

Julie Carter

pseudophakia

*For my mother, who will worry that it's
autobiographical. It isn't.*

*And for my husband, who never worries about
anything at all.*

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Revelations

A stronger wind reveals the shape of things,
as leaves peel back from blackened twigs, or hair
displays our curving skulls. A kite's frayed strings
uncoil like asps, then snap. The lawn chair's wings
emerge when it takes flight. The skirt betrays
the thighs, and mortar cracks in walls once square.
Deep-footed oaks tug at the ground and craze
the hunching concrete walk. A draft surveys
the floorboards like a tomcat. Snow falls up
and drifts the sky. Every straight thing bends
to greet the ground. Although our faces cup
the wind in hollows, skin can't comprehend
the jut of bones, the way the cyclone's maw
can find the sharp spear heart inside the straw.

And silent

Shush, shush, shush
November's 3 a.m., and silent
save the bristle straws of my neighbor's broom.
She carves a floor, her porch planks bared
of shushing leaf crumble.

Morning squad lights did not wait
politely outside the pane, knocking pause
or whisper through the carved mail slot door,
but spun to fire the phosphorescent starmap
painted on my walls, spun to light
her husband's shroud-passage,
my own breath sparkle.

She swept the floor after him.

I cannot hear the crackle of her synapse,
sketch her cerebellum's curve
as she sweeps, shush shush,
in the snap cold of November,
and would not tell her son
(he of the vinyl siding)
what his mother does to chap her hands
between his two times weekly visits.

A leaf falls in twilight hush
to tap her window,
waken her from daylong sleep.
She surges to her kitchen's night,
stands and waits and waits for morning.

Defining water

I saw four lights where there were only two
because I couldn't tell each glow apart
from its rippled reflection. Once I knew
they stood above a river I could start
defining water. What I had dismissed
as some myopic flaw became the wake
of water bugs that coast the slick, and twist
reflections to their bidding. If I take
my glasses off, the air begins to spark
my faulty optic nerve with fictive lights,
till there are dozens dipping in the dark
like miners in their lantern helmets might
have shined before they broke the riverbeds,
and brought down water on their lamping heads.

Message in a bottle

Ohio folds itself like a green pleat
beneath my stride. The air is webbed with blue
and bluebottles that sail in birring fleets
from feast to atrophying feast. Tattoos
of chlorophyll and dirt disguise my shoes
in glyphs intended for another eye.
Three bobwhites spring out chuckling toward the sky
carrying the message from the mud.
I stop within the cycloning of flies
to see if they will codify in blood.

Amnestos

Then Edward's mother whispered through my phone
that he remembered no one else. That I
stood in that gap of memory alone
and wanted. Would I come to him and try
to see if some brain fissure would unfold
if I could smile just so? I took a fern—
a fecund, restless thing that I could hold
before me like Medusa's head. In turn
he froze, then waved me off. I'm not the one
he taught to kiss, the girl who loved him back.
She's scattered through my synapses, but none
of me is who she was. Time is a track
that leads one way. Lost cells cannot regrow
and those I've shed are who he used to know.

Aside

New sidewalk work forced me to detour past,
through unknown gates, now rusted open. Slim
walkways paved with bulging bricks. The last
blind corner twisted me into a dim
dovecote, squatty trees whose every limb
bore pigeons, rainbowed slate with eyes of brass.

Twin blades

I climb the stairs and find a shaven man
reclining where no shaven men should be,
and say, "Who are you?" When he laughs at me,
I hear he is my husband. He had planned
to bless me with a face I've never seen—
his own—scraped clean and close, with just a nick
below his nose. A rash, bright red and thick,
is springing up; a razor hadn't been
within two inches of his rounded chin
for twenty years. I stare at him in vain
to find the man I wed. Is this the place
where old romances end and new begin?
As unfamiliar skin reveals its plane
and I must learn to love another face.

Good Friday

I can't complain. It's still a day off work,
no matter that it storms and my belief
abandoned me in ten long years of grief.

Lens

The branches spread like Rio Jesus, gold
with carotene and sunburn, at the curve
of highway twenty-two. My husband folds
the map in threes and mutters at my nerve
in spying miracles in autumn trees
or Virgin Mary rutabagas. He
is for agnostic things, at best, so please
keep silent on whimsical piety
and drive. The windshield seems to magnify
the sun to burn our corneas away
like sidewalk ants. A driver passes by;
perhaps he wonders why the trees today
are so disguised and strange. The sun can pass
no secrets through shatter-resistant glass.

Fall

I watch a mottled feather pass my face
and wonder if a bird above my head
has lost the means to fly. Is there a place
where grounded pigeons nest in ostrich beds,
or bob on kiwi legs? And if the sky
refuses them for their new lack of wings,
why have I never seen them fall; am I
too much a mammal to observe these things?

