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Book of Rooms

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BOOK OF ROOMS

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2012

Dedication

For my parents, whose love and support gave me the courage to choose words carefully.

BOOK OF ROOMS

by

MIRANDA AROCHA SMITH, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

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Abstract

In this preface, I discuss how I chose the subject matter of my thesis and what magnetized me to the poetry genre: its inherent musicality, the power of its indirectness, and the possibilities that emerge from the double-medium of speech and silence. I explain the structure of the book as a series of rooms, ordered in a non-linear fashion that alternates between poems and prose poems. It is a form that allows the reader to move through time and space at whim, without privileging any one room as more “sacred” than another. I also describe my influences, which include poets Adrienne Rich, Li-Young Lee, Rachel Levitsky and Haryette Mullen. Finally, I investigate the book’s themes, which include impermanence, silence, generosity, non-self, the importance of memory, the perpetual vanishing of form, and the insubstantiality of existence.

Preface

“Poetry was always, for me a kind of probe into the unspeakable. It was a way of speaking indirectly about things I couldn't speak directly about.” – Adrienne Rich

“It's poetry's main role to look at whatever it is the mainstream culture ignores. So whatever isn't being seen and isn't being remembered, poetry turns toward that... intimate life, intimate personal life, isn't actually that talked about anymore in public.” - Jane Hirshfield

Toward Mindfulness of Speech

The poems in this collection are traces left in the wake of a spiritual journey through many rooms, temporary residences. Along this non-linear path the body experiences the world through various apertures of freedom and confinement. Each room affects the body and mind in a unique way. The central chamber of the poems is the monastery, a space permeated by silence, where attention is trained on the movement of the breath. Here, the speaker finds rest in perpetual motion, and learns to accept a lack of resolution. Along the journey, the poet emerges: an investigator who writes in order to contemplate, and embraces the poem as a medium through which her contemplation can be shared with others. Like painting and song, the poems are alchemical, altering the space in which they are delivered, transmitting experiences and understandings that may be difficult or impossible to speak about directly.

Poet Jane Hirshfield, a Zen student for eight years, lived as a monastic at Tassajara Zen Center for three years before returning to poetry. Monastic training, Hirshfield says, gave her tools with which to better practice the art of writing poetry: “When I returned to poetry, a rather different person in many ways, I brought with me two things particularly useful to any writer: the monastic model of non-distraction and silence, and the desire to call forward a complete attention.” She argues that attentiveness is central to both art-making and living: “I...see the development of a continually deeper and more clarified and refining attentiveness as the path through which art and craft as well as life are more fully realized.”

Similarly, Poet Li-Young Lee describes the vocation of a poet as yogic: “I...feel that, as a yoga that one practices, writing poems is like any meditative path. You move through your own psychology, and then you move beyond your psychology.” Like any yogic path, writing poetry also requires single-minded attention and receptivity, and a welcoming attitude toward questions and ambiguity.

The center of life at Gampo Abbey, a small monastery in Nova Scotia, Canada, is the practice of Shamatha Vipassana sitting meditation four hours daily. I lived at the abbey for six months, from Fall 2007 to Spring 2008. When I came home, I hoped to continue the contemplation made possible in the space of the abbey— for example, on the non-existence of a static self and impermanence— through writing. I also hoped that writing would continue to disrupt my habitual ways of being and encourage me to take risks in thought.

Just as language in a poem arises from a fundamental silence that continues to reverberate through the poem’s reading, so speech at the abbey arose from a background of silence, which we observed before noon and after eight in the evening. This panorama of silence was an encouragement to consider one’s words carefully. Similarly, Ezra Pound urges poets to be precise and mindful in their use of language in the landmark essay *A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste*: “Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something.” In poetry, this deft wielding of language is what gives a single image its power, creates a specific and vivid texture, or conveys a precise emotional resonance. Through precise use of language, the writer gains sculptural control over the poem on the multiple levels of word, line, and stanza.

Similarly, Zen priestess Shundo Aoyama demonstrates the impact of a single word and argues for increased mindfulness of speech:

Not long ago, one of my friends left the world, never to return. Another friend announced the news to me by saying, “She is deceased.” Later, a different friend said, “She passed away.” I felt that there was a very large gulf between the two ways of saying the same thing. Here I saw reflected the difference in the personalities of these two friends. “She is deceased” seems to be an official, indifferent report with a cold ring to it. The words “she passed away,” on the other

hand, showed more sympathy... beautiful words are appropriate and full of consideration. (46, Zen Seeds)

The intense pressure of living in a close community encouraged mindfulness of speech, a heightened awareness of what I said and how I said it. The abbey was an arena of choicelessness, where the meal-plan was pre-determined, the dress-code strict, the options for behavior limited (during break, whether to take a walk outside or do yoga in my room). Speech was also choiceless: I had no control over who might sit down across from me at a meal and have to engage in conversation. However, this choicelessness made me more aware of the importance of careful word-choice.

Adrienne Rich, in her poem “North American Time,” also advises us to choose words with care, for they are “found responsible.” However, she goes a step further, to argue that we have only two choices: speak or remain silent. The poet must speak, then, or endure an oppressive silence:

IV
It doesn't matter what you think.
Words are found responsible
all you can do is choose them
or choose
to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
which is why the words that do stand
are responsible
and this is verbal privilege

Returning to day-to-day life without talking about my time at the abbey felt like an oppressive silence. Furthermore, I wanted to share new facets of my life that were born of silence, and thus difficult to articulate. It was a journey, however, to choose a genre to write in—whether creative-nonfiction, fiction, or poetry.

Departing from Creative Nonfiction and Fiction

My initial approach to writing about the abbey was through creative nonfiction, which enabled me to describe the monastic environment in anthropological detail, render my relationships with other

residents through scene and dialogue, and to take the reader directly to moments of conflict, challenge, and insight through scene. However, my main challenge was to keep my reader engaged in a story without much conflict or external action.

Shifting to writing fiction fulfilled this need by allowing me to focus on the love story between monk and nun, Kihashiro and Julia. Writing fiction allowed me to invent conflict, now that I was no longer restricted to the facts, and a longer time period gave me a larger canvas on which to explore devotion and friendship. I enjoyed the ability to engage the imagination in an attempt to create a “guided dream,” as Robert Olen Butler calls fiction. Also, working with two main characters allowed me to render the point of view of two individuals in the monastery, expanding the more limited point of view of my creative nonfiction.

The novel begins in El Paso, just after Julia’s passing from cancer. Kihashiro has inherited her house, packed with objects she’s collected from her years living in Japan. Julia, now a ghost, still can’t let go of the house, her memories of the past, and her friend Kihashiro. Meanwhile, the house is literally crumbling around Kihashiro, the foundation succumbing to mold, a sinking ship of relics from the past. Kihashiro, though tethered to his family to Japan, is still in love with Julia and faced with the task of letting her go and making sense of their unresolved past. The characters first meet and fall in love in a monastery in Japan, where they practiced meditation as monk and nun. The novel traces their lifetime of conflicted devotion.

Midway through the novel, however, my motivation flagged. Now that I was writing fiction, I was no longer in dialogue with my lived experience, which I still wanted to revisit and investigate. Just as living in a monastery was about growing intimately familiar with one’s own experience, I wanted to write in a way that brought me closer to my own experience and collapsed the distance between “self and other,” poet and reader. Adrienne Rich, in her essay *Someone is Writing a Poem*, describes this intense connection between the poet and reader: “All this has to travel from the nervous system of the

poet, preverbal, to the nervous system of the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished.”

If fiction, on the one hand, was too far away from my lived experience, the voice offered by creative nonfiction was too anthropological and detached, too much a faithful record-keeper. I needed access to other kinds of voices, available to me through writing poetry. Adrienne Rich describes her enjoyment of the multiple voices in poetry:

As long as I can remember I have cared about the timbre, the phrasing of a poetic line... worked close to the pull and release of voices. Sometimes they’re conversational, sometimes ... dialogues or choruses of Greek tragedy, addressing conditions of urgency in a communal order or disorder. The voices may be individual, but they’re searching for a shared moral reality.

(Interview, Adrienne Rich on Tonight No Poetry Will Serve)

Writing poetry allowed me to speak from a spectrum of voices: the nun, ex-nun, young adult, and bookstore employee, among others. I employ theatrical dialogue (“Vanishing Act”), as well as speak from places of transition, voices from the “inbetween” time between young adulthood and adulthood.

The speaker of “Golden Absence” is ethereal and disembodied:

I've been carved out
again, to enter the air
delicate as a spiraled
shell

In the poetic mode, I could invite surreal and absurd imagery into my work, disregard chronology and leap through time and space, as well as juxtapose different perceptions. In prose-poetry especially, I found the freedom to fracture and re-organize memory as I needed to, like a jeweler sorting beads.

My poems linger in various rooms of the abbey – the bedroom, kitchen, shrine room. They excavate and interrogate objects like artifacts – jade Buddha, a paring knife. They study the trail of the

barest sensation, such as a ringing in the ear, or the sensation of the breath, like a mother running her finger along her child's spine. The poems themselves are rooms, too: containers of image and breath. The monastery is the central chamber, where the deepening of awareness takes place. At the same time, poetry gave me freedom to move beyond the monastery and dialogue with other aspects of my life and the culture at large. The monastery is nestled between rooms from the past and present: moments and scenes from the used bookstore and El Paso, and dialogue with other texts and aspects of popular culture. Creative nonfiction had imprisoned me in the monastery walls in terms of temporality, limiting me to the six months I spent in that environment. Poetry allowed me to reach beyond that space and time to dialogue with websites ("lightinthebox.com"), Taco Bell ("Register"), other texts ("Civilization in Ancient China"), my ancestors ("Christmas in Tampa"), loved ones ("Why We Must Fight Against Forgetting"), and the streets of El Paso ("Paseo de las Luces").

