AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Stephanie Rae Roush for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 20, 2010.

Title: Something Mortal I Could Fall Upon

Abstract approved:

___________________________________________

Karen E. Holmberg

Something Mortal I Could Fall Upon is a collection of poetry exploring geographical, emotional, and cerebral permutations of home. These poems ask: What is home? What does it mean to give up a place? How does, or can, one rebuild the home? Although it is clear the speaker loves the landscape of her childhood and feels loyalty to her family, the poems quickly problematize home as the speaker reveals memories of family members’ addiction, recounts abandonment, and describes feeling separate or outcast from the family. Throughout the manuscript, emotional wars play out between devotion to the family/landscape and disgust of the unpleasant realities of home. Trying to reconcile conflicting feelings, the speaker looks to the natural world and to society/the industrial, plumbs years of memories, and peers into the lives of historical, yet similarly distraught figures. The only definitive acts become the process of seeking answers and the understanding that though home may be imperfect, it is still undeniably longed for and ultimately inescapable.
Something Mortal I Could Fall Upon

by

Stephanie Rae Roush

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented April 20, 2011

Commencement June 2011
Master of Fine Arts thesis of Stephanie Rae Roush presented on April 20, 2011.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

________________________________________
Stephanie Rae Roush, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am exceedingly grateful to Dr. Karen Holmberg for her encouragement and her
tireless assistance throughout this project. I also extend my gratitude to David Biespiel
and all the English Department faculty who have influenced and inspired my critical
and/or creative thinking and writing at Oregon State University. Thank you to my
fellow GTAs for their friendship and feedback, especially Heather Bremicker, Becky
Olson, Simon Bravo, Kimberly Rasmussen, and Jon Peacock. Thanks to my mentors, my
editors, and all those who listen. Above all, I thank my family. I write for and with and
through our love.
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I.
The Possibility of Closeness

Leaving this place
is an erosion:
wheels and wipers fling out dirt
and pine needles.

Each day cars can carry out
a few boxes, a bit of mud
and gravel from the unpaved roads,
but a metal grate bridge into Lithia Springs
(maximum capacity: eight tons)
equals the impossibility
of just packing everything and leaving
because no moving truck
could get across.

What are the things I’d leave behind?

Gutters redistributing rainwater? An outbreak
of trees and moss flower
growing up through
cracks in the bedrock?
Walls meeting
in a seamless corner?

I am aware of the capacity
of moving vans, open grate bridges,
height of an overpass.

So I take samples:

paint chips peeling off
the bridge that cost me extra, rust
in my nephew’s bruised knees,

the weeds I cursed, the spring
that welled up at the top of the hill
and the moon
cressing stray leaves
as they roll along the highway.

(stanza break)
Here are my boxes taped shut
and plastic tubs marked
for each new room.

I calculate closeness.

Weigh all these endless
evidences of contact.
Thin Ways We Live

Rambling, singing, screaming
tempos are served to all
available eardrums;
all the things
that the floors and walls promised to keep
are soon broadcast
in the middle of someone’s shower
or sleep.

A bass line brawls
on your kitchen table. Voices knive
your cordon bleu.

Today’s forecast:
intermittent warbling
courtesy of spring
cleaning in Apartment D.

Lives emit on all sides:
ochestra of televisions,
hairdryers, drawers, doors,
coughs, sex. Then rounds of birds,
street cleanings, car alarms,
alarm clocks, sinks and flushes.

Finally, when the off-key mutterings
stop piercing your brain
like a fire alarm, you find some peace
in the thin ways we live.

You, too, will stand at the kitchen sink,
scrubbing away while you trill
over the steaming water.
You will send up your guilty rhapsody
and dance around while
low ceilings and linoleum
carry out your sound.
To Absurdity

You know, dear one,
how I celebrate each day’s
stupidity, how it owns me. You know
a little bit of the synapse gap
corrupts each day. Pieces
do not break away
in their brilliance, like
the Escher drawing in my kitchen
where you notice the patterned flock of birds
spiraling to white space
and then realize more interlocked birds
between their wings.

