

I drove all the way to Cape Disappointment but didn't  
have the energy to get out of the car. Rental. Blue Ford  
Focus. I had to stop in a semi-public place to pee  
on the ground. Just squatted there on the roadside.  
I don't know what's up with my bladder. I pee and then  
I have to pee and pee again. Instead of sightseeing  
I climbed into the back seat of the car and took a nap.  
I'm a little like Frank O'Hara without the handsome  
nose and penis and the New York School and Larry  
Rivers. Paid for a day pass at Cape Disappointment  
thinking hard about that long drop from the lighthouse  
to the sea. Thought about going into the Ocean  
Medical Center for a checkup but how do I explain  
this restless search for beauty or relief?

The problem with sweetness is death. The problem with everything is death. There really is no other problem if you factor everything down, which I was no good at when studying fractions. They were always using pie as their example. Rather than thinking about factoring things down, I wondered what kind of pie. And here I am, broke, barely able to count to fourteen. When people talk about math, they say you'll need it to balance your checkbook. What is a checkbook and what, indeed, is balance? Speaking of sweetness, for a time I worked in a fudge shop on an island. After a week the smell of sweetness made me heave, not to mention the smell of horses; it was an island without cars, shit everywhere. When I quit, the owner slapped me.

Intimacy unhinged, unpaddocked me. I didn't want it. Believe me, I didn't want it anymore. Who in their right mind? And then it came like an ice cream truck with its weird tinkling music, its sweet frost. I fled to the shore and saw how death-strewn, all the body parts washed up and sucked clean like that floor mosaic by Sosus of Pergamon, *Unswept House*. Seabirds flocked and dematerialized like they do. Bees raged at their own dethroning. Love came close anyway, found me out, its warped music all the rage. It had a way, just by being in proximity, of opening the shells of the bivalves. Disclosing their secret meat. One doesn't really *suck* on frozen sugar water. One allows it to melt in the oven of the mouth.

I met a man a dying man and I said me too.

Met a dead man and I said me too. Must be

dead cuz the living can't meet the dead and he

said me too. Did you know the dead can fall

in love he said. Fact. Did you know the dead

fall in love better than the living cuz nothing

left to lose. The root of all blues. Skeptical still

I strode onward in my seven-league boots as in

the fairy tale "Hop-o'-My-Thumb" from a book

of German fairy tales given to me when I had

chicken pox. Scratching myself bloody, the ogre

gored to death by wild beasts. Seven leagues per

stride toward a dead banjo player in a bad

mood. *Enchanteur*. Or *zauberhaft* in German.

It is abominable, unquenchable by touch, closer

to the sublime than sentimental, more animal

than hominid, I've seen it in the eyes of birds

weaving on a stem of ragweed, voracious,

singular, there is no one like me, Dickinson in

her narrow bed, her cold clenched hands, her

penmanship unreadable, even following a recipe

for black cake, her black cake came out strange,

lusher than the template, and every freak I ever

met had that same look in their eyes, armless,

threading a needle with their lips and teeth,

legless, rounding a corner on their cerulean cart,

monarchic, imperious, wild, sad, and like every

virgin queen, the need for love revolting and grand.



Press a foot into this beach and blood  
will ooze up instead of saltwater. If there  
are poems, let them come in sick waves  
like pushing contractions for a birth I did  
not have the strength to finish. Cut me, cut me!  
They cut me stem to stern and out came a little  
drug addict. Do you know the houses here are built  
from shipwrecks? That the nondenominational  
host a vespers service in a chapel whose weekly  
whitewashing will not staunch the bleeding  
of the wood? The mad reversals: fawns are carnivores,  
coyotes whine for edible flowers. Each morning  
glory a tsunami siren. Cut me! The ocean too  
is red though it thought it was exempt.

The best is when you respond only to the absolute present  
tense, the rain, the rain, rain, rain, and wind, an iridescent  
cloud, another shooting, this time in a shopping mall  
in Germany, so this is why people want other people to put  
their arms around them, I will walk to the bay where there is  
a kind of peace, even emptiness, the barn swallows' sharp  
flight and cry, who now has the luxury of emptiness or peace,  
the beauty of thunder in a place where there is rarely thunder,  
the mind like a jackrabbit bounding, bounding, my wet hair  
against my neck, grandfather's barber shop, the lineup  
of hair tonics by color like a spectrum, the pool table removed  
to make a room for great grandma to live out her years, my  
father cutting a semicircle in her kitchen table so it would fit  
around the stovepipe, rain, rain, fascism in America is loud.



From this bench I like to call my bench I sit  
and watch my tree which is not my tree, no one's  
tree, the quiet! Except for barn swallows which are  
not loud birds, how many exclamation points can I  
get away with in this life, who was it who said only two  
or maybe seven, Bishop? Marianne Moore? Either way  
the world is capable of quiet if everyone stays indoors  
and no jet planes, my tree, it just stands there  
in the middle of everything in a meadow on the bay  
looking what Barthes called "adorable," then I drove  
the mile west to the sea which had decided to be loud  
that day, the sunset, oh, ragged and bloody as a piece  
of raw meat in the jaws of some big golden carnivore,  
and I cried a little, for none of it! none of it will last!

