Exhibition, Featuring

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EXHIBITION, FEATURING
Poems

Cassie Duggan
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To My Nana
Until it was nothing more than a gray paper moon, hanging in the sky.

Haruki Murakami
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ABSTRACT

*Exhibition, Featuring* is a collection of poems inspired by art, life, and history intertwined with the very center of humanness, convergence of heart and brain. The poems assembled here attempt to recreate the sensation of memory and remembering, and at times, trying to forget. Concerned with language and the ways in which we communicate with others, the lines weave in and out of conversation, evoking daily interactions and thoughts carried within us, continuous as breathing. The collection is divided into five parts, each establishing a variance of the whole—all parts a harmony. The reader will discover formal poetry, poems evoking the senses, and even dialogue broken and pieced into verse. Imagination lies at the forefront of this collection with poems riding the edge of reality, flirting with the absurd. The poems use imagery to explore the unknown and unthinkable. In each stanza, lyrical language mediates reality and invention. The poems are interested in discovering place, time, and history, and understanding how every factor contributes to making a person a self. Within this exploration is also the question: how does family make us who we are and in what ways do the people who influence us continue to do so from a distance? *Exhibition, Featuring* circles around harrowing global issues, and also emphasizes the significant smallness of beauty through words.
PREFACE

In her collection of lectures *Madness, Rack, and Honey* Mary Ruefle speaks to why I admire her, and why I consider her influence crucial to my own writing. “In the Short Lecture on The Nature of Things“:

(Turn vase into hat and wear it)
You think the vase has become a hat; it has not.
My body has become an upside-down flower.

Turn the expected upside-down. Consider the world from alternate views.
Understand the nature of things, and be surprised by them. These are important facets of seeing that I contemplate in my writing.

The poems here in *Exhibition, Featuring* are working on a myriad of planes. In some I use the word *blue*. In some I discuss current events. In some family. In some art. In some, in some, in some. The poems are of a voice, mine, and that voice is concerned with the world and the people in it, and reaches out to someone. In Frank O’Hara’s manifesto on Personism, he sums up his poetry ideology as such, “I was in love...I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem.” To me, this idea is precise; write a poem to another person. Oftentimes, I do not have a person in mind like O’Hara, but
the concept is there. An intimate exchange intended for another. The medium of
the poem is crucial, because most times a phone call just won’t do. And although
I do not subscribe to the New York School of writing in way of directness, I can
relate to this sentiment O’Hara presents. And in many ways this is what I’m
doing in my poems.

Specifically, in the series indicated with Roman numeral titles I tried to do
exactly this. These poems originated from imagined letters between two
disconnected people, as we often find ourselves isolated from those we love. I
wanted to condense the complex feeling of missing someone. “I’ll miss / missing
you” is the best example of this in action. I used the line break here to
intentionally give space between miss and missing, the future and the present,
both entirely possible at once. The line is simple, and yet the reality of that
feeling is so cloudy; the body aches when you miss and then in a different way
when time makes the missing lighter, easier.

In my manuscript I use the second person frequently, often addressing the
reader, but sometimes making the address ambiguous. I realize this does not
make things easy for my reader, and yet I think that poetry can be read with
many senses. One can listen for lyric sounds, read with ears picking up the sonic
elements that communicate meaning beyond normal speech. Language in a
poem can be interpreted endlessly. This is one of the things I love about poetry.
The writer can intend one thing, but in the same line the reader can understand
the opposite. In many ways, I embrace this disconnection. I allow for multiple
readings and missed meanings. As much as we intend to be precise with
language, there is always room for mistake. Imperfection makes life interesting.
It also makes poetry interesting.

Returning to the vase hat and the idea of absurdity in poetry, in XXVII of *Materia
Poetica* Wallace Stevens says, “Poetry must be irrational.” I once had my Nana
read a poem of mine. She didn’t say anything at first to me, so when I asked if
she had finished reading she said, “Cassie, it doesn’t make any sense, stars can’t
be peppermint.” I love this. Since then, I’ve only sent her prose to read, because I
don’t have the heart to show her how fully I’ve embraced those minty stars. I’ve
written what doesn’t make sense. And how sensible it seems! My attraction to
poetry is the irrational that Stevens demands. The logic is not straightforward,
but it is there, as irrational as it appears. At the center of this lies one very true
and firm belief I hold: the imagination is our strongest asset, as writers, as
people, as brains.
Dean Young writes in *The Art of Recklessness* “Reality must be called forth; it is not imaginary but it comes into being in collaboration with the imagination.” The reality in a poem is inherently imaginative. I do believe in the imagination/reality balance beam though. One side can’t be entirely heavier than the other. And so, in these poems, in the manuscript as a whole, I am rocking back and forth on the playground, one foot on the real, firm ground, and the other up in the air, kicking out into imagination. Young speaks to this up and down, as a source of tension too: “Poetry is in perpetual negotiation between these two urges. Between interior and exterior, between liberty and obligation, anarchy and order, self and community, referent and what it can refer to, sign and thing.” Because poetry is so condensed it allows us to elevate tension in big ways in a small space.

