

ARTIFACTS: SELECTED POEMS

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## ABSTRACT

The title, *Artifacts*, is a compost of words *art* and *fact*—with *fact* as Latin for “something made.” A poet recreates language from syllable, word, and shard, and ropes off sacred or desecrated places. The movement of the imagination from small to sublime, from clay shard or carved flint arrow to cultural landscape, is a useful analogy for poetics – a field school approach influenced by my studies in anthropology.

*Artifacts'* poems vary in context (*place*), but each explores *emblematic structure*, *kinetic tension*, *eco-poetics* and a *language-driven* (vs. idea-driven) process. Sections include: Turning the Field: Structure and Surprise; Examining Shards: Emblematic Poems; Piecework Expertise: Poet as Archaeologist and Curator; and, The Nature of Dig Sites: Locality, Language and Transformation.

In conclusion: “The artist, poet, ecologist and archaeologist each use imagination, locality, and all of experience to recreate a whole from fragments, emblems, syllables, and the tension of words, wire and line.”

## DEDICATION

The collection of poems in this manuscript is dedicated to my children, Lorna Josephine Vaughen and Jared Victor Vaughen, my *magnum opus*. May you always find astonishment in the *vox humana*.

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I acknowledge the following poems have previously been published: "Morning Walk" (James Dickey Award, *Lullwater Review*, Emory University, 1995); "American Wife Opens a Package from Iran" (*Greensboro Review's* Amon Liner Award for best poem of the year, 1988); "Birds Audubon Never Painted" (*Chattanooga Times Free-Press*, May 2008); "Just off Blythe's Ferry Road" (*Sequoyah Review*, 2015); "Photograph 1942" (*Birmingham Poetry Review*, 1988); "Remembering Jerusalem" (*Chattahoochee Review*, Atlanta 1995.); "The Mending" (*Cold Mountain Review*, Appalachian State University, 1995). "Farm Dedication" was a commissioned poem for the 2009 McConnell-Hartman Farm conservation project in, where I shared the podium with Wendell Berry and Clyde Edgerton.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

#### Art and Fact: The Poet as Maker

The title of my collection of poems, *Artifacts*, offers an immediate association with the compost of words *art* and *fact*—with the word *fact* having origin in Latin and meaning “something made.” A poet recreates language from the smallest syllable, word, and shard and ropes off a sacred or desecrated place to explore. A poet is a maker. The movement of the imagination from the small to the sublime, from a clay shard or carved flint arrow to a cultural landscape, is a useful analogy for poetics. This “field school” approach to poetry is influenced by anthropology, the focus of my undergraduate studies. Indeed, anthropology informs my poems overtly in language and imagery as well as point of view. The poems selected for *Artifacts* are quite diverse in context, meaning *place*, but each is an exploration of *emblematic structure*, *kinetic tension*, *eco-poetics* and the *language-driven* process. These terms may be unfamiliar to some. Any survey of essays on poetics quickly concludes that there is great conflict and struggle in choosing appropriate terminology—a struggle that does not burden a person writing about the craft of fiction, with its tidy consensus around terms *plot*, *character* and *setting*.

## Turning the Field: Structure and Surprise

The *structure* of a poem should not be confused with any *form* or *formal pattern* immediately recognized by *scansion*. We may approach the field of a poem and immediately see patterns of rhyme *scheme*, repetition and the footprints of *feet*. However, many—perhaps most—contemporary poems require a different kind of field work, a deeper read, a deeper turning of the field. Any discussion of my work, of *free verse* poems, demands a look at the overall movement of the poem rather than noting couplets or beats. A formal poem such as a sonnet, pantoum or villanelle will also offer a structure of movement apart from its form, overall or within a line—if they are mature, polished, rich or *ripe*.

“Poetic structure is, simply, the pattern of a poem’s *turning*,” states Michael Theune in *Structure and Surprise* (3). A close read of a poem’s *structure* or *turns* is a meaningful way of exploring poems for both reader and writer – and for conversation in the classroom. “Structure does not necessarily mean simply order and rationality. Rather, structure’s primary concern is the art of the turn and often this means making surprising turns”(3).

In *The Flexible Lyric*, Ellen Bryan Voigt notes that structure—the way a poem turns—is a more relevant or meaningful way to “classify” a poem, “regardless of form.”

“For genres to be useful they need to survive—transcend—any particular set of formal conventions, which the art continually outgrows” (116).

Voigt turns to nature for insight into structure:

Willow and pine trees share the same structure but differ in texture and; spider and crab are alike only in form; milkweed fluff and a chick’s feathers...— these pairings have in common only a certain texture. And just as meaningful scientific classification has come to rest on structure — distinctions among species from which Darwin could trace common ancestry — so too, I maintain, does any useful identification of the lyric. An argument to that effect, however, requires definition of the elements of a poem based on *function* rather than substance. (116)

Poems tend to resist any “preoccupation with form to the exclusion of structure,” the “hierarchy” Voigt describes as touted by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.” Brooks and Warren’s *An Approach to Literature* and a few years later, *Understanding Poetry*, dominated the discipline since the early 1930s. Only John Crowe Ransom “left the door open” to other approaches of understanding says Voigt, who champions “proposing analysis by *function* rather than substance” (124).

Doing so maintains texture as a poem’s silk or oak or clay — common to both structure and form, which can nonetheless be

differentiated—and leaves joined, as they are in successful poems,

the logical and the local, the paraphraseable and the ineffable. (Voigt 124)

Poet and teacher also Voigt offers a wonderful analogy to help us understand structure when reading a poem, or when creating a poem—comparing structure to a *load bearing* wall in architecture. Voigt writes:

With such an approach the productive inquiry becomes whether, in the complete work, any particular wooden wall is weight-bearing, or put there for the elegance of design. That is, structure is the way all the poem's materials are organized, whether they are abstract or concrete, precise or suggestive, denoted or connoted, sensory or referential, singular or recurring. (124)

I might suggest the analogy of function of a *trellis* also offers insight into the function of structure in poetry. Trellis is an image and word which often appears in my poems as a structure for fine tendrils of thought and association.

Voigt describes *structure* as “a taxonomy” that categorizes poems in a way that she says is “at once radically new and strikingly familiar” (124). Almost no one regularly thinks or speaks in sestinas, she notes, yet we do engage in structured thinking and speaking, in the use of effective turns. “Structure offers a whole new way to conceive of poems, that is at once paradigm-shifting, highly sophisticated and readily apparent and available” (116).

What accrues—what is structured—is increasing boldness in the commentary *on* the list, a darkening tone, and thereby a purposeful movement through the allusions, assonance, alliteration, anaphora, phrasal repetition and rhyme, images, figuration, puns, varying levels of diction, and onomatopoeia. In most poems, to these same elements of linguistic texture is added lineation, which provides both an additional rhythmic system and additional opportunities to make discernible pattern, which in turn many seem to give a single effect. (Voigt 126)

Pattern alone does not create a powerful or useful structure. Randall Jarrell pointed this out first, notes Voigt: “The sort of unity that is generated by mere homogeneity or similarity is plainly insufficient for poetry” (Jarrell 697). Monotony has unity too, he notes, but good structure is reaching for more than mere unity – it can support a turn. Jarrell says: “The organization of a good poem, so full of strain and tension, is obtained not merely by intensifying the forces working toward a simple unity, but by intensifying the opposing forces as well” (Jarrell 711).

There are a variety of structures such as *elegiac*, *emblematic*, *ironic* or *retrospective*, many with a rather simple two-part structure, observes Theune. *Dream-to-waking* is his term for the structure that provides a dream, daydream, or vision and then a waking from that dream. The turn may employ *ironic structure* if the dream or vision is undermined once the poet awakes. The *elegiac* can turn three ways: “from grief to

consolation, from grief to the refusal of consolation or from grief to deeper grief," he notes in his book's companion online Wordpress blog.

Corey Marks expands Theune's idea of a two-part *emblematic structure*, of moving from meditation to insight. He emphasized a necessary third turn—a re-description that "demonstrates a change in the speaker." In other words, poetry is a language of transformation and surprise. He continues, "The movement between outer and inner states allows the structure to dramatize a moment of realization, of changing thought." What separates a good poem from a poor poem, according to Marks, is the poet's ability to convince us that the poem is "dynamically alive in the world to which they respond" (57).

*Turning* as the main movement of a poem is readily identified with nature. Maple leaves turn. Seasons turn. A chrysalis turns to a butterfly. A Jerusalem artichoke turns toward the sun. Evening turns to dusk before turning to morning. Man turns toward death, eventually, as a natural process. As the Catholics finally admitted, the horizon merely turns and the earth turns around the sun, not the other way around. The South African Zulu tribe and the Jew in his or her Diaspora turn to the ancestors for consultation. The structure, the turning in the poem, gives the art *pulse*, a life blood—and hopefully elevates our resting pulse as we write or read or listen.

## Examining Shards: Emblematic Poems

My poems generally emerge from an *emblematic structure*. Perhaps this is because I was raised to be an observer of the small within the sublime since childhood and continued this with my undergraduate work in archaeology as an anthropology major.