Poetry, the only father, landscape, moon, food, the bowl  
of clam chowder in Nahcotta, was I happy, mountains  
of oyster shells gleaming silver, poetry, the only gold,  
or is it, my breasts, feet, my hands, index finger,  
fingernail, hangnail, paper cut, what is divine, I drove  
to the sea, wandered aimlessly, I stared at my tree, I said  
in my mind *there's my tree*, there's my tree I said in my mind,  
I remember myself before words, thrilled at my parents'  
touch, opened milkweed with no agenda, blew the fluff,  
no reaching for comparison, to be free of signification,  
wiggle out of the figurative itchy sweater, body, breasts,  
vulva, little cave of the uterus, clit, need, touch, come, I came  
before I knew what coming was, iambic pentameter, did I  
feel it, does language eclipse feeling, does it eclipse the eclipse.

My earliest memory is telling myself stories without words, starring the decal dog, cat, and butterfly on my crib headboard, I couldn't talk yet, then my mother coming in the room to pick me up, I lifted my arms, it must have been my mother though I've never called her mother in my life, I call her by her name, Norma, and always have, another early memory is getting lost in a toy store, finding my mother and encircling her legs with my arms, but it was not my mother, it was another lady, a stranger, and from then on toys too were strange, the small oven that baked cakes with a light bulb, playing under a mock orange tree and in the abandoned chicken coop, finding out what I called violets was really petrified chicken shit.

Since age three, I went looking for salvation, the village was safe it was believed, and the churches within toddling distance, so I toddled to the Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and to the best and worst of all, the Church of God between the cemetery and rhubarb patch, cement blocks painted white and a misspelled sign, Bible school was severe, required memorization, much religion seems to require memorization by children, I won a two-inch plastic manger scene with glitter on the roof for my recitation of John 3:16, there's your sins, teacher sneered, after making us put red polka dots all over the hearts we'd cut with safety scissors from white paper, now go get saved, and I did, seven times, I even went to catechism, but the brother said I was too young to convert, he wore thick glasses, his face covered in acne scars, the best part of getting saved was diving into the old pastor's big belly, I could see his undershirt.



I was not a large child, though large in silence, learned  
from pods and brambles and cattail's velvet fruit. Like  
the world, which began as a pea-sized notion under  
the mattress of an oversensitive girl, I grew vast, too vast,  
it was said, for my landscape's monsters: cows, mudpuppies,  
bullfrogs, Polyphemus moths with purple eyespots on their wings,  
nightcrawlers in the worm bin, catalpas inside out on the hook,  
nature, outmoded as stockings with a seam up the back, as rations  
and iron pills and traction for back pain, dad strung up  
and weighed down until they figured out it was a tumor. I flew  
far away to feel molecular, but even among the throng, my life  
was enormous, a raucous tragedy, having outgrown its theater's  
cherubs and filmy purple curtains and thereby gushing  
out into the street, filling it with arterial soliloquys.

Freak accidents do happen, girl said it ten, twelve times that night,  
her pronouncement curled in my head for decades, a tequila worm,  
my sister and I snowbound in a cold house, our mother stranded somewhere  
sleeping, she said, in a public library, I pictured her under a blanket  
of paperbacks, power out so we tracked each other's breath  
in the flashlight beam, that girl, somebody from the neighborhood,  
made it through the snow to play a role in our tragedy, maybe snowshoed,  
wouldn't put it past her, freak accidents, she said, moving the candle  
to the center of the table because fire turns little girls to cinders, I was eight  
my sister twelve, blizzard brought out her kinder nature, normally she'd  
have used this as a chance to murder me, we ate saltines and margarine  
huddled in bed, don't choke, the freak-girl said, wind whining, power lines  
writhing and crackling across 13th St., our father shivering in his coffin  
under all that snow, oh, that freckled oracle, Lizzy Ferris was her name.



ld Bill Hickok, not the actual guy but the guy who portrayed him  
who died of emphysema, whose grandson was killed in action in Iraq.  
all day, I wondered. Aside from gunfighting. Figuring out whether  
which determined the color of the hat. My hat, how did my mother  
est's Variety, powder blue. My gun, a toy. I was wise enough at age  
ctions. I would become what I loved. My mother didn't hover  
o with what I was. Her best friend made a particle board lid for the crib  
the cement slab and drink highballs, unimpeded by kids, who all  
red her madly, though half of them died young in motorcycle wrecks.  
if I rescued or killed or swung from a noose until I was dead. That  
omain was TV dinners and James Joyce. Mikel's first crush was the body  
owboy who swung from the noose in a spiral pattern. Mikel called home  
wise died young and hung. I decided my kind of cowboy would read  
ok called *Tall Tales* about tornadoes and card games and white whales.