I am interested in how tension can be created by pulling the strings on multiples playing fields, for example, how form and content can create or dissipate tension. Also, how language and tonality can act tensile and establish movement in a poem. There is a simple and clear example of this in the opening two lines of “Poem for You Sitting and Reading in the Other Room or The Word for That.” I open with a conversational tone directed towards the sun saying, “Easy there sun, you weren’t called in,” which makes for an easy and readable opening, but
then I complicate that established tone by upping the poemness and using lyrical language in, “to quell the sugary shade, plain as vanilla bean scraped / diagonal across this room.” This kind of tonal shift happens throughout this poem moving the poem forward and also making the reader work in complicated tonal realms. This is something that my manuscript continually does, and tonality is a major concern of mine as a writer and reader, which evidently shows up again and again in my poems.

Speaking to the content of this manuscript, you, reader, will find several recurrent themes appearing poem to poem. On a macro level, I am writing about memory and selfhood, place and how history establishes us in a space and time. In two poems specifically I explore the idea of national tragedy and anniversary. In “Foxtrot Anniversary, a Greek Tragedy” the assassination of President Kennedy lies in the forefront, and in addition how we condition ourselves for yearly remembrance. I am curious about how this affects our grief. A more recent anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings led me to write “Settle Down,” where I illustrate how scattered the information of the tragedy found us, the American public. This is a very specific example of the way history invades my work. I am interested in exploring the past and how it shapes place, both physical and internal.
What I didn’t mention in the beginning is that starting to write is like trying to move a parked car, but once the wheels start inching forward, I cannot stop. This is what I love about writing. The momentum. The lack of control. The ability we have to lose ourselves and get completely lost in a poem. To hold our hands up at the end and say, \textit{what have I done}? Poetry has no risks. So why not try it all. Why not write through everything, even the truly terrible, in order to produce something you can look at and think, \textit{“Yes, that’s it.”} I can’t connect every dot here, but I know the bigger picture. I understand the poems simultaneously on a micro and macro level.

Through tedious revision and rewriting it becomes evidently clear that I was there from the beginning. And through all of this solitary concentration emerges the intense urge to share the work, a desire that propels each writer into the cycle of write, revise, share, repeat. The rigorous workshop schedule has instilled this positive habit in me, one that I am eager to maintain.

\textit{Exhibition, Featuring} is the product of continuous reading and writing over the past two years. This collection has been orchestrated to tell stories from a sensitive world infused with mythology and oral history, a place abundant with
images and surprises. This manuscript is an endeavor to create something unique through language, and build a place where readers can find a piece of themselves.
EXHIBITION, FEATURING
Drop cloths are always beautiful.

Dean Young
RSVP

We all leave each
other when the trees
shake their
arms, and loneliness
touches grass—
opposite of alone will be
a thing of summer. We’re so
small. Love project
toss me a hand, I’m mud
deep, my breath sinking
rock slow. I wish
others light and extended
vacations. Closet
sex and broken plates, nights walking
warm to nowhere everyland. Don’t
let your strain show, lover.
Watch check, best
time of day.

Come home and stay
drum tap toes, heartbeat
show time, our
middle sway. I’ll take
your diamond flush
for my clubs.

Smallness of three
years, can’t speak,
high fives with big
eyes—already she lives seriously. Can’t remember not

at war. No good proof of hereness, so I’ll go on my gut.
Auld Lang Syne

It just occurred
to me that I’ll never
be able to write a word
you haven’t already heard
in my head.
We are more than friends,
friends, somehow you surprise
me, which I say I like. The snow
from being forgotten, is black.
We are feckless patriots.
You taught me
that picking fights is the same
as picking apples, you have
to have an eye for bruises.
This year, I am
thankful for no-kill shelters.
Depending on the angle,
my heart is in free fall.
This year, I am thankful
for you. Come sit
as the chair sinks
into the new year.
I mean the floor. Pouring
water into my sand bucket
I thought of discovery.
Denial

This isn’t about the grave dug neatly out of the earth, no, this is about all the people we didn’t sleep with on the terrible nights when there was pounding and noise like an orphan playing make-believe with something else, legos invisible plastic blocks gifted as the parents who never, or as the hot grass waits to be trimmed in August. Loneliness is here, but the meaning…lost somewhere else; me on the outside waiting for the post office to open, you the beaten boxes getting sent out on trucks.

Today I’m thinking of making something. Sure with my hands, or maybe out of pipe cleaners and clay. Is it a project without direction? And who needs a car to really drive something home? This is practical. When I grab the palm of your hand with my fingers your spine will go dull like an old yellow pencil, but there will be a chair. Over here, see? I burned the broken dresser drawers and nailed in hooks to hang the dried lavender, the smell of purple humor.
I Thought We Were Talking About Desire

I’ve come to count

on a bewildering array of laments
from the Doppler
radar in winter

cupboard moth
predictions pull

the light
bulb string
kitchen snow

falls and flies. Ocean

must prove himself
past sins

forgotten his once famous
face mere
watercolor stains

blotted napkins
left behind

after love

story. Blinds turned up
heaven. Shades down

I lie
in light lines
my feet align

bright slats
down here
I fingerprint
the full red moon
in hardwood sky
your nose blood

or I punched
you wake.
Henry, you are a thing
of principle. You are such
a glow I stay
awake. My lack
of simplicity is a bus
riding deeper
downtown, picking up
more and more
passengers.
Exhibition, Featuring