Just as a stanza asks the reader to "stop, turn, pause (Jane Hirshfield, interview)," the contemplative life asks a person to do the same. Like a book of hours, my thesis is "meant to be attended to as part of an ongoing life...designed to call us to a more contemplative way of being (Jane Hirshfield, interview)."

Why Poetry?

Of all the possible genres, poetry beckoned me with its musicality. Just as the metaphor for a strong meditation practice is playing a musical instrument – the strings must be neither too loose nor too tight – so writing poetry asks for a similar delicate musical balance.

And just as the pace of life at the abbey forced me to slow down and pay attention to the concreteness of the world, to be deeply aware of my food as I ate, or a flower arrangement I passed in the hallway, writing poetry grounded me in a concrete reality of objects and images. Adrienne Rich describes this quality as the hallmark of poetry: "The writer's job is to keep the concreteness behind the

abstractions visible and alive (interview).” Ezra Pound similarly advises poets to “go in fear of abstractions.”

I came home from the abbey in spring of 2008 still processing and questioning the experience I had just gone through. I especially wanted to probe the challenges I had faced there: accepting a life-style of non-attachment to people and the material world, cultivating equanimous relationships, living according to the numerous rules, and obeying the quick pace of the schedule. Poet Adrienne Rich explains how looking back and “re-visioning” experience is necessary, an act of survival:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence)

Writing poetry about the abbey allowed me to “re-vision” my experience in a different way than either fiction or creative nonfiction. Freed from the constraint of writing a coherent narrative, I could explore particular moments and images that might not have emerged if I hadn’t had license to write about them poetically. Unlike fiction and creative nonfiction, in which a coherent narrative thread is necessary, poets may depart from narrative to follow the trail of language, image, thought, and emotion. I could enter a poem in any of these directions, without worrying about breaking a narrative thread. For example, writing the poem “Ruminations,” I entered the poem by going directly to the sensory impression of peanut butter dripping through my fingers while eating a banana. In the poem, I free the impression from the arc of a story and allow it to operate on its own, framed by white-space. At the same time, the poem allows multiple images to dialogue with one another, like photos spread out on a table.

The freedom to bypass chronology gives the poet license to jump directly to moments at risk of remaining unarticulated. According to poet Adrienne Rich, experiences that remain unspoken are in danger of becoming unspeakable:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language— this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.

Many poems emerged from images that appeared in my life: rainbows knitting nests in the hair; a man's back pressed against the glass; a paring knife; romance novels stacked on the counter; a tumble of red glass bracelets. Sometimes, a physical object triggered a poem, such as the "carved, coconut ring" found while I unearthed objects from a drawer, or a Mexican Pizza at Taco Bell. Writing poetry was like finding a home for images from my own life that felt rich and suggestive, but didn't fit into orderly prose, for example: my grandfather, pouring coffee "into a saucer so it can cool, sips/ slowly like a cat." Furthermore, I now had a convenient means of evoking silence: poetry's whitespace, which functions as embedded silence.

It's not about thinking, argues Adrienne Rich, so much as imagining. Poetry was a space for my imagination to give birth to images: "Even in the car, the rules haunt you like a storm against the windshield, blotting out the sound of your favorite album. Flat-lined. The sopping petals of a spring azalea, stuck to your boot (On Rules Against Ingesting Intoxicating Substances Like Alcohol, Coffee, and Music)." Re-visiting my experience through writing poetry allowed me to see more clearly and gave me permission to imagine what I hadn't perceived at the time: "Zero in on the last head of lettuce of the season; the head, small and browning, like a curled squirrel (In the Kitchen)."

Poetry also gave me an arena in which to ask questions. Li-Young Lee explains how questions enhance his own poetry: "They're a way to admit my own condition of not knowing. I think that asking a question that can't be answered can move a poem forward. I feel like my whole being is a question (interview)." In poetry, asking questions invites a lack of resolution, like a koan or riddle, pointing toward understanding that arises from the process of questioning itself. For example, in the poem "Astral," Tracy K. Smith asks several questions at a time, pushing the poem forward with urgency:

What if

My foot presses down onto the white blanket

Of moonlight patching your sheet?

Where am I that I am here?

The pressure of these two questions, and the gap provided by the following stanza break, lead the reader to linger in the airy moment of questioning, in which the speaker's body becomes astral and insubstantial as the act of wondering itself.

Like the poems of Tracy K. Smith and Li-Young Lee, my poems embrace the questioning mode. Many of my questions are metaphysical and ask the reader to remain in the open space of questioning. "Poem to Allison Love" begins with a question: "How to explain that I wasn't surprised/at news of your death?" The speaker has no answer, though the question leads her to excavate her past in search of one. The poem "Drift" also begins with a question about death:

Sure, you can think of death
as disappearance, or drifting
into another room, but what about

the emergency lights flashing like a circus
come to town?

By asking a question, the poem attempts to reconcile the weightlessness of death with its tangible effect on the living, the "contagion of terror [that] passes through phone lines, between generations ("Drift"). The haiku that concludes the poem brings the reader to the precise moment in which the grandfather's mind drifts, and subsequently turns into spoken haiku:

by mistake,
grandpa/ pushed the gas pedal/
Instead of the brake –

Writing a Poem: Words Emerging from a Ground of Silence

Chinese-American poet Li Young Lee, in his 2003 talk at the UA Poetry Center, describes poetry as a double-medium comprised of both silence and speech:

Poetry ... distinguishes itself from other forms of language because it's a double-medium. One ... is speech or language, and the other medium is silence... as time goes on, that other medium begins to assert itself more and more, so that language becomes more a way to inflect silence, so that we can make it palpable, and I'm experiencing something like a greater interiority.

By writing poetry rather than creative nonfiction or fiction, I could give silence a more tangible, atmospheric presence in my work. Just like speech at the abbey, in my collection of poetry, silence is the ground from which speech emerges.

A poet engages in a complex decision-making process, like jazz improvisation. Adrienne Rich, in her essay *Someone is Writing a Poem*, describes this process:

The theater of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time—how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them? ... the field is charged by the way images swim into the brain through written language: swan, kettle, icicle...

Writing poetry, I was suddenly engaging with language more like music: reading my work aloud while I wrote it and experimenting with stanzas and line-length to make a poem slow down or speed up. I was also considering the poem as a visual object on the page. I enjoyed the focus on process rather than product and began to treat composing a poem as an end unto itself. The whole experience of writing reminded me of my mode of being while at the abbey: "In silence, I ditch/room after room, a bird in/ migration ("Folds to Revisit")." In the same way, a poem would emerge, and then I'd move on to the next. It reminded me of my relationship with chopping vegetables in the abbey kitchen:

In the kitchen, I am alone /
again with a task, both /
necessary and fleeting
(Folds to Revisit)

Similarly, writing poetry requires solitude. It is a task both "necessary and fleeting," just as the breath of the poem continually vanishes to make way for the next breath, and the next. And just as silence surrounds the body in the monastery, whitespace nestles the poem, a frame around the unfolding

movement from line to line, stanza to stanza.

Structures and Form

My thesis is organized in a non-linear way, moving back and forth in time, just like memory. There is no spiritual hierarchy to the poems: although “In the Kitchen” is designated as a “sacred space, a second shrine room,” it is not intended to be privileged as any more sacred than the used bookstore or the elevator, the shrine room or Taco Bell. Although the monastery is recreated (and complicated) in the poems, the outside world is given equal stature. Without the used bookstore, there would have been no journey to the monastery. Although the speaker finds herself dissatisfied in some rooms and more content in others, each room is part of the larger journey, and integral to the whole. So the book skips through time and space.

Poems written in free-verse alternate with prose-poems. While the free-verse poems capture lyric moments, the prose poems are more like buildings. The white-space in the prose poem creates this architectural form by slowing the reader down, bringing him or her to linger in an environment with its unique textures, characters, and demands on the mind and body. The white space also gives the reader space to contemplate the thought experiments in the bookstore, and even participate in life at the abbey—to anticipate the ten-day silence, or to walk mindfully down the hall. The prose poetry renders two spaces, the bookstore and monastery, each with a distinct dimension and pace: the monastery is large and slow, while the bookstore is cramped and fast. The lyric poems move even faster. Compared to the prose-poems, they unfurl. So the organization of the thesis mirrors the rhythms of life, which alternate between slow and fast.

A Portrait of Life in the Monastery: “Folds to Revisit”

My poem “Folds to Revisit” renders the day-to-day unfolding of monastery life and captures the daily rhythms there:

I begin

again in my bedroom, map
in hand, bedclothes
folded. Folds of horizontal
intent, folds for visiting and
revisiting. (Folds to Revisit)

The rules guiding life are the “map in hand,” reminders of how to live moment to moment, rules such as “don’t eat while walking,” to “sit with your legs uncrossed,” to “not wear jeans in the shrine room,” etc. The speaker of the poem moves between the multiple rooms of the abbey —the bedroom, the kitchen, the attic—in which she is brought to the knife-edge of experience: “In the kitchen,/ I cup my hands beneath/ the hard spray (“Folds to Revisit”).” The intense pressure of abbey life leads to birdlike movement, in which the body exists in perpetual motion absolutely necessary to survival. The line-breaks capture this type of movement from room to room, a journey guided by necessity rather than inclination:

In silence, I ditch

room after room, a bird in
migration, entrances bright
with survival.

It is a vibrant existence, in which the perpetual displacement from room to room is a source of freedom rather than anxiety. Ani Pema Chodron describes enlightenment as “[being] continually thrown out of the nest (When Things Fall Apart.)” Homelessness becomes an invitation to dwell in mindfulness. By the end of the poem, the speaker completely identifies with the activity of chopping vegetables, her sense of identity no longer limited to the body, but expanded to include the precise moment of mindful awareness:

I am
some magic juncture

between a carrot,
a potato peeler,
and hand.