Do you remember that morning
I stood in front of the kitchen sink
wondering why
the water bottle would not fill, wondering
for some time
until I recognized the water
flowing over my hand and the fastened cap, mocking me? Remember

the night I woke to find the moon
glowing, fiercely yellow
behind the curtains?
How beautiful, I thought.

Dear one, I bathed in devotion

when I pulled back the curtains
to find the yellow haze
of a street lamp.
Antiquarian Press Exhibit

We are received by rows of brightening metal.
The docent looks at us
over the florescence of a Single-Stroke
Staple Press, explaining how
the production of the first paper fastener
was paired with rising trade in paper.
Bendable brass inserts were sold
one at a time.

Now we know
ways to bind: strait pin,
eyelet, ribbon—our fingers handle
nickel inserts of grommets, bent brass,
or stroke the curled tail
of the Hotchkiss No. 1.

Every device is countered
by a device undoing its work, which
was always a history of need:
a staple, then a staple remover.

Approaching antique machines,
we half-expect to be emptied
by their ready mouths, or, at least, to see our world
as changing, cut, clip-less, clipped.

We know ways to bind, but we
have never learned
to be replaced,
to feel ourselves
bent back out from the world, pried slowly,
finger by finger.
Feral Day

I seek out
the dissonant screams
of some indistinct being,
only to find
the neighborhood stray
skinning an infant
rabbit in the flower bed:
tufts of fur among
the hyacinths,
feral eyes,
membrane pulsing,
a repulsive newness.

When I break it up,
the grey cat licks
his paw like nothing happened,
like he cannot taste
the blood.

The infant, throbbing,
hops pink-backed
through the fugue of hyacinths.
Crickets offer their coda of sounds
to the cat wandering
away and the torn body
I no longer see
as night comes around
to collect us.
Brother, When You Came Home

I could not bring myself to relay
the emptied hangers,
brushes left
with her hair still threading
between their spikes, her burgundy
sweater with its loose strands, dust outlines
of Dali posters, discolorations
where books pressed
against the wall, everything

at the end of the list
as she slowly moved out
while writing you letters
of love and faith and hope,
which you could not know
were narratives of abandonment.

So, we sat on the stairs,
waded out a little
into the silence
which can barely be heard
beyond the labors of blood

and further back
where each umber-colored stair
in our childhood home
reminds us how we slid down
on our stomachs—a slow, scraping descent

burning us. All afternoon we slid down
sharing the reddening skin which
was all the pain we aspired to.
Rebuilding

Don’t you look
regal in dawn’s sanguine
fringe of light
enthroned, anchored to
the center of your web
between the birch
and my car’s antenna.

You look fearless,
even when the engine
starts, even as
the spokes of your home
tremor and sever
as I pull away to leave
you dangling; your silk
bunched around you.

By night, you’ve journeyed a few feet
to sprawl your grandeur
across my bike’s handlebars.
Spinnerets stir
under the carport light,
as if my actions
warrant only
a tsk, tsk.

Soon enough, a mosquito hawk
is ensnared. You wrap
its long wings as if,
all along, they were
the jewels you expected
from the day.

I listen to the engine cool.
Linger in its tick and hiss
as I shuffle keys
on the ring.

Once I open my door
I’ll have to push
past the remnants and
walk among the half-emptied
rooms that were our apartment.

Unfazed, you tend
to the steady chores of your
diaphanous home.

I watch you crisscross
those large wings.
And for a few minutes
you’ve made rebuilding
seem easy.
Poems

I.

We are not certain, we are things
distant as church bells
or tongues of geese harsh
and piercing
against the tree line.

II.

Like the day’s cinders
we permeate everything:

elliptic zippering
of carpenter bees.

III.

Some days we appear
like starfish. The restless infant
of your inner ear
commands: tear us
apart now. Cut
the arms and legs
until we become an army
against you.

IV.

When you burn us
our ashes stick to your fingers.

Seep in through your fingerprints.

(stanza break)
This is our blood
that won’t be happy.

V.

Reach out for us.

We know this world,
this beautiful mess of a situation.

VI.

We drip
sounds that decompose
over every rush
of purple

and orange bled out
on morning.

VII.

Decaying flower head of timothy
in late summer paling,
separating; we
will speak you.
II.
What We Reach In This World

is not very tall.