Why should we move
the cedars from the sky
if the shadows are begging
for a change of scenery,
or of negativity; instead
we could negotiate relativity
in a sports bar over a couple
*that sounds good*
drinks, in the corner
the manager yanks
tiny legs, a boy
whose arm is stuck
in the claw
machine, little him grabbing
the plush elephant tusk
for dear life.
Nature always has a way of taking
the spotlight, proving we’ve made
the wrong decisions claiming
victim to our mistakes, filthy
trash. But hey, that’s the
future and today it’s all glitter
and gasoline parading
through the streets, and my dear,
this morning we took the most
*isn’t this gorgeous* walk, I’m still picking
sparkles out of my ears. The point
is this—we are only here long enough
to see one thing, so what will it be:
Dorothy’s real red slipper behind glass, or years
of absence? Giving the *real*
last pack to a stranger,
and signing up for boot camp the next day,
we all have our own way of dealing with loss.
Some paint four coats of white to erase
the habitat of the last person ever known.
A place to call home,
a driver’s license turned
up on the grass,
such a notion we have
to return what is lost.
Ursa Major

This is a poem becoming a bear tangled in a nest of stars. This is the story of Darwin evolving.

Yank the string coming down through the clouds, you are eucalyptus blinded.

Callisto, most beautiful, you are blue. This is the story of discovery, an upright human

and a baby on all fours. A teddy bear dunked in icy pools, strung up over the polar caps.

His furry ears clogged from end to end. Still the favorite of night has blood to fall.
Floral Arrangement

This isn’t the first time he’s appeared
raking the pollen off my bare chest
sweeping petals from my face.

I need to see something unbelievable.
The street is made to be cut in half.
This isn’t the first time he’s appeared.

One reflection will turn you away.
Pick this berry, leave that one
and sweep the petals from my face.

He’s sharp as a tooth, now
stepping out onto this sidewalk
this isn’t the first time he’s appeared.

My eyes, ravaged raw
the second half of this year
sweeping petals from my face.

I never noticed the sky wasn’t blue
it was the sunset being too goddamn incredible.
This isn’t the first time she’s appeared
sweeping petals from his face.
Backyard

_The world is big and I want to have a good look at it before it gets dark._
John Muir

Your trees, gods and their shadows over untold earth
national placeholders now, beauty in a glass positive. Whipped winds
cross rivers, the unknown—a comfort to so few. Was it mountains
or rain on our minds? You do not know what is beyond
preservation, where the paint runs solid, hard
to hang, but the animals are destroying the land. Air aloof, living
an experience, can you feel it? The water, a spirited
guide, leads wandering men to your home. There was a backyard,
yes, life in big sweeping circles. We are imitating
life. Chalk storms in dated classrooms dismissed, left to shrivel
in the dusty West or sent off to become presidents. This photo
is so perfect I can’t bear to look at you, pretend your eyes are mine
tracing the light scaling California mountains. It doesn’t get any better,
my hands are sediment, infinite, sweet and silty on the tongue.
It is winter in a way
that you would love.
Henry your wool
cloak, your rough fingers, you reach
for me; we went missing. A car, no heat,
this is pressing. This is an old story,
invisible scoring, the note left on my car
buried in frost.
Poem for You Sitting and Reading in the Other Room
or The Word for That

Easy there sun, you weren’t called in
to quell the sugary shade, plain as vanilla bean scraped
diagonal across this room. Sure, go ahead, open
the day with a no hitter, I know there’s a stat
for that, something you’d say, swing
swing one-man pinwheel airing
out your limbs
as if they just fell on your shoulders like dust
bunnies from the ceiling fan. And what else
comes to the front in this rain—your quiet old car
and us overlapping
on the roof, high enough for August bricks
to invent hot weight, buildings crushing down
our wild heads and talking arms.

Well

my lungs can’t feel that urgency here, and as far
as I’m concerned the bus
driver is the one in charge. Shhh, the time
it takes to get from the kitchen
table to you is proportionate to the instant
bacteria dawns a snowflake, ice raptures a web
reminding me of a million other verbs. How else are you supposed to come back to earth? But her dad died and the same day I ignored mine when he called. There’s got to be a word for that. Somewhere [insert artist] is laughing at my tee shirt and shaking stormy hands at the sky.
Settle Down

I’ve lost something
is like saying without
you I lose
myself, or even
I found something
in you,
in the carpet
rungs
a blue yarn
light, I lost my mind, lost my inner
guide—here

the poem realigns, asks the you, the me, where we
side on the anniversary, today, yesterday, April, if we saw it
coming from a mile away, as they say, or if now sitting here
bowing forehead to forearm I can spot
the past from the doorbell chime, the Tuesday
from the Friday, same process
uneven hardwood. So when I rest
my eye on the floor, dizzy oak waves,
I can’t find

Be careful with your Sunday. We knew a guy in jazz, a guy in
finance
all the detectives found in the blood-soaked apartment
a million dollars
a powerpoint with 122 blank slides
their desire, their dogs upturned a pretty classic
risk/reward scenario—I hope

you fail. Can I say that out
loud? We’ll get a photographer,
direct market, we’ll mass marry a forgetfulness
and a heart. Your red checkers stacked like
whatever you make sure to throw in the closet minutes before anyone comes
over
for dinner, and maybe dessert, that’s it
little cookies ladder up to cup
hot cup of
originally brewed to celebrate language,
can I say I found what I was looking for.