Influences: Rich, Li-Young Lee, Levitsky, Mullen

Adrienne Rich's plaintive and urgent voice, with its skill at joining emotion, thought, and rhythm, often played in my mind while I wrote:

I
Wherever in this city, screens flicker
with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,
victimized hirelings bending to the lash,
we also have to walk... if simply as we walk
through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
of our own neighborhoods.
We need to grasp our lives inseparable
from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces,
and the red begonia perilously flashing
from a tenement sill six stories high,
or the long-legged young girls playing ball
in the junior high school playground.
No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

Like Rich, who conjures startling images such as “the red begonia perilously flashing” and “rainsoaked garbage,” I ground my poetry in concrete imagery. Rich creates lyrical movements which are unexpected and jarring, shifting from the softness of “if simply as we walk” to the loudness of “through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties (“Twenty-One Love Poems”).” Similarly, my poem “Drift” moves from a soft question to the jarring image of “emergency lights flashing like a circus come to town:”

Sure, you can think of death
as disappearance, or drifting
into another room, but what about

the emergency lights flashing like a circus
come to town?

As I write poetry, I often begin from a place of urgency that is the impetus from which the poem unfolds. My poem “Drift” emerged from a moment of alarm and terror in the wake of a phone call from

my mother to say that my grandfather had been in a car accident. It begins with a question that resists answer and explodes into a full-fledged excavation of history, ghosts, and terror. “Craving” begins with a moment of desire, “The whole day I wanted/ to scratch insect bites,” that grows from line to line as the speaker seeks resolution but finds only dissolution: “[the] banana peel... [soon to be lost] into darkness.” Other poems begin with striking images and commands.

Poet Li-Young Lee inspired me with his ability to employ a vast palette of sound and silence. Lee attunes the reader to the sense of hearing itself: a name called from far away, an inaudible singing, bird-calls. He even invents new kinds of speech. For example, in the poem “Out of Hiding,” Lee asks the reader to imagine how a child might speak to a bird:

When I heard my name again, it sounded far,
like the name of the child next door,
or a favorite cousin visiting for the summer,

while the quiet seemed my true name,
a near and inaudible singing
born of hidden ground.

Quiet to quiet, I called back.
And the birds declared my whereabouts all morning.
(Out of Hiding)

Lee’s work inspires me, as I continue to write, to invent voices and render the sounds of silence.

Rachel Levitsky’s book of poetry, Neighbor, inspired me with her investigation of love and social interaction between neighbors in an apartment complex:

Love is a more complicated thing
when I am speaking of my neighbor

who knows I’ve rejected him on numerous occasions
to whom I’ve been lately inexplicably nice.

Love is a complicated thing
when I speak of my neighbor...
(“Neighbor”)

Here the architecture of the apartment complex complicates the relationship between neighbors, the near-proximity creating an atmosphere of suspicion. In “Thought Experiment Behind the Register of the Used Bookstore: Everything is Impermanent,” the bookstore is also a space that estranges cashier and customer:

The middle-aged women who cycle through stacks of romances, women who are the reason why the bookstore stays in business. Who always head toward the same corner of the store, who look like they’re grocery shopping.

The speaker of the poem, locked into the observer’s vantage point, observes the bookstore like a zoo. Just as Levitsky investigates relationships between neighbors, several of my poems investigate the relationship between clerk and customer. In “Bats Like Black Diamonds,” a moment of intimacy is achieved between them by “swapping postcard scenes:”

I'd like to visit Carlsbad,
the cashier says, so
I tell her of bats, rushing
from the cave like black diamonds—

However, in “Register” their disconnection is amplified:

The cashier/girl
at Taco Bell gives me a nasty
what can I do for you?
All gracious hostess.

From the outset, referring to the cashier as “cashier/girl” reveals the tension inherent in the near-proximity. The speaker of the poem is herself a girl and former cashier. But the very act of naming and labeling reinforces the distance between them.

I was also inspired by poet Haryette Mullen, who uses poetry as an investigative scalpel to probe culture and language. In “Page 34 / if your complexion is a mess,” Mullen parodies an advertisement, pulling familiar language out of context like artifacts laid out on a table:

if your complexion is a mess
our elixir spells skin success
you'll have appeal bewitch be adored
hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora

Similarly, my poem “lightinthebox.com” investigates artifacts of language. It meditates on the process of clicking through a bridal website on the internet and encountering images and words:

For sale online:
all the images of my future life in white
dresses, even a maternity
dress. Great fun if I want to possess
like Mcdonald's toys-- cupcakes, orchids

Like Mullen, the speaker in my poem finds humor in the contradiction between her desire to possess and her wariness of the manipulation of the images. The poem also reveals her own vulnerability to the images:

Hands are swan-bills. They say
A curved neck is a sign of
vulnerability, attracts a man from
across a room.

I read this in an airport bookstore, and I admit
I tried to bend my neck while reading
and long after.

(lightinthebox.com)

Themes in the Collection

I am a collection
of desire

precariously
housed.

- Rachel Levitsky, Neighbor

My poems articulate the desire to see the world in a fresh way. Like meditation practice, they attempt to disrupt habitual ways of seeing and feeling to make way for fresh awareness.

The poems challenge, interrogate, and respond to memory. They construct a link between familial history of immigration from Cuba and myth: the hero's journey. They speak with my ancestors.

And they propose thought experiments: What would happen if you decided to give away your belongings?

They question the desire to travel elsewhere – the child in “Future” dreams of going to Japan, a romantic, idealized desire. The real journey is inward, toward stillness. To get there, the poems move through reluctance and self-doubt, the intense longing for home and the familiar.

They study loss and letting go – of former identities, possessions, and personal preferences– in order to recover a more authentic identity. Now and then, the speaker stumbles upon a mystical core, where the ordinary division of “I and you,” “subject and object,” break down.

The poems explore the speaker’s sense of otherness, of finding safety in another culture, of home in dislocation. Just as the hero leaves the palace in “Mythology,” the speaker of the poems goes on a spiritual journey, passing through many rooms and costumes along the way. The collection begins with the very basic instructions that call for a return to stillness. From this basic ground, the other poems—elaborations outward – are born.

The book is marked, inescapably, by impermanence. These poems vanish, line by line, to make way for a new, fresh moment. They are ephemeral as Tibetan Buddhist sand-paintings. In poems like “Thought Experiments,” the reader is made conscious of this continual vanishing of moments and experiences.

What is spoken in the poems is often as important as what remains unspoken. Aspects of life at the abbey that I rarely discussed– but which defined life there– now feature strongly in the poems. For example, the rules of living in the monastery are never listed outright, but they have a palpable presence in the poems as basis of the speaker’s confinement and liberation.

These poems grapple with the difficulty of detachment: What has been “let go of” is paradoxically present, for example, “*It’s hard for me to let go of letters, especially*,” Sopa admits.” The objects in the monastery are totemic presences – “*Nice watch*, she says. It’s forest green with a silver

face.” Through the practice of generosity, they become an expression of love and intimacy, as in “Things That Can Be Shared”: “Between two friends:/ a book, a meal.”

Elsewhere, physical objects impede freedom, as in the bookstore where books themselves are obstacles. The poems investigate the textures of this everyday dissatisfaction.

They attempt to make sense of the difficulty of taming the unruly mind which is anything but obedient. They acknowledge the speaker’s fear of silence and journey past that fear to see what one can discover. Breath itself is the vehicle.

Throughout the collection, the speaker struggles with memory and forgetting. In meditation, it’s the struggle to remember the breath. This is the most basic instruction, in “How to Practice:” “You’ve forgotten,/ again: the breath, remember, breath.”

But it is also the struggle to remember to be generous and loving, as in “Why We Must Fight Against Forgetting,” to remember:

the moment
to grasp the golden ball, and heave it
spinning into the air.

Materialism

Early on in the thesis, the desire to possess appears in the poem “Vanishing Act.” The bookstore co-worker has been stealing books from the store, while enhancing his reputation as an expert book-finder. He even finds freedom by being fired, while the poem’s speaker remains. She, on the other hand, has no impulse to steal or enhance her reputation. Both confined, they act out in different ways. The speaker herself soon vanishes from the bookstore by leaving to the monastery. It’s a movement into a space where her body behaves in a different way. Rather than gripping “a gray plastic pricing gun,” she sits in meditation, or else moves from “room to room, a bird in migration” in the poem “Folds to Revisit.” She is no longer in relationship with merchandise that can be bought, sold, or stolen.

In spite of the desire to let go of the material world, physical objects take on primary, even totemic, importance for the speaker in the monastery: “A flick, and Jade Buddha goes faint, milky green.

I believe objects have spirits, Dad announced once, fingering his half-boat pocket-knife... I grow fond of packages, containers.” The poem presents the reader with a conundrum— letting go of material possessions has made the belongings stand out all the more. A new challenge emerges: how to practice generosity, when there is a deep desire to hang on to the few possessions that remain?

Out in the world again, the speaker must continue to navigate her relationship to objects. In “Register,” the transaction of buying food at Taco Bell distances the speaker from the cashier. She must use her imagination to revive a compassionate sense. The food as commodity to be desired, bought and sold, makes “The Mexican Pizza” an example of involuntary generosity. This interaction is in a sharp contrast to the poem “In the Kitchen,” where the speaker is in the abbey. Her role as vegetable chopper changes her role from consumer to active participant in the community.

The speaker confronts the marketplace. In “lightinthebox.com,” desire is the engine that leads her to click through the website, on words like “cathedral, floor-length, empire.” Yet she is aware that she’s being seduced. There is still a struggle, though, between her desire to let go of these words and images, and her desire to inhabit the images, to buy and wear the dress. She knows, however, the image that seduces her is of an idyllic “future life” that does not yet exist. The speaker reckons with her own clinging to an illusory future. Virtual objects, just like physical objects, exert a pull on the mind.

