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# Finally the Moon: Poems

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# FINALLY THE MOON: POEMS

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Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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2014

## **Dedication**

Frank X. Williams, Father

Andrew X.M. Robison, Son

# FINALLY THE MOON: POEMS

by

KIMBERLY KATHRYN MATHES, B.A., M.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

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## PREFACE

### 1.1 Scope of Project

As with almost any poetic endeavor, this project began in the literal—with an interest in physical space—and transformed into the metaphoric. The opposite also occurred, where seeking to write about the abstract and metaphoric, namely angels, sometimes turned into the literal (see “Sometimes an Angel”). Ultimately, through my natural inclination as a writer and traveler, what began as a project examining place through poetry expanded into a project which examines all kinds of ways that space is filled: artistically, religiously, creatively, culturally, all the while retaining the original endeavor to write about place.

For all of my adult life, beginning from the age of seventeen when I first visited Europe with my sister, I have given myself every possible opportunity to travel. Writing about places, then, for this thesis was an obvious way to start collecting my experiences and myself into poems. When I travel anywhere, I’m interested in immersing myself – wandering around, talking with the people who live there, eating the local food, and finding out about the language(s) that are spoken there—even if they are only varying forms of English. I then endeavor to make sense of my experiences traveling through language and imagination by recording what I encounter and then considering what that encounter might possibly mean by adding form.

The ‘places’ that kept expanding out of the literal writing about place, surprising me most, were poems about my father and poems about art, which just kept coming to me in unexpected moments. I knew that I would write my thesis about physical spaces—geography and culture—but I never imagined that the spaces and places I carry with me would also end up in this project. While writing this thesis, I literally returned to places I had been as an undergraduate student during the years of 1987-1991 and reassessed them with a more mature

eye over twenty years later—the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Tower of London and the Metro in Madrid, for examples. But I also returned to these and other places through memory and imagination. In the process, other items of significance returned to me: the dictionary from my childhood, for example, and a baseball scorekeeper’s card. And so many poems, in the end, turned out to be about seeking and finding, which is precisely what these poems do on multiple levels. This thesis contains several poems with titles that begin, “Finding such-and-such,” wherein the speaker searches for everything from lost eyeglasses to St. Anthony (who, ironically, is the patron saint of lost items). What I found is an old story—what we encounter in an attempt to find something else. But it’s a meaningful story as in this endeavor I ended up with a series of poems that I never expected to write and that I only realized were even a small series as I began to form the thesis as a whole. I began with a literal search for my grandfather’s grave, for example, and I ended up finding a poem. That might sound trite, but that’s very much how the process of writing this manuscript came to be.

Many of these poems are filled with angels, which is a subject that sometimes I find and sometimes finds me. And for quite a while while writing this manuscript, even after I wrote and submitted my thesis proposal, I wondered how angels and place, two seemingly unrelated topics, would come together into one manuscript. However, as I began to realize how angels are one way to understand how we humans fill space from a religious/spiritual/metaphoric point of view, I began to understand my own writing better. Returning to Swedenborg helped me in this realm, too. The man went from being a geo-physical engineer to a visionary who toured heaven and conversed with angels. How was this possible? By shifting one’s vision from the physical understanding of space to a more abstract and spiritual vision. One of my poems, “Sometimes an Angel” takes up this idea directly wherein attempting to examine angels metaphorically, the



poem lands squarely in a more literal realm. Rather than ask how many angels can fit on the head of a pin, why not ask how many different ways can a human envision an angel? And what does that envisioning mean? Angels can be a metaphoric vehicle for helping to understand existence, the Creator (God), the impossible (miracles), but also, as the poem asserts, sometimes angels can just be angels. As Harold Bloom will reveal later in this preface, that's okay, too.

In his preface to *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration*, Edward Hirsch contends that "The duende (or the demon) and the angel are vital spirits of the imagination...They come only when something enormous is at risk, when the self is imperiled and pushes against its limits, when death is possible" (xii-xiii). In truth, angels have come to me in various ways of knowing since I traveled to London once in my early twenties. At the time, I felt wary of my experience and didn't write about it for years. However, after poems like "At 1:30 a.m." came to me, I began to trust my angelic experiences more, and the original experience that I had over twenty years ago returned to me in part in my poem "Sometimes an Angel":

in disguise: he who slips one evening  
into the streets like a London  
fog to provide distraction in order  
to help someone find something  
critical that's lost--a passport,  
let's say, or a child--and who  
disappears as soon as the air  
clears, and the tourist, relieved,  
starts for home. Sometimes  
an angel is just an angel, (13-21)

This poem began as a response to a question, but after re-reading Hirsch and reading Harold Bloom and certainly Swedenborg, I realize that it's taken on much more of a life of its own. This poem in its questioning of the literalness or metaphoric aspects of angels provides the frame for this entire thesis – not just in exploring how angels may exist in our realm, but in its use of

place, and in creating this poem, I gave myself permission to go to new places—both imaginative and spiritual. In entering these new places, I found more interesting and lively poems than I had ever written before. I also found more room to play and more depth than I had previously when writing.

In addition, in writing this thesis, I came to understand that, for me, angels are a method of understanding, a way that I can take the mysteries of life and convert them into something that I can at least attempt to know through my imagination and intuition, and I can make this attempt through writing about them and putting that writing into poetic form. While this may not seem “something enormous” or risky to most people, many times during the process of writing I felt pushed to my limits, only to eventually break through and find something—a line, an image, or even a whole poem—waiting for me. For me, the risks often felt somewhat frightening, and these moments, once endured, were often followed by minor revelations.

In the widest possible sense, therefore, upon writing this preface and collecting my thoughts, I realize that this project examines the use of place and space and the relationship between, but it also looks at many other aspects of space--how words fill the page, how landscape fills space, how human imagination fills space, and how we humans make meaning by understanding place within space. The scope of this thesis widens even as it finds its focus more clearly.

## **1.2 Poetics and Assessment**

Difficulties in creating this thesis included a lot of starting and stopping and one incredibly frustrating and frightening series of seemingly empty months where I felt that I wasn't writing poems. I composed this thesis across a full calendar year, not registering in the spring of

2014, instead of across one academic year. The extra time turned out to be critical in the end, especially as I used the UTEP trip to London and Madrid to moisten the dry spell. I signed up for the trip full well knowing that traveling so far from Phoenix would likely get me back to writing poems. And it did. The first poem that I wrote after this time was “On the Corner of Bedford Place and Bloomsbury.”

This poem, however, was preceded by a series of months, from February through May, when I felt stuck. I felt that no poetry was coming to me, and I was also not figuring out how to go out to meet it. But, actually, I was wrong. As a part of the process to keep writing, even if I felt that I wasn’t writing poems, and as part of the process to keep my thesis going despite the dry spell, I made myself write a poem every day during the forty days of Lent. I had no idea how much poetry I had written and collected until I came back from the summer travels in Europe and sat down and went over my journals. Many rough poems, especially the ones about my father and the ones based on the campus where I work (the library, art, students, etc.) came from this exercise in writing for forty days. I also gathered poems from short trips around Arizona. I was both surprised and delighted at what I found.

But then had to get down to business and revise. Finding the shape of each poem wasn’t especially difficult, except for a couple of poems whose shape are still waiting to be determined (so they subsequently didn’t make it to this collection). Where I did struggle, guidance from my thesis advisor helped. What challenged me more than how the poem went on the page (with stanzas, line breaks, etc.) was the actual editing of the poems. The composition teacher in me kept over-using punctuation, including a penchant to rely on the outdated semi-colon and a complete over-reliance on commas. Guidance from my thesis director helped with that as well,

and I found it telling that in relaxing my need to over-control the language through punctuation, the manuscript as a whole began to take a more noticeable presence and form.

My final two struggles with this manuscript came in determining the title of the collection and the order of the poems. One day I sat in the library where I usually write at a large study table alone, hoping for inspiration to come and direct me how to organize my poems into a thesis. I had spread each poem across the table like I was organizing a deck of cards. I gave the piles post-it note labels like “dad” and “angels” and “place,” but what I subsequently realized is how many of the poems in this manuscript are about multiple themes simultaneously. Some are about both my father and angels—one theme or idea helping me reach or understand another. Sorting them by theme became futile. So in a rare moment of patience, I sat there and waited. Inspiration, like an angel occupied elsewhere on duty, never arrived. So after time elapsed, I did my best to mix up the poems and offer a sort of assortment, attempting to spread out the recurring themes, and I submitted this as my first full draft to my advisor. When Daniel Chacón suggested I break the manuscript into parts, both the order of the poems and the title began to reveal itself. Why not title the collection after one of the poems, “Finally, the Moon,” and then break the parts into moon cycle? This idea allowed me to certain topics occur at natural points in the manuscript (an ailing father at the end, for example), and deciding on this arrangement also allowed me to finally affix a title to the work.