Tapetum lucidum

She wakes whenever I forget to miss
the creak step near the top with stuttered feet.
And phosphor pupils beam from the abyss
of blankets. In the darkness she can cheat
my unlit lenses, hearing's incomplete
perception: slow or skinny, frail or faint;
eyes glowing like a sundog or a saint.
The rest is hidden. She blinks into black
and I need light, a spill of light to paint
her into fur and life and death and back.

Ball

I am a moon-face in my mirror, blurred
and glowing with an astigmatic twist,
round and hard and bulging like a fist.

To Livy

Time spoons our cells away. We are dessert
for appetites that whet themselves on stone.
Both ribs and mountains sliver into dirt
long after histories become unknown.
But some stories still matter. Sacrifice:
a heifer for the favor of the gods;
or truth's not an unreasonable price
for happiness—an arduous facade
when ruin comes and we've already claimed
our lives are perfect. Contradictions must
be hidden, burnt, ignored, or just renamed
exotically—some foreign pile of dust
ground exceeding fine. The wind defeats it.
So ignorance meets bliss, and smiles, and eats it.

Not taken

She couldn't read the road, no matter
that she saw how calligraphy filled
the Farsi cracks with macadam, finding words
within the holes and breaks, the pattern
aped and duplicated, here at the shoulder, there
splitting the doubled yellows, new tar black
against the fading cinder grey.

The dog passed this place on clicking claws,
escaping from his bath. She asked the tar
which way he might have turned, there at the crest—
pattered to the west or trotted east
on steaming feet. It wouldn't speak, too slow
to crack new alphabets, to send new tongues
uncoded through its brittle skin.

He'd come back, cold, a frost of spines to towel
and curse and scold. For years he fled. She quested
up the hill, the long black pavement, riddled
in Persian. He'd run and return, return
until his hips failed, sprawling, his eyes clouded blue
and still the pavement murmured underneath a tire
and would not answer questions or point the way.

Man-eater

Predictably, Roy says "the manticore"
in one too many syllables. His brain
dissolves words into code and can't restore
them to their proper formula. The rain,
too, cannot be a single sound comprised
of discrete drops combining for a whole
white noise of water. Forests are disguised
by every twig or leaf. A lump of coal
is just a hundred textures. Faces tear
to nose and mouth and chin and eye and eye,
and turn again to skin and tooth and hair—
inhuman, borne of disparate parts that lie
uneasy side-by-side. So he becomes
a monster building monsters out of crumbs.

Duck duck goose

Gene speaks of geese, of ducks, with quick sign fists
and I must beg him slow his silent speech
to match my rusty intellect. He flips
his left hand at his waist, a hinged hand beak

made of his right, his fingers wild and mute
in words like moth-heads beating on hot bulbs.
I cannot understand. A door leads out
to backyard pastures where the golden bulk

of corn that made ducks squabble lies in lines
uneaten, framed by feathers. All Gene's birds
lie, too, like shredded pillows on the lawn
in crimson cases, laundry left undone.

Focus group

My eyes are crossing into middle age
without the rest of me. Since I was ten
I couldn't see a hue, or read a page
beyond my fingertips. I squinted when
my loved ones ghosted like an old TV
beset by static, or when wolfram globed
even the spindled lights that wrapped the tree
to palm-sized fruits. The universe is robed
in blur for me, in edges ill-defined
and creeping closer. Even ghosts decay
into a shadow family, unlined
by my old astigmatic disarray.
And when they edge in closer, they explode
to pixel-ciphers. I can't read the code.

Greenling

The first mow of the season. I'd forgotten
the way the bank falls sharply down to stone,
the way the vines chunk in the blades, the rotten
planks that lid the cistern. All the known
and unremembered plans that spring has grown.

The death of a saint

I fell into the ravine when she died.
Small stream-eaten rock cleft I fell
and sopped burbling waters with a sweater sponge,
knelt shy three inches from a poked-out eye
a scissor stick pointing that way, no that way.

My feet are diviners, seeking obstruction,
roots and weeds, and blind-eyed I fell,
gasped at the shock tumble with no giant dog
to tug at my collar or lead me home.

Sprung

The yarrow died. He said the yarrow died
last year when I was too strung out on grief
to pace the yard. I couldn't bear the fat
cartwheeling clouds, the soil like fudge, the shit
of too damned many birds. In winter, death
is like an earthquake. It's not if but when.
But June's no time to die, too many flies
will gather friends and dot like berry seeds
along your face. This spring, he touched my wrist,
told me the yarrow died when you were dying,
told me its skeleton in brittle grey
was still footing the yard. I pulled it out.

Pick-up sticks

The garden's full of bones, too late to mourn
a maple's passing, who can say what day
said farewell once the leaves were all windshorn
and piled so tidily? There's no decay

to notice, no wood-borers pushing dust
onto the mulch, just snap-twigs breaking brown
and falling, as the sere and wingless must,
like spilikins that lie where they're thrown down.