Hi brother, I can send
you orion, slow post though,

I’m under the new country
sky, but it’s all a freckled pear.
There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow.

Wallace Stevens
Babysitting the Octopus

Sleep was like a crying baby I couldn’t hush.
But the child is not a baby, he is a solid twelve with four years of sick in the mix. That kind of nagging worry must feel like crooked seaweed wedged in front teeth.

Monitored the dark clock, rushed into his room to prove the rising blanket right. He is beginning to see the world for what it is, wonderful saltwater.

He must shudder every day and poke ruddy fingerprints along the marble countertop, prodding the seabed for fool’s sand. He’ll ink the walls rusty and point to the shadow when asked about the stains. All it takes is a pattern shift to change who you are, and every octopus wills its skin rough with marine mountains, textured and tall, or blinks smooth as an oyster’s throat.

Eight arms shuffling tarot cards must be better than one, ten bloody fingers feels safer than none. Metamorphic bullseye, see the color storm the center? You were once a rock, now startled stark white, just realized the fish knows more.
Casseiopeia

And you bent to pick up the palm leaf, forgetting the need for it, something about your whipped saga. You had a piece of it. It was quite erotic you recall, notes on fish scales and a light post guarding the Cyprus tree. And when the button fell, that was your slingshot back over June. Did you mistake your iris for tinted or your hand for antlers? You woke to your chair nailed to the ceiling. Call to me, your daughter, waiting out the storm. It was me in the reflection of you in your hand mirror. I am your daughter, but the line is twisted. You told me all the pretty things to say. It was me. And how dearly can you kick and cry for the waves when you only wanted saving from the clouds. Mother, I must remind you.
We met
in the big green space
and looked up
to the pirate flag waving
out someone’s window.
You kissed me on the nose.
Henry, we missed it all.
Did I Mention Tennessee Williams?

Did I mention Christmas? You spent all morning stringing lights and prayers along the awning. The dog sat close on the steps.

I never told it another way. People are not so dreadful, not so beautiful. I called in the lightning, you let in the cold.

I’m sick at best, I swear.

The self was not thought of, nor selfishness spoken of.

What a day we had: good fortune and sympathy. When we married,

a wedding of blue roses, now outside, a clean mess. We blew out the candle as the eclipse hid the sun. The moon breathed harder, spoke more often, and showed us language.

I want to tell you something funny.

Nothing can live up to that moon or the movies.
My Spanish Brother

And there it is, the arrival for the first time
the smoke from the copper chimneys.
I want you to bless me before it turns
into cause for sacrament.

A smoke from the copper cardinals
sweet redemption rising
into a cause for wonderment.
He remains alive fighting America

as sweet redemption rises,
he is both an insider and a brother.
Can he remain alive to fight for South America?
But anyone raised by a name is

both a brother and an outsider
unlikeably born into a prayer
but anyone raised by a name is also
a lie against this uprising.

Like he was born into a prayer
as the saying goes he
lies against the uprising
in the most unequal part of the world.

As the saying goes he
pictured a miracle from the top down
in the most unequal part of the world,
the land has come full circle.

Picture your miracle from the top crown
and there, the arrival for the first time
this land has come full circle.
I want you to bless me before it turns.
Grow Up Human (Instructions From Your Great Grand Someone)

Thoughtlessness will lead to latent and perpetual remorse, but the way is obvious if you listen. Ask questions. Graze the line for jewels; bite open the cookie and misread your fortune—You will know where you first came from—meaning you’ve forgotten me as I’ve never imagined you and the way your voice cracks when I start to tell you a secret. Your friends will help you unearth gold in your mind, but they won’t tell you when it’s a fake buried in the thief’s bag. No, they won’t see that movie with you. I knew we were older than we felt yesterday, or a long time ago. The ingredients were with you from the start.
Nebraska