Emblematic structure explores the shard, elevates the small image. However, any survey of modern poetry reveals a struggle with the concepts of *image*, *fragment* or *shard*, and their role in poems. We know image can serve in a deeply interior psychoanalytic sense by reappearing across a collection or a life, or as a mere “trigger” that fades or meets with the delete button as the arc of the poem turns its attention elsewhere. There’s no need to set up a false choice, as I have found images to serve my poems both ways. In emblematic poems the image becomes the object of an observer’s affection, meditation, and deep study. To draw on the popular fairy tale, the emblem is the small object that keeps us tossing and turning, restless – the pea, perhaps the letter *p*, under the poet’s mattress.

My poem “Felt Boards” is a celebration of my earliest introduction to deep image through the simplicity of physically one-dimensional silhouettes used to echo the stained glass windows in the sanctuary. In the felt board medium of the pre-electronic Sunday Schools, the softened images were intended to simplify complex stories and focus a child’s attention. In my experience, the interaction of mere outlined images held

only momentarily by unseen static set me free to focus on a myriad of sacred and secular associations.

The poem “Felt Boards” emerged with the *emblematic* structure just as I was reaching for an *elegy*, a poem about my Aunt’s life to share with family at her funeral. Prior to sitting down to write such a poem “on-demand” for the poignant occasion, I had no meaningful recollection of felt boards, or thoughts about these having any bearing on my adult years. I had not yet remembered these, in fact. Yet remembering, turning through the book of her life, and reflecting on my particular relationship to her as the niece she drove each week to the protestant Primary Department, the image of her placing the star in the blue felt sky was the delightful origin of the poem. Is my poem *elegiac* or *emblematic*? It’s both; any poem can turn more than one way.

The *emblem* has origins in a genre of Renaissance art that combined a poem with a brief, cryptic motto and/or visual image embossed from a raised surface or *emblema* (in Latin). Theune notes the two-part structure of an emblematic poem: “It begins with an organized description of an object and culminates with a meditation on that same object. In this way, the emblem structure moves, from sight to insight, from perception to reflection” (27).

Another example of an emblematic poem from my collection *Artifacts* is “The Boy with Bread in *The Boston Globe*.” My poem is *set* in Cairo, but was created line by line after I glimpsed a photograph *set* in *The Boston Globe*, and not in print but *set* in a

blue computer screen. I can recall the “delight” of finding my way into the broader political scenes unfolding in a sublime but short-lived Arab Spring in 2011. I saw the image of a boy the same age as my son. The boy was carrying a large tray up above his head. The tray was stacked with triangular loaves of bread, presumably to share with protestors in Tahir (Martyr) Square. I had no preconceived thought about the direction the poem would take me—to the public street or to the family bakery. Robert Frost advised that the figure a poem makes—its structure—“begins in delight” (11).

The emblematic origin for my poem “The Boy with Bread in *The Boston Globe*” is not limited to the context of the photo or current events, but surely has a longer shelf life. In my poems, I tend to travel to the *intimate* scene rather than to the *public* square, and so the boy in my poem turns to the small drama of learning to whistle, a kind of poetry itself made of syllable and breath. By the end of his day he has little to conclude from the big drama in the street, but owns a momentary “satisfaction” that alludes to the universal “satisfaction” of political engagement, of speaking truth to power. If a poem begins in delight, as Frost insists, they might do well to end in a momentary satisfaction, an audible whistle.

W. K. Wimsatt’s classic work *Verbal Icon* points out “what distinguishes poetry from scientific or logical discourse is a degree of concreteness which does not contribute anything to the argument, but is somehow enjoyable or valuable for its own sake.” For Wimsatt, and myself, poetry is “the vehicle of a metaphor which one boards heedless of

where it runs, whether cross-town or downtown— just for the ride” (76). Frost explains how the ending of a poem has its catalyst in the emblematic origins:

[A poem] inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the *first image* (emphasis added) of the original mood – and indeed from the very mood. (11)

An object, a named thing layered with connotation, an artifact layered in culture and mud, or a *snapshot* of a moment, may be the only prompt a disciplined writer needs. Yet, the visual image or a chosen word must be more than *prompt*; the image must have a *pulse* – an energy. The artifact may or may not be charged with gravitas; it may be rather ordinary like an onion to Naomi Shihab Nye or a sycamore to Wendell Berry. Another poem from *Artifacts* speaks directly to ordinary objects that have a pulse and are not mere props taking up space in our lives, and so it is titled “Emblematic.” The poem notes that any emblem you elevate, or mediate upon, is drawn from a “scarred sense of place.”

Just as constructs and deconstructed notions of *house, water* or *fog* work as

psychic patterns and metaphors in Elizabeth Bishop poems, *bread* has appeared more than once or twice in mine. *Bread*, a yeast-driven, dynamic, man-made creation, imitates nature's transformative powers whether one steps up to the Communion rail or not. I am often uncertain as to why or how any new item "triggers" my imagination or desire to scratch the surface of its presence to reveal what is buried, until a first draft of a poem is complete. However, the triggering experience, place, or emblem will stay with me and implore me to find an opportunity to write in a busy day. As I explore the image I am not limited to a reporter's lens, but use language as art to imagine an ever-expanding context and association.

Like *bread*, the *barn* also prompts my imagination as *emblematic*—in the vein of Theune's call to *meditation* and of T.S. Eliot's word *digging*. In an increasingly developed American landscape, the word *barn* may soon need *excavating* by memory and photograph, by running our hands along repurposed weathered boards. My recent poem, "The Barn's Slant Lines," elevates the landscape's near-organic, near-soil, rotting barn as a "mediator" between several locations: field and forest, man and nature, childhood and adulthood with its *structure* offering the scaffolding for a rite of passage such as entering the *loft* or *lofty*. In the poem, a Veteran returns to catch a rare glimpse of the barn or a barn similar to the one where he learned to read, where he hid a fist of buckeyes as a boy as treasure, where he learned to climb the ladder, where he began to understand the connections between worlds. The speaker in my poem, the Veteran,

notes that Wallace Stevens left a jar in Tennessee, though his local audience would be more familiar with another *Wallace*, the populist segregationist paralyzed by his narrow hard lines, George Wallace. And similarly it is implied that both Wallaces are less truly engaged in his native Tennessee. For example, the poet Wallace chose the multi-syllable *Tennessee* without having actually been there we can speculate from biography; politician Wallace used the same shallow border crossing for national political ambition. The poet and the audience are the ones engaged in this realization. The barn poem allows these two radically disconnected Wallaces to meet, as only a poem can do. The barn and the world of ideas are drawn as rafters from Nature, a scaffolding to frame our lives as an enduring tool as any, and also a cultural *artifact*. The barn is bridge with its clay floors but also the loft; the barn compels or imitates as art our own ascent. Even as the Veteran in the poem is compelled to pull over from the roadway to take pause in poetry, he surely finds it more inviting than the only other fixed landmark—the cemetery stones. The barn in its transience, in its purposefulness, is more powerful than the stones marking the dead. The barn gets to return to soil, field, or forest floor—eventually. The stones movement is so slow as to appear or represent the stationary. The *barn*, like a poem, is dynamic, is *art*.

Barn imagery first came to my work as a *commission*, a very different process than my usual prompt. I was asked to write a farm dedication poem for a cultural conservation program. A local family had the remnant of their grandparent's farm with

the original barns and they chose not to replace these with a suburban strip mall. We held the poetry event in the field and gathered in the barn for local slow food, music and a show of matriarchal quilts. The audience was not a university audience, but one with ties to the *place*, to the music, to the food being shared. Wendell Berry and I shared the podium, shared common themes, but with different approach. I would surely include farmer poet Berry as a person of influence on my work, but more for his engagement in sustainable agriculture than his Sabbath series of purely contemplative poems. Berry does have exceptions to his method. His “Sycamore” is an emblematic poem I’ve returned to many times for its tight, sturdy structure when a compelling image of my own invites me to see and listen and write.

The Sycamore

WENDELL BERRY

In the place that is my own place, whose earth

I am shaped in and must bear, there is an old tree growing,

a great sycamore that is a wondrous healer of itself.

Fences have been tied to it, nails driven into it,

Hacks and whittles cut in it, the lightning has burned it.

There is no year it has flourished in

that has not harmed it. There is a hollow in it

that is its death, though its living brims whitely

at the lip of the darkness and flows outward.  
Over all its scars has come the seamless white  
of the bark. It bears the gnarls of its history  
healed over. It has risen to a strange perfection  
in the warp and bending of its long growth.  
It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.  
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark face.  
It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.  
In all the country there is no other like it.  
I recognize in it a principle, an indwelling  
the same as itself, and greater, that I would be ruled by.  
I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it,  
and is fed upon, and is native, and maker. (65)

*A commissioned* poem demands a clear understanding of process. My process generally begins with the pulse of a powerful image – not a phrase, place or person, but more a resounding *bell*. Indeed, *bell* serves as *emblem* in “Commemoration,” written on the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s *dream* speech. I explore how a church bell rope, intended as an icon of solidarity, might be completely counter to another’s point of view. The bell’s rope for some is more closely associated with a noose, with lynching in the South and framed by the voice of Billie Holiday’s number “Strange

Fruit." The poem's turn, therefore, represents a study of *reality* verses religious *ideal*, or even shallow tribute. The structure is *dream-awake, ironic, elegiac*, even—but surely *emblematic*.