The parting-month of spring

I am too deep in June. I feel the end
of spring in every nighttime twitch, in skin
too napped by crumpled sheets, lungs that extend
too slowly for my brain. I'm trapped within
a disappearing tadpole tail, or buds
unfurled to rotten lace. I suffocate
in puddles burnt to oxygenless mud
or buzzed with mayflies. Summer desecrates
the green with brazen gaud and cocksure joys
too hot for memories. As harvest reigns,
the way young corn turned hills to corduroy
is hidden by a profligacy of grain.
And sleek July's utility decoys
us from its lethal manners once again.

Deerfly

Deer flourish in this wildwood. I have stared
while dozens dapple through the Escher trees
in quick battalions. Yesterday, a pair
stood knee high in the grasses of the lea
between the wood and road. Winter's dull teeth
had gnawed their hides, and scraped fat from their bones
but not to kill. Their dying, when it comes,
will be halogen, green-eyed on the hook
of headlights. Perhaps mine. I threw a stone
and shouted, but they didn't even look.

Counted

The miles spool out in heartbeat lines of tar,
in whispered cinders shushing on the glass,
in diesel's grey, in lightning bugs who scar
the windshield when they chance the overpass.

Drive thru

I've seen too many insects die that way
with whirring wings that weren't quick enough
to shear the wind. I've seen lean swallows stray
into my path, ride turbulence too rough
for my smooth mammal body to withstand.
But some slow few lie crumpled on the tar
like feathered caps. I've seen the furry bands
that stripe a raccoon's tail hang from a car,
an inadvertent trophy for their aim.
But still I drive. The horrors of the cross
between man-made and nature are the same
if I should see or not. So I'll engross
myself in speed when bright mosquito blood,
if theirs it is, lies specking on the hood.

Batlet

I bore a palm of bones, a dusty skull
and tiny broken paws that cupped around
the scooped-in sockets, as if every dull
grey basement light were bright enough to wound.

Sparrow

A shard of splintered glass still pricks my foot
since I passed underneath the window burst
by sparrow flight, as if the building put
itself into her path and wasn't first
on this old street—predates by eighty springs
my birth, her egg. But in her jealousy
of robins' breasts, of cardinal-bright wings,
she'd slit her throat on kitchen glaziery
and dyed down red. The tendrils of her blood
that traced the scratches in my iron sink
remain, despite my bleach, despite the flood
of soap and scrub. I've seen a sparrow shrink
from feathered warm to nonsense lines of brown,
and feel the glass in me that brought her down.

Catkin

She is the thinnest covering of skin,
a paper lantern crumpling. He waits
pietà for a cat who suffocates.

Resin

The moth is resined to a plastic sack
that shields equipment from such overspray—
it costs too much to fix, but insects lack
replacement value. As if on display,
it's pinned with makeshift glue; and in the spark
of sun the amber glints with latticed gems
of veins and crystal pores. I try to work
my fingernails beneath the spiky limbs,
but push too hard and break the fragile shell
in half. There is no larva to escape
this quick cocoon; there's nothing but the smell
of plastic, and this sticky dust. I scrape
my palm but still the mottled resin clings
with glittering remains of spotted wings.

Love is in the air

I walk point on the line, with him
fifty feet behind to double check I don't miss
the hiss or the fumes. Step and stop.
Step and stop. There's a crack somewhere
in the two miles of two-inch running
from the ridge to the streambed meter
where the pressure reads ten instead of twenty.

It's too cold to yank half-buried tubing;
it could snap and arc a hydrocarbon rainbow. But holes
can hide under a year's dirt, muffled, and you hope
that the line's curl lifts it up like a rollercoaster,
or that salt will leak and melt the top-lying snow.

If hunters knew how brine pools
in the line when it follows the ground's curve,
they'd all be out with hacksaws, making
saltlicks in the tree cover. There are flickers
of camo through the grey web of branches;
and shots, but they're maybe a half mile off
and my head's an orange.

There is some squeak at my feet, enough
that I stop and hold my breath in time
for a grouse to burst with a delirious chortle
of wings. Two miles, and the light is purpling—
no time to hunker by a tree trunk
until my knees steady.

And it's too cold to breathe through my mouth
but my nose wants to whistle like methane
through a cracked pipe. Step and stop
like a bridesmaid. I can't hear
hissing if my feet crunch in snow, or if I sing
at the top of my lungs to alert man and deer
that I have only teflon tape, a coupling, some clamps.