The sun, hanging on the forest
like cobwebs,
we cannot touch.

We cannot comprehend
this room of a tree,
the hollowed, charred redwood assigning us
its gift of smallness.
We are eclipsed

by growths that rebuke us
with their silence. We open
our mouths to say please, remember me,
but waver, wordless.

So, here we are still,
unanswered.
Blue Hour

In the blue hour our fingers reach
to harvest the cold light of fireflies.
We are children again lost
among their language, their brief text.

The Drive-In screen harvests the light fireflies emit: a square moon our laughter howls against.
Loosed from college, childhood friends
jump down from the truck bed
to run out and flicker among the fields.
When we stir the air of fireflies
our separate lives somehow fold back together
like the finger of our hands cupping the dark.

Fireflies tease their cold light
in and out of our fingers, yet
we search each crack
for the yellowed glow of hopefulness.

They flicker in and out of existence:
And how many times have we come up empty?
Our cupped hands are hopeful nets;
we’re young, we still believe things shine for us
though many times we’ve come up empty.
Still, we chase the fragmented flight
to the end of our hour. Each summer
we return to these fields, drawn
by memory’s fragmented flight.
We rise up again like children
among our own wondering: brief texts that,
in the blue hour, our fingers reach.
What Knives Are For

Her grandfather holds out a rifle and draw-string bag containing rope, knife, half-frozen bottle of water, and spam sandwich saying simply, “Here.”

All day she searches for hunting reverence, that phenomenon filling the conversation of family gatherings. Something must be hidden, she thinks, in past trophies or the cold of being there. She knows what knives are for. She has seen deer insides the color of spam in its gelatin movement against buttered bread. More than she can stomach. Hours of winter seep in through her nose, mouth, pores, and she cannot reconcile the countless conversations, her family’s excited buzz. Hours standing half-frozen, half-asleep. Then, she spots the brown of a buck. She can see its eyes, its nimbus clouds of breath. Even, perhaps, its familial longing. Her grandfather’s face, strained and reddening in the moment when she will not shoot, is more than the cold or generations separating. Her mystery dims across a chasm of distant shots.
Early Years of Lucretia

Mother prepares for Lupercalia by sweeping out evil spirits with twigs and horse hair brushes; health, fertility, and purity sought in quick, forward motions. She sends slaves to the forum for dormice, lentils, honey, but never stops sweeping. She orders more slave women out to scrub our togas and stolas in the tubs of lye, or to wash blankets in the Tiber. On the banks, they wait for the sun to dry the cloth stiff over the acanthus.

Amid this chaos, I put my ear to the cat’s stomach; the touch sparks a churning of pleasure, and his rumbling that follows sounds like mother’s orders, or slave women at the loom, or sounds constant as centurions marching more men back to Rome.

§

The loom is endless work. Mother has left me with Alia, her skilled dark fingers flashing over the upright beam and striking the weft into tight cloth. She works each thread with ease then leaves me to struggle with the warp yarns and weaving sword and the memory of her deft motions.

When Alia returns to pull out my few lines, I promise myself I will be better one day. I will stop Alia’s constant undoing.

One day she will hold up the perfect palla I wove.

As I leave, I can still feel the ghost pressure of warp weights and the yarns that brushed against my legs. I hear the hiss
of Alia sliding the weaving sword against taut threads, east and west. The sighing, back and forth. Its music settles in me.

§

On Lupercalia, my mother’s dutiful obsession always sparked the churning of our domus.

Other festivals the slaves alone cleansed the villa and cooked warm bread while the smells of oil and sausage and cheese escaped out the wall vents or drifted toward me, igniting my hunger. On Lupercalia my mother’s pressured motion with the broom sounded out, shh, shh, shh, like the sharp breaths of unexpected pain. I watched her labor over the dust clouds until they finally were swept outside into satisfying piles of expelled evil spirits.

When mother held up her palms and brushed Plublius and I out into the peristyle garden, it was as if something sinful needed to be averted in us also.

§

At night, I take out the doll Alia made for me, the simple dark wool threads for hair. A blue bead shines among the wool like my own favorite ornament and her linen and rag body lies soft in my hands. Sitting near my window, moonlight illuminates her perfect seams, and it is easy
to imagine pulling her apart
and, triumphantly,
sewing her together again.