By the end of this process, one of the largest and most surprising realizations that I came to is that in order to create a book of poems, no matter the topic, I need to be willing to play and be playful, not only with language but also with imaginative leaps. As I was struggling with the order of the poems, Daniel Chacón suggested that I simply “play with it.” That seemed, at first, an almost outrageous suggestion, but it was a crucial one. Certainly through the process of

forming and revising this thesis, the most critical moments for me were the ones in which I allowed myself to play and simply see what happened:

### Mexican Postcard

Why did I choose this one? Something  
to hold onto,  
the edges blue like water, and every  
time I'm afraid of  
leaving, I am  
I am afraid of staying  
I am afraid of losing  
I am afraid of being  
lost. I am afraid of  
forgetting. And I am afraid to remember

Where every color,  
every shape, line, every  
turn in the card has  
meaning and significance.  
Orange jaguar dream, orange jaguar  
crouched in  
the turquoise field,  
half-feline, half-human wearing  
that wavy frown, sitting on  
that throne, waiting for

the secret that's only whispered: *colors in Mexico are alive*, which comes  
while I'm standing on the steps of Toniná looking over the whole empty emerald world.

This poem literally began as two strands of words on a sheet of unlined white paper—notes that I jotted down on a blank sheet of copy paper during an English department meeting. In collecting the poem after the initial draft, I saw the opportunity to write lines that read either vertically or horizontally. I saw the opportunity to use the shape of a postcard, and I allowed myself therefore to enter into and write a different kind of poem. This is the sort of playful forming of lines and language that I admire in poets like C.D. Wright.

### 1.3. Framework

Since I wrote my thesis proposal over a year ago, I have been working on writing this preface. Finding sources for the proposal initiated my search to find my place in contemporary poetry. The task seemed daunting at first. It felt daunting for over an entire year. And then, suddenly, as my manuscript began to take form, this preface did as well.

What began as a thesis that was supposed to be mostly about sense of place, punctuated by some feisty angels, has equally evolved into a thesis about angels – because the metaphor of angels keeps reshaping itself in my imagination and thus my poems.

Roger Gilbert has written a comprehensive article about the resurgence of angels in contemporary poetry in the 1990s. Entitled, “Awash with Angels: The Religious Turn in Nineties Poetry,” this article traces the resurgence of angels after a long absence through the Postmodern era. With exception of a few of notable poets, Denise Levertov and James Merrill, for example, who had been writing about angels throughout most of their careers, Gilbert claims that “the evocation of angels and related figures by poets of many different stripes [in the 1990s] reflects a more general impulse to revive modes of representation that had come to seem increasingly illicit or unavailable in the ironic, postmodern eighties” (239). Indeed, Gilbert’s argument is thorough and clear as he uses over a dozen contemporary poets, from poets as different as Martín Espada, Reginald Shepherd and Jorie Graham, to examine and discuss his argument and the sudden reappearance of angels in contemporary poetry in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Harold Bloom has an entire book, *Omens of Millennium*, which is, in large part, devoted to examining the contemporary use of angels in popular culture as well as providing an historical overview of the human interest in angelology. In 1996, when the book was published, Bloom argued that the current American popular interest in angels relegated the state of angels to “debasement,” reducing them to being “easy, and therefore vulgar” (45). His theory coincides with Gilbert’s—that the resurging interest in angels occurring at the turn of the millennium is no mere coincidence.

Still, Gilbert's article and Bloom's chapters on angels (especially the one on their 'debasement') brings readers only to the end of the twentieth century, leaving a gap of roughly fifteen years. And here, I've wondered *What has happened in the interim, and where does my poetry fit in?*

That I completed my B.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and then attended graduate school to study literature in the 1990s is not lost on me. Clearly I picked up some sensibilities from that decade. The book that influenced me most then, as a graduate student and very young poet, was Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris*. And though this book doesn't ever mention angels overtly, it is a book of poems that examines themes like prayer, meditation, religion, and God. Gluck designed the book in a cyclical fashion with poems that present the passing seasons as well as the cycle of daily Christian prayer (e.g. Matins, Vespers, and so on). Although exploring abstract topics, such as the speaker's emotional state towards God, Gluck's book firmly rooted in space. She literally uses gardens and flowers (replete with roots) and landscape in order to spring into meditations that consider a more religious space. I suppose it's not surprising, then, that my manuscript finds itself in a cyclical form.

However, for a little while, after reading Gilbert's article, I left myself wondering if I hadn't created a thesis that was somehow already outdated. The first decade of the twenty-first century has substantially fewer poets writing in the angelic realm. Nonetheless, I persevered in creating my thesis and in continuing my research, trusting in the process, and waiting to see what materialized.

In the meantime, I also read poetry and writings on Sense of Place, a topic which began to gain and clarify its own identity in the 1990s as an article by philosopher Edward S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time," suggests. This article,

notably from 1996, argues for the relationship between space and place using phenomenology, considering ideas from the likes of Kant and Heidegger, and counting on perception to help form the basis of human experience of place: “But perception remains as *constitutive* as it is constituted. This is especially evident when we perceive places: our immersion in them is not subjection to them, since we may modify their influence even as we submit to it” (19). This description interests me as a poet because my inclination when in a new place is to immerse myself as much as possible and submit to the experience, but there’s no doubt that the act of recording the immersion will inherently contain some modifications as memory, form, and even the poem itself dictates. Casey acknowledges that “perception at the primary level is synesthetic—an affair of the whole body sensing and moving” (18). It is this synesthetic experience which I wish to explore with my poems on place as shown in my poem “Maybe This...Over Here”:

Toward the mountains where the blue  
sky is wrapped in a horizon of haze  
the brown cattle bend to the ground  
facing south. I imagine these western  
high plains not full of Indians, cattle, horses  
or buffalo, but filled with angels as they are  
now wings bobbing and waving  
in the April wind, feathers combing  
and braiding the air like fingers. (1-9)

Here, my intention is to capture a single moment where the physical world and the imagination meet. Eventually, reflecting on this moment through the vehicle of a poem allowed me to make a leap from the poem’s present to my father’s health in an attempt to achieve some understanding of a moment that occurred months earlier that I still I cannot fathom where my father was alone, having fallen in a parking lot in the middle of an extreme winter day this past February, lying there for hours without help. But summoning this moment in the imagination and then the poem



then takes me to an even wider space, to two specific events of our world which occurred this year and are also so difficult to fathom—the shooting down of Malaysian Flight 17 over Ukraine and the beheading of the two journalists by ISIS. It’s amazing to me how grounded a poem in a moment and place allows the imagination itself to potentially open up to the whole world.

C.D. Wright’s book *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998) has also greatly influenced me. Ostensibly about a drive through a specific place, the rural south. Wright’s long poem searches through people, places, and even graffiti. Her poems are both stunningly serious and also highly playful, and her formation of the stanzas of this long poem vary widely, from lists down the page to prose poem stanzas. In a book filled with objects such as photographs, plant life, and eyes, angels appear three times. They have less substance than angels of other poems as her angels lead away from the physical realm and into an ephemeral one: “For I am the cipher in her story in which she robbed his grave of its voice and appears herself as an old angel. All that there is is the ghost of his breath” (Loc 447). Wright’s use of multiple types of lines and configurations for her poems interests me as much as her content. Each moment of the poem is delivered deliberately and with an attention to playfulness—pressing the limits of a poem to see what happens. At the same time, in passages like the one quoted above, the movement from angels to ghosts seems natural—a study in what isn’t present (or is present in non-physical form). My poem “Day of Questions” takes on a similar endeavor:

PART: DECLARATION

When I am a ghost,  
I will be luminous

and steady  
as fire,

waver like a lick  
of lavender on canvas—

Ghosts (like fire)  
think  
  
they're always  
home. (33-42)

In the Kingdom of the Hollow-at-Heart, the insect is king.  
In the Kingdom of the Beyond,  
all lie where the ground is smooth.  
Everything's what it seems to be, and a little less.

In the land of the unutterable,  
words float like reflections across the water.  
Nobody visits us here.  
Like shadows, we spread ourselves until our hands touch,  
then disappear in the dark.

*(Bye-and-Bye, 344)*

Wright continues to weave both angels and place through his poetry into his lyrical lines as evidenced by this poem from this year:

ACROSS THE CREEK  
IS THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

No darkness steps out of the woods,  
no angel appears.  
I listen, no word, I look, no thing.  
Eternity must be hiding back there, it's done so before.  
I can wait, or I can climb,  
Like Orpheus, through the slick organs of my body.  
I guess I'll wait,  
at least until tomorrow night, or the day after.  
And if the darkness does not appear,  
that's a long time.  
And if no angel, it's longer still.