The pioneer years started after the first Halloween you tried to be sexy. You are 25 and know more than you had memorized yesterday. The snow freezes on the riverbank, reconsider the physicality of geographical boundaries, to disappear with burnt suede jackets left in the white by boiling cowboys. This is Husker Nation. You will be contained there, registered in the witness protection program for physical therapists adducted towards the middle. To find out the center of the world is hundreds of feet off, to stand in the very middle and be dead wrong. Green beer is
bottled for stink and
stored to make you feel
drunk off algae. Dwellers
on the bluff ate TV dinners
and Raisin Bran, fledglings
on the hopscotch scene.
You will leave furniture
warehouses empty
handed. Your golden
retriever looks like you,
maybe in the parking lot
after team kickball you
will remember you were
addicted to the long
distance relationship.
Yesterday’s tomorrow is
today only when you’re in
tune with how much you
miss him. Here children
wonder what whales
would dream if they could
dream without ever seeing
one. Conscious breathing
is like forgetting where
you came from. You will
study cadavers, holding
roman candles, bright
shine like a camera NOTE:
chordae tendineae NOTE:
frontal lobe NOTE:
descending aorta NOTE:
cerebellum NOTE:
superior vena cava NOTE:
Soul: origin Midwest
On a long day in a
particularly long week you
will drive to Iowa for some
space, truly the best they
can offer, out past tall
stalks and steaming
nuclear plants you will call
me. Hello.
The summer we braided,
you were a rash
after camping
with your dad. Henry, later
I heard a song about the little bugs
that bit you up. Burrowed
and the heat stayed heavy in the air.
The music sounded
better than breathing.
You couldn’t handle the itch.
The red bumps I loved,
tearing down your leg.
Foxtrot Anniversary, a Greek Tragedy

The mice pray for rain
with attentive beauty,

a kind of widow traumatized,
routine repository

clocked with every congressional decision. Or
is this mid-life crisis blooming Sweet

William in the front
yard of Dallas,

an Atlantic upbringing.
We are fences.

You aren’t forgotten
in a time

of reviews,
experience unchanging,

impossible. I don’t believe
in homeruns, or those bones

uncovered by passers-
by in plain sight. Is it a hoax?

The leaves under my feet,
plastic and my cheeks

chill, from first frost,
fall, and grief.

The king’s death made
gentle, you could say your father
changes your luck,  
you could say

all tragedy is about the way  
we live. The man

was not only a hero  
but a father, maybe this is why

we cry. For each  
bulletin of metastasized

violence, for favorable  
winds, uncanny

the cat is afraid  
of the umbrella. We are waiting

in lines, television on,  
my grandparents

married the same day.  
America, the same day.
We Can Rust

There is education behind your frantic
drunk lectures. Fight-drool in those dream gardens
mad honey whispers. Her skin
recalls some bare summer or the strap

of a tank top slipping down
her freckled shoulder. Most understand
what can rust. Winter needs coffee, and metallic
memories lie hidden under your cold
tongue. Human bodies love rhythm and consistency
in phases. Pluck plastic strings in time
with the rain; be at home here
chanting music through her legs.
Blues Poem

Mama blue eyes  be sorry
Mama blue eyes
be sorry some more  You’ll never know
what it is to blindfold your heart like a sore
Young women don’t trust  pressure is off
Say I’ll take you there ashes coloring the coffee tin rust
no  young women don’t trust
Be sorry some more mama
You’ll never know what it is to lead
  blue eyed mama be sorry
how hard it is to need

Congratulations you are going to die  wolves are prophets in the sun
Congratulations  wolves are going to die

Go gather forbidden fruit  brother stacked oranges so high
cut your hair  fever came out
  cleaner than before  cut
be sorry some more
more sorry
  be  friends dig your bridge

blue eye scare
I think it’s because we never existed inside time.

Robert Hass
I.

Oak leaves
fall after one
another, covering
the pavement.
It was just Spring.
Since the day we met
we’ve transposed
reflections
of each other.

Imitation is our
darling mutation.
Did you ask for this?

I suppose my brain
is mine, and yours
yours, a sunken
disaster.
That’s how we
splinter. I am

holding onto
the counter and
our daughter

hides
under
the table.
II.

In the green I am
a crag. And the cliff,
the line that divides
what your daughter
knows from the world
with crosses. I think
of the Irish Sea,
what it would be like
to see pagan circles
drawn on the icy
waves. Shadows of clouds
a spectacle
on this rock face.
III.

Hummingbird, unwrestle
the world. Flit to the reaches
of your small heart. The sun
shines at you. Shine
back. Leave our tree,
wise little bird, you’ve learned
the absence of true closeness.
But you are my saving.
My old head is bruised and buried. When you ask for me I’ll be quiet, because you need to listen.
As far as I can tell I’m on an island. The tide is rising further than it did fifty years ago. I’ve mismapped my geography. You must be moving away from it or climbing the oak in our front yard. Is my white shirt still hanging on the back of the chair?
You
are you. I said
that. But last
night I woke
wailing
for you.
And it was something
about having been
asleep, and then
suddenly unasleep
that I realize
how much I can
miss.
A happy couple in
the parking lot.

I shouldn’t have
eavesdropped.

I made
them nervous, repeating

because I saw you,
somewhere helping me,

carrying
my groceries.
VII.

There was my .
His name
more than just
a name
when loved.
Here I am
on this
coast he
is not.

Leaving: an action:
takes a chip
off your back, and
when you leave often
your spine
drips
like a severed
icicle.
VIII.

The premature
forms in this house
are ringing.

They are bleeding in the sea
and the lights are flashing.

Some are nude sketches
in the snow. Most are
browning leaves. It is

three o’clock. They come
back home. It was the dog

that first heard the scratching.
Now there are only lemons
left in the kitchen and

our hearts tied
to the ceiling fan.
IX.

