

The Elephant

This morning I watched a nursery of raccoons
feast behind the mall dumpster, a pack
of hot dogs torn open and rolling
over the concrete like glow sticks
at a birthday party.

I fold over-priced machine-knit vests.
Long Island's shoppers spill iced coffee
on the floors, dragged by children
to watch automated cars rove
in circles. I remember going

to the summer circus with a garbage
bag full of second-hand light up toys,
glittering globes, galaxy spinners,
hand-held mustaches, a little cash
for roasted peanuts.

Thin women on trapezes,
men with teeth bright as new
quarters, collars, hats stranger
than the mating rituals
of isolated birds. Now

I recognize the palm of December.
Kids flock to the Macy's Santa,
his stomach heavy with promises.
When he laughs I see
the elephant on stage

her hero poses, her stone
skin, her holler I named Joy—
I wished to climb
her back as she worked
hard for her life.

INTERVIEW: GARBAGE

I mostly remember the man who overdosed in the bathroom at Chipotle.

I wasn't even a manager yet. That area, you know, so much shit going on. My friend Sheila, we had to meet her out back by the dumpsters just to give her a burrito bowl away from the cameras. One time a customer dropped her phone in the garbage and begged us to look. Actually she offered to do it herself, but I put on gloves, took her to the back and went through the bags one by one. She said she had her kid's pictures on that phone. I was like, why am I doing this. I'm getting nothing out of this. But I mostly remember that man.

Those doors lock from the inside. I saw him go in, you know, but how long is too long? We couldn't get the door open. I couldn't find Richard. He was the manager. So whatever, we called 911, they had to break the door down. I didn't think the guy would be dead

but he was dead. Then here comes Richie: "What's with all the cops?"
He'd been smoking in the back. But those fucking paramedics, do you know they left
the needle? Right where they found it.

Doctor

I know every thing that has happened to her:
three brain tumors, one husband, a miscarriage
in the hospital bathroom like a toddler who slipped
into traffic on the way out of the doctor's office.
She came to me almost gone, referral citing
chronic migraines, depression. She left the man
in the car. She bared her stomach to me
for the probe. I said *have you considered therapy*, she said

with a little more kindness maybe I will not die. Amy,
do not be afraid. I have diagnosed you.
This death in you has died a thousand times
in my mother, born an ocean away and decades
before: red vow, stubborn house, the dark grey ocean
of your guts where everyone can see.

Against Murder Abuse Terror I Pray

For these small ones in neat rows asleep
in cots on the floor it's noon and I know
heartbreak will come like taxes daily
hanging from the edges of their apple slices or as
they stand in line at the doctor's or the polls
even now they're backlit
by the looming abundance of a life
that may drown or carry them
over these swathes of eastern topography dark
like bruised knees

today they sleep while the afternoon sun
pulls the garbage men on and off
the trucks tomorrow all hell
that I petition god to break
into pieces still smaller pieces for you
indiscriminate hells to take with your coffee
or comb through your hair at night how the butterfly
needle pinches small blood then
the ride home

INTERVIEW: FOUR DOLLARS

I was getting maybe seven dollars an hour? Google the minimum wage in '91.
Four dollars? That can't be right. God. Let's say seven. It was called No Name.
Gone now. Used to be between Guess and H&M, somewhere
in that corner of Green Acres Mall. A few months. They made me wear the clothes.
Name brand stuff. Maybe they were trying to be funny. I was fifteen. They wanted...
it was Matthew's birthday party. They wanted me to come in and I just quit.
I don't remember much else. I was at the register. At the Key Food
and the Jamaican restaurant. I quit them all. Keisha and I would work
the same jobs, call in sick for each other. This tiny movie theater on Sunrise——two days,
I worked there. Empty, dark. By the popcorn I stood and thought: What am I doing here?
I left. Pocket money. It didn't matter. That was before I had my baby.