§

In the peristyle garden, Plublius practices
with knucklebones, throws them into air
and lets the bones catch on the back
of his hand. Such skill I could not master.
I keep thinking of how I had practiced
in front of the hearth; the sheep bones
flew out from the cradle I tried to form
until mother made me stop. As she took the bone bits,
she warned, *Lucretia, you must learn to be good.*

Watching Plublius, I remember how mother
cradled the bones on the back of her hand
and whispered how she bore another son
before him. A deformed boy left to the cold
and dogs, or the mercy of another family. *To be
good, Lucretia, a wife must not mourn this. A wife
must birth good children,* she warned.

§

My father kneels at the altar before
leaving for the forum.

So here is a husband. The kiss
and iron ring on my mother’s third finger
sealed the engagement.
I stare at the iron ring imprisoning
the nerve on my own left hand, no,
encircling, encircling the nerve
all Romans believe leads straight and true
to a woman’s heart.

With quick fingers, my father takes back
the bulla, my birth-locket.
Unfastens it without a word.

I am stripped of my family name.

Power over me transferred
from father to husband
in one swift motion.

My father looks so distant now. I wonder
if he hesitated
when my mother placed me at his feet.

I think he must have,
must have waited, before picking me up.

§

On the bridge between girl and wife,
I offer up my childhood images
to the Lares. They demand the surrender
of who I was.

All morning, the slave girls prepare me.
They curl my hair, ash my eyes,
shroud me in powders and plant dyes.
And they slip jewels over my body, but

I keep the name, Lucretia, as the link
through all I must renounce of a life, fifteen years:
the soft dolls, knucklebones, hair ribbons,
games played with Plublius under
the ever-present sun of Rome.

The slave girls part my hair into six locks and fasten
each piece with wooden fillets. I chant
_Ubi tu Gaius, ego Gaia_ as they place
the marjoram wreath in my hair.

*Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia.*

My mother tells me it means
_to whatever family you belong_
_I belong also,_

yet when I cross into womanhood
I hear my mother repeating
_you must learn to be good_
and my fingers go back
to the slick ribbons. I can feel
those hard bones and the taut cloth of Alia’s doll.

I remember the sighing
of warp weights and slave women.

I see knucklebones and fire.
Facing the Lions

The sea lions lift their cones of fat
onto the dock until they are a nuzzling
mass bulging over the sides.
She tries to count them, but
what might be one could be another also,

until they roll, visibly singular, back
into the bay where they flicker
through dark water, peripheral

brown bullets as her mother unexpectedly
takes her hand, strokes her knuckles,
the deep lines of skin, half-moons
of fingernail-tips, slivers of cuticles.
She says, “you have my fingernails,” something so small
and brutal.

Her mother points now as
a few more sea lions separate, but the girl
does not need to look.
Their guttural bickering, hacking,
the way they bark their language across
each other is
the way we all face our sameness.

Daughters become their mothers
while denying it
with spit and groans.
Wilding

At the grocery checkout, among the Rolos and celebrity break-ups, patrons twitch, tethered to this sprawling line. A varicose man is digging for change; his pennies stutter across the tiles. A mother sends her boy back for milk; it has to be the blue cap, not the green. The cashier needs a price check on those pears. Preferred customer cards. Coupons for cat litter. It matters.

I can almost summarize my restlessness. And if I stand here long enough, this petty dance feels like some backward way of becoming wild.

We understand rage: making malleable another’s flesh, seeing what the body can embody.

Yet, we stand here, and a hollow surging of irritation becomes all we must survive.

A girl unloads her bulging cart. She positively fidgets in the express lane, the moral quarrel in her lowered eyes and stooped back.

Everyone goes on lunging for tic-tacs or horoscope almanacs.

We pace our territories, funneled to prescriptive foot-tapping sighing shifting eye-rolling eye-wandering unbearable slowness.
Cravings

She has known the cool pleasure beneath,

and so prods her fingers through the warmed tops of sand piles.

She thinks of sugar, thinks it all must be sweetness.

The girl crams sand into her little fist, her waiting mouth.