Crawlspace

The spider silk dissolves into my tongue
like cotton candy—coated black with dust
and oxidized, a quick organic rust
arachno-chemically induced. I just
pulled off my mask to gasp, obeyed my lungs'
demand for breath untainted by the crust
of grime that sealed my filter, felt a gust
of cooler air around that brick. I thrust
my face into the crack and found the strands
all littered with grey corpses and debris
that melt against my mouth, a hundred bands
of sticky web fall on and into me
like fibrous napalm. Spiders understand
guerilla warfare all too humanly.

Fair

They had a wealth of indoor plumbing
and a gleaming Ford for a dusty flurry
the cows could outrun and did, come milking.

It was land, in flooded fields that snagged
the soil their neighbors lost, in muds
of creekbeds overflowed into the fallow,
wrist deep hungry for the seed,
that set them up in style.

Pictures too handsome for Grant Wood,
no pitchfork to hand, just Sunday's
gotomeetin' starch, he pressed his hat
to his heart in a pledge allegiance.
His wife with a sideways look so longing
aside at the Ford like she'd rather be sweeping
Ohio dust along behind those
rubber wheels and ticktock engine.

Stand with no shoes on the porch floor creak
and dig wood spurs from that crevice
between the pad of the toe and the pad of the ball
where the skin is too tender and white.

The same porch that gleamed with whitewash
in their solemn odes to Daguerre
now greys like their hair would, splinters
like their spines did, buckles
like their belts under pressure.

Eat candied apples like my grandpa said
his daddy loved. There's your reason
to go to the fairgrounds for seven years
and stagger in crowds with a redlip clown mouth,
slipping the too heavy slick apple

to the cinders, and grab up dirty.
Eat around the gravel and the bug.

She loved that Ford, laughed at it lurching
along in the barnyard, to threaten the chickens
into half flight. They dodged out to the fair
without children or horses, no extra sets of eyes.
All for candied apples and the engine hiccup.

Funny, at the fair now you can see
photographs of car meets train. Car loses.

The how of purring

I hear him purr and wonder at the cause.
The needle in his neck? The water bowl
that always needs a scrub? The aching claws
I clipped for testing? Crunchy treats I dole
out like they're silver? Tell me what he's gained
through thirteen years, two owners gone, and now
disease that blinds, exhausts, dehydrates, maims,
while foolish people wonder at the how
of it: the how of time they would not spend,
or cash they won't afford. They do not ask
the how of purring. Do not ask what end
could make it all worthwhile. This too shall pass,
the fur and needle pricks and bleeding paws,
and leave me ignorant of purring's laws.

Molt

I make too much of pigeon deaths, their wings
crushed flat on tarmac, when my neighbor's son
puts poison out. He won't say why a spring
of feathered bodies littering the lawn
and street is better than their molt, their dirt.
It's hard to shoo a corpse—they can ignore
a flapping arm, and rot. Cadavers skirt
my house, my neighbor's house, the country store
just up the street. I haven't seen them die,
no overhead attacks of poisoned grain
to seize them, make them plummet from the sky
to mud, or lawn, or concrete. But the stain
of death is on the sidewalk and the street,
and I just felt wings break beneath my feet.

Down

Fat pigeons chirruped in the rafters, wild
as sleeping puppies. If I held the bread
just right they fluttered chortling down and filed
along my arm, plankwalkers. Feathers piled
against my neck, enough to buoy my head
if it slipped sideways on a tendon's thread.

Shoulder

I cannot find the body in the grass,
no slicker trail of blood. The hazards spark
the world to red, the rain to chains of brass
hung from the sky. I hear a sullen bark
beyond the highway. Had the dog been dozing,
jolted, like me, by the green of eyes
that flashed and disappeared, or might be closing
in on us both? Something bloody lies
out there, now silent, dead or only broken.
So many somethings. I just start the car,
watch in my rearview mirror for some token
sign of life, some shadow on the tar,
but there is nothing but the gleaming black.
Like every road, mine bends. I can't see back.

William

for Gary

I played hide and seek
in the dip of his grave, the shade
of his marker; and shoved aside hollyhocks
to splay, hot and still,
with my face in the grass shroud
of William.

He died on my birthday
and was buried by May,
beneath the chill thistles
where I lay with green fingertips
dug in, knees drawn up,
ready to quail-burst from cover
if my brother should find me.

Still William's grave sank with no furor
into a subtler foxhole,
hiding my green t-shirt
and too-bony ribcage
from the stutter stop, laughter,
my brother's breaths gasping

but the flies only found me,
crept sideways on Bill's angels,
to hide in the crevices
or tickle the curve of my back
where my shirt rode up, showing
a freckle like a thumbtack
in my spine.