“If no angel” is a mighty risk for Wright as he continues to consider the absence of angels in the presence of place. “No angel” is not only “a long time” but it is “longer still,” and it makes me wonder if there is movement now in this decade toward considering the missing angel; what happens if it disappears from our human imagination from our intuitive way of knowing? What happens if it disappears from our sense of place?

Also in this decade, in 2011, at the end of his poem, “The Angels of Winter,” Canadian poet John Reibetanz, ponders,

for who is more homeless than snowflakes here  
every human exhalation rising like a prayer  
that answers itself as the spent breath fills with angels. (25-27)

Here is the moment that yokes C.D. Wright’s breathy angel from 1998 with our current decade. It’s a moment where wintry homelessness is transformed into a type of religious or spiritual understanding, showing the way in which humans fill space with a combination of what’s before them and their need for imaginative understanding.

As Bloom points out in *Omens of the Millennium*, the history of humans reveals a relationship to and a fascination with angels. Angels are present in all major religions. Angels

have survived multiple millennia. Major influences of certain eras will help determine to what extent angels appear literally or figuratively in writing, for example, whether they appear in corporal form or solely in essence; however, they certainly continue to consume the imagination and influence the poet's ability to consider and make meaning, sometimes, as Hirsch points out, coming "when something enormous is at risk" (xiii). Surprisingly, I am one of these poets.

## 2.1 NEW

### For the New Widow

Sometimes I need  
to be alone, sitting under  
the trees with a thousand

cicadas buzzing overhead,  
my thoughts as still as the grass,  
the sky empty as a clean plate.

Greasy eggs and ham leave  
a blue space in my stomach.  
Andrew dreams the grim

reaper lives inside of him  
and asks, "Mama, what does  
this mean?" It's no longer

morning, and the day becomes  
heat. Across the lawn,  
the widow houses grief

while sitting at the picnic  
table reading. Her eyes  
water, but she loves

a good story. "Oh, you  
believe in angels?" She  
pats the bench twice, "Tell."

## Sometimes an Angel

“La Paz is an extraordinary city, so near heaven, and with such thin air, that you can see the angels at dawn.”  
--Isabel Allende, Paula

“Do we take [Allende] for what she is really saying, or must we translate her images into metaphor and say that by ‘seeing angels’ what she really means is...  
--James Littleton, Professor

Sometimes an angel  
is just an angel. It doesn't  
matter if you see him  
or not. It doesn't matter  
if you believe. *How*  
*can this passage be*  
*read?* That sometimes  
an angel is just an angel  
ushering in the new day,  
the lights of dawn glimmering  
above the city before the sun alights  
or perhaps acting as the good Samaritan  
in disguise: he who slips one evening  
into the streets like a London  
fog to provide distraction in order  
to help someone find something  
critical that's lost--a passport,  
let's say, or a child--and who  
disappears as soon as the air  
clears, and the tourist, relieved,  
starts for home. Sometimes  
an angel is just an angel,  
joining the mother in her  
need, or offering company  
to a lonely child or to the mother  
of the child gone missing, providing  
a light for the child lost  
in the deep. Sometimes  
an angel is just an angel. When  
he arrives, standing  
like a column beside  
you, and he realizes he's  
been abstracted into metaphor  
he'll likely guffaw, but you'll  
hear only silence because  
now there is nothing more  
to hear and nothing more to say.

At 1:30 a.m.

Angels fill the house gathering  
in the ceilings and upper walls  
rousting about, describing how  
we live inside the sleep

of the wounded. They tell me to love—  
despite and even if. They give me  
these words, pouring them like pebbles  
into my cupped hands, and when I tell them

there's no love strong enough to make me  
want to live in this world—not even  
the love of my son, they say nothing  
at first, so it must be something else.

Then they answer with silent ovation.  
“You're so tired,” they applaud. “Just wait.”

## Things We Can Talk About

My father, who recounts  
funerals like he's telling the plot  
of a movie, who combs  
the obituaries more than his balding

head, has had a stroke at 72. My father,  
who dominated a lifetime of conversations,  
dwells in silence. The left side of his face  
droops, and his eye tears. He's collapsed

into his six-foot frame as he shuffles through  
life in beige moccasins. Before  
I call him, I make a list, "Things  
We Can Talk About": his sisters,

the student who knows Neil Young,  
the lack of faculty raises. As a fall  
back, we can bitch about my ex-husband  
together. My father, who recited

"Stopping by Woods" as if the words  
waltzed in his mouth, who created  
"easy wind and downy flake" with his  
teeth and tongue and lips, and made snow

appear with a wave of his hand, who  
taught me to love sound while reading  
to my sisters and me each night  
before sleep, now sits as if he is

paused. Clots threaten where language  
thrived. My father, heart of my language,  
source of my lines, has finally run  
out of words



## Do Not Touch: An Inquiry

Some of us need to dip our fingers into some kind of regret and walk around with them sticky for hours. What if I said you could only gaze at your lover? What if I said you can only listen to your favorite song on mute? Just seeing should be enough, but in Detroit, I need

to determine if Rivera's mural is lively or tired, smooth or tough, soft or broken. Is the paint stiff or sorry? How does peeling and faded feel under tingling fingers? How can I tell by only looking? And in Oxford,

I suppose that rubbing my front teeth against Thomas Bodalin's chest to see how the wood holds up against humidity is also against the rules. Let me be clear: At the Prado, Calliope's nipple longs to be brushed by a hand. Why else does her marble breast hover just above my head?

Goya went deaf and Milton went blind. Imagine the vastness of that kind of darkness. What would they do without their hands? How would Francisco meet the canvas? How would Milton find his daughter? How can light and air transform into life if all we can do is see and if we can never, ever touch?

## What Remains

### I. Song

My neighbor turns off his lawnmower. The grinding noise gives way to birdsong. I make out five distinct songs but can only identify one: the brown cowbird gulps out his tune, sounding surprised at himself every time. My guidebook says he is “to be discouraged at the feeder” as he is “parasitic on” other birds. I don’t know what this means. So I let him eat

in return for his song. My yellow house faces north. It’s wrapped by green lawn and a chain link fence that three does surmount on Saturday mornings while I sleep. The cowbird’s tree sits on the side of the house where the grey cat presses herself against the window screen, black eyes wide as dimes.

### II. There Is Providence

On the front step, I find a song sparrow still on the porch far from a window or a nest. The brown speckled softness doesn’t lie far from the feeder, so I cannot determine how it died so close to my front door. I watch the bad luck hover and grab my only shovel, red plastic snow shovel, and convey the body across the street to the hillside. As we cross, the bird turns from the wind

to face me, its eye spying me prepare its grave. But the shovel’s shape prevents digging, so I must roll the bird under the sage, ease her against the base of the plant. I sprinkle her feathers with dirt, and what remains is to entwine my fingers, fold my hands into wings and pray.

## On the Corner of Bedford Place and Bloomsbury

Not the leaves shaping  
hands for the maple, not nighttime  
dreams that suggest which side-  
walk to take. Not even the green  
air or the dog with his yellow  
teeth vicious like love. And not the cries  
of a baby, his open mouth like a baby  
o. Not even silence, which you could  
at least slip over your fingers like a glove.  
What comes in this waiting? No words. No  
letters to lend shape. No long line to run  
down the page like a path carved among trees,  
not the red letter post box or the shrill  
sounds of traffic, buses looming two stories  
high, running right along the road. Syllables  
and clouds are frozen in the sky. Nothing  
arrives but this space:                   white,  
sullen, wide, and piled high with waiting.

.

## Sweet Benediction

“Sweet is it, sweet is it  
To sleep in the coolness  
Of snug unawareness.

The dark hangs heavily  
Over the eyes.” --Gwendolyn Brooks “Truth”

Gwendolyn Brooks visited me  
one night. She wore her large,  
round spectacles, and her hair was not

yet gray. The room had one wall  
of windows, which ushered in angled  
sun and dancing dust. My students

sat around an antique table, their fore-  
arms resting alongside the worn  
grain of the wood. Gwendolyn Brooks,

who I cannot address in the familiar  
as Gwendolyn, once asked, “Shall  
we not flee into ... the dear thick

shelter of the familiar?” had arrived.  
She stepped around the table, placing  
her palm over each student’s

head as if we were playing a solemn  
game of Duck, Duck, Goose. Pausing  
she floated her palm through the golden

light above Katy’s hair, and all remained  
hushed, including me, including Gwendolyn  
Brooks, and in the silence of the pantomime,

I realized when Gwendolyn Brooks comes  
to say nothing, you listen.

## An Essay on Refraction

Down by the river all  
things are golden: the sun  
in the southwest glances  
off the tumbling river  
and illuminates my son's hair.

Rain never comes  
in October, except pouring  
piles of yellow leaves. The dryness  
comes. The darkness  
comes. We turn back  
the hour.