They lived next door, four boys, meek dad, and Mary Lou, their mom, who had good reason  
to be unhinged and she was unhinged, the oldest boy they had on a leash tied to a clothesline  
like a dog, the youngest would sit on the corner eating cracker sandwiches, a four-square  
of saltines between two slices of white bread spread with yellow mustard, who one night  
got into Mary Lou's diet pills and made strange markings all over the bathtub with black  
crayon and climbed to the top of the curio cabinet like a squirrel, then one of the middle  
boys, peanut-headed, rolled over my pet caterpillar with his bike wheel so sluggishly  
the guts oozed in slow motion, and let's just say I'd suffered for that caterpillar, nailed  
holes in the lid of its jar and studied up on its diet, it was Pat or Tom, peanut-headed  
either way, I knocked him off his bike and sat on his stomach and stuffed grass in his  
mouth, and next door to them, a woman lived alone in a low white house, it was said she  
had a sunken living room and white shag carpeting, a taxidermized tiger and an uncaged  
parrot who flew through the rooms and spoke in tongues, but I don't know, I never was  
inside, the only one who wormed her way in was Mary Lou and her testimony was unreliable.

His body was barely cold when the suitors swooped in on the young widow, the ground was still fresh over the grave, it was spring, the president had been shot a few months earlier, nests mocked the gravedigger's work, the suitors swooped in from all directions like carrion birds, the first an oval-headed man from across the road with dirty phone calls the night after the funeral, then one cornered her in the garage by the bag of her husband's clothes, and two brothers peeked in the windows and tapped on them like woodpeckers, and the school ring salesman, and the old man who looked like Colonel Sanders, and Al, her friend's husband from Wabash, Indiana, while his wife was strapped down getting shock treatments, and the small man with a big voice who pawed in the night at the screen door like a bear roaring her name, just a few months earlier she'd watched the president's funeral on television, there was Black Jack, riderless horse, boots set backward in the stirrups, and the president's widow, walking straight-spined under a black veil, and now the robins hopped as they always had, their songs like a tangle of string in the air, and how did she fend them off, the suitors, and go to college, and read *Ulysses*, and write papers on that manual typewriter, and feed us, my sister and me?

The lambs this year are dumb but lambs are dumb  
their tiny brains archaic smiles humans to a lamb  
are all the same all rams the same all ewes are mom  
all milk is mine all lambs are me all blades of grass  
a single blade of grass incapable of love unlike a pig  
who aims to please who specifies who trots behind  
as loyal as a dog and kisses like a dog its tongue  
astonishingly soft who grieves when led away when  
loaded up when walked into the marketplace who'd  
die of grief if held too long to get to slaughter  
weight nostalgic for the hills the mist the girl the battered  
truck she pedaled to the barn the chickens who have no  
self at all who yearn as one who peck the flat terrain  
as one who rise as one and fall as one like rain.



urrowing sow. Salty-sweet of blood and hay  
earn from the pig born blue. Lil cries, Ell says  
out on the train. He keeps watch for suicides  
hills. Lil holds a live one under her coat, pig's  
the hem. Blood freezes on her pajamas. Momma  
h fancy body. Pigs have more hair than you'd  
white lashes. Eight altogether if you count the dead  
hen Momma rolls over on it in her sleep. The biggest  
a runt that goes nameless, doesn't give a shit,  
re tit. The sow loves none of them, moons only  
her, won't eat until she comes to the barn.  
ren: sold off, kept as pets, grown into slaughter,  
wander and walk along the tracks in the rain  
ter's daughter who stepped in front of a train.

The patriarch of Jesus Camp is dead! Father of Greg who dragged a giant cross  
across the high school parking lot on Good Friday is dead! Father of Charity who  
wore pink housedresses to high school is dead! White anklets. Orthopedic shoes.  
Duck-faced Charity who Jesus stole early. Embezzled. Hijacked to heaven before  
we were ready. It's not fair we cried! Ground our teeth in our sleep. Had to get  
bite splints. Even if the streets are paved with gold we said. Even if Charity can chip  
off some gold and use it to buy cosmetics. As if Heaven has a Hook's drugstore.  
As if being pretty counts in a place where everything is pretty. The patriarch only  
smiled. That way he did with a weed sticking out of the corner of his mouth. Charity  
was his daughter but he said and I quote "To be absent from the body is to be present  
with the Lord!" What does that look like exactly we cried. Are there chairs? Are there  
lambs to tend? Because you know how we get when there are no lambs to tend! He had  
a look in his eye like Charity had given him previews of coming attractions. But his lips  
were sealed and now they're sealed for good and now only an echo from the grotto.



The fat suffering of the farrowing sow. Salty-sweet of blood and hay  
like a carnival. The girls learn from the pig born blue. Lil cries, Ell says  
it happens, mom. Brian's out on the train. He keeps watch for suicides  
on the tracks. -40 wind chills. Lil holds a live one under her coat, pig's  
gray cord hanging out at the hem. Blood freezes on her pajamas. Momma  
suffers to rid herself of each fancy body. Pigs have more hair than you'd  
think. Ice-white, and long white lashes. Eight altogether if you count the dead  
one, and one is crushed when Momma rolls over on it in her sleep. The biggest  
they name Moose. There's a runt that goes nameless, doesn't give a shit,  
finds its way to tit and more tit. The sow loves none of them, moons only  
over the woman who tends her, won't eat until she comes to the barn.  
The fate of the living children: sold off, kept as pets, grown into slaughter,  
mothers themselves. Some wander and walk along the tracks in the rain  
like Judy the singing minister's daughter who stepped in front of a train.