Richard Hugo calls writing prompts such as *barn, bread*, or a nationwide commemoration ceremony, "triggers" that should "*trigger* the imagination as well as the poem"(8). Hugo was perhaps one of the earliest poetry teachers I discovered through his essays in *Triggering Town*, the first person I read who was teaching the *process* of writing poems. I had worked in trial-and-error and vague notions of what was engaging until visiting his *Town* in 1980, my freshman year of college. Hugo reminds me still, as I approach every revision, "The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words" (8).

### Piecework: Poet as Archaeologist and Curator

In writing poems with an *emblematic structure*, it has been helpful to investigate the complex role of image, of "things," as viewed through a survey of modern American poetry, and beyond. Consider *image* through a continuum of modern poetry—with the orthodox Imagist movement sat down as manifesto by Ezra Pound on one end—and extending along the line to moderate, balanced practitioners including T. S. Eliot, H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Galway

Kinnell, Robert Pinsky and Naomi Shihab Nye. Of course, nothing in nature or reality is quite so tidy and linear.

Regarding Pound, Eliot, Bishop, Olson, and even Williams, their ideas in prose are now somewhat static, compared with the art of their actual poems. Their essays are bound in dusty books that are artifacts themselves, but their comments and convictions are worth review. We take their findings for granted the way we take new findings in any archaeology for granted because we have come to expect a fragmented skeleton, the handprint on the cave wall, the DNA in a late wife's comb. Any surprise of significance seems rare these days. We live in an ever more visual society with images viewed in fragments, pixels, albums, and media – and viewed with a million quick clicks. We hold a gallery, a natural history cabinet, a map of ancient ruins, and a flurry of emoticons in our palm. Our anthologies are online and hyperlinked at the level of a word or an author's name and we can run with scissors toward these with a goal to cut and paste it into our life's *collage*. In other words, our anthologies are fluid, less bound in glue and thread – and even *place*.

Our methods of digging for a sign of something intriguing in the compost are not Pound's methods of digging. The imagist vocabulary of today is more like Whitman's prophetic "multitudes" and there are many entry points. Fred Chappell describes modern poetics by evoking an Appalachian quilt in his essay "Piecemeal: The Longer Poem Returns." He is doubtful about whether the patchwork of images will

hold up after many washings. He remarks, “contemporary poetry has never recovered from *The Wasteland* and *The Cantos*” (216)

‘The fragments I have shored against my ruins’: this phrase from Eliot’s crazed and despairing Tiresias is almost too famous to bear repeating, yet it is too apt to overleap. The collage method that Pound and Eliot instituted has been as influential in poetry as its analogous procedures have been in plastic art and music. Picasso, Braque, Jean Arp, and Kurt Schwitters are but four masters who made their canvases and sculptures littorals of fragments, and Stravinsky described modernist musical structure as the “pulverization” of classical harmony. The fragmentation and subsequent recombination of familiar elements is one of the obvious hallmarks of Modernism. (Chappell 216)

The mosaic procedure “is alive and widespread” Chappell concludes, as if with a sigh; however, he also reminds himself (and his reader) that modern poetry, long or short, is “capable of producing a startling variety of tones and effects” (216).

Chappell, known for narrative poems and stories honored by membership in The Fellowship of Southern Writers, sets this *piecemeal* work in opposition to “the old-fashioned way, with stories that have beginnings, middles, and endings.” However, quilts by nature also hold a story in the tension of their parts and have utility and

beauty and a *wholeness*, notes anyone who has worn a thimble or been “tucked in.” The quilt structure is not linear, even as elements of contrasting light and dark fabric move our eye as an oil or acrylic medium might. Piecework by nature holds multiple stories, are often made collectively by women in quilting *bees*, and move back and forth in time and generations depending on the selected swatch. Quilts are *collage*, sometimes *bricolage*, and only recently displayed as artifact and studied as a coded visual journal into the lives of ordinary otherwise anonymous women. I am particularly intrigued by the Gee’s Bend collection of Alabama that now has a curator and a gallery schedule across the country. My poem “Variants: The Quilts of Gees Bend, Alabama” explores the improvisational quality of these quilts that transformed scraps and traditional named patterns into a wholeness of art, survival, psychology and utility.

Chappell is not rigid in his criticism and concisely notes the response to his struggle with modern verse: “Only the continuous rearrangement of small motifs can give an accurate impression of current history.” Other poets “have justified their use of fragmentation by calling up conceptions of psychology and physical science” (216). Reading Chappell, I am reminded of Rilke’s reaction to a tedious display of artifacts in Italy discussed in his *Letters to a Young Poet*. It is 1903 and Rilke is writing a fifth letter to the young man describing the artifacts as “distorted,” the exhibit as “over abundant relics of the past,” though curated with “tremendous effort.” He calls these “coincidental remnants of another era, which is not ours” and “over-rated.” Italy, he

reminds the young impoverished poet far away, “is not more beautiful than elsewhere” (Rilke 36).

I would add that quilters and poets are particularly skilled in using the materials left for them to mend and recycle. The quilter’s scrap bag is generally local, much like soil or vernacular language. Poets, in other words, do not set about to take scissors to a fresh large bolt, but are left with thread and needles to make sense of what is left, knowing from experience, time frays *all* things. Poets, like quilters, are good at repurposing, being regenerative toward age-old thoughts and *motifs*. Culture looks to their poets for “fresh language.” Also, there are no straight story lines in nature, and archaeologists operate their field schools in a spiral. In other words, archaeologists do not dig straight down, and must bring with them many tools designed for tender sifting, to see what is there, not what they expect to find.

We live in a fragmented world and few have the tribal knowledge of how to make a quilt or a poem or apply a solstice to a trauma. Reading Chappell’s essay “Piecework” I am also reminded of novelist Tim O’Brien’s notable *piecework* on the war in Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*. Noted by many as a blur of the genres of fiction, *metafiction* and autobiography, it also has an element of poetry. *The Things They Carried* is a catalogue of *metaphor* and *metonym*.

To continue this historic and ongoing conversation of shard, image and archaeology as it relates to poetics, I reach for Laszlo Géfin’s work *Ideogram: History of a*

*Poetic Method*. He writes that modern poets “have all been, to a greater or lesser degree, *archaeologists*” (3). Géfin’s examples include:

[William Carlos] Williams digging into archives to gather material for *In the American Grain* and *Paterson*, [Charles] Olson’s literal digging up and laborious deciphering of Mayan hieroglyphs in Yucatan, [Gary] Snyder’s “field work” in translating ancient Chinese poems from the original and his collecting of Hopi legends—all have in common the desire to unearth the natural foundation of human thought upon which a new poetics and poetry may be constructed. The entire modernist movement in all the arts is inseparably tied to such “digging,” and in fact cannot be understood without it. (3)

T. S. Eliot noted that Pound could best be understood when he was being “archaeological.” Ironically, Eliot notes, this is when he is most original (Eliot 11); Pound’s poems were adept a re-creation. Eliot embraced the field school methodology as a modernist gesture of doing away with romantic notions of “originality” in poetry explains Géfin (4). He points out that Pound was the most outspoken about the need to move away from the traditional *metaphor* toward a *vector of ideograms* with their “intuitive affinity for description by particulars” (4). Pound wrote: “The image is more than an idea. It is a vortex of cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy” (Dove

xxxvi). My framing of the ideas of Eliot and Pound (and other poets) as archaeologists working in a field school might help us understand their common bond with the shard as a revelatory experience, and their differences in techniques and tools used in sifting the broader context.

Rita Dove performs the role of both archaeologist and curator, in her relatively new role as *anthologist*. Her introduction to *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry* is a concise and frank look at the continuum from Pound to Williams. Pound had “infectious visionary zeal . . . before hunkering down in Mussolini’s Italy,” says Dove candidly (xxxvi). Place and displacement surely affected Pound.

Pound, however dominant, was not the only voice demanding exploration of the *thing*, of *image*. Williams pushed his red wheelbarrow. Archibald MacLeish implied the wheelbarrow should be allowed to just “be” and not “mean.” Hilda Doolittle—whose very name became a shard as *H.D.*—and who was once the fiancé footnote for Pound, sought a “feminine response” (Dove xxxvi). A miffed Pound referred to H.D. diminutively as “Imagiste.” The name calling to discredit did not stop there. In a popular published essay, Bly pejoratively called Pound’s poems mere *pictures*. Today we have Bob Dylan pushing a wheelbarrow through his lyrics looking for love, or at least a crude piece of love in a world where he reminds us “everything is broken.” Williams’ metaphor with its dynamic wheel keeps getting *reinvented*, keeps *turning*,

keeps *hauling* the compost. The wheelbarrow image turns up in my poem “Flea Market.”

Pound’s insistence that “an image is not reproduced as reality but as a construct, charged with visions of history, cultural allusions, the collective unconscious, and inscribed with the existing sociolinguistic palette” now sounds like he is overstating the obvious. Dove notes his manifesto failed to take hold primarily because it was vague (xxxvi)—but perhaps vague just enough for T.S. Eliot to find some common ground to dig. Today, modern poets and readers are immersed culturally in frames of archaeology, evolution, psychology, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell’s interpretations of myth and archetype.