In the Museum of Atrocities, A Couple Argues

While surveying the stores of looted crystals,
keys, belts, and prayer beads twisted brown,
as humble as colons.

Rust grows on the machetes as they bicker—
like testicles the grenades sag
with old anticipation. They don't notice

the stained marble busts of genocidal men,
and as they skim over the plaque beneath
the white robe nailed to the wall, she feels angry

about the sharp wooden plank of his hand
in hers, and he feels angry
that she closed the door on his mother's

foot, and between them who
should clean the scum from the stove,
and who should gut the chicken,

and why would he wear such insensible shoes,
and she that prudish top, and how cruel
of the air to condone them on that first day

and never again——Dear God!
How they walk this hall like puppies
blind and yipping while the educated crowd

squints at a grey-scale photo of a shattered house,
of a man inside his shattered house, silent.
solitary, hands

in his pockets.

Cat

Through the open door of the nail salon I see my house: stoic as a suit of armor.
Athena the cat lives here, among the tiny bottles and drills.
She weaves between the legs of young girls who know
their colors: this one wants red, the other green, and still another
red, on fingers and toes.
Athena climbs slow into the foot bath and bares to me all she's got
as she laps the water from the faucet.
Right now, there's a bag of dirty laundry near my bed, a half empty
pack of razors on the ottoman, a blow dryer unplugged and left on the floor.
I swat flies. I check my watch.
Athena contemplates the outside, my house there with its shutters and sponges and
plastic tubes, only to come and sit before us who wait
to be made. Then she opens her mouth—
licks the elastic skin which connects her leg
to her stomach, and her stomach, her feet, vulva and tail, heeds
none, pays nothing, her only chore: to give her body
the rough lashing it demands.

INTERVIEW: YOU STILL NEED A MAN

You have no husband. Am I right? You are young. I still lived in my home country when I had this man from the States. Nice man. Italian man. Lots of money. And so beautiful——his belt buckle, silver with wings. [*In these months the sun sets at 8:30.*] He didn't want me to work. Why come over the ocean and marry this rich guy and still work like——well like a woman from my country?

[S*weat behind her ear. Red and white paisley capris.*] Can you blame him? I ignored him. Went to school.
I taught thirty years, my children didn't suffer, and look. Now he's dead and I carry myself.
My children didn't suffer. [*She is so close that when she shrugs I shrug with her.*] Two years he's dead.

I take the bus for fun. When I sit in the front I see all kinds of people stepping up. At your age you should be driving. [*In the street lay a bumper and two bolts. No right turns on red.*] But take your time.
You like your job? It's not that you don't need a man. You still need a man. Only for love.

I've Entered You and Moved Inside You Until You Were Too Used To Go Outside

The cheetah print fitted sheet
plastered against the door
of the washing machine

is frayed at the center
and belongs to the woman
beside me who snaps

at her husband, *where were you?*
On the TV, a girl steps in
to her mother's red dress.

Her door is open.
Across the hall
a light flickers on.

I've brought the last two weeks
to this liminal space
where each holds their nose

against the smoke
of living: gym socks and snot,
laundry bags slumped

on the floor like drunks
at confession. We're packed
shoulder to shoulder; kittens

waiting for their mother's tongue.
I see a commercial for
doorbell cameras, then another

for faux wood
blinds. I hear a daughter
begging to leave, feel

the man place his hand
on his wife's hip.
I do not feel shame (I don't)

when my stained grey panties fall
wet and crumpled among years
of dust like a child caught and

waiting to be beaten.

Sunday, December 31st

The first woman mentions
a miscarriage in September.
The next, her brother's
crumpled neurology

at Thanksgiving, shattered
blue ceramic and then silence
like bare skin. Above us,

the Messiah in stained glass
Gethsemane prays against
his poison cup, the cup
that will make him. I confess

I spent Christmas Eve half drunk
in my mother's lap: *were you*
afraid to have me? Now Paul

at the red altar trembles
over the microphone as if
it were new. Soon, we'll sing
It's Turning Around For Me.
What is? Maybe Earth,

one of one with its seasons——
no Spring on Mars, no
strokes on Venus, no
good-run-women like

Dealia in her fur, almost shaking
with conviction: the point
is Hallelujah. The point
is all those days behind us
lined up neat like stones.