\*

The cottonwood extends  
a hand blessing the river. The lower  
trunk is the wrist fastened to the ground;  
the main trunk profiles aligned fingers;  
an artery forms the thumb. This hand holds  
no human life.

The female downy woodpecker  
takes flight. Her underwings fan out  
like a bloody sunset.

\*

I have left the door open  
again and let out the kitten  
who gets lost coming home  
from the neighbor's backyard.

\*

The colors absorb my eyes:  
Royal blue and gold,  
then grey, grey, grey.

\*

I am waving.

\*

When he goes, he leaves  
the smell of coffee.

\*

No one says,  
“She’s gaining weight. She must’ve lost  
her poetry, again.” But they do  
assume he’s walked out. Or she has no self-control. Or  
she cannot manage her will. Or she must have made him leave. Or.

\*

When winter comes,  
she bathes in the leaves  
that pile against  
the fence.

The boy cuts his tree, scissoring carefully  
around the lines. It blazes red. The window frames  
his effort.

\*

These nights in my dreams  
I walk and walk across  
pavement, over exit ramps,  
under viaducts--carrying  
my sleep, gathering myself  
around a spindle. I tuck in where  
my esophagus meets my stomach just  
beneath my breasts. I bundle  
magic. I walk  
and walk across miles of sage  
and sand to where the concrete  
wears the ocean and wait.

## La Nieta

When I travel, my grandmother sends the saints  
along: St. Christopher, Patron Saint of Travelers,  
St. Jude, Patron Saint of Lost and Desperate Causes,  
and Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patron Saint of the Americas.

Through us she visits the earth's places. This summer  
when we go to Guatemala and Mexico she will worry  
until we return. On old school buses we'll ride through green  
mountains, and when we drink *pox* and burn

*comal* as an offering to Maximón for help with love,  
we'll regret it in the morning. Later, in Chiapas,  
after meeting the law student who speaks Tzotzil  
and Tojolabal I'll release the saints and lying

next to his brown body, will attempt to braid my tongue  
into Spanish again and again. And when I walk  
through the *mercados* watching women wave  
open vibrant *telas*, he'll tell me about Trovadores

and sing, "*No soy de aquí, no soy de allá.*" Crossing streets  
I'll breathe in laundry soap and frying meat and suck  
papaya from plastic cups and peel mangos and avocados  
with my hands. And when I lie down at night under the open

window I'll be lulled by the calling of the night birds  
and sleep softly to wandering butterfly dreams.

## Grace

The child works on printing, the fat black  
crayon marking paper the color of the sun.  
Upper case letters align like soldiers:

G G G G G G G G G  
J J J J J J J J J J J

But lower case letters mis-

behave, reverse and drift: d d d d d b d d d b

p p p q q p p p p p q

She gets the first letter of her name

right every time: K K K K K K K K K,  
but the last letter is tricky. Which way  
to extend the leg on the v? And she wonders if

F is supposed to blow west  
or east. Each letter forces finger  
cramps. Her mother patiently

insists—again again--already teaching  
the child the mystery of birth: the great  
unease which leads to unwavering

devotion. Late one night, she accelerates  
through the dark, rounding the curves  
of San Juan Boulevard, reminding

her of the crayon tracing loops and filling  
empty paper. She sees words  
carved from darkness. All

that time at the antique desk  
scraping shapes into letters, learning  
reverence: letters to words, words to love.



## Mexican Postcard

Why did I choose this one? Something  
to hold onto,  
the edges blue like water, and every  
time I'm afraid of  
leaving, I am  
I am afraid of staying  
I am afraid of losing  
I am afraid of being  
lost. I am afraid of  
forgetting. And I am afraid to remember

Where every color,  
every shape, line, every  
turn in the card has  
meaning and significance.

Orange jaguar dream, orange jaguar  
crouched in  
the turquoise field,  
half-feline, half-human wearing  
that wavy frown, sitting on  
that throne, waiting for

the secret that's only whispered: *colors in Mexico are alive*, which comes  
while I'm standing on the steps of Toniná looking over the whole empty emerald world.

Day of Questions  
PART: GHOST

Do ghosts drift along on busy  
city streets? Do they materialize

under city lights?  
Do they wear pale

yellow? Answers come  
quietly as a cat. Is there

a proportion between  
the population of living

humans and dwelling  
ghosts? In other words,

do more ghosts exist in larger  
cities? When they travel

the streets, do they follow  
the signs?

Doubtful: One Way.

PART: YELLOW

I am enamored of the swath  
of yellow. (I am enamored

of *swath of yellow*.) I am enamored

of what  
comprises the swath:

white sunshine daffodil

lemon petal layers

of acrylics like

frozen	strands of
golden	
taffy.	Eat
	me.

## PART: ILLUMINATION

back strokes:

lilac &

shell-

blue—brightly

thinned

## PART: DECLARATION

When I am a ghost,  
I will be luminous

and steady  
as fire,

waver like a lick  
of lavender on canvas—

## PART: DESIRE

Ghosts     (like fire)  
think

they're     always  
home.

## About Angels

1.

Not moonlight, not firelight, not the vague  
lamp of the TV room: none illuminates  
enough to reveal the entire wing:  
51 rows of 89 feathers.

2.

We older daughters were supposed to keep score  
for all nine innings every game, but somewhere in the bottom  
of the fourth, I left the remaining columns empty for about three decades.

3.

My father's crazy girlfriend thinks she's won, creating new  
bank accounts and changing mailing addresses  
for his checks, but she's the only one keeping

score. We three only want our  
father to return to us.

What else do daughters want?

4.

I keep searching for the angel of baseball but he retired  
during long the strike. He took off  
his cleats and walked bare-  
foot through the bull-  
pen door in right  
field, through  
the empty  
stands,  
and out  
into the night.

5.

Only the Los  
Angeles Angels  
really wear halos.

6.

Out of left field: the green  
beans are in Bisia's silver  
colander savoring the moonlight.

7.

On the pitching mound when an angel stretches his wings  
they grow the distance between first  
and third--as the crow flies.

8.

I count the wings that will carry me to see  
my father--two wings per leg--Phoenix  
to Houston, Houston to Detroit. When we

arrive in mid-November a gaggle of Canadian geese  
will gather on the patch of green between 6 Mile  
and Haggerty. This is also along the path

we will take to visit my father. They'll make  
six beaks, twelve webbed feet and a dozen  
tucked wings all together. Together

my sisters and I form six ears and eyes,  
thirty feet and toes and a half-dozen grand-  
children half of whom are already grown.

9.

I imagine Cyrus on second, one wing stretched  
toward first, one wing toward third. But he's facing  
the outfield, and I'm behind home, unable to fathom his face.

## Beginning

These little Sunday night  
jaunts, throttling up Main Street  
in the dark, dipping right on a yellow,  
the wind fondling me beneath my blue  
mechanic's jacket, gliding under the few  
stars that outshine the city lights, my tangled

hair waving, and my lower lip  
numbing as I cup his hips (the most  
under-rated part of a man), I hope this isn't  
the final ride of the season because the clock turned  
back one hour last night, and now blackness escorts  
us just beyond the city.

## Keeping Score

My job is to track each pitch and play, to mark  
balls and strikes and HBPs—of which there are  
many with these teams of eight-to-ten year-olds.  
Every time my son stands at bat, his two front

teeth resembling home plates residing side by side,  
I tally the results: ball one, called strike  
one, strike two swinging, called ball two.  
At the two-two count I breathe and say his name

and shout, “Come on, buddy!” But only once  
in nine games has the outcome been any  
different. That time he swung, and the ball  
and bat together shouted “Ping!”

and he was so surprised I had to holler at him  
to run, and he ran, and I sat back down and picked  
up the pencil and wrote: GO, 1 to 3, and then shaded  
in the cross that marked the end of the inning.

## 2.2 Waxing

### On the Metro

What about the dark  
angel? You know  
him. He enters

the train wailing like a siren  
cracking morning like a fallen  
egg, demanding bread, only

a little bit of bread.  
I clutch my bag  
and stare like my Aunt

Georgine told me never to stare.  
I cannot look away. Back  
home, on the corner

of I-17 and Bethany  
Home, veterans hold up  
cardboard messages and one

man waves a sign asking  
for money to visit his children  
1500 miles away. I hand

dollars out the window.  
But this one. I don't give  
him a Euro nor the extra

nectarine the senora  
packed into my sack.  
Filth seals his toes

into curved feet  
that paw through  
each car, each step

a cloven hoof  
placed carefully inside  
another body's shadow.



## I Waited for Sunday to Return

### I. On Saturday, in Nogales

I speak Spanish. It comes out swinging  
like a rusty gate. We use the bathrooms in Food  
City, and I buy a few *santos*, and when we go  
to Payless for shoes for my son the young man  
behind the counter tries to upsell us in English,  
but his gate gets stuck in the mud, so I say,  
*Podemos hablar en Espanol*. He smiles  
but remains silent in either language until  
the paper curls out of the register and with  
a flourish, he yanks it free and says, “*el recebo*.”