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For a couple years, I slept nights in Babe's basement on a low gold couch right up next to the wood burner, mom had been displaced from her own house, long story, so my sister and her kids and husband could live there, they'd crossed the bridge to move back home because Em had a hole between two chambers of her heart, mom stayed in a one-room place, a little crouching house set back off the road behind the trailer park, kerosene lamp, nowhere for me to sleep, so I'd run across the yard and crawl under the barbed wire to Babe's basement door, they'd keep it unlocked for me, when I needed to pee, I slipped out the door in the middle of the night to unbridle my stream like an animal, squat and watch the snow steam, and back inside where the fire logs too were animals, settling in and licking each other with blue tongues, Vic was still alive then, Vic Sr., he had his shop set up down there for rock polishing, agates and tiger eyes, pick, he said once, and I chose a fire opal, I guess the conditions of our lives were bad but I was at peace, feeding logs into the stove's mouth, alone with the precious stones, there in the fabled underground.

Once, I took a Greyhound north across an icy bridge, it was all night to cross that bridge, a bridge lined with stars up from the sky and fastened to the cables and the towers with electrical tape, bus windows fogged-over from all the huggers, lovers, masturbators, numb frostbit moon going black and so many stops along the way, boarded-up gas stations and light swinging, butchered deer hanging head-down from a crust of ice on blue snow radiant, some hollow-eyed chaps from or disembarking into godforsaken loneliness which to love, not the lonely ones but loneliness itself, when I was on Highway 2 outside Jack's, wild blueberry pie but closed the hatch and told me to crawl into the belly of the bus, exhaust lit red when it pulled away, walked far that night hip-deep snow to the shack, no heat but wood, Faulkner



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light swinging, butchered deer hanging head-down from maple branches,  
crust of ice on blue snow radiant, some hollow-eyed chump embarking  
from or disembarking into godforsaken loneliness which I had come  
to love, not the lonely ones but loneliness itself, when I reached my stop  
on Highway 2 outside Jack's, wild blueberry pie but closed, driver opened  
the hatch and told me to crawl into the belly of the bus to retrieve my bag,  
exhaust lit red when it pulled away, walked far that night, then through  
hip-deep snow to the shack, no heat but wood, Faulkner and a feather bed.



I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered my life via nothing but luck, as a child on wet sheets, I could not contain myself, as a teen on the bed where my father ate his last pomegranate, among crickets and chicken bones in ditches, in the bare grass on the lavish grounds of a crumbling castle, in a flapping German circus tent, in a lean-to, my head on the belly of a sick calf, in a terrible darkness where a shrew tried to stay afloat in a bucket of well water, in a blue belfry, on a pink couch being eaten from the inside by field mice, on bare floorboards by TV light with Mikel on Locust Place, on an amber throne of cockroach casings, on a carpet of needles from a cemetery pine, in a clubhouse circled by crabapple trees with high school boys who are now members of a megachurch, in a hotel bathtub in St. Augustine after a sip from the Fountain of Youth, cold on a cliff's edge, passed out cold on train tracks, in a hospital bed holding my lamb like an army of lilacs.

My first night in New York, I was such a beautiful dick, my soul circumcised, no shielding foreskin, wearing some sort of leotard thing and gold fabric safety pinned around my waist as a skirt, I'd pierced one of my ears with a darning needle, ice cube to numb it, to hurt: the only verb I knew, stabbed through that ear hole a gold safety pin, the kind girls back then wore on plaid skirts, and Kev that first night, his robe an evil green, his unacceptable glamorous nose, eyeholes as if precisely cut from his face with a utility knife to exhibit the dangerous spectacle at play inside his skull, Roland Barthes: "I cannot get over having had this good fortune: to meet what matches my desire," and, I would add, he who would slaughter me.

Thirty-nine years ago is nothing, nothing. A three and a nine, nothing.  
I had nothing left, a few clothes, some blousy trifles that mean nothing,  
bangles left behind worth nothing, nowhere to live, sacking out trying  
to sleep on my mother's couch, the touch of a bed too much, I had been  
so hooked that nothing could hush my jones, Reagan elected, world  
I thought I understood spun to nothing, Lennon blown to nothing,  
not long before I'd bought a cherry popsicle right outside the Dakota,  
lips cold and red, melted down to nothing, now every cell shivered  
to return to 7th St., window looking out on gray nothing. It would be better,  
I thought, if Kev had followed through and offed me like his hero William  
Burroughs rather than this ostracism, though I was the one who left,  
my mother had discharged her warhead, *if your father was alive*, against which  
I was nothing, I knew nothing then of nothing, its shacks shawled  
with moss, its bitter curatives and ancient hags redressing my narratives.

We all have our trauma nadir, the umbilicus from which  
everything originates and is tied off and turns black  
and the cord eventually falls away, to speak of it in mixed  
company, well, it's just not done, to think of it alone,  
in a one-room house with three of the four walls composed  
of windows looking out onto bears, prehistory, don't think  
of it alone, there is really no place for it, where do you  
find an urn large enough to hold the ashes of a pod  
of problematic blue whales, and even if you find that urn,  
where is the mantel strong enough to display it, I do not  
recommend home cremation, even of something as small  
as a songbird, well, he burst into my bedroom, I was finally  
asleep, I tried to kill myself, he said, and as I called for an  
ambulance, he hacked away at his wrists with a pair of scissors.