Out of Fear

I brought the little bed downstairs.
On the curb it can be taken by anyone.
In my cave I carved with nails what I thought
was the only sun. It's cruel, this purple
sky. The light is cruel. Truth walks by
in her ranger uniform, her little dog
barking: *you didn't have to stay so long.*
I hate that dog. I hate truth.
I hate that little bed I clutched for years like
an intestinal perforation. I recall
that term from an EMT class I abandoned
out of fear. Just teenagers, we'd pose
one by one in the cervical collars. Then
we'd leave them on the floor, waiting
and open like ribcages.

On My Second Cup of Tea

Since the first tipped over and
stretched long steam legs
from the carpet to the windowsill
in a thin approximation of fire.
No consequence for me—I am not
a child who must answer for
the dried ketchup on the sofa,
or explain to an elder the half-naked
bodies on my laptop at midnight, when
the curtains were drawn and
under the sheet the body seemed
a carnival. No excuses—
I had waited till night, I had shut
the door, the way it's shut now
as I squat to watch the stain dry
dark. I am closer to an idle car
than an ambulance. I was told
in such spaces the devil
recites his name. I remember
how I dropped my glass and
watched the light play on the edges
like kitchen snow. The water
trickling forward, I stood still
there, I stood until my legs shook.

Decision To Leave

ICYHOT. Hard hand
rubbing Tiger Balm
into my side. Where Christ
was pierced, I say.
Shut up, you say, and flip
me over. Face in the
mattress, I pretend
I'm dreaming. Decades ago,
epidural for your
cesareans. Before that,
Caesar's back. Remember
learning pulse points?
Mine rose when the boy
held my wrist. He thought
I was in love. I was afraid.
Like the time I forgot
how to brake, rode
my bike into an old
man's gut. Yesterday
I called the hotline
for guilt and the lady asked
whose pain is it?
Whose pain is it?
Ants on the nightstand
from the window you
opened. Pulling my
shirt down, you say
next time don't
wait so long.

Stranger

Wednesday I walk in my pajamas
through the wet grass into
the night bustle of a little town
where under an orange light
a man unzips his pants.
The moon hangs from the sky
like a swollen stomach.
An open fire hydrant floods
the sidewalk, couples scattered
around like bottlecaps or leaves.
In him I see the unnamable
impulsion of David half-naked
and mad in praise of God,
in the plaza where all the virgins
stood. Once a stranger kissed me
in a bowling alley bathroom,
the girl's bathroom, out of
nowhere he held my neck
and kissed me on the mouth.
Someone near strums a guitar,
repeats one lyric. What illness
sets a mouth on a chord?

Ars Poetica

He's had at least four, the fifth
chilled and unopened
in his right hand, and with
Hillside surely blurred to serenity,
the man on the corner dances
full out. The speaker hung around
his neck tosses a tango mix
across the street to where I stand,
on line for the bus. My feet
ache from the restaurant booths
and retail lines of the city, where
high-rises schmooze, thick
crowds bristle. I'll go home
to my letters, I think, I'll bathe
and forget the day, but still
the dancer slurs prophecies
to my left, twirls like water
down a drain. I could never
move that way——as if
untouched. When I smile,
he blows a kiss, claps
his hands, signs
the cross, takes
a bow, and now
I shrink him
into a poem.

Luxury

Hands stacked
on the yellow pole
like a tiered cake, I'm
packed with desperation
against strangers as if

the zombies had come
and this was the last train out.

Her elbow in my nipple, his
knee in the crook of mine,
all eyes on the floor where

an amorphous lump of slime
lay laced with hair from which
the light bounces like glitter.