### 2. Later, the Drive

back to Tombstone is clear with showers of cottonwood  
leaves. The road curves like my body—quickly  
and unexpectedly with one or two pot holes paving  
the way for the slight chance of utter collapse.

### 3. At the Ghost Town

we park on the outskirts and hike in.  
Main Street boasts only dirt and weeds  
waiting their turn to tumble. I peel white  
paint off a wooden rail near the one-room  
schoolhouse thinking that even the angels  
have left here. The sun washes the day  
and clarity stretches like a dome to the distant  
stream. I want to ride the sunlight down  
to the river and follow its flow, but I like  
the weeds am waiting for wind to sway me.

## On Monday

Sunday arrived a day late. I always  
forget how short she is and bright-  
eyed. She looks, peeking over a stack of books  
and everything in the distance is just a little too far  
to be clear. Sometimes the sun glances

on my pages, transforming my hand  
into a moving shadow, and then blue lines  
appear from the dark. When Sunday arrives  
on Monday there's nothing to do  
but find Tuesday and see if anyone else turns up.

## *Bull, Horse & Reclining Woman*

### I.

Who expects Picasso to turn  
up in Glendale, hanging  
between a Matisse  
and a Miró? It's a sketch

not a painting from the Blue  
period: dark  
ink pen on paper  
behind glass. It won't fetch

millions at auction, I'd wager,  
but the fingertips that conjured  
*La Guernica* lit this paper too.

### II.

What route did it take to arrive  
here and be fixed to a wall  
in the suburban desert? Did  
anyone say, "Someday, Pablo,

your horse and reclining woman will hang twenty  
feet from palm trees and young people on cell-  
phones who won't answer your call?"  
And when they do glance at your twisting

horse, by chance walking  
by, they will say, "Really?  
I could draw that too."

### III.

The librarian finds me in reference,  
head tucked, writing  
this poem, points  
her finger and asks, "Is that your

student?" I nod. "He just used the Picasso  
as a clipboard, *put his paper right  
over the glass and wrote on it.* It's  
a breech in etiquette,

you know.” I know.  
But at least he got to touch.

## Pocket Poem

Digging through my purse I say, "I know I have a poem  
in here somewhere." I pull out a compact, a tampon, a lipstick,  
an opened roll of Mentos, the pink wallet I got for Mother's  
Day, two postage stamps stuck back to back, my eyeglass  
case, a packet of Kleenex, my iPod, an old granola  
bar, an apple, one winter glove, a clanging clutch of car  
keys, a plastic Tyrannosaurus Rex whose over-sized  
tooth chomps my thumb, two pieces of Trident  
gum slipped from their paper wraps, a rumpled Starbucks  
coupon, a library note stamped "overdue," an empty  
bottle of Aleve lined with lint, some dental floss,  
frayed and unwound from its spool, a dried Sharpie  
missing its cap, a Chicago Cubs pencil with a broken  
tip, and one lone brown M&M, which I study  
hard to see how edible it might be.

## What Lies Ahead

Jesus Is Watching You says the billboard above  
the adult video store. Every day, for seconds passing  
by in the car, I watch him watch me: at first

we're acquaintances, and then, one day,  
I'm ambushed by desire. (What would  
the Buddha say—Jesus hovering over the adult

video store, churning up desire?). Oh Jesus,  
with the watery eyes, Jesus, with the wavy, rock-  
star hair and close beard that outlines thick

lips. His mouth forms the love I crave. As he peers  
down from his billboard, we exchange glances.  
He is the compassion I don't give myself,

the perceptive man I've yearned for  
who comprehends my beauty and forgives  
me my trespasses as I am unable

to forgive myself. Soon the video store  
vanishes. I'm too taken with Jesus  
who is no longer mounted mid-air

and I'm sure his cries arouse the dawn,  
and soon I'm imagining his fingers brushing  
my face, his tongue long between my lips.

And as I dream of loving Jesus, I am swerving,  
nearly colliding with myself, completely ignoring the road.

## In Sedona

I keep a flower in my pocket  
and when I lift it out  
it rains one yellow petal at a time.  
When Andrew and I came

here in January only the clouds  
kept us company along with  
a little pattering rain. Today,  
the vistas open 360 degrees.

Men speaking French  
and Spanish walk by as Americans  
shout from the top of the red  
rocks. I sit beneath a shaggy

dream in the shade. Orange  
flowers stir the wind. Juniper  
nuts dot the earth. Later, I walk  
by the juniper at the top of the vortex

whose branches wave and hand  
me a message. When I arrive  
at the bottom I find Andrew  
holding the message too, but we

stay silent--neither  
one of us knows what it means.

## Finding St. Anthony

Святий Антоній  
Святий Андрій  
Святого Миколая

Dozens of saints lie under glass  
coffins in the narrow passages  
underneath Kiev. I am

uncertain which glass box with the Cyrillic spelling  
contains Saint Anthony, so I pray before each: in gratitude  
Saint A., patron saint of lost items (car keys, glasses, marriage

licenses, faith), the saint I need  
the most, Patron Saint of Domestic  
Animals and Children, pray for us -- all of us -- the whole

lot: four cats, three boys, two dogs. Oh,  
and the parakeets, too. My beeswax candle  
wavers, and the monk in the brown habit

gestures that I should catch the drippings. I cannot pray hard  
enough. Before each casket, I stop, bow in thanks--the heat  
on my brow, my babushka slipping down my satin hair:

*Saint Anthony, thank you, and if you're not St. Anthony,  
rest in peace, and please forgive the intrusion.*



## A Sonnet from the University of Alcalá

That day, Spain conspired against the tour  
guide, whose choppy English succumbed  
to the cacophony: the doves crying bullshit,  
the sparrows bickering, the jet gunning  
overhead. The crows shouted for silence so  
they could cry alone. Lunch bags crinkled,  
complaining of the weight of the ham, bread, and juice  
inside them. We were here for a grand tour of history:  
to see the where the holy seed of San Ignacio de Loyola  
was planted, to marvel in the courtyard at the Latin  
phrases that hovered like airplane advertisements far  
above. But I only memorized the sounds, shaking  
like leaves in every direction, the guide who couldn't  
lead, and the storks nesting quietly in the distance.

## Nothing about Enough

That family in Nica—husband and wife  
and their two children—all in one room  
no larger than our kitchen, including  
their table and comal and straw pallets,  
and their coughing baby who had oceans  
tossing in her lungs while mucus sealed  
her eyes and lips. Her mother begged,  
*por favor*. And my children now, so  
insistent on headphones and cellphones  
and devices to hold. St. Mary, mother  
of God, how do we stop the wanting?

The manger is a just metaphor—our  
children can be warmed by even  
a donkey and celebrated by three  
wise men—three should be enough.  
But my own child, my own, the one  
who drank my milk for twenty-two  
months, knows nothing about enough.  
No roof on the school in Nicaragua,  
no books, no paper, no pens, not even  
a pencil or a crayon to write a poem.  
But he wants another one, just one, you  
know, this time a different size or color.

## Just Outside of Winslow

Sometimes your woes meet you sitting in the first bathroom stall at the Flying J gas station with your purse balanced on your knees, the brown wall sullied with black marker: *Donny K. has a limp dick*, and scrawled beneath in blue pen with a fat heart dotting it: *I know. He can't get it up*. On the road back to the highway, you notice the Purina store and note the second young couple you've seen in one day holding up a cardboard sign on the side of the road: "We'd rather beg than steal." You roll down the window and hand them a five. Though right now, you're still in stall one, hands clasped over your head, counting up the numbers: hours on the road: four; months your eight year-old son has lived half-way around the world: six; the number of days until you return to work: three; the number of times your new husband has been angry enough that he won't forget your words: too many. Pouting in the back seat of the car while he accelerates to ninety, you regress to the age when you learned to manage long car rides, Detroit to Valhalla, twelve hours each way for three-day stays before headphones, computer games, and video systems littered the car, your growing limbs allowed one-third of the back of the tiny orange Horizon. As you calculate the number of hours until you arrive in the valley, one lone cloud in the Arizona sky forms a top hat, drifting along the high plains.

## Finding Dziadzi

I try to find his stone in the cemetery south  
of Detroit. My stepsons sit in the car, grumpy  
about looking for the grave of a man they never knew.  
I recall his mound and marker sitting under a pine

with no one else beside him and I find his parents where  
they're supposed to be, closer to the road. Why isn't my grandfather  
near his parents? After he died, my grandmother rescinded her space  
beside him and decided on cremation. Her dust floats in the sun-

light in the aspens outside Pagosa Springs, so far from downriver  
Detroit. In the meantime, I've lost Dziadzi in the twenty-three  
years of stones and graves added around his narrow spot.  
I call my mother who tells me what I already

know: *he's under the tree*. But no matter how long I look,  
tracing the paths of grass around the plots, he's missing  
like a bored toddler who's wandered off on his own.