To kneel at the ledge
with eyes for the sun
is a morning I want
to live in. A brief man will allow
himself letters, but only
privately to the woman.

Yours is a tongue so
sad it could taste
salt on a flower

that only blooms at night.
I trapped the church
bells under my bed. At the hour

this morning
I couldn’t discern
the sparrows.
The dragonfly of my tongue
is hot, a boiling lesion,
a dewy sill. This is
not new for us. You are here,
you are not. The sharks
came and went, folded
suits remained locked in trunks,
kraken called in sick,
and the bird never spoke
to the ocean.
XI.

Either way I’m letting you know
I can’t be home, not now,
not ever as you are beating.

I’ve been choking you all this time. My hands grew tighter and tighter around your heart.

I’ll miss missing you. The blue dress I asked to dance.

The smile I gave a kiss that New Year’s Eve in country snow. When the word spreads, you will see me more than ever.
You do not always know what I am feeling.

Frank O’Hara
Self-Portrait at the Sculpture Park

elsewhere

I wrote you a letter, no stamps
we are the bricks

tawny promises
fallen from their post
inscribed like lashes

but the artist wraps himself in a dry white towel
arty occupancy installation
incorporates stale cereal and aluminum kidneys

calls it symbiosis
calls it factory
calls it poem

been too still the bodies are blue

move me else
where

There are places you should stand as the train passes
and places you should not, here on the overpass
riskless

or down at the hotel bar, one high and the other dark,
used-to-be-yellow slide wants to be alone on the jungle gym at night

still so much can be said for the single-minded
tracks

teasing the wind with it’s sheer steadfastness
no joke
we’re all standing to go to a station elsewhere
A dog noses
your recycled
bottles. The fourth
movement plays
from the window
three stories up; Henry,
you are a flood
in a sandbox. And
the thunderstorm
is tapping
at your window again.
Rabbit Logic

The saints say hop
on my shelf. The saints say

the Mississippi is a street that feels
like America. The saints say you wake up

sweating with aftershocks of stranger
anxiety and an unkempt garden.

The saints say this feels
like the America everyone

wants but no one is from. The
saints ask what other

animal feels embarrassed? The poodle
tied to the fire hydrant? The cat

in the bag? The saints say my
friends are mapping the X

where men grow. The saints say this is the second
time I’ve eavesdropped on a happy birthday. The saints

say you can’t find them. The saints
say you eat what you can find.

The saints say natural disaster is
a good topic. The saints

say to straighten up at your local
dive bar. The saints say every child denied

a quarter for the spring horse ends
up here. The saints say this is magic.
Tornado Castle

Not so long ago, the inhabitants of the Middle connected storm cellars to create the Below America. The cats and dogs took turns walking alongside the Above Americans and the Below Americans. The roses smelled sweeter below and the museums glowed with unseen artists and obscured artifacts. And when the moon rises above the Above America, the Above Americans smile. When the tornadoes wash over the plains the Below Americans hush. They hold hands silent to the wind. Time rushes and houses fly. Each one thinks, it takes only one person to do a desperate thing.
Pleiades

Breathing
on your ears,
he’s after
you again. Him,
a street over.

An atlas on the bookcase
insists this is where stress
intersects and public
parks grid against
the strict brick blocks.

You are nebulous
pronouns forthright
swearings to the earth,
seven faces
squinting at the sun.

My mailbox
is an indicator of
the past. The eviction
notice and warning
letters, the blood.

You are several
middle-aged hot stars
running from the bull.

Ladies hoping
for half a dozen
darlings unearthed
from the sand.

The mothers
command you,
to cry again or else
they’ll fade into gods.
Blueprint

Write more smart voids. Language can elaborate a woman better than the man can cut parsley. Quotidian symphonies melt on plates. Skip summer research assigned to lust vacations. It will be like peeling the wet leaves off your car window, like my hand lifting off your chest. Try harder. Rip through singing time—

those who never dream of falling off map or dripping off the rose.
If Instead He Heard a Song from a Fruit Shelter

I set up camp in a dimly-lit wooden house, where I see fruits in colors I shouldn’t and I draw over the same charcoal sky.

As decisions are, I am between living entirely in the day or in the night, but I know the poet will ask: Do you dream in the light or sleep with the light dreamers?

I know, I saw the bird too, I heard the bird too, the chirping of hard rain slicing across the sun, a forethought before the crying storm enters the room.

A lady may stop by my cabin, when she does, the scenario will be reversed and I will never think of sleep as sleep.

The poet is you, and the lady is your mind unmindful. Not awake, she came from glassy Tennessee in a flying train car.