Though the ex-nun is no longer selling books, she must reckon with Starbucks lattes, the mall, gift-purses from relatives, never used. Still, the challenge is letting go, not just of external objects but interior collections: “A list of auspicious coincidences grows long, like a necklace of opal beads. Then vanishes.” With the last line, the poem points again to the ephemerality of the entire material world, though it may seem the speaker can choose what she can grasp or let go of. The book ends asking whether it is possible to possess anything at all.

Insubstantiality: Life as a dream

The kitchen is the room in the abbey where the perpetual vanishing of all physical form becomes manifest, actualized by the speaker herself. “The cuisinart quakes beneath your palms, decimating form.” The second-person voice invites the reader to participate in this cooking. In this universe, there are no actual possessions: reality is insubstantial as a dream. There is only attention or lack of attention: “One night, I run soap over my arm, notice that I’m not actually cleaning.” The growing awareness is synonymous with the speaker’s freedom. The alternative is a funhouse, where the speaker sees herself reflected back again and again, a solid ego identity, separate and suffering, whether in the bookstore or the mall’s three-faced mirror.

There is another class of object present in the poems, objects that symbolize freedom, objects that are given away and so become tokens of love. However, in the poem “Why We Must Fight Against Forgetting,” the speaker is guilty of forgetting to practice generosity, to give what she intended to give:

Because you found the carved coconut ring in
the Indian marketplace, bought it for your
true love but forgot it among the tumble of red glass
bracelets and postcards of tribal children...

Motivation and Memory

The great fear motivating the speaker’s spiritual journey is also at the heart of this poem:

“Waking to find his life spent, /and mis-spent in dreams...”

It is a fear of sinking into complacency, of “always stand(ing) behind plexiglass and paper/backs, buttressed by those pillowed shoes...”

This fear kindles the speaker’s desire to remember: “to grasp the golden ball, and heave it /spinning into the air.” It is also a desire for activity, to be an agent in one’s life, rather than a passive cog in a machine: “Your boss who glances up at you absently as you enter the bookstore, clock in...”

“How to Give” suggests that the greatest generosity may be surrender; to live deeply in the present moment, inhabit embodied experience, and sit:

in the tub, unsure

of my own age, turned
the tap, water rising
like a field. I didn't
know it was one moment
I'd remember
clearly, this giving myself
completely.

In this moment, the speaker is freed from a self of fixed identity ("unsure of my own age"). The enriched moment is evident in the trace it leaves on memory: "one moment I'd remember clearly."

In the poem "Folds to Revisit," the speaker also finds a deepened connection to the present moment in the kitchen, in relation to water:" "I cup my hands beneath/the hard spray."

"Folds to Revisit" is also a poem about memory. Folds in the bedclothes are a physical reminder to live mindfully, just as folding a robe around the waist is a reminder. It is through the repetition of remembering that the mind is trained: "Folds of horizontal/intent, folds for visiting and/revisiting."

Such training was at the heart of monastic life. Another contemplative tool was chanting: each morning, we chanted a verse from the Diamond Sutra, an invitation to remember the ephemeral and dreamlike nature of reality:

Regard all compounded things in this way -
Like stars, hallucinations, and flickering lamps,
Like illusions, dewdrops, and bubbles on water,
Like dream images, flashes of lightning, and clouds.

My poems also functions as aids to memory- reminders to seek stillness in the mind and disengage from outward seeking.

Desire vs. yearning

In the final line of his poem "Disappearance," Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh invokes yearning, a positive force distinct from desire:

Late at night,
the candle gutters.
In some distant desert,
a flower opens.
And somewhere else,
a cold aster

that never knew a cassava patch
or gardens of areca palms,
never knew the joy of life,
at that instant disappears-
man's eternal yearning.

The yearning in Thich Nhat Hanh's poem arises from the depths of the poet's solitude, in the wake of impermanence: the guttering candle, the disappearing aster. Unlike desire, which is ultimately self-extinguishing, yearning is eternal and eternally unresolved. Yearning manifests as the desire for freedom from suffering and dissatisfaction and urges the speaker of the poems to embark on a spiritual journey. Desire, on the other hand, is the inexhaustible impulse to hold on and possess all manner of phenomena: pleasurable experiences, objects, people, mental states, emotions, memories, etc.

My work is motivated by both yearning and desire. In "Body in Silence," the last line is an unresolved dart of yearning and an invitation to contemplation. The remaining white space invites the reader's participation: "The head monk holds a book and reads: *And now, please imagine a being you love is caught in deepest hell, trying to escape a pool of scalding water.*"

In "Reverie," the child-self yearns to visit Japan. Though her parents talk her out of it ("What's the point? Mama asks. *Does it matter who you once were?*") she still wants to go find out who she was in her past life.

Elsewhere, the speaker yearns to overcome the separation between self and other, to feel compassion for figures who are inaccessible, at a distance in time or space: the little girl in the red wool hat on TV ("The Day of the Dead"), Allison Love ("Poem for Allison Love"), the half-sister ("Echoes From My Half-Sister's Life"), the cashier ("Register").

Desire also manifests in the poems as reverie, longing, or a mysterious itch.

In the first poem, "Craving," the speaker experiences desire watching a banana peel on the table:

a banana peel
bending on the table
like a woman's back.

Desire in these poems is usually frustrated. In “Bats Like Bat Diamonds,” the idyllic White Sands can’t be visited; the postcard version exists only in the imaginations of clerk and customer. In “Register,” the speaker’s desire for fast food leads to a feeling of separation from the clerk. In “Christmas in Tampa,” the speaker longs for a significant other, but is chained to her spot “on wet grass, listening for your voice.” In “Civilization in Ancient China,” the speaker passionately desires to understand another culture; she is an assiduous student, but the more she learns, the more frustrated she becomes by the omissions of recorded history, and finds herself identifying with the voiceless:

Less advanced
culturally, I know the book speaks
of me now, dynasties that could
not be unified, eunuchs who could reach
the emporer from inner apartments.

The poems in this collection emerge as a non-linear journey through a series of rooms: one by one, the movement in each room unfurls like an origami flower before vanishing into the silence of white-space. In the end, my poems must speak for themselves not in prose, but in the medium that values unassimilability and silence: poetry. In that form, the silences will at last have the opportunity to speak.

Book of Rooms

I. Sacred

How to Practice

Be still, like a doorway
anyone could walk through, everyone
facing the same direction, no one
watching anyone else, watch your breath,
like a mother running her finger along
her child's spine. It's impossible not

to think, so let thoughts happen: former
lovers might perform Macbeth, reeking of lavender
and cologne, faces painted white like mimes,
crayon-red mouths. A dwarf might
interrupt, dragging himself across the stage
with a wooden leg to announce your

cousins have eloped on horseback, before
throwing a dagger into the audience, where
it will sink into your chest and just barely miss
your heart. Bring your tongue back
under the palette, eyes loose over the room
like casting a net: guess snow. If you find

yourself wondering, why am I here, again?
The thought will drift away like cloud
cover. Rest, and rainbows might
knit nests in your hair. It's a little like
becoming spring-time: a long tract of
time. Be obviously where you are: like

leaving a dinner party to stand alone
on a balcony, everyone knowing exactly
where you are. Where you are not. You
are not. You are almost. You've forgotten,
again: the breath, remember, breath.

Reverence

Each month at Sojong, the time of confession, the Aztec-gold Buddha statue is dressed in orange robe. We watch, seated in rows like red dominoes: monk and nun stride down the aisle like eager hairdressers. Flanking him, they unfold the orange brocade cloth and drape it around his torso. Buddha doesn't speak, he is satisfied. Part by part, he is coming alive. They mother him: tucking, tugging, pinching. When they are still like guards, our waiting begins.

May it Give You the Boost You Need to Practice Well

Paint outside of class, with your mind, Mr. Bartman calls out, over the fleet of students under hot lights, moving paintbrushes, bodies angled like ships around the still life. As if to goad us, he continues: *ugly things, alleys, concrete, what no one wants to paint*. My eyes learn to scavenge: neon purple plastic of the abandoned playground, dark alley behind the art store, scattered shards of green glass behind the school. He sounds exasperated: *No one looks at their food anymore. Pay attention*. At dinner, I learn the topology of pizza: orange wedge with its purple shadow, air pockets rising like caverns. A serpent at our backs, he goads us: *The hardest color to paint is red. You have to paint every color but red*.

Meditation: a leash around the neck of a wild, raging elephant. *Notice the gaps*, remind the monastics at the abbey. They say this often, like a melody played by different instruments. Gaps in thought. *With practice, they'll get bigger, and will arrive more often*. Thinking slows. The mind is a pool of water with rainbow hued stones. Note the gaps, but let them go, move on: an endless garage-sale of the mind.

Practice of waiting. Each morning at 5:45, I stand in line outside the shrine room, hands held warm, already waiting for my breath, like looking steadily for fireflies: one, two, three. At breakfast, the journey between fingertips and the pearly, sticky skin of hard-boiled egg.

It is dance. Space between footsteps as I walk slowly to the shrine room. Foot-falls. Heel-toe, heel-toe, prickle of red carpet. (Maybe it's a little romantic.) A rain-drop finds my shoulder, striking like flint against a tender heart. Weather of pauses. Giving up. A cool dot of rain on the cheek.

Mythology: The Hero Ditches the Palace

Tonight, I paint you as a coward: a Gauguin. Wanting the coffee-brown sun on a woman's neck, you slip through the yard at night, dirt-caked chickens skittering. Left behind: your wife on the bed, monsoon in her belly, behind you, behind me. You leave beneath the moon's thin nose.

Please stay, brother begs, would weigh down your boat with oranges. A palace is not a palace. One afternoon in childhood, you sit beneath a weeping tree. Cattle shift nearby like clouds. Is this freedom? you ask the silence.