## Dream #9

My bracelet dropped  
off my wrist. A string  
of round, flat fresh  
water pearls pink  
as a sun-

set: whatever I lose I find

in the grass. My eyeglasses next  
to the garden hose peering  
between the blades  
at the ants. Above me  
hummingbirds, big as softballs, form  
a necklace that hangs above the lawn, shimmering  
peach and purple. My bracelet

slithers

like an iridescent  
snake.

Whatever I find  
I lose in the grass.

## Leaving Gloria

*for Gloria J. Emerson*

Andrew says, "Mama, corn has yellow  
hair like you and me," as Gloria waves  
goodbye. The adobe wall she built by  
hand surrounds her yard. She lives

in her mother's house, which belonged  
to her mother's mother and her grandmother's  
mother, and so on, in the Diné way.  
Gloria paints black crows and yellow dragon-

flies and slips stories onto canvas by layering  
paint and light. One day, when Andrew and I  
drive away from Gloria's house, it will be the last  
time. And like Dorothy and the Scarecrow,

I will miss her most of all: her frying pan palettes  
smeared with acrylic paint, the dining room  
chairs wearing a different T-shirts on their backs,  
the pot boiling on the stove for when Andrew

and I arrive with corn. Driving away,  
with Gloria shrinking in the rearview  
mirror, Andrew and I look for the prairie dog  
that fled when we first entered the winding

drive. Andrew spots him before the dirt road  
drops onto the pavement. He rolls down  
the window and waves back, saying, "I knew  
I could find him. I have big eyes."

## Walking with Angels

Somewhere he stepped, his shoe perhaps sporting  
a buckle, his head wearing a wig. Somewhere his soles  
pressed the arranged bricks and worn wooden  
floors. Occasionally, my footsteps land there, too.

Occasionally, he filled his cup with wine, and his fingerprints,  
for which there's never been a matching set, lined the pewter.  
Cyrus knows where he's been and might have seen Swedenborg  
only yesterday. For me, it's been centuries since

anyone sipped from that cup. Maybe he placed it on the mantle.  
Maybe he knocked it off the oak table when his cuff caught  
the corner. Maybe he needed no cup, and the wine came  
pouring into his mouth directly from heaven.

## What I Carry

How to bring a young boy into this shadowy world when he is full of such light? I offer options: *You could pray to St. Michael. You could pray to St. Andrew, your patron saint. Or you could pray to St. Anthony. He's for kids.* But my go-to saint is St. Francis: *Make me a channel of your peace.* But this boy doesn't accept the options claiming he doesn't know how to pray, can't even start. And I can't explain what I know. I simply know we only have what we carry.

In the 1970's, St. Brigid's ceiling wore bluebirds and naked men in loin cloths, and I inspected the dinky penises on the flying baby-angels because they were my first exposure to naked males. The ceiling was as wide as the sea, and I floated on it buoyed by Russell Robinson's deep voice, which commanded we sing it over and rocked my seven year-old body, rattling my ribs, vibrating my arms when we raised them during the last part of "Our Father," and the adults beside me would pull me almost off the floor:

"For thy is the kingdom and the power and the glor-y. For. Ev-er." we sang. "Ah-men." Mr. Robinson's voice has resided inside me ever since, the deep resounding of the man I have never heard again, not in forty years, and still his bass voice lives ("Sing it over!") within me, reminding me the lift and lilt of grace and how to manage what I carry.



At 3 a.m.

Reading online, I learn that writers and artists can buy  
houses in Detroit, my homeland, for the cost of utilities

and insurance and a two-year commitment to stay.  
Meanwhile, my husband continues to pull semi-trucks

and backhoes through his sinuses at regular  
intervals, affording me these moments of early morning

reflection. My broken foot is showing colors now that  
match the Midwestern sunrise—not the fuchsia or water-

melon streaks like here in Albuquerque, where we stay  
with family, but the greys and dull purples of swollen

rustbelt days. Writers might move to Detroit for cheap  
housing. They might. But so much depends on the sky.

## Finally, the Moon

On her 42nd birthday, she drives past bluffs and mesas gliding  
east of the sunset that opens like a rose, commanding  
curves of gratitude. Three decades as an adult, two divorces,

one unexpected child have driven her to this place where  
four lanes thread New Mexico's Badlands, and her life  
winds northwest on NM 550. This moment becomes the sky

ahead, expanding bloody reds and fuchsia with yellow  
outlining the horizon. She cups this bounty. It is all  
before her. It is all behind her. One man in a baggy jacket,

hands shoved into his pockets, walks the shoulder looking  
down. He, too, is headed towards the night. After she arrives,  
she will transcribe the lines of the road into lines

of a poem and see letters coalesce into words.  
She will seek stanzas, experiment with enjambment,  
deliberate form. It takes four decades for this

confluence to occur beneath transitory clouds.  
Seventy-five miles per hour reveals ideas born  
in places: canyon, volcanic rock bed, sealed

into black waves, high plains desert silhouetting  
a curled juniper, an absentminded tumbleweed,  
and, finally, the moon, blossoming into crescent.

## All that Matters

I write SB for a stolen base. K for strikeout.  
BB for a walk. I haven't kept score in thirty  
years yet I still know to put a thick crosses  
where the innings end. In the slump  
that is my life right now these little diamonds  
bring me home, one brown box for each  
at bat, shading out debt and angry spouse,  
aching foot and ailing father, arriving  
to where there's only one bat and one  
ball, and I get to sit behind the backstop  
counting every single pitch, the balls  
and strikes and passed balls the only way  
to measure all that matters in the moment.

## 2.3 Full

### First Book of Words

In 1969, the year of my birth, the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* was published in hardback the color of a paper bag. As a child, when I wanted to know what a word meant, my father told me to look it up. Thumbing through the thousands of pages, letters, symbols and illustrations

meant finding a single word took ages: months and years would pass between Li and Lo. Only then might I land on *longevity* through the length of chance, the way that my index finger might land on the right town on an unfamiliar map: *what's this doing here?* And when did this book and I part ways? In 2013, sitting in a writer's workshop

in an antique sitting room in Tucson, Arizona, I spy it above me as close and as far as an angel: the original compass of love that led me straight to words. *The* book—*The Exact One*—right year, proper dun color, spine intact with the cover ragged, just. like. mine. Its layer of dust says that it's lonely, that its crispy pages have remained untouched.

The book's fatness peers down from the high shelf, tired as a middle-aged mother, and I pull her down from the shelf and hold her cover between both hands, then trace her words under my fingers, touching several pages, dry and soft as aging skin, and we sit like an old couple in December, across a linoleum table, sharing a warm pot of soup.

## Old Lesson

Mexico rose wet with ash. Every day, new words were given to me across counters and grocery aisles, words like: *¡Mira!* And *justo llegamos*. And *no*, which is the same in both languages, but the vowel comes across the palette in Spanish, brushing the nose. In English, it's only a matter of lips. *Solo* works similarly. In either language, you are alone (*estás solo*), but in Spanish it's a whisper and the tongue touching teeth. In English, the words start the same way but then the jaw collapses and the throat invades the mouth. In English, if you are solo, you're simply alone, but in Spanish, using a different verb, *eres solo*, you're not only alone, you're also unattached, single, and very not married.

## The Face at the Bottom

The face at the bottom  
of the cup is bowed and wears  
eyes, which peer  
through round  
glasses and a nose. When  
it blinks, it disappears. Its  
grey brows often  
frown but twice  
last week it  
winked at me like a child.

## Everybody Knows That

Angels live in libraries.  
Descending after closing time from the vents and skylights,  
gathering at the tables, they read, heads bowed  
toward the pages. They don't even whisper. The old  
lady librarian's fiery eyes demand peace.

One angel  
a month types the new library cards on yellow  
cardstock using a gray Underwood. The striking  
keys ease the silence.

At the check out  
desk young Damien's wings wriggle and flounce,  
knocking Cyrus's books to the carpet. *Little Women*  
and *Satanic Verses* thud on impact while Cyrus slips  
*Paradise Lost* under his wing and shoves Swedenborg's  
*Heaven and Hell* under a nearby bookcase with his foot. Angel

wings inhibit bending down and Tyree, trying to  
help gather the fallen letters, tumbles into a chair. The old  
librarian glances up from her copy of *Time* and flames  
lash out of her irises. Damien and tucks  
in his velvety feathers. Sirius shrugs and pats  
himself down. What matters most is making  
sure Milton's still there.