Dove notes that vagueness wasn’t Pound’s (or H.D.’s) biggest sin. The tendency to “lose oneself in a single mythology” was their weakness. For example, H.D. became obsessed with ancient Greece and Pound with the puzzle of Chinese characters. Pound’s faulty thinking, said Dove, also stemmed from: “the immersion in many traditions, concomitant with an abdication of responsibility, which perhaps later contributed to his mounting irrationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-American rants” (xxxvii).

In his 1962 essay, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” Robert Bly scathingly described Pound’s demand for pure objectivity as “astoundingly passionless” (Dove xxxvii). Bly was turning more toward Spanish-language poets such as Federico Garcia

Lorca and Czech poet Rainer Maria Rilke. It was Rilke who told a generation of younger poets through his famous letters to “go into yourself” to find images. “For the creative artist there is not poverty – nothing is insignificant or unimportant” (Rilke 10). Those who were listening include:

W.S. Merwin’s ‘rain with its bundle of roads,’ Russell Edson’s stone that will not consent to be owned. The poems of Mark Strand and Charles Simic played out their dream logic in psychic terrain where the method of narration was often the parable: Simic wrapped the nightmarish experiences of his Serbian childhood into the iconic tropes of folklore while Strand went deeper, un-imagining the self against a landscape as starkly drawn as a Hopper painting. (Dove xiviii)

What emerged for Merwin, Strand, Simic and painter Edward Hopper was the result of both external place and internal synthesis. *Place* alone is not enough; poetry requires we *internalize* our place, to *embed* ourselves like a shard in mud that cannot exist unchanged. Rilke says, “As a result of this turning inward, of this sinking into our world, *poetry* should emerge” (Rilke 11).

*Ecology* seems to be where modern society is currently most lacking in connection or focus, with *ecology* being the prime example of *holism* that’s as old as Aristotle. The Greek philosopher Aristotle first set down the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *Holism* is what literary critic Wimsatt described in his *concrete universal*

theory that explores how specific or general (concrete or universal) a verbal representation must be to achieve a particular effect on the reader or audience (Wimsatt 74). Again, as Voigt earlier noted, *structure*, and not the author's intent or theme, allows us to see a poem as *whole*. *Holism* has ancient roots but certainly modern insight gained from Charles Darwin's study of evolution: the tendency in nature to form wholes as systems, cycles and orbiters.

William Carlos Williams, "a twentieth-century literary Everyman," moved away from Pound for political reasons, but mainly because he was on a quest journey for a "uniquely American variable beat, improvisational cadence" (Dove xxxvii). The idea that we move from the local to the universal, the concrete to the abstract, the small to the sublime, was perhaps grounded in the physician's unique understanding of the systems of the human body, of these as an imitation of nature. Williams concluded his artistic expression should also be grounded in the local, and this was not an intellectual idea, but was one that surely came from the poet's actions and experience as he "jotted down lines between patient consultations and hospital visits, claiming that medical training had sharpened his observational skills" (Dove xxxvii).

In *Ideogram*, Géfin expands William's ideas about grounding of even the most general ideas in local culture :

General ideas, if they are to be living and valid, to some extent depend on local cultures. It is in the wide range of the local only that the general can

be tested for its one unique quality, its universality. The flow must originate from the local to the general as a river to the sea and then back to the local from the sea in rain. (69)

Géfin underscores Williams idea that the poet does not *copy* nature, but *imitates* its movements, actions and turns (69).

Williams, who we certainly credit as being fluent in the language of image, found Pound's ideas became limiting—and unnecessarily so. If poetry imitated art and was not merely Hamlet's "mirror held up to nature," it must be *dynamic*—it must have a *pulse*, a *kinesthetic* nature, an *arc* of a single or multiple turns. Pound's precise "Imagism" was often deemed *static* with the utility of a *snapshot*—too objective to engage an audience, implied Bly (Dove xxxvi). This juxtaposition of the shard in the compost is the situation of archaeology and contemporary poetry. In his book *Imaginations* Williams asserts or clarifies that imagination, "does not tamper with the world but moves it" (150). I have concluded, like Williams, that the human cognitive process is essentially *isomorphic*, or *equal*, to natural process. We discover nature within our being, our actions. This is the intellectual and mathematical equation that I have interpreted for those close to me by saying, "I feel most alive when I am writing a poem."

Williams moved modern poetry in the direction of an ecological imperative, noting poetry was re-creational and dynamic within a context. He also moved Charles

Olson, and more recently, Jed Rasula. *This Compost*, Rasula's seminal work explores the poet as librarian, archaeologist, field worker and curator.

Artists across all disciplines were approaching shards in the compost. Sometimes these archaeologists were disoriented, confused themselves about the origin, top, bottom, edge or age—or just exactly what they were looking at. Indeed we are often left with the shard of *cc*, *carbon copy*, in a sense. Chappell notes that just as poet William Carlos Williams offered “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” we have Stravinsky’s “Sacre du Printemps” and Picasso’s “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” (Chappell 3). Marianne Moore, who said, “It is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,” was mentor to Elizabeth Bishop who Dove aptly points out, “managed to chisel the universe into pixilated uncertainties” (xl). Bishop, and many women who followed, wrote in a kind of code about the unique feminine vortex. After World War II, a new catalogue of images emerged in the compost of American poetry including the industrial blue-collar imagery of Philip Levine’s Detroit, Richard Hugo’s “scarred facades of Montana mining towns,” and the winter “hermits” of Robert Bly’s Minnesota (Dove xlii).

Chappell is wise to remain skeptical of the contemporary curator’s tedious catalogs and to note the difficulty in applying criticism to poetry’s longer, fragmented poems. “The *scraps* turn out to be red herrings” to any reader’s “detective work,” cautions Chappell. He adds: “We scan them with an inevitably frustrated curiosity and

no emotional engagement.” Yet, he concludes that certain passages arrest attention with a strange mournfulness such as Pound’s (and other poets’) “massy confused work.” “Hints, whispers, wisps, shards, scraps, sighs – whatever can they add up to? Can a poet make an effective poem out of mere echoes” (219) ponders Chappell?

There’s no clear or short answer to Chappell’s important question and concerns about the parts and the whole and the tensions between these. There is a demand on the writer, critic, publisher and reader to explore contemporary poetry with new understandings of how structure, tension as transformation through language can work as *synergy*. Rilke turns the young poet’s attention to nature as the source of *synergy*:

If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable. No experience was too insignificant – the smallest happening unfolds like destiny. Destiny itself is like a wonderful wide tapestry in which every thread is guided by another thread, and held and carried by a hundred others. (Rilke 24)

Poets must keep turning new ground, because the compost under our feet now has so many layers, so many remnants, and admittedly, few who reach for the handwork of the spade’s sharp point, who *notice*, as in take *note*.

In 2008, Robert Pinsky’s poem, “Poem of Disconnected Parts,” emerged in his collection *Gulf Music*—and emerged again as a shard in an anthology elevating poetry

of *engagement*. Editors, or *curators*, Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray note that such *socially-committed work* is free from the stance of *witness* associated with Carolyn Forché's *Against Forgetting* (6) and that "Many of these poems directly challenge the authority of the poet as witness" (9). "These poems juxtapose source materials sometimes to mount a critique of them but just as often to achieve a sense of lived reality through them" (12). Naomi Shihab Nye speaks directly of "weapons of mass destruction" and "awe" (as in "shock and awe" as a military *modus operandi*) in her poem "Dictionary in the Dark" (149). "Other poems open up a large diachronic view: they temporally juxtapose the present and the past in ways that imply not only analogies between these two moments but continuities through history" (12). ). Keniston and Gray write:

The long poem or sequence also recalls modernist modes. But length in the poems seem to serve different purposes than it did for Whitman or William Carlos Williams. Kinnell, for example, incorporates catalogues not of abundance but of trauma and deprivation. (14)

Pinsky's poem also reminds me of Kinnell's "When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone." Pinsky's "Poem of Disconnected Parts" is worth a close review as an example of a contemporary poem that seeks to transcend its fragmentation, to be experienced as a whole by circling back to the *ancestors*. The movement of Pinsky's poem, Williams and Rilke would likely agree, imitates nature in its movement, turns, and what Keniston and Gray aptly call "friction" (15).

While accurately titled “disconnected,” Pinsky’s poem is not “unconnected” (Keniston 243). The poem opens with the *dig site* of Robben Island. Those who scratch the surface of the poem will recognize this as the locale where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned by the South African regime during apartheid. Apartheid is by nature a *disconnect*. The poem, however, *connects* us to another place and time, another prison in Argentina, where the torturers demanded to be called “Profesor.” Apartheid, it seems, gets assimilated many places, by other names—by language. Pinsky says that the poem is his “pledge of allegiance to *attention*, to memory: allegiance to the ancestors” (Keniston 243). Pinsky’s poem ends with the words of a South African Zulu *sangomo*, or ancient, ancestral spirit. Pinsky reveals that while visiting South Africa, his Zulu host took him to a kind of archaeological landscape, a *dig*, with a traditional seer. He was told by his guide, “In our Zulu culture we do not worship our ancestors: we consult them.” Pinsky says, “my poem and I are *in* history, not above it or outside of it” (Keniston 243).