I aborted two daughters, how do I know they were girls,  
a mother knows, at least one daughter, maybe one  
daughter and a son, will it hurt, I asked the pre-abortion  
lady and she said, her eyes were so level, I haven't been  
stupid enough to need to find out, cruel but she was right,  
I was and am stupid, please no politics, I've never gotten  
over it, no I don't regret it, two girls with a stupid penniless  
mother and a drug-addict father, I don't think so, I shot  
a rabbit once for food, I am not pristine, I am not good,  
I am in no way Jesus, I am in no way even the bad Mary  
let alone the good, though I have held my living son  
in the pietà pose, I didn't know at the time I was doing it  
but now that I look back, he'd overdosed and nearly died,  
my heart, he said, his lips blue, don't worry, I've paid.

I fell on an incline, talus, tibia, fibula, calcaneal tendon mangled,  
red circuits ruptured, body facing east toward a little town named  
Climax and then New York where I once danced in a circle of girls  
at Kev's sister's wedding, broom, shattered glass, Kev in his parents'  
bathroom pilfering benzos from the medicine chest and now his  
grave, lonely in sunlight in Sag Harbor, my leg twisted west toward  
the lake, sunset, San Francisco where Mikel covered in KS lesions  
with his last 50 bucks took me in a cab to see the Conservatory of Flowers,  
actually only the zinnias, "just look," he said, a yellow that made my eyes  
ache but nothing thus far compares to bone pain except childbirth,  
put a bullet, I begged my ex-husband in the 48th hour of labor,  
right here, pointing to my temple, leg inert in a black cast for months,  
dead grandma's wheelchair, son by then a junkie, blank and mean,  
I crawled to the cold road pleading for help, humbled yet, queen?



OD'd on his suboxone and not on purpose, opened in the kitchen dark a bottle  
I thought was my own trifling med and took his drug instead, stop signs he called them,  
helps you stop without insane withdrawal, but tells me now he just used it to deepen  
his high, heighten his depths, he didn't care what he took or did or what combo  
he imbibed, just ate up anything to make it better. Deader. I had no clue what I'd done  
until later in bed my Self began to break into parts of equal measure like frames of film  
unspliced and floating away from each other, alone, couldn't figure out how to use  
the phone to call for help or to swallow my own spit, three days I sat up on the sofa  
for fear of disremembering to breathe if I slept, him gone, out of his mind on dope  
he tells me now, too hot for long sleeves and his arms covered in tracks so he  
wouldn't come home for fear I'd see. On the third day, I returned to myself though  
never all the way for I had glimpsed the oblivion he sought hourly for years, saw  
I'd authored him in my bones, he was my allegory, analogy, corollary, mirror, I forged  
his suffering, his nail, his needle, his thrill. Of course I swallowed the stupid pill.

Freelance artist. That's what you say when someone asks you what you do in your  
back pocket. "What kind of art do you do?" Oh, this is my art, my disability—especially if they can't see anything wrong with me.  
*want* to work? Wouldn't you feel better if you did something you  
doesn't want to be respectable. Leg blown off, yeah, that's a thing, but  
all the time, anxiety, dread, regret, guilt, there's no peace, no  
hope with each new prescription that doesn't fix a thing. It's a cycle.  
You can't cut out the part of yourself that doesn't work, that's the  
in order to numb the pain. You do things that you want to do, but  
but destroy you in the long run, like the reason you're here is  
that I'm suffering, but at the same time I want them to know  
feel like this person recognizes that I'm something other than a  
called a human being. Sometimes I want to be looked at as a person  
expect me to be normal. I can't live up to normal. So I live up to

out of your

—I'm on

, "Don't you

person

s feeling fear

A bit less

th screws.

to yourself

for a while

le to know

I want to

of being

ey don't

t I am.

How do you stand being so virtuous? My only virtue is my lack of virtue. My only fear my fear of a virtuous mob. Once my son sawed through his wrists with a pair of scissors. Burst into my bedroom, I was sleeping a rare sleep, dreaming a rare dream, and he cried that he had tried to kill himself. Even as I called for help he sawed away. He was fucked up, drunk, he knocked the phone out of my hand, maybe I slapped him, he says I slapped him and I believe him. They sent him home after they stitched up his wrists, wouldn't even keep him for a 24-hour hold. I made threats, pulled rank. I'm a social worker, I yelled. Oh. Well then. Ha. He's still got the scars. I saw them when we were playing Scattergories. For a while, I hid everything sharp in the house. Even pencils and paring knives. But you can't really live without sharp things. "If I want them I'll find them," he told me. I use the scissors now to cut my bangs. One clean slice straight across my forehead. Through virtue's flimsy yellow curtains there are many rooms.



Maybe we wander the soundless antechambers, halls  
and gateways, rustling scapular and underskirt, slight  
swinging of the cross on its cord makes a sound  
like a bottle fly. Angular shadows, stories-tall, color  
of Mourvèdre grapes, purple-black with a yeasty haze.  
Maybe—can it be? Death is a nunnery? Six lines and sick  
already of this allegory. Looking for a nonfussy definition  
of the Sublime. Something I can really sink my teeth into  
like the tough meat of an animal, the last of its kind. Or  
spinning the wool of a black sheep, all the while telling  
myself the story of myself. Nurse says the membrane  
between life and death will thin like the effacement  
of the cervix. I remember begging to die when I gave  
birth and begging to be born when I was dying.