She soon resents her father’s fingers prying open her mouth, darting in to dig out the grains. Gritty spittle rivulets run around her chin,

but she still lowers her hands for another crumbling fistful. She still wants to fill her belly with sweetness. With those warm layers giving way to cool grains.
III.
Pennsylvania, This Arrow Reddening

I. *The Way I Name You*

Crimson azalea bristle, real  
and spiked, beautiful weapons  
of renewal opening,

   some beginning in the manner  
of pink flesh. Below, the barren shrub  
browned and waiting—

this is not a sort of calm—

robins among the half-dead, calling them back  
with their notes warm against winter's  
acknowledgement. Coming  
to the surface, worms cajoled  
by the days of rain,

this way connected to the robin

that swallows the slick offerings.  
Robin mouths fill with silence.

From their stomachs, pieces of earth  
are calling back, calling me back  
to cold air sweeping blades of Pennsylvania  
and this season, changing, named,  
seems something mortal I could fall upon.
II. Place You Like Mortar

Pennsylvania, the mist-light I felt
moving across my fingers
was beautiful.
I don't know the way
outside this arrow reddening,
radiating outside me. It makes connections
ending quickly: notes
of robins cut the wind, double-edged
against my blood rising
and retreating and the constancy
of gnats reappearing
an inch from my opened eyes.

These are all fragments.

Branches curve up and out, their nakedness
the careful worship of debris.
Among the robins,
gnats fly out
like overzealous bits of dust
trapped in the motion of fruitless
pollination.

They rest on me,
making my body amenable to flight.
Pennsylvania, still this arrow
reddening, radiating
the way among
the half-dead
(pine needles, mulch,
bark), this layer
over what is alive,
abundantly, underneath.
III. This Love is Not Unconditional

Ground alive with new springs.
A year later and your water still seeps slowly
into my shoes covered in grass clippings,
from the outer flesh of fabric to socks
to skin toe-wrinkled, claimed
by this place at the edge of the woods
where fields meet in an overgrowth
of ivy covering the ground and moving up the trees.
Only, out of this growing, the single hemlock,
dead, is adorned in turkey vultures
sun-bathing, roosting in the cool mist
and then breaking away to the scent
of small bodies on your roads.

Great wings unfold like giant tendrils
of brown smoke. They cut up your mornings
into spokes of light which slide across my face.
I wonder, already, how I will come back to you
(a wing unfurling, readying for flight?).

Land of coal air
and steel and railroad lines
unending. Land of rivers
browned, or looking blue, sometimes,
in the shade of a mountain. Love
is learned circling my stretch of woods.

This love is kept
like the mint
hidden away under
an overhanging of ferns
which pull back
wild and unapproachable.
IV.
After Pennsylvania, nothing changed except to flatness. Everyone looked the same and talked the same. You stopped looking out cornfield-filled windows.

You counted the miles that felt like Pennsylvania and tormented me with the paper’s cross word puzzle. All the clues you presented as if they were a father’s final challenge, insisting you should know this, come on, you should know this. But my few answers were no reprieve because the radio still sounded the same and the people talked the same. When the flatness finally broke us, you called ahead for a room. A few minutes of details for the Super 8 and the woman’s reply

“Oak-a-lee Doe-k-lee” burst out of your grinning mouth like Nebraska’s quick turn of white-shot mountain rocks cut out of the plain.

The subsequent Did you hear that? what she said? was proof of your America. You should have seen your face, right then, in Omaha, when we still had a thousand miles to go.
Beloved Recoiling

The Perindens Tree is a magical tree from the Aberdeen Bestiary. Doves lived in the tree, fed off its fruit, and were protected because dragons (the dove's enemy) could not enter the Perindens Tree or its shadow.

I have always looked back, yearned back to the feeling of beginning. The shadow of the maple fractures to falling leaves and I kick up their scent.

Little deaths mingle, unreliable sweetness released by their crisp breaking under my boots. Everywhere vestiges of what was: winter birds are dark plumes against the sky; Queen Anne's lace turns grey and fetal; and the mourning doves curl—

haptic tufts in the rain and twilight—against the barren maple.