Rain bowed

I wonder if the water etched a spotted
bull's-eye on the pane—something to lure
the bullet birds to smash where blinds obscure
the scrabble toeholds in the screen. The knotted
cord plays on my fingers. I can pull
and burst the room with light and glitter eyes,
the beaks like shining corn, the frantic cries
and clack of wings. Do feathers bloom the dull
and piebald grass? Does blood bloom on the sill?
I've envied birds, the hollow flit of bone,
but not the skullthunk knocking like a stone
tossed by a lover. I could make them still,
could snap a neck as swiftly as a bean.
Instead I wait. Clean. Unseeing. Unseen.

Raining cats and dogs

Thunder purrs its way across the state
and I lie low and wonder if the gable
will hold fast to its nails. The cats berate
me from the dusty cellar. But on cable
storms sweep in red. Too soon the water table
will swamp the basement. We'll all bob along,
unhappy apples listening to the song
of cyclone sirens hurling warnings down,
then choose the elements where we belong:
they die within the wind; I, winded, drown.

Twinkle

When star-nosed moles stare with their raisin eyes
at arching vaults that sky their rocky lawns,
whose faces do they choose to wish upon?

Three blind mice

The farmer's wife is cruelty at rest
in calico, in reddened hands and brawn
that stem from wringing rooster necks at dawn
before they crow. She serves invited guests
with crumbled sage and dressing, second best
china for the preacher. In the lawn,
three sleeping rodents lie and dream of drawn
butter on the grains of grasses pressed
into the dirt; of tails still twitching warm;
of noses that would stay content with weeds
and never long for bread to feed their wives;
of ears that could detect the hens' alarm;
of eyes that have more use than poppy seeds
in farmhouse kitchens filled with carving knives.

There was a crooked man

The house is crooked, and the siding gaps
enough to welcome in a mouse or vole
who hopes to find more shelter than a hole
in sod can offer it. The owner naps.
His cat curls like a furry sleeping-cap
around his head. But rodents on patrol
are not as silent as they think. Parole
is brief, then they find prison in the snap
of jaws. He calls her appetite a vice,
disgusting him, if she makes the mistake
of asking him, with purrs, to share her meat.
So she learns secrecy; she kills the mice
with one quick bite before the man can take
them from her mouth and never let her eat.

Old Mother Hubbard

The mutt's tail thumps against the parlor floor
but cannot stir his mistress from her chair.
She waits, as if a djinni enters there
and grants three wishes. Both grow gaunt, and sore
from pressure on the flesh that long before
became too thin a cushion. Shelves are bare.
This is no place for mice to feast; nowhere
for kin to step in unannounced and pour
their joys in friendly ears. The hall is grey
with dust and shells of some dead spider's lunch,
without the track of butcher's blood to brand
his passage, with a beef roast or filet
beneath his arm. The dog now dreams the crunch
of brittle bones that form his warden's hand.

The boy who cried

The reed had time to wait, piped any tunes
the boy knew best, like shrilling false alarms.
And farmers, red and round as full balloons,
puffed up the hill again and waved their arms
to spook the lamb-starved wolves that stalked the wold.
The boy, ruddy with glee, leapt into view
and poked fat bellies with his flute. The old
men grumbled at their ouster from their stew
and cuffed the boy and stumbled back to town.
Then waiting till the moon's light didn't bleed
through clouds, the boy again disturbed the down.
But no one answered. Satisfied, the reed—
while villagers sat chuckling in their beer—
began to trill notes only wolves could hear.

Three little pigs

The straw knew better than to stand. Why should it shelter anything that mowed it down with flashing scythes? The stupid boar withstood the warning jabs of stalks dried into brown sharp splinters strong enough for porcine hide, ignored the husks tempting each burning brand. And now the wolf had come and piggy cried for some salvation. Quietly, a strand unraveled, and its sheaf slipped from the strap. No sudden movements, subtlety was key to relishing the spring of an old trap so long dreamed of. See piggy stare, and see a ripple spread along the grasses who would pass the tale. The sticks knew what to do.

Red riding

It was the trees who whispered to the wolf
a little girl walked lonely in the wood.
They knew she'd lead him to a clearing, roofed
by shuddering branches, witnesses who stood
helpless to the woodsman. Roots entwined,
spread tales of holocaust beyond the hill
as ashes coated even churring pines
at forest's edge. They plotted how to kill.
A rabbit's no fit morsel for a lord;
there's something sweeter. Feast, the aspen called.
It took no more. But champions' lives are short,
and end in blood-splashed leaves, redder than fall.
Still charnel bark lies heaped within the clearing,
and xylems hum their malice out of hearing.

Blue boy

The cows ache in their bones, rapped on the ribs
by a dour boy with bitter, cracking sticks.
They low their discontent, nagged past the ricks
of haying green, nagged from the sweetfill cribs—
hard cobs of broken corn. The fields are grey
with dust, the crumbling stalks of grass like ash.
Boy drives them through the gate that drags a gash
through clay. The cattle wander anyway,
and eat strategically, sapping the walls
of every mow. He wiles his days in sleep
until the urgent mealtime handbells ring.
The cows were patient, immune to the calls
for quick revenge, until the boy lies deep
beneath the toppled haystack, smothering.