I've lived with death from the beginning, at the edge  
of its villages. I sang it little songs, pried open its mildewed  
pods until the seed fluff detonated in my face like, well you  
know what it's like when seeds detonate in your face. I lived  
so close to death I got inured to it all, like being so comfortable  
living in the underground house we didn't notice the dirt walls  
crawling with colonies of ants feeding their winged queens, or how  
we got so used to living next to the train tracks that the screaming  
whistle didn't wake us. I've known the echoes of death's amphibians  
and the poems of its fine gentlemen with their monocles and top hats,  
cravats and curls, their adverbs. I hate adverbs. I died but how  
did I die? Swimmily! Prettily! Open-throated Italian shirts,  
white as eyeballs rolled back, cuff links and first-rate booze,  
the green kind, green as heat lightning, as magic shoes.

In the dream, my mother called my name from the lower levels, I called her name from the uppermost level, not Mother, but the name she was stuck with when she was born, she never liked it, nor her hair, called it bushy but didn't really care, I take some comfort in her knowing I was there, the crowd kept her from the climb, it wasn't in her nature to rise, slept on sugar sacks in the cellar when she was a kid, from my vantage point I could see the whole sky, the totality, horizon's circumference, funnel clouds of every ilk snaking in our direction, when she was five she lied to the barber, said he was to cut off her hair as short as a boy's, after the tornadoes hit I ran through the wreckage to find her, the peasants on the lower levels had drowned, I called her name again, loud, an old woman sat on a folding chair, humped like a witch, in charge of the dead, my mother, my mother, the old woman pointed to a body in a line of wet bodies on the floor, I screamed the scream of giving birth: she was what I had, or all I had, or all I had *left*, it is hard to remember dialogue in dreams.

I dreamed of it again, my dad's body lost to us again but finally found again, we set him in Dickinson's coffin, wooden, painted white, where had his body been all these years, things felt strange, I could see the stitches holding my dad's eyelids shut, but lo and behold his eyelashes, so long they tangled now and then, were still intact, and at his throat, like Emily's, a nosegay of violets, a pink cypripedium, and two heliotropes in his hands, I loved his hands, they were not large hands, they cut and sanded wood, they had a fineness, a delicacy, it was said after Emily's little nephew died she became delicate, would not even let the doctor feel her pulse, just walked past the door so he could diagnose her via a glance, my mother and sister added bluebells to his coffin but they called them sweet peas, I don't know why, I don't know why I miss Emily so, and him, why die, why dream?



How will I leave this life, like I left my job, drifting off without  
comment, like mother took off to get schooled, shut the door  
hard on my crying, she had books to read, or father in an ambulance,  
rotating light swept red over oak trees, then the hospital bed,  
hallucinating warship and sea, or the way my ex left us, dragging  
his clothes in a garbage bag through snow like fresh kill, or like I left  
Kev, I had twenty minutes before he'd get home to try to change my mind  
or kill me, out the red door with my dad's briefcase full of all my poems  
and the typewriter and seal-skin coat, and then the airplane home,  
so freaked by the years with him in New York I broke when I stirred  
up a grouse in the woods, will I leave like a grouse leaves, drumming  
the air with its wings, or like Freddie left the stage when Queen played  
Live Aid, glossed like a racehorse, top of his game, or like I leave parties,  
no valedictions, out the door like smoke from extinguished candelabras.

I dreamed a color, no plot, a color, strange, there once  
were shoes called oxblood, the color was akin to oxblood  
baby shoes, but not that exactly, nor calves' liver, though  
closer to liver than heart, nor that girl with oxblood hair,  
nor mahogany, fuck mahogany, I fell once, walking on the rocks  
along a jade lake, the cut was small but deep and mean, my  
blood, magenta edged in something the color of antifreeze,  
an unthinkable yellow-green, bioluminescent though not like  
a glowworm, fuck glowworms, they lean toward the false indigo  
of cheap illuminated wristwatches, maybe a certain bunch  
of gladiolas delivered to my studio apartment by Mikel, who opened  
my honey jar and licked all the way around its mouth, fuck that, it  
incensed me, the color some combination of glads, honey, tongue,  
rage, and Mikel, dead so long, the Kaposi's lesion on his thumb.

My love for things is partial. Mikel on his last legs, covered  
ded that I see the beauty of a mass of chrysanthemums. Look,  
that I could see the beauty there but all I saw was a smear  
wanted to leave that place. I wanted to leave him to die  
on that's what I did. Even the molecule I allowed myself to feel  
made me scream. What would have happened if I'd opened  
as I was told to do if I wanted Jesus to live inside one of its  
itman told me to "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew  
from their jambs!" Let love come streaming in like when  
ve A Lot and drove it out of business. The only store in town.  
n the river, Mikel said. Put them in a tributary. I did. I put them  
touching them. Now I want to chalk my fingerprints with them  
to hold them like he held me and touched my upper lip and called it  
e that made me wince. I felt love all the way then, and never since.