In pieces, in wet bundles of sugary decay, I have found you, my Perindens, leaves imprinting their shadows on the sidewalk to hold your form.
Light is Required

Written after viewing a photograph of two girls picking berries in a field. The image comes from Lewis Wickes Hine’s collection of documentary photography on Child Labor in America (1908–1912). The photo contains the caption: Field and Farm Work: Camille Carmo, age 7, and Justine, age 9. The older girl picks about 4 pails a day. Rochester, Mass.

They have followed the crops. Fathers say, “when the berrys is ready, they has to be done,” and so the girls dressed in the dark.

Evergreens, like sentinels, like bushel men, lead the way.
The roots of the spruce shove up through cold dirt. Though their shoes are wearing down those efforts, some root tips still stick and catch as the girls, Camille and Justine, follow the path like the others.

The girls hurry after their older brother’s long strides. Tree shade turns humid the closer they get to the sunlight rising over the clearing.

The girls do not feel like Gretel.

The field is an oven.

***

The bushel man hands out the pails
and each girl takes two. Loose wooden grips roll in their palms. Empty buckets arc with their steps as the two find a spot away from the other pickers.

In the field, low bush branches work patterns into their shins under wrinkled dresses, and scratch at their hands as they pick the blueberries.

Some berries break in their hands, the juice shrivels fingers.

The girls count time like this: move when the legs go numb, when the skin of their hands cracks like burst berries, when the dirt crusts painfully over their chapped skin.

(stanza break)
Justine, the older, walks the full pails back to the bushel man.

Some berries spill out and back under the grass.

Later, the fallen will be stains on the hems of their dresses.

***

Not ready to pick, the green berries cling hard to the thick bush.

Camille wonders what makes the sun so bright her hair sweats. This was always their future. To be in the fields someday.

But too soon, the girls say.

***

When the photographer walks the field, the girls keep their heads down. He talks to the bushel man who lies, “they only help today, for their brother.” The bushel man is weary of the glinting equipment. He says, “they are happy to be little girls picking berries.”

The girls like the man’s smile, like the way he brushes past the bushel man. Justine says, “Too soon. I am nine. She is seven. I pick four pails a day.” They keep their heads down. They keep picking.

Camille squints up, wonders why he takes their picture. Justine answers in the language of sisters: not speaking, a nod, shifting her eyes, hand on the younger girl’s shoulder. She is saying the light is good here. She is
saying the sun on their hair is lovely.

They keep picking the berries against
the resistance of the low branches. They stay
away from the bronzed or webbed leaves
that tell the story of mites that bite. When the bushel
man is further away, the girls tell each other
stories about becoming the earth, the clouds,
berries and trees. Camille says bones might
change color like their skin. She says,
“the story of our knees is red, brown, purple,
black—bones might be too.”

***

Lanterns light the last hour
of picking, then lead the way
to the black path under the evergreens.

“Your brown bones” Camille whispers at night,
when Justine unties the loosened, sweat-soaked bow
from her sister’s curls.

In the makeshift shack, no screens to keep
out the mosquitoes, no light
to attract the other bugs, only blood and sweat and
tired bones, the girls try to fall asleep, and in their dreams

they still pick berries and carry their buckets
to the bushel man. The pecks always come back empty. Pick, pick,

pick, drop into the pail, bend, and they pick again.
Nightmare in Three Parts

-for my brother

I.

When I am compelled to your room
by the nightmare, your still form rattles
my mind.

If you wake
to find me fanning
my fingers over your parted lips, listening
to the slow breaths catching

and leaving you, how
would I explain?

II.

No point. You know, already,
the threat of loss draped over our bodies
so thick and dark our shadows
bear the excess.

Nightmares have sprung up in you and I
can only slick your faint blond curls back
with your sweat.

III.

We dwell in the root of the problem:
morning light threading
closed blinds, cold milk
fluting over our cereal,

pulp of orange juice
on our tongues. The day assembles
around these needs, these physical borders that always take us back.
Memory's Only Witness

My parents stir in their fevered sleep
and I imagine
the way the blackout forms:
memories slipping away and cowering
like beaten dogs
before the reprimand.

Through darkness
thick as blood
I am drawn to their fermented
sounds like phosphorescent lures.
I can’t seem to leave this place.