Father's eyes are gray-green, flecked pepper-brown. You meet them in every room and hallway, and try to be what they see: happy. Who wouldn't be? With all you've been given? Is happiness a white silk shirt?

The champion stands in the field, sinks a circle of targets, graceful as a mathematician. Friends part to watch. Who wants this? You, or them? You've lost track. Is contentment a comforter stitched with red silk orchids? And is happiness your father's smile? A palace is not a palace.

A woman's cry rends memory. Your shoes are broken like cracked gourds.

Tell Yourself: I Own Nothing, and Nothing Owns Me

Repeat this, again and again. Type the prices of the DVDs into the over-sized beige calculator, multiply those prices by tax, and think: These prices have no claim on me.

As you hand the DVDs to the boy with the Pink Floyd t-shirt, the receipt balanced on top like a little bow, tell yourself: I own nothing here.

While you sign the receipt for the Pizza Delivery guy, tell yourself: Pizza Hut doesn't own me. Sit in a chair in the backroom that isn't yours, and eat squares of thin crust extra-cheese pizza that aren't yours, while wearing a navy button-down shirt and khakis that aren't yours.

Exit the bookstore at closing time and enter the evening perfumed with sage, a smell that isn't yours. Walk to a car you don't own, through a night that doesn't own you.

Thought Experiment Behind the Register of the Used Bookstore: Everything is Impermanent

The books. The cloudy morning. The aged cash register. The romance novels: The biracial Cinderella stories. The Native American guy on the cover, with the six-pack and the headdress. The heiress with the spray of blonde ringlets, doing a backbend in his arms. The paunchy old lady with the walker who brings her own plastic bags, to fill each week with a new batch of paperbacks. The middle-aged women who cycle through stacks of romances, women who are the reason why the bookstore stays in business. Who always head toward the same corner of the store, who look like they're grocery shopping. The cardboard crates of books that smell of attics and garages, books that move to the shelves and then leave with customers, books that have known ten, twenty, thirty sets of eyes, until the spines are broken and first pages are missing, and the dumpster takes them. The shifting amount of money in the register. The flowers in the glass vase. The bruised sensation in your back. Your khaki pants. A man's back, pressed against the glass. This second.

Golden Absence

I've been carved out
again, to enter the air
delicate as a spiraled
shell, to make palaces
of teacups, garden hoes
of spoons— I've found
a shimmering chamber
in the ribcage, through which
it all can pass. I hope no
prince will notice I've
become a golden
absence; I want to be
lost, a pool of water
that knows
no pocket of land.

Things That Can Be Shared

Between two friends:

a book, a meal,

eggs cracked

brutally on the bowl

and fried, for the sake

of the other. Also,

inescapably, the self.

The stories they know

peer through the window, wild

myths that want to be

taken in. Afterwards,

one hands the other

a book. They don't know if

the joy resides

in the offering,

or the hand's acceptance;

in wondering what the book may contain

or knowing that soon

both will have trekked

across the same harsh field

of snow and branches.

Orientation

I knock softly on the office door: *Mehtok, I'm not fit for the kitchen. I may have to leave. I failed at cooking oatmeal and seven-grain.*

I'll see what I can do, she declares.

Mehtok is queen of fruit-bowls, of still life. She teaches me to unearth kiwis, uplift, revive, against the wallpaper of cool boredom. Each morning, I place freezer-cold spheres from my plastic crate in the lusterless fruit-bowls, my heart strumming her words: *Make it nice.*,

Leave: the word is my compass north.

There's extra hot chocolate mix in the cupboard, Sopa says. *Take only what's offered.* I find it there, canisters with labels in beige tape, names in black magic marker.

At dinner, I spoon Tibetan hot-sauce on my bowl of brown rice, burst with hives, rush upstairs to my bedroom. Sopa knocks on the door, enters, holds my wrist. Waits. I am a bird flailing between doors. The lost power of breath.

Some nights, I cleave to the outdoor balcony where I remember home in the stars' strong wandering. I miss Mother. I miss *check on father every half hour to see how he's feeling* and I miss my mother's eyes. In daytime, the silent, spacious hours are opening us like letters.

Ruminations

Alone, I walk through forest to the stupa, eating a banana. Mid-morning, I'm sleepy, and suddenly I remember: Don't eat while walking. Peanut butter slides through cracks in my fingers, dots the grass as I step through patches of daylight. Guilt like a stolen cranberry. Through the tree-branches, I can see my entire past.

In the desert of afternoon, Mehtok whips into the dining room like a red genie with clipboard, grips a chair. Trembling and gazing at the clock, she performs *famished*. I am her one-person audience, elbows propped neatly on the dining room table, hands wet from scooping carrot and celery. Go ahead, have an apple, I want to cry out, to toss her one from the fruit-bowl. But she is rule-keeper here.

Nice watch, she says. We glance at my wrist: It's a swatch, forest green, a silver face. Diagonal roman numerals. It marks me, like a hairstyle or a nick-name.

When we're alone in the walk-in freezer, she confesses: *I'm not sure I know what I'm doing here*. She holds her pencil like a cigarette and braces her elbow like a movie star against the frigid air.

In the freezer, plastic vats of peanut butter and jelly, boxes of kale and carrots teach me sameness, regularity, kept promises, to gather my work and haul it up a flight of stairs.

On the staircase, the weight of vegetables pulls my arms like twin mermaids from the depths, tugging me down into the basement's shadows. I surface into afternoon, a stretch of ironed time.

News arrives: a cross-country skier, killed by our food distribution truck. Age 27. We are quiet, though it's lunch, and we're usually antsy for a chance to talk. Mehtok crouches in the hall like a small sandcastle, chewing slow, plate of food perched on her knees.

It's hard for me to let go of letters, especially, Sopa admits in her bedroom late one evening. I remember a photo of a convict in his cell-block, slumping on the bed. An envelope stands on the radiator like a blinding window. I want him to keep his letter, to guard it. Wasn't I the one who sent it?

I used to spend hours ruminating, an older nun confides, walking beside me on the path. Rumination: another malady of the mind. Again, I find myself writing a letter of apology. I draw gifts in colored pencil to pacify him: three plums, a stack of records, a cup of tea.

Body Orbit

Thought Experiment in the Used Bookstore: Give Away Whatever You Are Most Attached To

Give two dollars to the man outside the store. When a young woman with curly red hair and a biography of Van Gogh gushes about your earrings, slip them out of your earlobes and hand them to her. Wear a new pair of earrings every day, just for this purpose. When your co-worker asks for a dollar for the Coke machine, give it. When he compliments a book on your hold shelf in the back of the store, tell him it's his, you've already read it. Say, "I know you'll enjoy it."

Vanishing Act

The scene: Girl with long brown braid grips a gray-plastic pricing gun. She sits in the middle of a circle of DVDs stacked like squat skyscrapers. She wears a lanyard nametag, moves wearily like a small T-Rex.

Voice of co-worker (goth, 20, wearing black polka-dotted bandana): *Tim is gone.*

Girl (rising to crouch): *Why? What happened?*

Co-worker (head peeking into the back-room): *Long story. (Voice gets soft.) Mike found out he was hiding books.*

Girl (speaking directly to audience): *Tim is my co-worker with magical book-finding abilities. Customers will cut by us, go straight to him. Fired. I guess his hold shelf was too small. There's never enough space on the hold shelf for all the books you want.*

(She gestures to shelves hanging poorly on the wall, heavy with unruly books. The aura of a men's locker room.)

Even if you had a lot of space: what if you buy all the wrong books? Books you won't ever read? On the other hand, even if you have good taste, how much time do you have to read, working here?

I'd always marveled at his knack for finding. Turns out, Tim was taking books out of their sections, nesting them behind books. A hidden kingdom of the most wanted titles: The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down. Slaughter-House Five-- pretty much everything by Kurt Vonnegut. Tim made the store his own personal hold shelf. The books are lost now. We won't find them, except by accident.

Folds to Revisit

Silence, morning to
midday, like frost on every
surface. In silence, I ditch

room after room, a bird in
migration, entrances bright
with survival. In the kitchen,

a paring knife. Silence
is also speech: my body
speaks, puppet in a vast
arena, tied to the vanishing
point. Three-tier bird cage, we

roost in the attic and swoop
down, unremarkable,
unseeking, obeying laws
of our species that fix the

night sky, points to compile
and re-visit. No dancing, no
music, or meat (except
for Saturday): In the kitchen, I

toss the same choiceless
salad, lettuce a tide, the plate
a passionless beach. I begin

again in my bedroom, map
in hand, bedclothes
folded. Folds of horizontal
intent, folds for visiting and
revisiting. In the kitchen,

I cup my hands beneath
the hard spray.

In the kitchen, I am alone
again with a task, both
necessary and fleeting, I am
some magic juncture

between a carrot,
a potato peeler,
and a hand.

My Possessions, Nearly All Gifts

This is my bedroom. On the low bedside table: Two books. Always two books. On a ring-box: Jade Buddha, thumb-height, Mom's vassal. My desk-lamp – a flick of the switch, and Jade Buddha glows milky green, as if his body is made of clouds and star-powder.

I believe objects have spirits, dad announced once, fingering his half-boat pocket-knife. We were moving, packing boxes.

Underneath my bed: the laptop computer -- Pandora's box -- remains shut. Don't be tempted by music. Zippered suitcase holds two letters: Open in case of emergency. I grow fond of packages, containers.

I especially admire a box of candy: It arrives in the mail, beautiful, French, domed like a cottage. An older monastic wants it. We have never spoken. A scribbled note under the door: *Are you using the box?* Now is my chance: to give it away. It rests in my arms like a birdcage as I bring it downstairs.

Boredom: Two Kinds, Cool and Hot.