The essence of luxury is distance.

Minutes before, the rats
sipped dark wine from the gutter
between tracks as if

it were a river.
It was a river,

and this is a wedding:

the cement mason pushing
sweat into the car. I can smell it——
his road kissing mine.

Missive From a Black Hole

Have you grown tired of your apples
& abalones & Acuras? Your
Buicks & balloons, bicycles &

cricket, your cloud cover creamsicles?
The domestic tigers, driveways & dry plains,
egg yolks, emus, elbows,

faucets & flagpoles, fissures &
giraffes, gardenias, garlic bulbs,
your Hudson, horseradish, & hallelujah?

What of your internments, ice cubes, IV's,
Jordans, Justins, Jennys,
Kleenex, Kias & kangaroos,

those lists, large intestines, London &
MoMA, marsupials, megalomania,
nettle, north stars & neck bones?

Your onomatopoeia, ouches & oinks,
plumbing, pretzels, Pacific,
quarters, queries, queues,

Rorschach, rhinoceroses, & rear-ends?
Your solar panels, soda floats, sinks &
toilets, Toyotas & Tamarind trees,

undercuts, umbrellas & ultra-violet,
Versailles, verandas, velociraptors,
wombats, waffle cones, & water? Keep

your X-Acto knives, your xylophones, your xeroxes.
Take your *yours*, yoked & young, still
zealous

and dappled with light.

Conversation

A: What languages do you know?
B: I'm the one who lines the pigeons on the wire.
A: Who needs the pigeons?
B: They are something to destroy.
A: Who is the destroyer?
B: Ice killed the giant beaver. A parasitic worm in the belly of Goliath.
Bombs for the children in Alabama.
A: Why the beaver?
B: The process of a home. The proof a home.
A: Who must prove their home?
B: Those who wish not to be destroyed.
A: Could you be more specific?
B: I'd written a story for the parents to live in. What everyone needs: pond, soil, trees
from which the lemons tumble like bowling balls toward their goal.
In the first draft they could live forever.
A: Then what?
B: Brother-murder. Then agony—
chafe of one plate against another. Then policy.
Policy into borders into canons over the borders.
Then the stove left on. Then "Eloi, Eloi, lama——"
A: Speak of something less ugly.
B: There are pigeons on the wire. Six of them,
six plush stones I gave you. There is the wire,
there is the ratio of weight to height. There is
the existence of flight.
A: It's no comfort that birds fly.
B: A man places a rock in a bucket for every hurricane.
Charley, Sandy. A rock for Katrina. With
these he will build his home.
A: What of the rocks?
B: The sticky soft eyes of Cerberus.
A: And the hurricanes?
B: Like the sigh of a schoolteacher dancing in red ink—
breath with a Before and After but the After
is longer, snake-like, enduring after sin.
A: Why teacher? Why sin? Why the dancing?
B: It is language.

On Looking

In junior high felons visited to warn us
we were Black. One guy, shot six times,
limped down the auditorium aisle
and from a folding chair testified
it wasn't his time to go. Rikers used to be a dump,
almost sinking. Contractors drafted cells
like bills for the senate. On career day
correctional officers would come
decorated like generals to tell us
how those animals spat, cussed
and tried to kill each other with sharpened
toothbrushes, scratched skin from their ankles:
those untrained, misbehaved people paid
forty cents an hour to wash cement.
At fifteen I worked in Amelia's garden.
Cats snuck through for the squash
and tomatoes. I made mud-pies
on tree stumps and killed snails
under orders. I crushed them with my feet, I
sat them in the road. She cleared me
to kill a cat if I was gutsy and quick,
if I believed enough that those plots
were mine. I spared the cats. I mourned
the snails, but when I saw the silverleaf
whiteflies I became America. How they repelled
me, sprouted from the leveled dirt
so bare with need. How about a job
where nothing disappears, neither
strawberries nor hospital staff——
if not them who will prescribe

the crippled man his cane or soothe
        those raw imprisoned ankles? Well,
the classes I passed aged on paper
        into monuments of good will, little
abandoned churches. Mr. Reed told me
        when I graduated: don't fall on any nuclear
buttons. Mr. Green said the red lines
        weren't invisible; I just wasn't looking.
The tossed caps hovered a moment
        beside each other as we cheered——
the pigeons on their branches saw a sea
        of sharp blue hands in the air.