Death does not exist in poetry. A line may fade into the silence past its breaking  
but that is not death. No choking sounds in poems, no smell of blood. I can describe  
the sounds, the smells, but description is, in fact, a hiding place. There is no nobility  
in description. Is there nobility in poems? Let's hope not. Nobility is another place  
to hide. "Through all these myriad felt and mostly scorned and disreputable realities,"  
Alan wrote in a poem. I hope it is OK that I have quoted you, Alan. It is a poem  
about love's nuance but Alan would agree there is no love in poems. There is no love  
in a mushroom, in a handmade wedding dress. No death in a funeral hankie  
embroidered with the words "Try not to use it." I looked at a worm and I thought  
it was an angel. I looked at an angel and thought it was a storm. What is wrong  
with the mind is what is wrong with the poem. It is difficult to get the news-  
boy to be a newsboy. He keeps turning into a girl carrying a fish in a cloth delivery  
bag to her grandmother who is really a wolf dressed as a grandmother singing a line  
from *Ulysses*: "So stood they there both awhile in wanhope, sorrowing one with other."



For twenty-six days I lived in an apartment with a dishwasher,  
and I'll tell you, it changed me, it changed my hands not to have  
them daily in hot, soapy water, and the change wormed its way  
up my arms all the way to my brain, so that I became incredulous  
at the notion of ever having worked through a sink full of dishes,  
I was also in a strange time zone, and at a high elevation, so that  
in bed, flat on my back, I felt short of breath like an invalid, I was  
like Keats, and cried a little upon waking as he did, opening  
his eyes once again to dying, and people in the town treated me  
with an unaccustomed degree of respect, when they shook  
my hand I could tell they were thinking that it was soft,  
and it was soft, so was my other hand, the softness snaked  
everywhere, into all the corners of my life and my whole interior,  
I had no origin story, no soul, I was, practically speaking, an appliance.

When I am away I miss my ravaged hovel and its birds  
pecking at the house like a boy in speckled trousers  
nibbling on the witch's sugared windowpanes I miss the sky  
dustrag at dawn menstrual rag at sundown and my mother  
who takes a lawn chair to the cemetery so she can rest  
from tending graves and watches a field mouse poke up  
from a hole next to my father's grave and a snake unwind  
itself from her parents' shared stone and a flock of wild  
turkeys humped beneath their shawls of feathers squandering  
their lives beneath the trees and notices a trampled path  
from the woods to meadow where the deer run  
and single-file cross over our future graves she bought  
the plots cheap one year and an urn for her own ashes  
from the mortician who has loved her for years from afar.

The emergent self is not a self that loves. Love  
unlasting. Love, unlasting as a sentence. One feels  
love's depths, and yet its depths are shallow. Something  
beneath the shallows, and something beneath that.  
Darkness guarded by air-raid curtains. Not ennui.  
Don't pin that on my lapel. Sublimity. Basement  
of an infinite underworld museum where, in secret,  
death and the sublime bash against each other as clouds  
bash during storms, or theories bash in rooms full  
of theoreticians. Love, having felt it, one wonders how  
it can be a rather small thing, yet if it were in the sky,  
it would be the wing of some dumb flying machine  
blushed for a moment like a tangerine but remember  
the sky's largesse and emptiness, and larger still, the self.

Takes time to get to minimalism, years lived through, eau de  
suffering, yes, I'm in that camp, as Orr writes, we move from  
choked silence to blurted speech to diary with its useless key  
to story to poetry, the most shaped, therefore most distant from  
the original crime, even pleasure can be a crime, especially  
once it's lost, and happiness, the word an assault on the tongue,  
why, the patient asks the doctor, does everything taste bitter  
as the stems of dandelions, even the tongue tasting itself tastes  
bitter. When I was a child, one night, all I could smell was blood,  
I told no one, it went on like that for months until a torrential rain  
laundered the air, Con at 88, his lungs full of cancer, mind hijacked  
by dementia, can't remember his own poems nor holding a pen,  
though he accepts my reading them to him, that's a good one, he  
says, coughs, an urn-shaped moment, thus radiant, therefore true.



My favorite scent is my own funk, my least favorite scent, other people's funk, and this, my friends, is why we cannot have nice things. I value the advice I give others but I don't like the advice that comes my way unless it reflects what I would have done anyway. You know how it goes. I like how my voice sounds in the car when I sing along with Earth, Wind & Fire but no one else can pull it off, no one. My bad acting, when I acted, was charming. I intended it to be bad, as a comment on the state of theater in the 20th century. On days I don't have to see anyone I don't brush my hair, I don't wear underwear or shoes or chemical potions meant to extinguish my funk, and in these times, I am nearly perfectly happy. If you're me, it's luxurious to go unobserved. When asked the inevitable question, whether I'd wear eyeliner if I was the last person on earth, no, hell no. Eyeliner is war. When I'm alone, I lay my weapons down.