How does a body behave in a room? What are the options? How does a mind behave in a room? Can it choose? How does body hinder mind, and mind hinder body? The desire for escape.

Home for cool boredom: a monastery.

Hot boredom. Is to suffer. You've known it, the hour before lunch, trying to focus on the cellular membrane. Cool boredom, however: a calm brook, lapping at your feet. I learn to tell them apart, like different strands of yarn. I remember them always, like the days of the week: waking, sitting, eating, but especially in the hallway's in-between time. It wallpapers the frame around my body's walking.

How to Give

A building with white paint
like Sunday taught me
how to give: like my grandmother,
placing a red tulip in a crystal vase
for a visitor, ten years
in advance. She sneaks by
the theater curtain, places
on the floor her shoes and jacket,
enters a room dark as a film
canister. She drops the tulip
in the vase. The ordinary

extraordinary. I am no Mother
Teresa, have never been
a nurse, but I've known service
to a dying man whose thank you
is mantra, right words after
a lifetime of imperfect
choosing. A response that can't be
helped: tucking
the blanket. How to be
a mother to a stranger? Maybe
it's possible before the itch
of words, when anger is a balloon
rising blood-red in the snow--
dense sky. One evening I found

a room with a porcelain
clawfoot bathtub. Sat
in the tub, unsure
of my own age, turned on
the tap, water rising
like a field. I didn't
know it was one moment
I'd remember
clearly, this giving myself
completely, asking nothing
in return. The porcelain
touched my back like Sunday.

Body in Silence

Will I go crazy? I wonder, brushing my teeth at night before the ten-day silence. This hour, my eyes are violet in the mirror. Night is taking all color. I spit and rinse, while the stars gather round our building, jostle the white paint of the wooden eaves, brush the bathroom window like a broom. Falling asleep, I am thinking: ten days. Ten days. The night is a gateway with stone guards.

In the afternoon, several hours of study in the library. At a nearby table, Ngedon raises an eyebrow, and I have to laugh. A hush across carpet: the door opens softly inward -- a newcomer. He bends, touching a familiar book-spine. Barefoot. I smile up from across the room, where I'm cross-legged and reading. He shouldn't wave, or smile, but he does. I wave back. How bodies mirror each other. I stumble against the step.

That night, the newcomer helps me finish in the kitchen. He draws a knife from the block, carves carrots at twice my speed. A story is written on his body: tree-logging in winter, absent knuckle of thumb. By his side, I scoop heaps of half-moon wedges, loosing them into the bucket like seashells. We meet again in a group. Groups. We are nearly always in them.

Rule of more than two. On a free day, we walk together to a rocky spot of beach. We brave a knotted rope down the cliff and find water hacking ice into crumbling tombstones of pink, green and blue.

The head monk holds a book and reads: *And now, please imagine a being you love is caught in deepest hell, trying to escape a pool of scalding water.*

Don't Want

Almost time for bed. Time to vanish and reset. The red-checkered tablecloth is between us. He says, *amazing -- isn't it? -- how life is like a dream. You get up from the table, walk into the hall, and this experience -- this now -- is gone forever. Takes some getting used to, doesn't it?* He rises, heads to the kitchen to rinse his mug.

A chronic ringing in the left ear warns him of carelessness. It warns me of desire. A bomb detonates into gypsum crystals, the desert air beige and blowing. Miles away, in a backyard garden, young red trees sway, threaten to break. A life suddenly altered – don't parents anticipate such things? *Rock concerts are bad for you. Take earplugs. You never know.* A wandering child stumbles against a metal grate, knocking the knee.

At mealtimes, I see a hole in his olive green sweater, at the shoulder. He doesn't notice: dime-sized, it frames skin, moves up and down, side to side, like a keyhole as he sits and stands, as he leans over to admire my watch with the silver face. *The ringing reminds me*, he says, hand touching his earlobe. I imagine I hear it too, like wind in a conch, the aching whine.

Years later: I am blowing the Tibetan long-horn and stop mid-breath, afraid. Have I accidentally caused someone hearing loss? It took a day before his ringing began to haunt me. From then on, it was a passenger in every room. Horrified, I touch my own ear: *I'm so sorry, are you ok?*

For Each Object that Appears Before You, Ask If You Experience Attraction or Aversion

The romance novels stacked on the counter: aversion. The red cactus flowers your co-worker put in a make-shift vase by the cash register: attraction. The cash register, with the dusty keys with grime in the cracks: aversion. Your mother's voice through the phone line, asking you how work is going: attraction. Looking down, the brown leather orthopedic shoes on your feet: aversion. The bruised sensation in your back: aversion. The digital watch on your wrist: attraction. The thought of the bathroom: attraction. The bathroom stall in which (you heard) a customer had a heart attack last year and died: aversion. The mirror on the bathroom wall: Attraction. The face in the mirror, with the skin that looks greasy, or is it the glass of the mirror?: aversion.

Reverie

One day, I'll go to Japan, I call to Mama from the breakfast table, as I conjugate a list of Spanish verbs: *llover, llorar, llevar. I'll find out if I was Japanese in a past life*. Daddy leans on the counter, slicing an apple into snowy moons, asks Mama if she's seen the dishwasher detergent. *I think Maria moved it*, she says, and to me: *Why does it matter who you once were?*

At night, in bed, I can see the clues, collected on my shelf: origami cats, birds and turtles, folding like questions. *What's the point?* Mama teases. *Does it matter who you once were?*

I twist a Japanese coin against the light, the empty center blossoming into the sun's rays. A collector's heart. My doll sits on the rug beneath my positioned lamp, black hair a helmet, pink kimono, marshmallow cheeks. I crouch all afternoon on the rug, awaiting her thoughts, until she sizzles like a Warhol-icon beneath the bulb.

Thought Experiment at the Used Bookstore: Every Being You Encounter Could Be Your Mother

The gnat crawling on the sink. Your dog, waiting for a treat like a child for a magic trick, blocking the front door. Your boss who glances up at you absently as you enter the bookstore, clock in. The woman who puts a stack of yellowed romance novels onto the counter. The little boy with the tie-dyed t-shirt who comes up to your knees and whispers, “weirdo,” then runs off. The weirdo who informs you that 2012 is real, his eyes shadowed by a bone-white cowboy hat. Your co-worker, who jokingly calls you “the local honey-trap” as you stack children’s books in the back of the store. The old man with dusty hair who sits outside the store, and whose back you see pressed against the glass.

Stalled at an Intersection: El Paso, TX. 2011.

Van Gogh on the street-corner lies in wait, analyzes the make of every car and the silhouettes of our skulls, my head especially. I invoke a spine of diamonds. In front of the line of cars, a man with goatee gusts by on a bike: action figure of freedom. *Please let the light turn green*, I think, and glance in the mirror to check if I'm still me: blue eyes, still shining. I can't resist another glance upward: lips, still in place. Now, let's all trade places a second. Shuffle, like friends playing musical chairs at a birthday party.

Exits and Edges

Why We Must Fight against Forgetting

Because you found the carved coconut ring in
the Indian marketplace, bought it for your
true love, but forgot it among the tumble of red glass

bracelets and postcards of tribal children
standing in the grass (where? when? whose?)
colorized like peacocks. It's because

of the hero, pushing up the pale green
mountain, purple crocuses winking
him forward, about to lie down in the grass

for a nap, which will last a century, a gray
beard curling in the crook of his shirt like a child's
palm. Waking to find his life spent,

and mis-spent in dreams. Because what if
the toad saw the face above-- with lips
like red fish, worrying into the deep blue

prism-- and was impervious. If he forgot
he was a prince. If his feet were content to swim as
the gold orb drowned? The way that, at 22, I began

to believe I might always stand behind plexiglass and paper
backs, buttressed by those pillowed shoes, and forgot
how to live in time: whether to let the days

pass fast, whether or not to pine for
another age. It's only now that I'd rather not forget
anyone's age, as innocent as that may sound, or

the years my father, wing of black hair
shading his eyes, stood waiting
in the camera store, ready to twist

the lock on the crystal case. It didn't matter
what his then-wife forgot. My father's hair is silver, over
coffee that smells of chestnuts

and Christmas, the morning between us,
springing ocotillos, our blue sky. A perfect
moment, dad says, but I'm wondering how to become

more adult, like him. No such thing, he laughs.
But I'm afraid of forgetting my own age, you
see, of sinking into the field, of ignoring

the moment to give: the moment
to grasp the golden ball, and heave it
spinning into the air.

Day of the Dead

The leaves on our tree
are apple yellow, and roots are sprouting
like eyes from a blanket of seeds.
In the bowl, the pomegranates
no longer blush, they scab: and yes,
death festoons the day, only memory
doesn't expire, to sprout
understanding that the dead
are dead. Perhaps today. The TV

news suspends
me, like a car knocked
into neutral, or a god
in indecision: A girl,
my age, faces a house
a block from hers, pressing white sky
like a Sanatorium, but this
is no Hollywood set. Her mother
may be dead
inside, and she waits
in the cold all day
for news. A camera catches
her crying in a red wool hat, not
unlike my own. We hear news
of her waiting. I walk to
the kitchen for candied
pecans, tasting

only grit. How to remember
the dead are dead? Even
on your death bed, they say,
the dead crowd your room, oldest
memories rising to the surface
of the mind like hot water, ghosts blooming
from the root
of your unassuming departure.