He ate Richard Cory's bullet

No warning. Just a note dropped in the mail
without a stamp. A month delayed the hurt
of dinner with a gunpowder dessert.

Temptation

That's the tempting itch, the thought of death
that makes a bridge abutment whisper *fly*.
It's why I keep no toasters near the bath,
no rope stored on a rafter. Bottled lye
stays at the store. It's easy to eat earth
or bullets, but too hard to mention why.

The lead out

He sank in blood, his ankles deep in shag
still wet, still red. His friends had made him come
to clean the room, to clean what Rick had done
with one small bullet. Everything was bagged
like sandwiches: the sneakers grey with matter;
the books that curled as if dropped in the bath.
The wall that caught the lead was peeled to lath;
the bedspread balled, though it survived the splatter.
He sank in blood, his wrists deep in the rug
that had been blue. He feared that bits of teeth
or some small piece of skull might lie beneath
the nap to bite his fingers as he tugged.
But there were no surprises, bad or good,
just rising grain as red bled into wood.

Lupus

If you had lived, would you now lollop up
a hill and howl at stars that bore your name,
or snarl when lapping at your coffee cup
so no one could mistake you for the tame

lapdogs who yap and piddle in a shoe?
Or would you be sedated so the pain
of bubbling joints could not come stalking through
and grin so shaggily inside your brain?

But soon

I'm writing speeches for my father's wake
deciding how I'll hold my hands and head
while speaking calmly of the newly dead
enunciating grief without mistakes.
I will not pull away if strangers break
my spine in crushing hugs, attempt to thread
their fingers through my own. I will not dread
their platitudes or pity, and will make
myself a smiling puppet. Casseroles
will bring me solace. I will never cry
in public, nor permit my hands to tremble,
nor fuss when dripping calla lily bowls
leave lasting rings on the piano. I
will be as still as that man I resemble.

Kodachrome

He gave a boost up to his broken girl
so I could show the world at squirrel height
without the climb. That photograph is curled
papyrus brittle, thirty years of light
dim brown my moonface bruises and the bright
red crinkle of his hair. I can recall
the angry snapping arm, the headfirst fall
through branches, yowling like a kitten. Skinned
then hoisted up triumphant, like a tall
flag waving, waving in a paper wind.

Struck

He used to stroke my hair. How can a word
that feels so gentle starve a father's brain?
And what new pill can make him whole again,
will peel paralysis from fists, or slurred
invectives from his clumsy lips? He strikes
a match, still. Holds a pipe to suck. And when
his mouth can't clamp itself around the stem
he clucks and dribbles smoke, a leaking dike
with only palsied thumbs for help, and dutch courage.

Toast

I might as well get him another drink
and hope he finds a worm. I think his joints
must creak in thirst, so like the cedar joists
that lift this house from mud. If anything
were to be gained by fighting him on this
I'd pour the liquor on the hosta's leaves
and watch it drown, and watch my father plead
like Mary Magdalene for one last sip.

Or I could learn to drink it all myself.
Small sacrifice. My liver should hold true
for twenty years. Hell knows my father's health
has lasted longer than he could expect;
and if I trace his steps, at sixty-two,
someone can drink me down from my neglect.

Recursive

I see it in the way he dots his I,
crosses his T. The ink used to be clean
and dark, without a wobble, even in
the swoop of cursive Z. The page's white
now peeks between the curls of open O;
it seems his hand cannot quite push the blue
together. Blame it on the pen, the rule
of thumb against four fingers. If he slows
again and sticks his tongue out as he grinds
each letter down, I'll think of some excuse
to save his dignity. He taught me how
to mimic every loop—to hold his hands
and act like I was writing—twenty years
ago. He won't know I've reversed it now.

Rung

The truck was bitter with Pall Mall
and coffee, smears of blue-green grease
a heiroglyph in the bed. All the men
looked like Dad, with winter
hatting his burning hair. The derrick poled
up the draping sky, the crisscross timbers
bubbled with ancient tars. He sent me up,
up the ladder shaky. He'll catch me,
catch me if my too-short sneakers slip
the knobbed steel. He stood straight down
to catch me, straight down in a pool
of men sockcapped generic.

Up. I don't remember
if he had plans beyond seeing a child,
seeing a climb, putting the one on the other,
watching me churn the first ten feet
lungwhistling in the cold and then
I couldn't look down to see
if he looked up. He'll catch me.

And there was a crow at the top, staring
down like a tourist, and I was kicking higher
where a mist buttered the rungs.
If I reached top, I was jumping, a soft leaf
floating down to the pool. If I reached top
where the crow glittered beads and I stopped,
screaming. Didn't stop screaming.