ROBERT PINSKY  
Poem of Disconnected Parts

At Robben Island the political prisoners studied.  
They coined the motto Each one Teach one.

In Argentina the torturers demanded the prisoners  
Address them always as "Profesor." (*sic*)

Many of my friends are moved by guilt, but I  
Am a creature of shame, I am ashamed to say.

Culture the lock, culture the key. Imagination  
That calls the boiled sheep heads in the market "Smileys."

The first year at Guantanamo, Abdul Rahim Dost  
Incised his Pashto poems into styrofoam cups.

"The Sangomo says in our Zulu culture we do not  
Worship our ancestors: we consult them."

Becky is abandoned in 1902 and Rose dies giving  
Birth in 1924 and Sylvia falls in 1951.

Still falling still dying still abandoned in 2006  
Still nothing finished among the descendants.

I support the War, says the comic, it's just the Troops  
I'm against: can't stand those Young People.

Proud of the fallen, proud of her son the bomber.  
Ashamed of the government. Skeptical.

After the Klansman was found Not Guilty one juror  
Said she just couldn't vote to convict a pastor.

Who do you write for? I write for dead people:  
For Emily Dickinson, for my grandfather.

"The Ancestors say the problem with your Knees  
Began in your Feet. It could move up your Back."

But later the Americans gave Dost not only paper  
And pen but books. Hemingway, Dickens.

Old Aegyptius said, Whoever has called this Assembly,  
For whatever reason—that is a good in itself.

O thirsty shades who regard the offering, O stained earth.  
There are many fake Sangomos. This one is real.

Coloured prisoners got different meals and could wear

Long pants and underwear, Blacks got only shorts.

No he says he cannot regret the three years in prison:  
Otherwise he would not have written those poems.

I have a small-town mind. Like the Greeks and Trojans.  
Shame. Pride. Importance of looking bad or good.

Did he see anything like the prisoner on a leash? Yes,  
In Afghanistan. In Guantanamo he was isolated.

Our enemies "disassemble" says the President.  
Not that anyone at all couldn't mis-speak.

The profesores created nicknames for torture devices:  
The Airplane. The Frog. Burping the Baby.

Not that those who behead the helpless in the name  
Of God or tradition don't also write poetry.

GUILTS, metaphors, traditions. Hunger strikes.  
Culture the penalty. Culture the escape.

What could your children boast about you? What  
Will your father say, down among the shades?

The Sangomo told Marvin, "You are crushed by some  
Weight. Only your own Ancestors can help you." (Keniston 154-56)

"Only your own Ancestors can help you," the ancestral voice tells the poet, and the reader who is also listening. We are crushed by "some weight"—while open to many interpretations – can surely mean the avalanche of image and language as well as any acute trauma.

Returning to my theoretical continuum regarding image and modern poetry, I place my work closer to Williams, than Pound or Eliot. Just as Williams saw his poetry as a form of imagination arising from the reality of his surroundings, Pinsky says, "Poetry concerns reality, and politics is a major part of reality." In the next breath, however, he insists that a poem is not a "versified editorial" (Keniston 242).

Preaching, like everything else, is possible in art, but it's not for me—especially so, to the choir. "Poem of Disconnected Parts" was written during the George W. Bush administration. . . . I felt outrage, but also confusion, and neither diminished the other: the potential impasse or emotional withdrawal – a temptation to think about something else. It also felt imperative to resist that temptation. But in poetry there is a different urgency, different from the civic urgency, propulsive in an almost opposite direction. I was attracted to the poetic challenge of making a poem that might include my own distraction and confusion and irritation at the daily news – along with the daily news. Poetically, I had no interest in naming the politicians I have listed here – names of which the pollen of forgetting has already begun to settle. But the drama of outrage and fatigue, looking and looking away, remembering and forgetting: to evoke all that in a poem was interesting.

Pinsky seeks to honor two realities, not just external conflicts captured in the headlines or the longer documentary format, but an inner conflict as well.

### The Nature of Dig Sites: Locality, Tension, and Transformation

For Williams, *locality* or place is the universal that gives heat and life to art. For Pinsky, a metamorphosis of fragments into a whole comes by engaging or consulting ancestors about present quagmires. The women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, circled their quilting frames and practiced the only voice and art of reconciliation allowed to them in the face of their *Alabama apartheid*, a piecemeal quilt grounded in *utility* and *locality*, meaning *reality*. "[Williams offered] no formal philosophy," regarding locality as a dynamic reality vital to a poem's formation, says Géfin. "It was merely the distillation of his own experience and of the people and events around him. To find a "local assertion" was his ideal, the "rediscovery of a primal impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions" (69).

While good poetry asserts itself through the local compost, not all compost is good soil. Corey Marks says that what separates a good poem from a poor poem, is the poet's ability to convince us that the poem is "dynamically alive in the world to which they respond" (56) In Pinsky's poem, the poet trying to make sense of the fragments of society, of the chaos where students are a kind of prisoner, by transcending his linear experience of one prison leading to another, to turn toward a new, although ancient,

way of learning. The listening for connection among his readings, experiences and travels gives Pinsky authenticity and the tension of the lines reveals the dynamics Marks demands. Pinsky, the poet, is alive and travels to a new place, is listening in this century, albeit through a native guide, who leads him full circle to listen to the ancestors. Pinsky, former U.S. Poet Laureate, will become one of the ancestors of American poetry in time.

Marks notes that it is the meditation on images or emblems connected by tension that unearths the power of the poems. "The meditation can be abstract discourse, argument, complaint, ecstatic cry. It can come to a tidy resolution, lead to an unwanted realization, or remain unresolved, still troubling the poet. It can be hopeful, skeptical, indignant, visionary, wild, resigned, joyous, reasoned, angry, or dejected" (56) But it must have *energy*, a movement impelled by the emotional situation. If it feels too pat, too flatly explanatory, too static, the meditation will lose the reader's interest, or, worse, come off as a lecture.

"Beware of general themes" in poetry, Rilke cautioned in his first letter to the young poet (9). We can easily leave the lectures to prose writers. Yet, we have all heard or read what Andrew Hudgens calls poems of "advocacy." In *Diary of a Poem*, Hudgens notes that a poem turns into the direction of lecture or advocacy through a reliance on narrative and its requirement for exposition. As we often say in poetry workshop, "the poem is trying to explain itself." Hudgens adds:

There is nothing like the drone of explanation to numb the lyric voice or vitiate powerful speech. Explanation is not only a lead weight on poetic lines, but it seems particularly insulting in poetry. I HATE poems that tell me racism is wrong. I know that. You know that. We all know that.

Now tell me something interesting about it. (65)

Hudgens touches on a subject worth mentioning, as most writers struggle with exposition in early drafts and align with narrative as an obligation to not violate the facts. Narrative, with its expected linear movement from “in the beginning” to “The End” rarely elevates our heart rate. Narrative is a marathon, poetry a sprint or pole vault jump. We listen to a story in resting position, whereas a poem is more likely to turn the dial on our pulse. If you’ve been to a “reading” of poetry and witnessed a room’s collective “gasp” as the poet moved our thoughts and physical reaction, you can relate to Emily Dickinson’s famous words: “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

Exposition is a poem’s obituary—a mere list of accomplishments. I fear my own exposition of Pinsky’s epic “Poem of Disconnected Parts” wraps it up too tightly and I’d prefer to let it breathe. Tomorrow, the ground may have shifted subtly and I will see new things in the soil of the poem. Turning is inevitable, the archaeologist in me knows. The wind blows. The birds land like thoughts and scratch out their existence.

In my own process, one of the first revisions I generally have made in early drafts is to cut the explanation and allow the emblem, the distilled language, even the unsaid or unwritten, to hold the poem together with tension and tone. After years of writing, both worthy and unworthy poems, I have learned to listen to the lines and revision takes a more subtle approach. I “carry to the page” the attitude that “all truth must conform to music” (Hugo 3).

My conclusion after many drafts is that you can never start with a large subject such as “racism,” “war,” or “nature” thinking that these “deserve” a poem. However, by beginning with a small detail, a headline, a crumpled diary page, a jar left in the wilderness as anecdote, you can send tendrils up the trellis of the imagination toward these huge, overwhelming subjects. From the small we reach the sublime. A good trellis—a structure that encourages movement, tendrils—helps.

While my poems often hold an emblematic tension or use emblem as a generating pulse that rises to a pattern, the poems are not idea-driven, but *language-driven*. Lines, enjambment, breaks, stanzas and turns are generated by language, and not a prescribed theme or concrete image. The image serves the language, remember. The emblem I begin with may be a word, a shard of language, which gets associated with another image through sound or syntax rather than symbolic gesture. Though association holds images in tension, sound is also at play. For example, in my poem

“Taking Turns,” a secondary turn in the poem’s structure is the language of *pedals* moving to *petals*.

*Language-driven poetry* explains Joseph Brodsky in his Nobel Prize lecture is generated from “the dictates of language.”