Poem for Allison Love, Who Announced She Was Skipping Art Class To Go Buy Hair-bands

How to explain that I wasn't surprised
at news of your death? As a child,
I felt the death-bed was romantic, the should-
haves, the loves lost and words
unspoken; journey that takes us, regardless.
One night, I dreamt I saw you walking down
our ghost-hall, the lights bouncing beneath

us like fishtank eyes, and we turned to each
other, sister. I burned to tell you that
I loved you. In truth I didn't know you well.
Just that your perfect
nose was bought-- you taught us the word
nosejob, which we whispered like children
trading baseball-card curse words. What hadn't your parents

bought? I wondered, about you
who left through the back door while
we measured the pitcher in the red still life. Once
you stopped me minutes before class to ask:
How do you stay so thin? Your nasal voice
like no one else's, an instrument out
of tune. No class had prepared me to answer

you on the spot. *I don't know*, I said.
The only words I remember saying
to you, and I still wish I'd had another
answer. I want to apologize for being slender,
for enjoying the small number marking the seam
of my white pants. *The littlest one was Madeline*.
I wasn't brave enough to ask, "Why does it matter?"

I wish someone had asked you, *How do you stay
so thin?* But only you asked that, Alison. There
are many ways and internet manuals on how
to refuse what is offered. I wonder how
you saw us: lithe as Botticelli nymphs? We
were tied to our reflections in the mirror's
black bowl, our ideal selves prancing by

like shy deer, our thumbs tugging moist
clay into handles and edges. I want to scrape
off the seeming-perfection with my palette knife. What else
would have satisfied you? When I heard
you surrendered to a coma after months, I knew

you well enough that it felt the natural conclusion
of your whodunnit, given the clues you

scattered, a row of incongruities. You leave me
wondering how I am also you, my own
failures standing out on the beach like shells
ripe for recollection, broken crags of red and peach.
Tracing the memory of those years, you are my
polestar, Allison, your parallel steps in the margins,
your terror, your question, and the confession I couldn't make.

Drift

Sure, you can think of death
as a disappearance, or drifting
into another room, but what about

the emergency lights flashing like a circus
come to town? The whole landscape alters.
A contagion of terror passes through

phone lines, between generations. Bad news
sounds like a poem when it comes
from your mother. Back when news

was slow as your feet, and theatrical, visitors
appeared one morning
in the salon, breathing differently. The set

for terror was more domestic without
the ambulance or car, your ghosts wandered
drawing rooms, curtains dappled the stale air

with watercolored light. A cat might drop softly
to the ground from a couch pillow, until
the place was redecorated in the seventies,

and ghosts moved to the backyard
in self-exile. A car turns a drifting
mind into a haiku whispered

by phone: by mistake,
Grandpa pushed the gas pedal
instead of the brake --

Grandfather tells me secrets – Miami, Fl. 2010.

You left and still miss the ripe green of the avocado tree, the way childhood gave itself to you, a spoon and green belly in the palm. You never dreamt of palaces, though others did. No, you dreamt of weddings in early evening, lights strung in the trees like cherries, the grip of a guitar's neck. Your dreams star a singing guajiro. And now, in my dreams, a guajiro wanders a party, singing. But memory resumes: the guajiro is dressed as policeman. Hat. Gun. Nights trap him until he is not man but wolf, shuddering through various forest tableaux, clipped fixture beneath the moon.

Echoes From My Half-Sister's Life: a Half-Empty Refrigerator, Chilled Florescence

I know only the rumor
of a house you survived, could plot it
on a map. But I must wonder back
to life the child, the lone magician,
pressing dough against the rough cloth
of the dining table, bringing forth
a man from clay, her red-checkered glove then
closing the door, so it could bake
hard as stone in her mother's oven.

He was a crouching man, steel-gray shirt,
a face of bone, who kneels now on
my father's bookshelf. The lips
on the man's face are black
like thread. Why black, for lips?

Father lives in symbols.
Black hair winged, shading
an eye. I once drew his crooked half-smile
in pink colored pencil, tailed like a fish,
reaching up as if to touch the eye,
his white, wide-brimmed hat,
colored with starlight.
Count: father's two mouths,
Pink, black. Yours, black and
rolled between your fingers.

Sometimes I feel we've landed
in each other's lives like space-cadets, boots gripping
the planetary ground in black and white
newsprint: I see your face half
turned, smiling, in the mask before you leap

away again. My guessing reaches back
years, through rooms I shade like boxes
in a cartoon strip: gray, crushed gold, until
present-day, this one ours. I want
a photograph of us together, to mark
the warmth of your arm, a trace
to protect us, as the black sky crowds above
like a magnifying glass: a memory
of warmth, like the slick stones
on a beach we might have visited.

Theme Song

My superhero shoes are made of daisies
and the latest unbreakable glass.

I don't believe headlines: The first casualty
of war is truth, so I'll sing
my own. You may have known me as
the girl at the party wearing
the Victorian lampshade, turning
her head between traps: that,
or that. A fisherman,

with a net
and cap, once drew
my constellated body from
the river. I emerged
a little shiftier. I don't exist
in the way you think I do:
every few nanoseconds

I'm new. Now I am the ripple
in the glass as you turn toward
the boutique mirror a third
time. Now I like
Japanese lanterns:
orange, white, pink. Sometimes metal
filings flock to my skin, and I am ground
zero, off-limits, it's best
for everyone involved. Or I'll find

myself sitting by the pool, eyeing
a lavender mountain
ridge, not knowing
how to help. One time

I appeared,
smoking in a bathroom
mirror, seconds too late.

I'd like
to teach the Pre-Raphaelites
a thing or two
about beauty.

Paseo de las Luces

Cigarette wedged in a grate, brown bag ghosts by,
and above, sky flies, unscathed by time.
I understand the postage stamp's allure:
"Paseo de las luces." I want to go there. But who
has roped this thin, white-barked tree to a pole?
Backward glance from a businessman, this glance
is all we have, the wind is constant
now, cold, announcement from headquarters:
the city's night. Pad-locked double doors,
the shadows of writing on writing. An escape-ladder
tattoos a wall, the sidewalk is closed
a few feet (Why the parenthesis?)
Crocodiles, wry and hungry,
A blue-green fence like a water-logged penny,
fantastical cage for grass.
A tree, veined and measured
by dead Christmas lights, the sound
of a man limping, a stress signal,
silhouettes of aging men on benches, waiting,
homeless or heading home, I can't tell:
all are experts in biding time.
Moons of knees through blue jeans,
flat exposed feet, a dreaming statue offers
me his elbow, a giant wing, a dentist's drill rises.
A sign for "ballroom" leading nowhere.

Leaving Sunday Morning for the Mountains

The peaks
are tall as all my hours
spent waiting,
severe as a thousand

downturned noses over
a lost book
of history. Cattle line
the road, nutmeg
soft. In the rock-face,

a blue-print
of the world's next
Superman.
And then we find
the ridge, pink
and blue like a cat's
yawning mouth.
Sitting at last,

we stroke the stone's
butter, though
the reddening sun
is already dividing
our bodies from
this vertical continent.

Craving

The whole day I wanted
to scratch insect bites,
to keep green
daylight in a fragment of glass
and hook it from
the ear. To touch the
warped spine of
the double-helix,
desire soaring
from my eyes like arrows,
even to a passing cloud
that seemed to have escaped
from an Italian chapel.
I languished, watching
a banana peel
bending on the table
like a woman's back,
the green leaking into
the yellow curve, knowing
I'd soon lose it
to darkness.

Bats Like Black Diamonds

I'd like to visit Carlsbad,
the cashier says, so
I tell her of bats, rushing
from the cave like black diamonds--
little does she know how long
I've kept this image without sharing,
but now I've done it: and swapping
postcard scenes, she tells me
about the full-moon
walk at White Sands: I can see
the red blankets spread on
the moon-blue sand, children
running-- *but no camping anymore*,
she says, and we hover
above the register,
my open handbag
useless. Then she tells me
she sweats
too much when she
visits her father back in Florida--
the desert changes you,
resets normal, she whispers, then
rips and hands me
the luminous receipt.

Rooms

Civilization in Ancient China

I.

I am testing your chemistry.

From jar, the word "full."
"Woman," from releasing the arrow.
"Wife" from woman and broom.
"Man" to employ strength
in the fields.

I'm studying.

Ancient letter *h* breathes
inside "Buddha," "siddhanta,"
and a single character will join
heart with dissatisfied,
water and cave.

II.

Then the celebrated gorges
of your river, cave paintings, pictograms
in their earliest stages, colours
I must imagine over mute
gray shadows. A list of your thousand
Buddha caves, names of twenty-three
out of thirty rulers unearthed
on indisputably genuine Anyang bones.
The codification of law, and you

shut me out at last. I leap
to the foot notes. Failing now,
wanting a story,
I open my book at random.

III.

In the north are tales
of bear-veneration and fox-myths,
sacred mountains, dog-magic and bronze
drums, but little is known of
the origin of the Chao people
and I want to cry. Less advanced
culturally, I know the book speaks
of me now, dynasties that could
not be unified, eunuchs who could reach
the emperor from his inner apartments.
First money from the skin of a certain
white deer. The prince, pushed
by his enemies,
committed suicide
or disappeared.

IV.

Footnote: someone ignored
a book.

There must be some mention.

V.

When I learned the word
misogyny I didn't understand
how it was possible. Was the word
real? Could there be a word
for what I hadn't experienced?

"Have you met a misogynist?"
I asked my mother.
"Oh yes," she promised.
I wondered at the man,
envisioned him as lonely
comic book villain.

Would I be exempt from
his hatred?

"Did he love
anyone?" I asked.
Without love, what was
the point?

Could the right woman
have sliced the belly?

I'm embarrassed now by the thought

that a woman (subject)
is the key to unlock
a man (object),
but is it true? There are locks.

The evidence
points to a settlement
of the remaining Romans on
the Old Silk Road, where
they married Chinese women and spent
the rest of their days.

VI.

Opening the brain
and extracting worms
can cure mu-sheng (a sort
of blindness).

VII.

My questions arc
across the sea,
"Heart-land" continent.

A vast, scattered literature
does exist,
never before digested into the compass of a single
book, built on a frame work
of questions.

The difficulty is
that the symbol
may, and every so often does,
have a remarkably wide
range of meanings.

VIII.