Each time they awake
as strangers, infant-headed
and weeping, there I am again
to author their gaping lives.

Does it matter
that I want to feel the night
empty itself of me? I, too, want to worship
among the forgotten things.
Wrap myself in their thickness.

So why do I come running back for them
in the crag-light of dawn?

Why is it
that the sunlight
spearing emptied bottles
to a browned and yellowing web
also finds
a love that hesitates?
Release

For a while, I watch you helplessly marrying
the window. The sound of wasp dance and silence
breaks through to what is beyond the hazy pane
as you strain against the resistance
of your decision. This mystery we both play out
as trees throw their slick petals from the other side.

At rest, you seem to know the way back.
No one prepares us for how quickly we arrive
in the next part of a life, working and stumbling;

no one says there might not be a return.
You rub the confusion from your body
and your legs churn together as if ready to fly,

yet you have stopped moving forward,
stopped crisscrossing the invisible paths
along this window’s nest of light.

Soon, I will make your going easy,
lift the paper from the cup and cast you
back to the air that will not lift me.
V.
Spontaneous Generation

A belief, up until the mid-17th century, that simple living organisms could come into being spontaneously. It was accepted, for instance, that worms, beetles, etc. came to life from dust, mud, or decomposing food.

Then one day the tree was a swing
of two yellow ropes,
four yellow knots,
and a plank of wood.

I know it’s not the same,
but all-of-the-sudden we could kick our legs
out over the little crick and back toward
the highway as water spiders clustered and passed.

I believed in that swing’s generation like we used to believe
aphids sprang from morning dew, frogs
developed out of primordial mud, and mice
were birthed of the barn’s damp hay.

Even then, I understood
that things left to themselves too long
come back to us changed,
or we to them.

When Mom looked at the plum-colored bruises
blooming along our bodies, she knew
the yard needed fruit trees,
some apple and cherry and pear.

At Lowes, we searched each row for our pairs of trees.
We found the young couples of apple and cherry,
but the man said there was no mate for the pear.
Its white flowers bloomed
and the crick ran white with their falling.

The man said no pears would come,
but arcing out on the swing we noticed
the branches laden with fruit,
which I know is not the same

even though we called it a miracle
and believed
our pendulum shadows
had everything to do with it.
**Picnic**

The blanket, rummaged from the trunk
and tugged over wind, lies
in the misshapen mounds the grass blades form.

Dad’s boots pin its flapping corners.
Mom unpacks the cooler.

The afternoon turns to red
grapes and turkey sandwiches disappearing
under a maple’s shifting, pinhole canopy of stars.

My brother and I race against
the day’s brief sprint of light. We reclaim
our jungle gym scramble of a world.

This is the memory of something good.

I chase it down like my brother and I leapt
at the ducks and drove them forward
into pond scum. Their panicked sounds
darted back across the park’s acre.
Everything stirred by our bliss of impulse.

It is the memory of something good and I
am suspicious of it. Did I notice the ducks
rearing their weary necks toward us?

Or was I the one anxiously looking back
to my mother motioning us in?

It would not surprise me to see the blanket
tugged from the ground. To remember
boots and all tumbling into the grass.

It would be easier to see everything balled up
and crammed beside the cooler in the trunk of our car.

Still, this is the memory of something good

but there are times when I pick at the image
like those ducks working with frantic energy

and I feel something cold roll down me

like the beads of dirty water spit
down their ruffled sides.
On Forgetfulness

Darling, if I knew what I wanted,
I would not have you
wading my nonsense motions
for words, objects, those things
I should know like I know
the presence of my bones.

I give you
tiny twitches
of eyelid, finger, mouth.

My dripping-spigot thought.

Though I crumble to whosy-whats-it,
do-dad, what-cha-ma-call-it,
you seem to catch
my meaning,

to reach for some
thing-a-ma-jiggy,
gizmo,
dohickey.

Each time you offer back to me
the ladle or a clip,
a waning moon,
highway 9, or the horizon,
I allow myself
to summon even less.
Revelation

Squirrel, tentative
with the green of a walnut in your mouth,
you couldn’t know
that from this high window
I have seen
where you hid all

those goods
under the fallen leaves,
behind a bricked ledge of
the sidewalk. I watch

you jitter and paw, hoarding
where the sycamore root gives
and digging
under low holly.