Daughter

She drifted off to sleep before he died,
like dozing through a punchline. If he cried—
stretched bulbing fingers out, weak as a kitten—
no matter, she had his last words pre-written.

Calling Anne Sullivan

I know what I could hear. I write them down
(the words that end in -oma) in my palm
like Helen Keller. Will I wear a gown
of paper blue? Blue is supposed to calm
my nerves. That's why these rooms are kept so cold,
to hold our thoughts, but I think still of tombs,
and ice, and baleful things. If I were bold
I'd rise, and keep on rising, like a bomb's
fat mushroom cloud. Disintegrate this room
with its chill air, its copies of McCalls,
its TV Guides from 1990, June,
its warning posters stapled to the walls.
Instead, as one of this blank timid herd,
I sit and sign carcinogenic words.

Go to sleep, Anne, nevermind

Benign. How harmless. But I see the scars
that dimple on my arm. In time they'll fade
from scabbed lividity, and I can wear
a short sleeved shirt again without the fear
someone will joke that I've been in the wars
or pity me, as if a hand grenade
had taken off my feet or burst my ear.
How odd. I sit and worry what to wear
to hide that I'm not dying. Biopsies
may split the wheat from chaff, the sheep from goats
with medical precision, but our skins
will bear the mark of Cain, of bullets dodged.
And even as our terror is dislodged
survivors' shame still bares our guilty throats.

Mortis

There is no graceful way to move a corpse.
Through cold and waxy as an unlit candle,
you wait for rigor hoping for a handle.

Two doors down from the funeral home

They have a generator up the street
because the power flickers at a cloud.
The surging rumble proves an indiscreet
reminder of their cellar, and the crowd
of cold cadavers, propped up under loud
flourescents buzzing like a waxing hive
for Tussaud masks. When thunder comes, I dive
into a book, turn TVs up, retreat
inside my head, afraid I'll hear the drive
start up, or never start. Flicker. Repeat.

Pall Mall

There was a trick to getting them to stay, a twist to the ends like the barreled monkey arms, linking one cleaner to another. The feet were something else, useless, dependent on furniture—the sofa-box of kitchen matches she had tucked down between the mattress and the footboard.

The power liked to fail if a cloud shade glanced off a line just right, and the house ducked into gloom, a cedar cask bunged up tight. She never learned the way to flick a paper match quick quick along the scratchpaper without risk to a fingernail the way her father struck, never learned the way her brother dabbed two fingers on his tongue and hissed out a flame.

The lamp pied the table with shadows, its chimney soot-jacketed and hot. Fallen dark, she never thought to sponge it first. It didn't matter. Without the flame the sink was just a rumor, hiding in the deep black, invisible. Pipe-cleaner people waltzed in the oil's flicker, drunkenly on stubfeet, a shocking uncle at a wedding.

White for boys and sickly yellow girls, they bent to revelry or rode salt shaker ponies. Still she always could unravel, straighten to the task of slipping brushy into an old pipe. Her father begged only that she not snip the wires, not cut them short.

High as an elephant's eye

He dodges into corn fields, two-leg leaps
from row to row. Outruns my stumbletoed
too-cautious jog, my hands cut by corn leaf,
my laces whipping at my shins. Untied,
my sneakers fall behind, or tempt inside
a clump of clay. He springs away, his Keds
a knot of burrs and laces. I can try
to track him by his wake, or lay my head
to ground to listen to the slap of shoes
receding and the thud of ripened grain,
his far off laughter at my where are yous
or threats to leave. He knows I will remain
there blisterfooted, out of easy view
till he relents and leads me home again.

Eaten by the night

It's the month of lady beetles, creeping through
the rotten siding, dying in detergent.
He should be home to hear the plumbing groan
November, or see the cracks emergent
in the plaster skim. The car is stalled somewhere,
or rutting deer lie dying with the phone
already dead, or there's traffic in the square,
there's always traffic here. And he'll come soon.

Legend

Someone like you must lie here. Roses thrive,
their petals red as meat and slick with oil,
given sufficient acid in the soil.

Wallenberg

They made a stamp for him that matched his years
with first-class cents, but now he's been replaced.
No one can mail a letter with his face.
Five decades lost: some claim he still appears

in Russian prisons; he must be alive!
But they say he died quickly, that a fool
who whispers his survival is too cruel.
His overburdened heart, at thirty-five,

gave out—no Russian blade to parse his lungs,
nor Stalin bullets needed to make peace.
And no call need be made for the release
of men dead half a century. The young

find him outdated, worthless as his stamps,
and call the suburbs concentration camps.