Me, habitant of this wooden house, understands waking is not waking and the rain, yes, the hard hard rain.
Orion

The opportunist in a top hat thought he was not caught, but scars last, crass rascal looking for a good-looker, legs and high neck; know the type? Cretonne flowers vined on the clothesline, summer now, sit down real visible and plain. Can’t predict how the wild orchid beams up like a scorpion shadow before hammering down. Indisputable logic, crotchety and rude hunt for the four-legged hearts, leaves probe for fingerprints. News scented on the bow.
Secret Service Trip

Mama blue eyes, be sorry some more,
keep breaking up fights between muscle
tanked sweethearts and tough cornhuskers.
The pressure is off, kettles whistling ragtime
sputtering steam on every mirror
you’ve got. The roads are closed for overnight
shipping. We are moving away
from all we know because Chicago
just made the Republican candidate
look good. They are here to organize the ice cream
social, a corporate celebration for convincing
young Catholics to dig aqueducts
on Mars. Post-its are Band-aids
for our desks and drinking warm
Diet Coke is another way to remind
yourself you are going to die. Friends,
we look good on paper. Congratulations,
I can’t stand how comfortable you are.
You’ll never know what it is to lead
someone blindfolded into this cactus garden,
to say I’ll take you there and mean it.
We all have something to work on:
you are scared of their bridge and I
of their hometowns. Young women don’t trust
each other. Florists are prophets and horticulture technicians water skyscraper ferns; both are useless when the sun don’t shine. In another time you’d be a gatherer, in another year Mondays won’t survive. We’ve been fluctuating between carbon compounds and forbidden fruit, stacked oranges so high one replaced the sun. It was time to leave after Cut Your Hair and tend to money laundering. Directions read: Tumble dry low, iron when needed, you’ll come out cleaner than before. You’re wondering how hard it is to keep up in Japanese drunk, realizing you are good at something. Wolf brother blue eyes on your driver’s license. Motorcycle law caught him jaywalking threatened Wolf, this time it’s a warning label. Newspaper read: Baby fever led area woman on a maternal heist, boyfriend tipped authorities off to sperm bank robbery. All hands on your head, your hands on deck.
This is Flying

If Wisconsin is home then look
out your window to see
Mexico from birds’

eyes, and if home is elsewhere
then be prepared
to go elsewhere. That feeling is a spider

hanging midair,
and the clouds marionettes,
joint legs knocking

against the sky box. Slow
mountains crest as months spin
around the sun. On the floor

you are painting our kitchen. Clocks,
picture frames, and maps
scatter the floor.

You need a center. Face me,
I know how
you like your eggs.
Lion & Lamb

The autumn day is unaware of the surprise
It has for the garden. Just as roses are grafted
Something red, to be mistaken for love and giving,
But I wonder how children learn to whistle?

A mouth rounding ooooh... Yes, the way the last man at the bar
Blows into his bottle, an unassuming reflex or muscles reversing age.
It was a roll of the tongue that created your name,
And then multiple angles of speaking so that you

Can disagree with me here. Henry, will you always
Proclaim third time's a charm? You mean to kiss the world
With your charm again, and again, and for those who can relate,
Think of the leaves green—now brown, and falling into the next big thing.
A State of Mind

Truth or dare. An allegory walks through the woods does he hear himself grinning. What is a pipe, if not a hat. Boy, girl. When we ask, who do we ask, and more importantly who’s answerer. Will you write you? Philosopher du jour. Is there a single dead man in Washington D.C. who isn’t memorialized. Are we there yet. Go to work on President’s Day. How’d he get the chance. In the pursuit of relaying messages, I’ll ask again: life? Who’s the optimist. If the roots are strong, and spring economical, predictable as any other year, can you grow a TV. Where’s the channel changer, clicker— remote. Your last goodbye? Where do I stand in relation to the painting, if the painting is moving, is it there?
Henry, the sun
set and the night is too
cold for this month.
Being inside makes me
miss the piano and waiting
for you to come home.
Play the scales.
I could hear the human noise we sat there making
Raymond Carver
Personals

*Style is never anything but metaphor.*
Roland Barthes

Let’s get personal, or do we mean
acquaint ourselves with thought
dimension since last summer
we grew arrowroot in the garden,
and yesterday we learned
precisely what arrow
heads look like, who knew it didn’t
just thicken the pot, and who
will be there next time
we try sweeping dandelion greens
into the library, telling us, *no, no,*
*plants and books must be organic*

but on their own terms. When
the garden begins to sprout
metaphors, then maybe death will
find irrelevancy, or the fruits

will lend sex to the gloves and shovels,
someone will make commentary

about kids who go to summer camp
year after year, but I never went
to summer camp and I’m
no gardener.
Here We Are, Saint Francis

Down at the very start of this city, weather dives fierce on streets and buildings box out the sun, grand reaching angles, zigzag fire escapes crawling up to half moon people. Strange they call themselves umbrella-ready, water-hardy folks but craters are not puddles to stomp in music, not since June at least. Welcome singing on a crescent scale, turn of day dote on them. A cathedral, a bar—who falls, who stands. What’s it to look out, if you haven’t even found an entrance. Unwatered cactus never asks. The needy window pleads. Bluebird bound a bible home, skyscraper shade burned us all.
Springfield Plateau

After practice a cheerleader cried in a Walgreens parking lot,

the rain poured like country music.