You know what living means? Tits out, tits in the rain. Tits in the cereal bowl. Tits ablaze. What beauty there was is now on the wane. I've seen beauty tinkle in the spring its little breeze-borne bells. Summer's copper gong, heat frizzing the wisteria until all that's left is rat hair. Winter, I think there are ice flutes. I think blue lips of killed kids blow cold notes from ice flutes. You know what living's for? Tits sacrosanct. Declined. Tits blued by cold, insomnia, midnight, indigoed like collapsed veins, steel-blue-stained pillowcase of the crone whose nightie won't be pulled up anymore. I saw my tits when I was young reflected back to me in a blue mirror on which were laid out lines of coke. Even then they were old, savant-tits, they knew things. Purpled. Milked-out. Mounded low and moving slow in the old way.

in full access to their imaginations are crosshatched  
l from a certain angle, wearing a tight black slip  
s dangling out the bottom and cornflower boots  
nct box store and were donated with the soles worn  
—from a St. Vincent de Paul while a defrocked nun  
ing bras for resale. Don't marry that. Its boots all  
loan out its rain hat. Or adopt a calf. I learned to read  
nger to suck ants out of their holes. One doll danced,  
at do you want from me? If you rotate me like a jewel  
uns all the way through like a pulsing vein of gold  
nizers who ruin everything that came before. The fish.  
people. Don't marry that. Go for something with half  
ourth. Like Mikel instructed about his ashes: A fourth  
I disobeyed, slit the phony box and set all of him free.

Lately I've been feeling about poetry like sex. Now and then I'm in  
the mood but then the mood doesn't bloom. The thought of it makes me  
a little sick to my stomach. Lead-up, lead-in, cleanup. Mixing of martini,  
metaphor, or the hard bangery of no metaphor at all. Cumbersome *I* like  
a big dick you have to handle. The *we* with all that *we are getting ice cream, we*  
*are thinking about getting a cat*. How does *we* think about stuff? Is it a brain stem  
thing? An art I never mastered. I have met people who would bang Ted  
Hughes on Plath's grave and then write about it. *I, too, bit his cheek*. That  
sort of crap. Yeah, I, too, have been that person. I want to say *at times*.  
*Long ago. I'm better now*. Really I'm just tired. A guy, I'm going to name him  
Delaney, once said to me when I wanted to be done with him, *now that you've had*  
*your little orgasm*, murder in his eyes. I called down all the angels from the skies  
to get him out the door so I could bolt it and wash him off of me. His big  
hand reaching for my throat. The prayer I prayed. That was sex and poetry.



I courted her, that musky tart, dusk personified, she of the purple prose and yellow journalism, her claws the color of Gauguin's Christ, pee-pee yellow with a dash of green, like that algae called xantho-something-or-other, missing its fucoxanthin, thus yellow-green, like poor-people teeth, like the finger and toenails of boozehounds, come to me, I said, her mouth like day two of a bad period, can hardly get up from her stool without that wooden cane with a stiletto in the tip of the shaft in case somebody gets local, but to quote my cousin-who-looks-like-Moses speaking of Etta James, "she's old, she's fat, she's sick, she's mean, she's the sexiest thing I've ever seen," like this girl who showed up at my door, she knocked and I answered and she just stood there in her tatters staring at me and picking her nose, sized me up like I should be the one ashamed of myself, she had a point to make, I guess, something about the grotesque, and Caren whose head was too small for her body who later became a cop and then a minister, said that I embodied that song "Femme Fatale" by the Velvet Underground, "false-colored eyes" and all, well now I'm barely femme and fatal only to some, my kidney hurts, I debrided my own burn, that loneliness I once lusted for I have become.

My tits are bruised as if I've been with a rough lover but I have not been, not today, I once gentled a certain someone and it turns out I loathe gentle, and bought a hard, red pear, hard enough to pound a nail into a reenactment crucifix, and I left the hard pear I mean dick-hard, on the red windowsill, abandoned it to its solo ripening until it began to exude that familiar musk, it might as well have said eat me, or sung it soprano, but the more it wanted my teeth in its hide the more I dodged it, I'd lost all respect for it, like that poem in which ripening plums are evidence that eternity is illogical, well of course it's illogical, and by the time I decided to just go ahead and dive, it had broken out with a bad case of fruit flies, my fault indeed but I blamed the pear, let's all blame the pear, this is not a metaphor but a fable whose moral is as old as time: I'm worried about these bruises and who will hold me when I die?

I hope when it happens I have time to say oh so this is how it is happening  
unlike Frank hit by a jeep on Fire Island but not like dad who knew too  
long six goddamn years in a young man's life so long it made a sweet guy sarcastic  
I want enough time to say oh so this is how I'll go and smirk at that last rhyme  
I rhymed at times because I wanted to make something pretty especially for Mikel  
who liked pretty things soft and small things who cried into a white towel when I hurt  
myself when it happens I don't want to be afraid I want to be curious was Mikel curious  
I'm afraid by then he was only sad he had no money left was living on green oranges  
had kissed all his friends goodbye I kissed lips that kissed Frank's lips though not  
for me a willing kiss I willingly kissed lips that kissed Howard's deathbed lips  
I happily kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed Basquiat's lips I know a man who said  
he kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed Whitman's  
lips who will say of me I kissed her who will say of me I kissed someone who kissed  
her or I kissed someone who kissed someone who kissed someone who kissed her.