## Why It Matters

The shadow on the palm  
tree paints the side of the math  
building, which forms a concrete  
cube. The campus architects must  
have feared the sun, or the budget didn't

allow for windows. The math  
students will need to day  
dream without a view  
for inspiration. The real tree,  
father of the shadow, towers

into the sky twice  
as high as the beige cube's top  
where tucked inside people  
study distance and calculate  
why it matters.



At 4:45 a.m.

The early morning angel came  
vested in black and grey and quoting  
the Koran with *Allah* dancing from his  
lips cloaked in words like *Inshallah* and  
*Wallah*. When he saw my broken foot  
he quit reciting and laid his winter

jacket across my outstretched  
leg. Only then I realized I was  
cold and that I was there  
to listen, though I didn't speak  
Arabic, and the black-haired angel  
had come to slip me back to sleep.

## Only Swedenborg Goes to Heaven and Returns

Sissy told me to look out  
for the sunset. And I do.  
She is right: midsummer,  
9 p.m., flying west, the plane  
ascends into the sunset,  
reaching one layer of dark  
blue like I am reaching  
heaven, only to increase  
altitude and puncture another  
layer. Only the pools of lava  
lining the horizon show  
where the curve of the earth  
gives way to the sections of  
sky that this plane will never  
reach. Flying into heaven this  
way, I wonder if I will die  
tonight, now, as I write this  
on the last leg of a long journey  
with my ankles swollen and my  
right foot burning and my  
sissy left behind in Chicago  
after the eight-hour layover,  
the head of the plane like  
a shark swimming through  
the blackening sky, sky, sky.

## México Shining

### I. Comal Rising

This time México turned north and arrived  
wafting through the sun across the concrete one

Tuesday afternoon in September. How  
rich the word: comal. In the daylight, it smells

of darkness, of Maximon in the cave, an effigy  
in striped pants propped against the altar,

surrounded by candles blinking. In the cave,  
the comal gives way to pox. Hours later, it

enters the mouth, sits on the tongue like fermented  
honey, like love that will not leave.

When I close my eyes, the comal becomes the chain  
kissing the thurible as Father readies the air.

## II. Mé-xi-co Shining

Metl = agave. Xictli = the navel.  
Co = within. Agave is the navel

within. The navel  
within is made  
from agave. Within

agave the navel  
forms. México is the agave  
is the navel within the agave

and also Metlxictlico,  
the center in which  
the sweetness forms and thrives.

### III. One Day

It all floated towards me at once--comal rising  
and México shining from my view at the top

of Toniná. I said, Love, this is it. Es todo.  
But he was gone. Already

departing, stirring up the sleeping  
butterflies as he strode through the grass.

Alone, I had the white and spinning  
wings, the day moon, pale

and arcing acres of green.  
I had the sun and the wide,

wide air that tasted blue. I had the new  
memory of my love and he, too, came shining.

#### IV. Red Galactic Moon

On the 27<sup>th</sup> day of September  
in 2011, on 8 Muluc in the Tzolkin  
calendar—day of the Red Galactic  
Moon—day 12.19.18.13.9 in the long  
count, México arrived in New Mexico  
as it does daily. This time, blue feathers  
fanned out from his head and goat hoof  
shakers hugged his calves. He twisted  
his inner thigh to let his skin touch the fire  
showing how to burn without singeing.

## Smashing the Apple

Andrew slams the beige box  
first. Then I wallop the key-  
board against the cement wall.  
Andrew shouts, "Mama, enter  
broke off and so did backspace.  
He asks, "Can I keep the space  
bar?" "No," I say, "The point  
is to keep nothing." I lean  
over and pluck the escape  
key from the gravel. This was

the Mac Classic II that I used  
through graduate school  
the first time. Somewhere  
inside its plastic walls  
essays on Hardy, Woolf,  
and Joyce grumble, along  
with poems over-ripened by ennui.  
Maisie used to sit atop the boxy  
computer like a grey loaf

of bread and every now and again  
drop one fat paw against the cursor,  
head bent toward the letters, eyes  
more electric than the screen.  
This is twenty years ago, which  
is twice my son's age on this  
Sunday in March when we decide  
to wipe the memory clean, no  
matter the words left inside.

## Letter to Miró

Dear Joan,

I thought I left you  
in Spain, but no  
you're here too  
in Glendale. On  
the wall your little  
animals play in red  
and green costumes.

Joan, though there  
I visited the Sofia  
Reina to see you  
and waited in line,  
here you are  
mostly my secret.

Here on campus  
most students think  
you are a woman,  
and those who do  
come to admire  
the paintings often  
miss seeing your  
mirthful animals  
for Picasso's bull

hanging in agony  
to your right. How  
can you miss what  
you can't even see?  
Oh, Joan, your shapes  
form glee: eye of pea-  
cock. Tail of fish. Spot  
of yellow. Hen's black  
beak and sleeping dog.

"This is all for you,"  
says each lithograph,  
here and in Madrid,  
every single one, *Todo*  
*para tí*, but I must lean  
towards the wall  
to hear it: *todo*.



Your offering  
for the world in sky

blue. Joan, your  
fat black streaks follow  
my fingers and I can  
touch your lines  
and trace your cones and  
the cock-eyed rhombus and  
the dog's black nose, and feel  
how the curving red arc  
becomes the neck

of hen. I will never see them  
all at once—the figures  
leaping and swimming  
and morphing, becoming  
each other, hen to hound,  
sea bass to cat paw, cat  
paw to mouse ear, mouse  
ear to black crossing raccoon  
tails, crossing raccoon tails  
to this fantastic dream.

## Everything Beyond

My first time in New Mexico, before I ever  
moved there, we drove north of Taos at sunrise.  
My mother and I wound around a narrow road  
leading out of town, heading into a dim morning  
light I had never seen before—droplets of suspended  
sun illuminated poverty, and everything beyond  
darkened into silhouettes. Heading toward the Rio Grande  
we passed two dogs dead on the road, lying still  
and bloodied like actors from a Western. The German  
Shepherd had blood pooled around his mouth—  
a killing so recent the liquid glistened in the sun.

## Somewhere

### I.

Somewhere beneath my toes  
are four cracks that refuse  
to seal, cells that reject joining  
their minute fingers together:

Red rover, red rover, send the big  
toe on over. Somewhere  
along my four metatarsals,  
four angels are learning to knit.

### II.

The sleeping and the awake  
side by side like toes topping  
the foot—so much easier  
to support with all parties

in agreement. Today I rode  
Blue for the first  
time since she crushed  
my foot, each of the four

phalanges snapping like  
wish bones. Four wishes  
on a hot day, and then I sat  
stalled out in a line

of traffic--anxiety won't  
start the engine, but physics  
and a well-timed thumb  
get her going every time.

## Dream of the Husband

You dream again of snow, and I open  
the front door in the middle of March  
to welcome the jasmine breeze.

The neighborhood cat pounces  
on a slash of sunlight, and the Airedale  
barks, reverberating the table

and the pen against this page. You  
dream of snow again, and I wonder  
what someone else's dream becomes

for me. When my husband shouts at the man  
in the mask to leave his dream, how does he  
crawl over the wall into my own imagination?

## On Leaving *Don Quixote*

I try to slip it into the drawer beside the lopsided bed,  
but it hits with a thud. I am ready to shed this weight  
of four hundred years, to drop this quixotic book that has dominated the last two months of my  
life. Like with my first  
two husbands, I decide to leave, knowing that when I go,  
I seldom look back.

This was not a decision I made  
lightly. I napped on it. And during deliberations, I drank  
a glass of Aspell Cider. In a gripping moment of regret, I again skimmed the introduction by  
Harold Bloom. But two days prior, I picked up Swedenborg, attracted to the thick pages of his  
spiritual diaries, in the city where he died. Now it's time

to depart. With limited space, something must  
remain, so even though Spain is my next destination, I cannot carry extra pounds.

May the next lucky person who sleeps in this tilted bed  
reach into the drawer for Gideon and find Cervantes waiting instead.

Of cou

## After Words and Books

When the great bird was carrying us home and the thunderstorm was hovering over Phoenix, I slept hungry for the void. The rain marked the plastic windows and I kept my head against my husband's shoulder while slipping in and out of the clouds the same way the rain came and went. There was nothing—not even the figment of an image to dream, nothing but shushing vibrations and the thin jet of air above my head, fingering my hair.

## 2.4 Waning

### About My Father

#### Day 1—After Falling

After falling, he lay there for hours during Detroit's coldest winter in over 100 years. Maybe by parked cars, perhaps besides mailboxes, or next to an ice-sealed bush, the fluid in his lungs formed two wintery seas.

No one told me what happened until my mother returned from South Africa and she called to share this news about the man whom she divorced

two decades ago. Why had no one interrupted the 84-degree day in Phoenix with such cold?