Image I want: I remember at last.
Image (did I imagine?) smiling up as I
peered down. Enough maps, I want
to see Cave no. 164, imagine
radiance of predominant
colors: black, white,
blue, green, gold. We meet
through time on this page
with its chalk-yellow border,
a peaceful empire between us.

Register

The cashier/girl
at Taco Bell
gives me a nasty
what can I do for you?
All gracious hostess.

To love her, I imagine her
eating Pop-Tarts,
weeding laundry for fresh underwear

rehearsing “how are you tonight?”
“what can i do for you?”
sweet, motherly, servile,

an arsenal of inflections
to alter the universe and countertop.

The failure of compassion is here,
difficult and easy to notice.

In a role so simple,
it's easy to over-act
reductions are delicious
(and the reason why I'm here)

I see cashier/girl glance
over the paper cups,
I freeze at my table

I once had recipes
for pleasantries: are you in school
around here?
how's your night?
(in the grocery store:
nice name!)
one by one

they expired like horoscopes
so quickly, I selected something weird
and probably tasty
from the menu:
fiesta cheesy fries,
pronouncing the words like prayer.

The register opens:

my food will be palatable
(no more no less)

love a transaction.

At the table my friend and I
talk of souls

how the girl with the tray of pies at Village Inn
had soul.

The Mexican pizza she gave me.

For sale online:

all the images of my future life in white
dresses, even a maternity
dress. Great fun if I want to possess
like Mcdonald's toys-- cupcakes, orchids
and Halloween brides-- but I want to imagine

myself inside
each one, and none align
with my inner bride (Parisian) who wears
the dress, not the other way
around. I write
to slow the rhythm
of see, judge, and click.

I click on a sailor
Fantasy. Lindsay, the girl stow-away,
who sails like a boy, loves coarse rigging,
salted air, a team of hard-working men.

This dress is for her,
a collar and stream of buttons
under her a smile: bashful product
of who she'll show her dress to. I'd like

to know the reason for my
love of gowns: *cathedral*, *floor-length*,
chapel, *empire*,
court, *column*. Antipathy
for *spaghetti*, *mermaid*, and the
clinical: *maternity*, swimming across
the descriptions like a sea-monster. I click
on *maternity*, between *trumpet*
and *plus-size*, find The Virgin, eyes
secretive and fixed to the sky.

I re-adjust. And there
she is, hand on waist, looking
stage-right: my own action figure
romantic heroine, shoulder-blades
protruding from the rigging, a back
on a new morning. The truth is

she feels watched
by that team of working men, her profile
the form of a seagull alighting on the helm.

Now she looks off, grasps her right arm
in a gray box. Lights eliminate
her coarser shadows.

I'm tired of wanting
what can only exist here, on
this virtual shelf, tired of adjusting
myself, accordingly.
Is the doll looking

at a man? Woman?
Husband? Mother?
Or me, now?

Soft arms snake down, and no.
I'm not imagining
this: as if she's bearing a fruit.

Hands are swan-bills. They say
A curved neck is a sign of
vulnerability which attracts a man from
across a room.

I read this in an airport bookstore, and I admit
I tried to bend my neck while reading
and long after.

She has a far-off look.
Who doesn't want to possess her
or be her? No one can ignore her.

I want to eat her like a cupcake.
I do not want to buy
this dress.

Christmas in Tampa

This is not the story
of parakeets exploding
from a cage. If you were here,
we could dress a tree. Instead,
I stand outside at dusk on the edge
of a stranger's wet lawn,
listening for your voice.

A thieving raccoon glares
and darts away. Back inside
the party, a man says:
even this, even
this, his hand rising
toward the country singer, her hair
beating air as she twists
her head in time; and abuela is clapping
for the littlest boy who's dancing
alone. Cousins with plastic
daggers and machine guns grip
my hands, swing me forth.

That night, I dream that you and I
are climbing down an infinite ladder, holding
fistfuls of seeds. We hit the ground and run, then
use the seeds as ice cream topping. The next day at lunch,

Abuelo tells the time I ordered
macaroni and cheese and sent it back
to the kitchen. He pours coffee
into a saucer so it can cool, sips
slowly like a cat.

On the afternoon telenovela, an actress sobs:
Solo quiero tu presencia. In the back
seat of the car, I write *snow*
in silver ink to remember how
Abuela sees it-- white
like coconut-- and wish

for an enchanted
ball of yarn, a better
GPS system. And I record
my latest theory: that love
is like hearing a good
interview on NPR while
driving home.

Inexact Synchronicity

The man stepping into the library elevator
just behind me calls our meeting,
synchronicity! But I disagree –
synchronicity is when you think of crows,

and a ball of wings and feet collides
with your glass door. I say nothing-
think, *coincidence*. I've learned
that *synchronicity* doesn't help

when my tank sags empty on the dark road,
though I've passed a highway sign
with my name in plain white letters. Nor does it
excuse kidnapping someone who looks

like Natalie Portman. I'll beware
the priest in cloak and top-hat who stops
the stammering father in the path, asks
to see his rough right cheek. Let's

save inexact *synchronicities* for lovers, who
see each other's initials on park benches
and book-spines, for the chess players married
fifty years, who invite me and all-takers

to their cafe-table Monday nights.
It all works out, they promise me, coffee
and pretzel between us. The tale is that
they met at a Jewish potluck.

It was his first time there, her first time
there. Explain the newspaper
he hadn't bought, open that day
on his desk, to the proper date and time.

On Rules Against Ingesting Intoxicating Substances Like Alcohol, Coffee, and Music

Then there's you, holding a glass of red wine, watching the orb suspended like a blood-moon in the glass. While outside, the true moon waits, like a backyard dog sniffing across the sky.

The Rules are diamond light from a projector, shining against the screen of your life. The giant face of a screen star, black eyeliner fixed into twin smiles. Inside the remaining darkness, your questions rise up towards her. And mornings, questions prod your mug of coffee, complicate the flavor with asterisks. The questions grow into a hand behind your hand, as you push the door and enter a Boston music store. Inside you, a classroom of children whines: *Why not? What better use of my time?* Their hands flying with pens and stenopads. Even in the car, the rules haunt you like a storm against the windshield, blotting out the sound of your favorite album. Flat-lined. The sopping petals of a spring azalea, stuck to your boot.

Shower: A Dance that's Fast and Solitary

Enlightenment: To experience the texture of life fully. Sip of tea, hot, dazzles the tongue. The band of ache under a shoulder-blade. Rasp of toast along the knife-blade. The wrist-bone pushes beneath the skin like a small planet. Watch and wait by the window before the first gong, rain streaking the glass on a gray-black morning. To wake from the daze. One night, I run soap over my arm, notice that I'm not actually cleaning. Water runs, hot, but I barely feel it. Is showering a skill I can become better at? I wonder. My years of unconscious showers. Will the choreography of a shower change when I shave my head? *Mindfulness will begin to dog you.* I try to run the washcloth over my skin like I peel my egg, like I follow my feet, like I sense my breath slipping.

In the Kitchen

Scrubbing her tea-cup, a zen priestess explains: when mind encounters an object, mind meets it, involuntarily, with response: passion, aggression, or ignorance, and with that, she leaves you washing a plate, sun an angry fairy in your eyes.

Finish by five or you'll have to come back at night so that the cook doesn't have to finish for you. There's no time at all if you're a cook. Hold the knife like this. Mehtok demonstrates.

Hours undisturbed. The knife on the cutting board with its regal red handle. Touch the amber scars on the thick plastic, a tally of vanished days. The list of tomorrow's ingredients, on the counter like a stained old magic spell: the quantities overwhelm you. So many vegetables and so few hours?

Wearing your thick, red winter cap, trudge to the garden with a paring knife. The day is white and flat like paper. Zero in on the last head of lettuce of the season; the head, like a curled squirrel, small and browning.

Now, inspect it for ants running from the rivulets – chase them across the linoleum with a sheet of paper, lift, and ferry them back to the garden. A leaf of garden lettuce: made of water and sunlight, like the world. Made of time, the earth's rotation through spring. Alpha: the only head of lettuce in existence.

The Cuisinart quakes beneath your palms, decimating form. A fly steals the afternoon on its back, jetpacks across the room. Tofu trembles underwater in the plastic vat, a sunset aquarium of your effort.

Your breath accompanies you, visits.

Wait for it, like a child watching grass for the soft rustle. This is another shrine room.

Don't Be So Serious About Everything You Give Up, the Teacher Warns

The woman in the department store makes my complexion look warm in the three-faced mirror. Says: you are *vintage*, explains that charcoal, gray lace, and floral print shirts are made for girls like me. I didn't know.

The songs at the mall tell the story of eyes meeting across a room. In one store, it's a woman. In another, a man. A private conversation over loudspeakers – I can't help but listen, embarrassed and awestruck by their public longing.

A former-monk writes me to gush, "I went shopping today. I felt like a prince in a bazaar." I recall my promise: Don't hold so tight to who you think you are. We have been everyone.

When a rainbow gets stuck in my vision, I'm back in the shrine room. *Remember your breath.*

I excavate my closets. I emerge with gift-purses, never used, from relatives.

Starbucks lattes – handily ignored. But I save the embroidered Indian shirt, a gift from my best friend. What would she do if I let it go?

A list of auspicious coincidences grows long, like a necklace of opal beads. Vanishes.

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Curriculum Vita

Miranda Arocha Smith grew up in Bethesda, MD where she was raised by Cuban and Costa Rican parents, both journalists. She earned her B.A. in anthropology with a minor in studio art from Mount Holyoke College in 2006. In fall of 2008, she entered the bilingual MFA program at the University of Texas at El Paso, where she teaches classes in Creative Writing and English Composition. She worked as an editor of the student-run literary magazine, The Rio Grande Review. Her poems have appeared in The International Poetry Review and Bordersenses magazine.

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