God the Dermatologist

There's a way to live if you want to Live
Forever, and you've eaten as much olive oil,
tubers and ground nuts as you could manage,

if you've turned and returned the ancient texts,
boiled your mother's remedies to dregs and rubble,
if after the Botox, retinols, and paper-thin scalpels,

you look up to find the past thirty years dragging
their feet across your brow. In ancient days we
counted minutes through drops of water

or by the profile of the sun. Now in crevices
clocks squawk the hour past, the second left
before your shift starts, and so you go.

Tighten your belt, flatten your collar,
powder your neck, brush your hair,
lace your boots and make your way

to the city, where the old-lady-evangelical pats
your shoulder and asks if you've been saved.
She says Without Faith You Have Nothing! and

Without Works Faith Is Dead! and God Keep You
and Grant You Life Everlasting! She believes
she'll live forever but she won't——

I can tell you the way to live if you want
to Never Die, if your terror is one day
sixty years from now, bedridden in a bare-walled

facility where the nurses whisper your diagnoses
to each other over lunch, and your children visit
after work and before the parties, where

they believe they'll Live Forever, under the strobe-lit-air,
thick and musk-heavy, palms and pelvises and DJ
atop the stage like a witch at the cauldron——

he believes he'll Never Die, seated as he is above the throngs
of sex and blow. Everyone is young and no one tries
to make you beautiful, like you try now, on your lunch break

smoothing smile lines with a tube of cold metal.

The problem is you've forgotten your grandmother's
prayer circle after the divorce: six women knelt
with unwashed hands all over her face,

their dinner taken standing over the kitchen sink—
cold turkey, pickles, mustard—and none
asked the other to be pretty.

In Loma Linda the retired hunch over
their tiny gardens, pull carrots
from the ground, share their sour breath.

If they Live Forever, thank the liquor. Thank
evenings spent ignoring the doomsday
herald who lived on the curb with a sign

pointed to the red wrinkled tit of the sun.

The Bus

So self-assured
as to be eternal
the city moves
ceaseless through night
like an ant colony
or my bus from
Jamaica Ave to Baisley
just twenty-five
minutes straight line
past Macedonia
Church and a couple
butchers cheap
billboards urging
women to keep
their babies or call
1-800-Jesus
tame compared
to the streetside
revelations I saw
on the Amtrak
from New York
to South Carolina
that lust would
drag me to Hell
and so on thirteen
hour ride straight
arrow down past
bulls in fields
perpetually bowing
my mother brother
suitcases and turkey
sandwiches with
acrid onion wonder
like an ancient
machine chopping
through wood
last week I heard
the Himalayas
were hidden for
generations in
smog until sickness
laid us all down

gorgeous but
we missed
our neon oil
and the Q111
with its sleepy
driver that night
we rode until
we smelled fire
we stopped like
a toy car
intercepted by
a giant foot
all those trucks
who needs
the moon
the red lights
made murals
of us trailing
through the dark
beans spilled
from a sack
personnel frozen
solid with hoses
leaking it was
Winter Monday
After Work
and we hadn't
stretched in
weeks everyone
repeating
what happened
ignored
like children and
stranded
before C-Town
the old lady
blamed E-bikes
the teenage
boys swore
the bus doors
stayed open
as if to let
the good air in
is it a blessing

to see
the veneer
stripped from
this superorganism
we bet our
lives on
I felt rebuked
later when
Dad said
beside me
on the sofa
How do you
feel now
you've got
a little taste
of real life