#### Day 2—Sometimes the Impact

Sometimes the impact is delayed. After a dinner of chicken and warm apples, my throat tightens against the sweetness and the grief clenches my voice

box, finding me everywhere I reside: in the TV room easy chair, at my desk, on the left side of the bed where I lie, imagining him fallen in the snow, wondering *where are his angels? Why are they leading*

*him away so soon?* I tap the silver angel pendant hanging from my chain. Grief will ring my throat.

#### Day 3: Water

She calls and asks if I remember him drinking water. Coffee regular? Yes. Water? No. I had the last weekend of his life without his needing a walker, and we listened to Gershwin in concert

together and showing him my campus made him proud. A beer? Sometimes. But never, ever water. *Remember* she said (not your mother, but your sister) *how he used to pop his vitamins into his mouth and put his mouth*

*under the sink and run the tap?* He collected only

what would push the pills down his throat. One time  
he caught me – I was just tall enough to stretch my neck  
over the sink to mouth the falling water. He caught  
me midstream and snapped, *Stop that. You'll chip a tooth.*



## Even Angels

Thanks to them, nothing  
I lose cannot be found  
except what is swallowed

by the sea. Even angels  
avoid the great depths—  
blue wet cannot accommodate

feathers. Soggy feathers  
don't serve. Even a human  
being can understand that.

*Atropos, Or the Fates, 1820-1823*

Franciso, I like your name. Or  
rather I like to say it: Fran-cis-  
co, to hear each distinct syllable  
and feel my tongue begin the word

and my mouth take over, stopping in  
Oh. By the end you wouldn't  
have heard me or anyone say it—  
pronounce the vowels as carefully

as you painted the finery on  
*Las Meninas*. Fran-cis-co – one  
syllable for each Fate that you  
painted: Atropos, Lachesis &

Clotho, who clutch scissors, a lens  
and wind the fateful thread.  
And the floating  
figure. Is this you? The largest

shape in the painting, curled in  
upon himself with the left leg in  
prominent view. Fates, Francisco,  
the unavoidable mess your country

made. What could you do  
in your deafness but depict yourself  
in untethered blackness just as the sign  
points out, "The one

figure that doesn't follow  
the iconography," the largest  
of all, the foot of your deafness  
floating, facing front, toes

grey, hands holding the brush behind  
your back, your head including your stone  
ears wrapped in a velvet scarf, unable to hear  
me utter Francisco, Francisco, Francisco.

## Maybe This...Over Here

Toward the mountains where the blue  
sky is wrapped in a horizon of haze  
the brown cattle bend to the ground  
facing south. I imagine these western  
high plains not full of Indians, cattle, horses  
or buffalo, but filled with angels as they are  
now wings bobbing and waving  
in the April wind, feathers combing  
and braiding the air like fingers. Maybe  
this was where to find my father's angel on

that subzero day outside Detroit and  
the angels belonging to the passengers  
on Flight 17 while it plummeted over Ukraine  
and the angels of the two headless journalists—  
here on the blowing plains of the Navajo rez—  
a chorus of angels, a passel, a gaggle, a herd  
a pack, a swarm a murder, a flock of them—  
plentiful but far-flung like sunflowers  
or stars far from the worries of their humans.

## Just the One

Patty and I were emboldened by Aretha singing  
*R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me*  
while driving down  
the Ford Freeway up  
Warren Avenue across  
Greenfield Road wherever

my father's Datsun B210 would putter. We were full-  
of-ourselves sassy. Now Aretha comes on in the decade-old  
Caddy and the sullen sixteen year-old to my  
right doesn't even know  
this is Motown. He is both mine  
and not-mine. His mother's sliding razors

into the whiteness of her arms eventually  
made him my step-son. Nothing I can do  
here earns me my props. I can't yell  
reason or cajole. I can't mystify or woo.  
I'm not even the enemy. I am just the one  
who is not and never can be.

## Finding Sam

My mother remembers me  
in the kitchen on Graham  
talking to Sam on the phone.  
I remember we often talked  
sitting on the yellow monkey  
bars. I listened while Sam told me  
stories of shark fishing in Florida  
while his mom's job as an ER nurse  
granted him stories of six year-old  
gore. It was 1976. In twelfth grade,

Sam drove us to Spanish class daily  
crosstown. Even in the flat green  
world of Dearborn, MI, he had a South-  
westerner's sense of time. I got a B  
that semester for being tardy  
every day. In 2014,

my mother and I share a turkey  
sandwich at Luci's in Phoenix. I say,  
"Mom, I found Sam. His office is two  
or three miles from here." So we drive  
west down Bethany Home and turn  
left on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Two miles down  
a shiny building the color of a penny  
reflects palm trees and parked cars.

I make a U and we drive  
to pick up Andrew from school.  
Thirty-eight years later, it's enough  
to know Sam's behind the mirrored  
walls, seeing patients and perhaps  
watching the same sunset fling the orange  
evening into ribbons across the sky.

## Two Guns

### I. West Bound

We are quiet on the freeway and now there is nothing to say but to watch the sun ease down the horizon, leaving a wavy pink wake. We have traveled over four hundred miles after working a full day. We pass Two

Guns, Arizona, and now, work ended for one day, there is nothing to do but note Mt. Humphries growing closer. We have been gliding under grey

since we left, and the end of the cloud front hovers between us and the mountain. When we arrive beneath the star-filled sky we will be halfway.

### II. East Bound

The same stretch of abandoned train cars line I-40. Whose day will be filled with hooking up to their loneliness and pulling them home? The fourth car explodes with graffiti: HOLLA. The H, taller than a grown man, leans

into the O which bounces into the double L which sidles up to the peaking A. My mother-in-law, refusing to believe that phones are now mobile, calls near Gallup and thinks

we are at home. But the land turns into reservation and more emptiness as we point the car north for the final leg, and the call drops as her voice rises and her hollering engulfs the night.

## CGI

After I show him the video that ends  
with the fairy in the apple tree, my stepson  
shrugs and says, "CGI." And when I don't  
understand, he grumbles, "Computer Generated  
Image." But I need that fairy with his black  
legs dangling between lacy wings the way  
I need the trail of feathers in the backyard  
not to lead to the lifeless dove, the way  
that when I'm writing in the library  
I need to imagine Cyrus and Damien above  
me stirring up the dust motes and floating  
in the sails of the skylight, releasing  
words and letting them drift down  
and settle onto my pages one tired  
lonely letter at a time.

## Carrying It All

I find myself carrying a fifty-pound duffle up 165 steps (which, the sign claims, is equal to 12.5 flights of stairs) because the lift is broken. The bustle underground delights, the motion brewing beneath, the towering escalators which lift and lower humans in lines, the wind whooshing, ruffling scarves and blowing back jackets. All this delight occurring beneath the soil, down there. Until the delight is no longer light and this business of carrying the burden beneath needs someone to bear witness. I want to travel light like tall John, packing only a small shoulder bag, allowing my length alone to fill this world and not my shoes, t-shirts or books, not my stacks of empty journals or my Levi's, which have been increasing in size almost annually. I only seem to widen in this world, pack on weight around my hips and thighs and belly. I never seem to grow any taller. And the young man, the one who didn't let me decline his help, the one who simply grabbed one strap and claimed half my burden as we ascended the 165-step spiral, the remaining six flights with my heart hammering too hard for me to hug or thank him before he eased through the shiny turn stall and into the light—that guy? the one with wings? I want to mention him, too.



### *The Results*, c. 1810-1820

Following the Napoleonic Wars, Francisco Goya arrived too one day in Glendale, hanging next to a William Hogarth engraving, “Analysis of Beauty,” and two of Honore Daumier’s political cartoons. Plate 72 of Goya’s 80-print series *Disasters of War* reminds us that dark-winged creatures, like hungry cats, crouch on the belly of a man lying prone. How the feathers stir the air around him! The sparrow on top the palm tree sees only his forest of fronds and knows nothing of the universe forty feet beneath him.

## Another Beginning

I never held a baby  
bird before. I removed  
the gloves and used both  
hands to cup the airiness.  
I was supposed to keep

my eye on it. My mother  
says I entered this world  
clutching a sparrow  
after the doctor yanked  
me out with forceps.

My job was to keep an eye  
on the bird with the gaping  
yellow beak, but it died years  
ago and I still can't look its way.

## The Goodness of Waiting

Walking back from Rickett's Park  
I came across my body. Under the dark  
and heavy sky I found it where it had been waiting  
for years. Putting it on there between the empty  
baseball diamonds, I felt the familiar tugs—a bit too snug

in the hips, too tight in the chest and full  
in the belly--but still familiar and easy. Finally inside  
myself again, I found an empty dugout and turned towards  
the field, watching no players, umpires, or fans, no cheering  
crowds or disputed calls, just me reveling in finally arriving home.

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