One who writes a poem writes it because the language prompts, or simply dictates, the next line. Beginning a poem, the poet as a rule doesn’t know the way it is going to come out; and at times he is very surprised by the way it turns out, since . . . often his thought carried him further than he reckoned. [Poetry] is the sensation of coming into direct contact with language, or more precisely, the sensation of immediately falling into dependence on it, on everything that already been uttered, written, accomplished in it. (Brodsky)

Another example where language playfully helped a line emerge is in my poem “Outside the Cabinet of Natural History.” The syllables of *serif font* led to the syllables of *Styrofoam* in a single line. I was *listening* for the line intuitively while allowing the image to pulse. The sound and syllables—and not an idea about either object or emblem—allowed or encouraged the lyric line to flow in that particular pattern.

A poem’s structure, language, music, association, *The Flexible Lyric* Ellen Bryant Voigt writes about—all generate a tension that serves the poem as a whole. I like to imagine the tension in my poems is nearly *kinesthetic* as expressed by an Alexander

Calder mobile. Some hefty abstract ideas are balanced by the asymmetry of smaller emblems and are allowed to shimmer in the movement of space and time. There are many entry points to look at any one poem, yet the elements settle into a cohesion and balance that has support wires if you look closely. Poetry is not a static art; tone, imagery and language rise and fall depending on currents of breath, audience, culture, the ear, and language fluency.

Charles Olson wrote about the *kinetic* nature of contemporary free verse poems in his defining essay, "Projective Verse." "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception. Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do other objects create what we know as the world" (Olson 177). Olson's ideas, known as the Language School, were generated in the rural setting of Black Mountain College in the 1950s, and attracted artists outside the literary sphere including Willem de Kooning, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg (Dove xlii).

The visual appearance of a poem on the page conjures fragmentation of language with line breaks and space. That is not a negative view, certainly, but allows for the constant recreation and reconnection that fuels imagination. If an element doesn't bring

energy to a poem, or doesn't work with the chemistry of the poem, that draft may need to sit in a virtual folder or a bottom drawer until it further transforms through decomposition. One shard of language may emerge from tending several drafts.

The language-driven poetry I seek, and what Olson tended like a farmer in his *field*, takes an *eco-poetic* approach. Charles Bernstein refers to this approach as “the way in which poetry reflects and refracts the environment that is its habitat” (133). Through the layers of culture, pressed leaves, bodies, breath and the natural world, language itself emerges in the compost of a poem's energies. The poems themselves emerge as *artifact*, as man-made art.

The *kinesthetic* tension within many of my poems cannot be separated from this idea of *eco-poetics*, of how poems themselves are regenerative regarding language and thought—and have movement. Soil is constantly eroding, enriching, turning—even burning with heat—whether it is by man, nitrogen's release and all other chemistries, and/or environment. In my poem “Outside the Cabinet of Natural History,” a tension emerges regarding the relationships of man and the natural world we name and study. In my poem, it's not the students or teachers, but the *bees* that turn the word *clover* into *honey*. Natural history is depicted as static, carefully arranged, as in a contained cabinet to be rather starkly isolated and observed, as taxidermy. Meanwhile, the world, i.e. like the world of poetry, is abuzz and fluid just outside the academy door. The reality of man in a world that is fluid and moving with, or without him, is an intriguing tension

that has served as a catalyst for many of the poems in my collection. This tension is expressed by Jed Rasula as “the ecological imperative” of poetry. In his seminal book on *eco-poetics*, *This Compost: The Ecological Imperative of Poetry*, Rasula sees poetry as holding the traces of our entanglements with our surroundings and reminds us “that all words derive from references to earth, or with reference to the activity of handling it” (Rasula 3). Through the layers of culture, pressed leaves, bodies, breath and the natural world, language itself emerges in the compost of a poem’s energies. The poems themselves emerge as *artifact*, as man-made art. Rasula echoes and elevates Whitman’s insistence that his poems—his “leaves”—be read outdoors. Beyond this expected context to Rasula’s ecological argument, he gets to the core of poetry’s energy—its recreational capacity. Rasula’s is an intriguing voice that calls on the imagination “as a resource of ecological understanding” (Rasula 3). Rasula challenges poets to engage in “the possibility of the emergence of newness, of the unpredicted.” The take-away for anyone exploring the process of poetry is that “poetry re-creates language” (4) and “*place* nourishes transformation” (25). Therefore, the particulars of a place are of importance to a *language-driven* poet, and create another plane of tension that bears on the making of my poems.

Rasula is reluctant to frame poetry and ecology with a word like “wholeness” stating that it is an over-determined word. “It might be better to speak of long-range views or the bigger picture” (3). Rasula elevates poet Gary Snyder’s view of poetry as

“ecological survival technique.” In other words, the study of poetry requires an understanding of the relevance of ecology; in turn, ecologists need poets. Succinctly put by Wendell Berry, “We live in an eternity while we live in time. It is only by imagination that we know this” (Rasula 90).

Rasula’s place on the continuum of image is hard to place, perhaps because he would not be satisfied by the concept of proper names placed in a linear line. It does have its drawbacks. His goal with *This Compost*, after all, is “to restore to the poetics at hand that solidarity in *anonymity* which is the deep issue of planetary time.” He reaches back to Emerson’s essay “Experience:” “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me” (Rasula 25).

We are symbols and inhabit symbols, and insight founded on the root meaning of symbol, *sum-ballein*, thrown together. When we think of something “thrown together,” like a quick meal, it is usually in a derogatory sense; but we tend to think of symbols as products of deliberation. (Rasula 25)

Heidegger, the German philosopher who had a lot to say about our issue of Being and our capacity to make sense of “things,” described man as *embedded* or *immersed* in the physical, literal, tangible, ordinary world. Heidegger coined the word “Geworfenheit,” as a neologism meaning *thrownness*. The implication, notes Rasula, is that “humans are not “outcasts,” fallen figures expelled from some ancestral wonderland, but that our

arrival into a terrestrial life is a forcible event” which we are reminded of whenever we witness a birth (Rasula 26). He adds:

Culture is said to live, while its makers die. The unsettling terms of this respiratory system have a long history, in which themes of truth and beauty emerge as consolations in the face of unyielding laws of organic life. . . . Our legacy of psychological dispossession attest to the fact that we inhabit a culture we can't keep up with. (26)

*American* poetry, not just the single *author* Whitman, holds multitudes, Rasula asserts. Many of the most heated voices in America are *anonymous*. They *rise up*, are democratic; they overcome. They are often the *dis-placed*—and not as the cool, politically detached Pound who placed his name on a manifesto and embraced overtly fascist politics. Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* cites the loss of anonymous cultural forces in the face of domination and abuses in history: “the miner's songs of the past, the songs of the Chinese workmen on the western railways, the poems of the Nisei camps, the lost songs of the slave underground” (102).

Poetry has a distinct public domain, Rukeyser points out, “an exchange of energy, a record of the emotional meaning of every moment, a concentration of universal joys and sorrows. It is a thing in which we may live and which may save us” (54).

Rasula explains that “the danger is no longer wicked tyrants and evil-doers, it is the cumulative by-product of *normality*, with its increasing disinterest in plants and animals, the earth and the stars; its marginal awareness of economic and political dereliction, and a corresponding hyper-attention to mass-mediated fame and fortune. In the new world of “infotainment” and “reality programming,” the traditional figure of “man” is itself a blank integer, a joker in the pack” (26). Man has made *place* irrelevant in numerous ways beyond art and there are consequences. As Jarrell noted, monotony is a pattern or form that is not recommended or pleasing to the ear or eye.

### Final Thoughts

In the shard, the man-made artifact, we find an entry point to a poem, to art, to the creative process, and to a momentary understanding of our place in time and locality. “A poem is irreducible,” states Michael Wieggers in his anthology *This Art: Poems about Poetry* (5). The small shard, emblem, a DNA sample, an acronym such as *DNA*, a gene, a carbon footprint, a hieroglyphic, a letter, syllable, word, or a recently discovered ancient woman’s hand outlined in an Indonesian cave, all serve the imagination in the process of making poems and any art. James Galvin’s poem “Art Class” underscores how the small, the irreducible can be a catalyst for the poem: “Let us begin with a simple line, / Drawn as a child would draw it” (5).

To conclude, the artist, poet, ecologist and archaeologist each use imagination, *locality* and all of experience to recreate a whole from fragments, emblems, syllables, words, wire and line. Is that whole deemed to be accurate, authentic, relevant, insightful, beautiful or related to today in time and place as universal? Frost would say it is, "at least momentarily." Olson says yes, if it is allowed to be "a high energy construct" (176). Chappell's Southern landscape is rich in "shards, hints, whispers, and echoes" (219). As Rasula poetically concludes: "Trope is conceded in the word '*universe*,' which speaks of one turn – taking a turn on the dance floor – and calls it a *verse* (192).