The car was stripes and humiliation. The cat found

the first small bone buried deep as hamster graves. Then the dirty

pink lace in the rosebush. The cabin, beside the Ozark river tilts,

dragonflies land on each other.
Baptiste Goes Blind in Three Takes

I.
I am the show and tell
cathedral, blanched spectacle a secret
street clears for me, me delphinium arms stacked
tall, so crowded, but when I began to lose
my eyes on the first day of spring no
one else lost their yeses. Marquee smoked
me, the child blurred in
to the room with an unmade bed and his face
was nothing
to me light became a funny friend,
we were cordial, even trusted one another,
but I simply had no need for anymore
a cheek warm
the window
nothing

II.
assemble an audience
ears with a penchant

for seeing the best in show
people, and if I were

showing you
you see my motions

you correct me
change the lightbulb

graze the stage
III.

Look down from the hill

on snow, loud white

blinded bleach and the round buildings

close as fingertips to air, tight prayers

broadcast to chapels on the sun.
Kiss That Goodbye

*California deserves whatever it gets.*

Don DeLillo

Neighborhoods
a replica
of the future.
Excellent adjectives
messed up
parents.
Rock technology,
young
alumni gone mad.
Polychrome
accidents promise
to change something.
Splendid isolation.
Patriots dream
with a wink.
Time is giant,
virtual kids
lack conflict;
sense idealism.
Dirty war
smiles a doomed
grin. He lost.
Opaque hands
in light.
Then Fire

Tucked in a drawer
at the end of this block

the daisy chain of colorless
bodies still

lying on the sand. Look first
the ocean blinded, then heat

a birth, smoke wriggles
through windows and harpoons

pale sky air. We were breathing there.
To make fire: sticks stacked careful

wait for rising.
To make love:

Stained photo lips
paused, tensile sight gag,

widowed in the ninth, let’s hark
back on Sutro, on dandelions in glass

jars, wishes for winter nights.
Snow falls reserved

accidental as finding yourself facing
himself, rising and twisting in a dark

east-facing room, your skirt there, and him
bending over you, bowing to a fire

he never smelled and buildings
he never knew. Then
fire float above the city
on a hanger of wind. Face East,

carry the heavy
wool on your back.
367943 Duende  (February 15, 2013)

The bullet is
on its way.

Your life is
logged in the big

computer and calculated
for risk. Things have

quieted down. Every coffee
brewed in a pick-

your-poison
kind of morning,

every eye gone
wide to the window.

Is she home?
People were born

in a time of
heavy bombardment.

White cluster
bombs threatened

every cul-de-sac
and today is no more

bullet than rock. Keep
watching

the skies. Your
color is danger.
Your wife is safe.

Things have quieted down.
Daughter of West Virginia

Starve that shiver, break
your rocks. This is for you
and only you
sweet, greasy child,
miner’s girl in the forest
of gods
taller than trees. You’ll need
a skeleton
key and spit-handshake to open
the world, to cross
states into your mother’s
name. She is iron and honey
and alive.

Playground, behind a
dogwood tree
she cast
blossoms
falling from
her mouth,
the bark
pulling at her
hair.

What would it be like
to live in the shell of a mountain?
What it would be
like for him.

In Louisiana he ran
a cab to the bottom
of the river delta, he swears
he’s seen it worse: drywall
for biscuits, cafeteria
ladies dressed up
as saints. It’s the worst time
to be the happiest
he’s ever going to be.
Breakfast for his daughter, a currant
rising in a bowl of milk.
In my dream
Henry, you are so
unlike you and I
am the bad me,
an ugly and jealous
ting, waking in a cold
sweat and finding
you here.
Masonic Mama

New to my pinkie
a ring swivels flaglike

climbing up and around the pole of my smallest
finger, patriotic gold deco holds in the rainbow

of our Masonic sisters, secretly true, aprons
tied around their pretty little waists. No

wasted time in the cradle basement
reading bible pages with burning

breath. When did you start
praying for us? Order the prism

west to east, we never asked red
to hide in the dark cellar,

but some hushes age
sweeter than wine.

Mine. She was such
a tan mother, drinking sun

tan lotion and popping
Red Hots as the sun stood

over noon time swim swap meet, keep up the pace
and we obeyed with sugar sticky on chlorine

palms, dipped our bodies in the deep end. On the hour
checked in. Our shallow belly

buttons trapped water like suburban tide
pools. Still we lay waiting for the drops to murmur, then
we heaved heavy sighs until the thimble turned on us, a volcano erupting kid laughs and madness. We squealed

and practiced drowning
without knowing what makes someone need
to forget
air.

Pouncing on the sky
teal plastic bands of her lawn

chair, I felt my mother’s oily legs
and saw her blue curdling
bruise where love grabbed her tight
on the hip. She flinched as we jumped in her lap,
cutting sharp:
secret societies

all women learn to join, and me
too soon

enough I could see
as I salute
sun spray from
my pale eyes that

he, any he will love
us again and again.

And again
it hurts so real.
Morning Redreamed

brother
been shot
bullet
hardly fast
enough
to dream
only

I can’t be an only
can’t be crying

wreathed in spineless
butcher’s broom
sibling stand gate
eyes toward
nothing
new

too light
looking
back coerce
serious Spanish
out of you

translate my ears
I’m lost viewing
meet me
the flyover
won’t stop down
never a sadder
thought
than dying in my
own blood
my hand
pushes confetti
against your chest
back into the hole