Fiddle

I've pressed my face against the dirt—just there,
beside that pile of stones—and cursed its chill.
I've tramped across the tracks to climb a hill
and search in vain for thaw. No sign of char
from striking miners' fires a mile below
that should be making ashes of the street
or opening a crack beneath my feet.
The hair against my face is hard with snow
and cold enough to snap. I should go home
and freeze in comfort. What use is a flame
that burns so far below my crackling bones
it might as well go cold? I'll move those stones
and plant myself in clay so my remains
may someday be as warm as Nero's Rome.

Smokescreen

I never could smell smoke, not on your sighs
or greying drifts among the ceiling beams.
You'd slip out, say you watched Orion rise
or got the mail. And if your finger seams

were daffodiled it was a trick of light.
And if your windshield clouded it was dirt.
And if your coughing woke me up at night,
just turn, just sleep. What I don't know won't hurt.

Tin can

Never let them give the ashes back.
Never tuck the corpse into your pocket—
leftovers tinned, or hair inside a locket.

Visitation

This is the grey beginning. Quarters clink
for midnight's congealed dinners from machines.
This is the way to sleep—a lidless blink,
your body balanced sweetly as your jeans

squeak on the vinyl chair. This is the tea,
grit-wallowed, creamless, these the dying flowers.
This is the cold announcement voice. Now we
are not all here. We have been assigned hours.

Antiseptic

There may be other people who have heard
the skipping thump of your slow-dying heart:
physicians with their quick cold fingers, herds
of lab technicians, nurses' aides with carts
on rubber schussing wheels. Equipment beeps
a Himalayan range of ragged peaks
on TV screens as saline drips down steep
transparencies of plastic tubing. Squeaks
announce their shoes on lino flooring halls
where corpses ride in state beneath white flags
of mourning. Silently your pressure falls
again and calls the ever-cheerful hags
who fuss at me to leave. Mortality
is cleaner when there's no one there to see.

To a husband who died while shoveling snow

I wonder at my tolerance for snow
that stopped your heart and never felt remorse.
Your resurrection means I never go
outside to jump in drifts until I'm hoarse
and gasping from the cold, with crystallized clothes
while you, inside, an Argus through the panes,
could laugh and wave if I looked up, your nose
pressed to the glass. If snow again campaigns
for murder, we'll abandon it for Greece
though I despise the sun and loathe the sand.
I know the heroes' fame, but Jason's fleece
is just a myth, as is the life I'd planned
before your brief demise made ice obscene
and waiting for your next one turned routine.

Moratory

She made bread with her hands, and pasta bowed
like Christmas ribbons in dull greens and gold
from chair to highback chair. The house smelled old,
of cinnamon and rotten wood and road
detritus sifting past the unglazed panes
to crocodile the baseboards' thick shellacs
into a skin of armor grey. Three tracks
of sepia betrayed water's campaigns
to slip inside, to etch the plaster skim
with feathered mottling. She made the bread—
spine twisting like a kolach, knuckles red
as beets—and waited for her seraphim.

Arrest

If I could hide within the hoops of bone
the surgeons cracked and spread like swallow wings
to free your heart, I would. You cannot doubt.
I'd ease beneath the sutures in your skin,
breathe only when you breathed, stop up my ears
to any noise but hushing blood. And when
you died no one could pry me out again.

Asleep with heart disease

I lie in bed and listen to his heart
and know that any moment it may cease.
It's been four years since I first played the part
of stethoscope to diagnose some peace,
but not in silence. Never more can still
and solitary joys relieve my mood.
I revel in his pulse as if the trill
of mockingbirds could sing in too thick blood,
and trust in sounds more musical than Brahms
that thump beneath the vigilance of ears
attuned to finding terror in the calm.
Unwittingly, his veins allay my fears
and hum him off to sleep while I, awake,
count days between the beats his heart should take.

Small bones

As if you die every day, and I spend each one
with a spade-blistered map on my palms,
and a stoop on my shoulder, and a kinked hipbone
curls my foot on the blade. This new tomb's
as soft as sherbet beneath the blooms

still greying on the briar. The troweled-out lawn
must keep you from foxes or neighborhood dogs
who lollop the fields with their noses pressed down.
Dig deeper. Cold, late autumn grass still clogs
the hole, survives the frosts and fogs

of November. I'll tuck you in an arch of clay
if I can, below the soil and stones.
I drive, lopfooted, deep—a posthole grave
I won't tamp down. I will not feel the give
that could be space and air, or could be bones.

Steep

The hillside flinches underneath my heel
and crumbles, loam and root, cascading down
like bitter water. Maple saplings wheel
just out of reach. Within the tumbling brown
we strike the creekbed, splash into the cold
and lie there buried by each fallen thing
that chased us down—the trees, the littered mold
of leaf decay, a pair of leather wings
that used to be a bat. We are alone,
I with the corpses of old memories,
and you, now corpseless, ashed right out of bone
and bound so meager, packaged like a tea
in tin. This is the water boiled to steam.
I brew you in the darkness of the stream.