## CHAPTER II

### SELECTED POEMS BY LAURIE PERRY VAUGHEN

#### **What Our Voices Carry**

*Verona, Italy*

A wooden shutter opens to morning,  
turns on a rusty hinge.  
The birdsong of headlines wait at the door.  
A woman in a satin slip leans out  
a second-language window – curses the neighbors  
below. We whisper the weather, reach for our clothes.  
In this city, the arch of stone echoes the river.  
A bridge forms between two worlds.  
We cross back and forth as priests  
as poor translators of the poetry.  
By noon we gather as well-tuned forks  
at a café of umbrellas – conversations  
on the tips of tongues.  
We rely on a worn field guide of flowering words.  
Our desire to name the world  
takes up our waking hours.  
We dream with a desire to listen and sing,  
to fold the billows of our flat paper maps.  
But then, rain brings a different clatter  
over the ancient cobbled stones.  
The crowd of street tables and accordion players abandoned. Our words  
evaporate.  
Our voices turn a corner.  
Quickly we gather up the market in our arms.  
The quiet ones sell altar flowers, flames.  
The loud ones hawk Bangle bracelets,  
beaded charms. The bell of a bicycle  
rings a warning. We shuffle into the shade,

the church awning yawns, then hurries us along,  
to weigh on the scale, like cabbage and kale,  
what our voices carry.

## Taking Turns

She's wearing a shimmer of spokes,  
silver shalwar kameez  
the colors of summer, sliced melons.  
She pedals by, is learning  
to balance an American life.  
At the edge of traffic  
she stops, looks both ways.  
She is taking turns.  
I watch for her return, a sunset  
caught mid-day amidst drab cars.  
Her husband takes her place,  
wears his white shirt tightly  
buttoned at his throat.  
He is learning  
a vocabulary of trust,  
a third or fourth language,  
how two wheels carry him,  
move together, separately.  
They return to each other  
more than once. Both unsteady  
but orbiting the neighborhood.  
The hand is reaching for the brake  
when she arrives again  
as the exact colors of lantana petals  
near my porch, the marigolds,  
the sleeping orange cat in the sun,  
a pattern of blushing  
pavers. The tight world,  
the two-way street unfurls,  
suddenly fluent, free.

## And on that Farm

*Ukraine*

The sky fell like feathers, a catalogue,  
a flash of cards, a child's alphabet  
scattered like stars across the Queen's crowns.

*A* is for *airplane*. *F* is the *field*,  
*flashlights* in a sleeping town in Ukraine.  
The Fisher-Price farm lost its sheep, is cut as hay.  
The folkish hen, her feathers dull as pennies,  
was not surprised the sky fell her way.  
Both peacock and parrot parse the poetry  
and rhetoric of the day. Steal attention.

*B* is for *bicycle* in the blue grass,

*C* is for *CIA*, *clowns*, *clock*, *cloud*,  
*Crest*, *Dove* and *Nivea* remain zipped into their brands.  
*C* is for the *child* who will never learn they *count*.

*D* is for the other kind of count.  
We fan out this *deck* we hold in our hand.  
We are *dealt*, we say. But we *deal*, *divide* and *demonstrate*.  
Our deck, a heart among three leaves,  
a busy spade.

*D* should be a *dulcimer*, adored *dog*,  
*dancer* on a *dime*-store jewelry box.  
*A day*, an ordinary *day*.

*D* is for our last syllable. The *dissected* stanza.  
*D* is for the word we can't imagine, get past,  
as an adjective beside a cooing child  
tucked in a rocking cradle, rocket cradle,  
*rock-a-bye baby in the tree tops*, lullaby,  
*bah-bah*, *blah- blah*  
*the sheep in the meadow*

are black, boy blue and burned.  
The handkerchiefs are white as *down*.

We move from literacy to math,  
to counting, comparison.  
It's all an accounting. Witnesses  
multiply. The media hum and sum.  
ABC. CNN. BBC. NPR. PBS.  
*Four-score and twenty...blackbirds...*  
pie charts drawn thirteen ways  
of remembering...

when feathers meant *light*.

*Early* responders ripped their rags,  
fastened them as streamers to the hillside,  
a translation for *every* ambulance to read.  
This *funeral* spray of *flags* will *find* their way  
as *finch* and phoebe repurpose as a net, a nest,  
a shelter in the spring's *forgiving* trees.

## Ledger

There are two sides to every equation.  
*Equal* tries to balance as an icon.  
On one side letters get tied together,  
gross-grain alliteration. Postage paid.  
Closure in life's ledger is rare.

There are red ribbons that mark  
our place in every book of debt.  
Our beliefs lean on the shelf, one way,  
or another, the words of Christ in red.  
We think we owe them nothing, but  
all grand images get grandfathered in.  
Grandfather becomes a verb, an act  
and will always need explaining.  
We place the asterisk of Aldous Manutius  
in the minutia, the margins of time and space.

On the other side of the equal sign,  
lawyers speak their Latin,  
accountants cascade their Roman outlines.  
Carbon copy, *cc*, is now a metaphor,  
another *equal* sign  
but once marked the secretary's blouse,  
smudged her face.

In the ledger's desk drawer dust,  
we find a compass, abandonment  
as keys, an appointed letter opener,  
spool of postage stamps, revolvers  
of inked dates, a rubber thimble  
for handling things,  
when campaigns came and went  
like Mass, like an assembly of lines,  
like mail, like jeeps for any weather.

We tear out the templates in the ledger  
that we never reached. The delicate blue

the softening lines in red.

We covered the typewriter  
like a teapot, like a tempest, with a cozy,  
like a casket with a flag.  
We stepped away for lunch,  
closed the Proper Nouns in our *Rolodex*  
with an *x* we now use to close Windows.

The archives are handwritten  
and the wish to compose with ink remains.  
Sylvia Plath could never burn a manuscript –  
a man's life – in a single fire.

Version control is a carbon ash we date.  
Archaeologists dig among the fields  
of paper work.

But it was the literal drama that made the man.  
Now the same cuff links with their alphabets  
and entitlements argue at the opening  
of each anthology.

Who will ask to see the file on *x* or *y*?  
Detectives have everything and nothing,  
not even gum on their soles, no pavement  
to pound. Our desks are at home.  
They don't have drawers or *Contents*.

The narrow columns of the old  
could barely ledger the fonts,  
the flourish of men.

Finally the journal pages get turned  
by librarians with white gloves  
like those worn by a night-shift nurse.  
The women's works have always been hid  
in the nightstand drawer  
near Elizabeth Bishop's dreams, Emily's  
loosened white gowns.

There's a letter from the President  
in each in-box now. Democracy  
once arrived on the caboose of trains,  
the frayed speaker fabric on our radio,  
a voice we dialed, and in red ink.

There are yearbooks in the archives  
segregated by gender, by mascot,  
by denominations of faith.  
There's a page ripped from the century,  
a choir of Christmas carol books  
brought to us by the insurance company,  
not yet an industry, a set of needles  
in a book from the same.  
The women gather on its cover  
in a room of embroidery, a kind of book club,  
a mending.

These women became the image  
of productivity, threading paper into their machines.  
Roller skating between the shifts.  
Landing at Normandy with Red Cross pins.

## Outside the Cabinet of Natural History

The glass wall of bees turns two syllables – *clover* to *honey*.  
Chemistry is small like lower case letters, like bees,  
that come and go, ignoring us, leaving us to tend  
our dusty glass shelves, summer sabbatical.  
The bees see us fixed like feathers, pileated on our broken  
branch. We align skulls and labels. Everything inside  
gets named and numbered, Fig. 1, Fig. 2, as old texts frame  
the study. The bees keep us guessing. Will they return?  
The curators speak of animation, living labs.  
Indeed, just outside the door, the jointed beetle mechanically  
crosses the threshold, the eroding sandstone mosaic.  
Just outside the door is the Arboretum Level IV, ignored  
on our way to class, to classify. We press leaves in the  
authority of books, specifically in sets, *The World Book*,  
*aesthetics* stretched to *zoology*, as if *infinity*. The weather  
shifts, warms to facts. Acorns graduate to metaphor, icon,  
parables with caps. David, who we see as more like us  
becomes a Goliath. We revisit all the stories we were told.  
The mosquito studies the arm. The students collect ubiquity,  
mount wings, arrange the world in rows, alphabets,  
on the blank white Styrofoam tablet in Serif font.  
We follow left to right, a worship what ascends.  
Today, the rain ushered us inside to take our time  
in a pocket of wilderness turned inside out for us,  
Nature raked, oddities floating in the fog of glassware.  
The sharp teeth of the opossum awake as irony in the air  
and under glass, a nest beside the hawk's claw.  
The snail's circular argument perching on the ring, the old  
oak podium revered, counted upon. We remember  
when we swarmed like freshman, jealous of the bee's  
agenda, their desire for petal gates. We scan the cabinet,  
study contrast as a feather and stone, the turtle shell and  
crown of thorn. The predictable.  
We thumb through Emerson's opposable worlds, a paradox  
of essays he preferred to read from pulpits draped  
with fading liturgy. He taught inside a church about the  
world beyond stained glass, stylized lilies, fish, and vines.

We too buy a used book already underlined. In time  
we will ignore the lobby, the cabinet with its red plume,  
variety of oak leaves from the familiar lawn.  
We no longer tap on the glass, or read warnings.  
We hurry on, along a path lined by the crimson clover  
blooming for the bees which we dub *drones*, blind  
to our microcosm, our theater of memory, deformity.