This seeing
and not seeing could continue
forever, but you scurry away, spotted
by a man and his dog
barreling down the sidewalk,

and I dart back from the window
knowing I, too, have buried things
to keep them my own.
The Possibility of Separation

Fallen pine needles
make their way up
the stairs clumped
to the treads and tongues of my shoes.

Pine needles trek to the lip
of the door then fling themselves
across grayed carpet. Along the wood floors,
they lie like scratches.

Outside, pine needles pelt down
to crevices in patio cushions
and into the folds of clothes on the line.
I find the pine culprits filling up
the bird bath or crusting shingles
and siding. Somehow they travel
to the kitchen cupboards and edge
the walls, voracious, amorous.

One day in my pockets
like fortunes from the woods;
the next day spit like venom
from the mouth of the dryer.

I wake to their matchstick mockings.
Pine needles dancing
along the windowsills.

I take out the broom. My daily routine
to divide. Divide. But the pine needles still cling
to the edge of the door and clump
between the broom’s bristles.

Each day I think an outward stroke
will be enough to claim the boundaries of a home,
but then the pine needles.

The pine needles.
What the Night Has

The night has emptying faces 
of storefronts, well-lit and unwelcoming. Someone yelling down the street a sentence obscured. The dog marking that last section of the neighbor’s fence. Children denying rest with a no, no-, eyes calling to their knuckles, heads to pillows.

The night has us struggling to finish: phone calls, emails, that last load of laundry, the dishes soaking in the kitchen sink, our long roads of argument, the final page of any book.

The night has, also, houses. Has the time it takes to become still: cooled incandescence slips through the curtains. We catalogue our mis-steps.

Yet, like the bellies of leaves shivering under the streetlights, we can count ourselves among the many things that can make their repairs with what the night has.
Pennsylvania (Reprise)

You are still a map I burn on the side of the road, a back road with guardrails leaning into the drop-off. I am tempted to veer and careen. To see what survives of a place.

You are like a hooked fish trying to circle back, and all the while a portable black radio with one working speaker gives the shivering of the hand, or the tail, or the boat a voice.

An old wooden ladder with rungs missing lies by the side of the house; peonies grow up between the spaces and curl their full heads around dormant rungs.

So, are you the peonies with their caught-fish heads? Would that not fit?

You are too many things.

And I need more than to be spared on a faded back road singing every imperfection. More than silence or skin. Guardrails and peonies.

Your ground will not quit me.
Notes:

Lucretia is an ancient Roman figure known for her beauty and virtue. She is a tragic heroine, but looked upon as an ancient Roman ideal for how a wife should behave. Late one night, troops, including emperor Tarquin and Lucius Collatinus (Lucretia’s husband) boasted that they each had the most virtuous wife. To settle the matter, they traveled to each man’s house to see how their wives acted while they were away. Other wives held lavish banquets and lounged about, but the men found Lucretia hard at work by her loom. That night, Lucretia proved virtuous, but unfortunately she also received the unwanted attention of the emperor, who then pursued, pleaded, threatened, and eventually raped Lucretia when she would not submit. In the history of Rome, her rape and subsequent suicide spurred the start of the Republic and the end of the monarchy. However, I’ve focused on the life of Lucretia before those tragic events, before she became a symbol of integrity.

Roman festival observed to purify the land of evil and bring health and fertility to the people (essentially a spring cleansing). Roman women, in particular, believed that participating in the various rituals would help the pregnant when it came time to birth their children and that the barren would become pregnant.

Bestiaries were common in the Middle Ages. They are illustrated collections of the natural world (mostly animals and plants). Each description and illustration conveyed symbolic meaning and a moral lesson. The Aberdeen Bestiary (12th century English manuscript, illuminated) is one of those surviving bestiaries. The message of the Perindens Tree is supposedly that if you dwell with God (the tree) you will be protected (from the devil—dragons).

“Light is required” was a phrase Lewis Wickes Hine used to refer to both the need for light in photography and the need to shed light on the pervasiveness of child labor.