## Eye of the Needle

Thread is thin. The eye small,  
yet they find the other.  
We close one eye to this world,  
to find a way to another.  
The tattoo of floss swells  
in relief, as the lector speaks.  
The altar cloth gets bruised  
by grape and monogram.  
A camel steps upon a seam  
that a woman named Un-named  
stitched and starched.  
She tied the knot, with the moisture  
of her lips, her dna, to hush  
the blind, offer the deaf a wink.  
The priest's white hand shakes –  
thinning threads hold the scene,  
the camel slipping through the mind,  
the needle's slight eye,  
through the wilderness we carry.

## **The Book of James**

*In memory of journalist James Foley (1974-2014)*

In Sunday School, the road to Damascus  
was paved with change.  
We never pulled down the window-shade map  
over the math, the cost, the spelling list of the week.  
Sunday was another school, another syllabus, text.  
The circumcision of politics had no business here,  
where hearts were screened.  
Today news covers our blue screen map,  
and it rains.  
In New Hampshire a mother covers her eyes,  
her shaking hand.  
She fingers through the thin pages of James.  
Her son is dead, beheaded, and we watch  
at our intimate window screen.  
The world of journalism, a two-edged sword.  
It takes so much to make us flinch,  
but his inner gate was locked, secure.  
No trespassing on who he was,  
what he thought, trials he won.  
"More time" was all he asked, and got none.  
The world glares, holds its press conference  
for non-print,  
implying there are words for this  
on the witness stand,  
implying there are declaratives,  
sentences held prisoner  
near Benghazi – another place we can't find,  
point out if quizzed. No one asks.  
There were graphs in his satchel,  
notebooks, books of note, hard drives,  
maps of Aleppo's broader state.  
A Red Cross crossed his heart  
along with a camera's detached strap.  
An essay on front lines was tucked inside  
a separate genre for us to find.  
He walked those lines, his peers report,

sometimes blindfolded,  
sometimes offering a smile,  
a cigarette,  
a blue flame  
he held calmly at the mouth  
of one among an online cloud  
of witnesses.

## **Birds Audubon Never Painted**

It wasn't that he did not see them  
among the pyracantha thorns,

or that they were somehow less.  
It's just that some things  
one must leave to memory alone.

No feathers of a black-tipped brush  
could record the gentle way they lingered  
as dusk began to cage these woods.

Indescribable –  
what happened next, when they flew.

The sound of wings,  
the burning color of rust.

Some things one must witness  
for themselves, at least once.

## Flea Market

History is a flea's market, a system of weathered tables,  
where doubt and old Veterans lean.  
The land-locked oar is lined up next to the Gibson  
and beside a set of rusting blue tong post-hole diggers.  
History's cabinet of artifacts grows lean,  
here just off the Interstate:  
A numbered milk bucket swings.  
Creamy Melmac stacks its plates.  
Don't expect a complete set of anything.  
The baby in the manger has been replaced by a Lego lamb.  
The tackle box gets lined with dominoes and lead.  
Our *Almanac* misleads us.  
The porcelain plate calendar will forever be 1976 ,  
Nixon forever a President.

I turn a page to read what facts get elevated  
for my random visit in July, This Day In History:  
Detroit's engine burned. Riots built the roaming 'burbs  
in a day. Or so it seems. Here, hyperbole is wholesale.  
Here are bins of action men with capes.  
This same day Henry Ford drove a model into a movie-  
like landscape now littered with tar and chip.  
He reinvented the wheel, a cliché crafted by Anonymous.

Things years apart line up with bullets, their quick imprint.  
History loves the list, a line of letters, metal type,  
a catalogue of orders. The poets unravel the spool,  
eye the needle, mend and bend fact closer to curb.  
Aluminum letters scatter across a table  
like ears of silver queen corn once did. We glean.  
"The stencils are a dollar each," says a lady who reads,  
who reads my mind for free. Who needs an entire alphabet  
of stencils when mailboxes are numbered – and their days?

The storage units open like a subdivision of garages.  
History gets stacked floor to ceiling. It's hard to find a single  
need, among the needle of old technologies, the dresser's

scarves, the cups that harbor English roses,  
Barbies with their long-lash Maybelline winks.  
People love to photograph cemeteries it seems.  
Hobbies are abandoned as limp skeins of yarn,  
a puzzle of missing pieces.

I run my hand through wallets of fallen soldiers,  
their waiting women. So much unclaimed poetry.  
Our Blue Mary has her baggage. She loves to travel.  
She holds out her rose, a fishing pole, and a Sombrero bowl  
with button pins. She reels us in. Is campaigning  
for both Eisenhower and R.E.M.  
History gets passed around – and down – like a hat.  
Anyone who shows up consistently can usher.

History begs for our treasure, for attention.  
Mary is surrounded by the lesser shrines of ash trays,  
shot glasses from Russell Cave,  
Graceland, Grand Old Opryland, the Rushmore  
revisionists – a mountain of history  
carved by unnamed immigrants.  
So much history depends on the anonymous.  
In the bin, books have no dignity.  
They look better together on a shelf, love flattery  
from Preface to The End. Hardback is relative.  
Someone imagined a coffee table  
cluttered with a conversation  
among C. S. Lewis, Huxley and JFK.  
They died the same year  
and day. Like Cervantes and Shakespeare.  
Like Adams and Jefferson who died on the Fourth of July  
in 1826. (I'm not even sure how or why I know this.)  
Seems some author hoped to mend the patchwork quilt,  
the patterns that tuck us all in at night. "Sweet dreams,"  
says the ironic Hipster pin, signed "Jung."  
The coffee table book is now dog-eared, underlined in red.  
Just over there, a red wheelbarrow is parked –  
parked, yes, like a car. Just another poetry artifact –  
which translates "décor."  
Oh, there are more of them and not all are red,

or exactly like the one Bob Dylan pushed  
down the street looking for a Mystery Date.  
The barrows are full of flowers, permanently.  
Public art is parked at the street.

A man pushes vinyl to the Luddite crowd. Spins the romance.  
Here, we can't depend on any one thing.  
We're required to be redundant. It's how we're wired.  
We download our load of lyrics.  
Haul them in our tight pockets. Who needs a wheelbarrow?

I still search for common letters, scan the lines for accent,  
learned to count the threads in linen. I've come, a taxed  
collector of handkerchiefs. I've come as Desdemona,  
not Othello. I pass the frayed ones during tragedy  
in parlors where I'm still asked at times to read.  
But most don't read much into words like "parlor."  
"Step into my parlor," said the spy to Emily D.

History leaves its symmetries, its limestone cemeteries  
for municipalities to mow and work around.  
Why is any place compelling? We've pulled over  
to this bare shoulder to peruse time, to see the oar  
get tangled in the fishing line of flat guitar strings  
that twine and need a bit of tuning,  
to see the fret-filled line of fence. Poets love to trespass.  
To bring a camera. It's almost too much, this history,  
this paper beach ball with its imprecise axis taken down  
for lack of context from the library. History is retractable  
as a Sunday School Map, "Palestine" as a place  
of olive trees, a name we recognize  
by cable's break with news. Though we are in Montezuma.  
The maps roll down like window blinds.  
History rolls down its menu. History can fit  
in our pocket like my Father's second edition, *War French*.  
He carried this artifact as his compass  
through a world that insisted on spinning.  
"It doesn't matter where you go; People are the same,"  
he said to me as lie and the take-away lesson.  
The German women's quilts covered his Allies, his buddies

who liked to fish, play guitar and dance with beautiful women.  
“The dead still want some dignity” is a sentence  
Underlined in his book. We fold away the rest as a flag.

Small things tend to last, to go with us place to place.  
The anvil, barn and silo last because we can't.  
This museum by the road has changed in the hour  
I have wandered. The oak oar dips a toe into the blue  
sea of Mary's robe. She's now a protagonist.  
It's her swollen ankle where the morning glory twines.  
The theologians balance on their fence, a trellis.  
All still goes un-mended, but disarmed.  
The Indian at the gate is a totem of chain saws.  
A Martin guitar shines like a Paul Simon song,  
gleams like a delta with no strings attached.

## Sorting out the World

1.

“Are there mountains under the sea?”  
my son asks as we run down the beach.

I connect to the kite of thought  
in the sky over his head,

“Yes, volcanoes.”

I add to his pail of treasures.

“Are volcanoes mountains?”

he asks next, sorting out the world  
the way he has been taught, perhaps misled.

After all, in all water there is some earth;  
in all earth there is some water.

Quietly the questions stir,

Where does sea and land begin and end?

Is it in the filter of sand—the crushed grit,

salt and glass? We dig our toes in deep

as the mosaic of brokenness

washes up like a shrine at our feet.

The sun tires of fading our world, moves away

and you drift farther out into the waves –

begin to look like every other man

who waves. Still, by habit

or ritual, I pick up a bleached curve of shell –

hold it against the darkening sky – pretend

this fragment of moon

has any pull left for me.

2.

Nothing is what it seems.

“Life is but a dream,” goes the English lullaby,

a daily stream, we float gently

through our private journal entries,

put on a headphone set of lies,

spout off a flurry of honesty that stings.

Privately we dream,

begin again to live our lives

apart from the beats of the clock,

the dusty rites of passage,

the keepsakes we retain.

We pack our disappointments away  
like skeleton keys, our adolescent  
keyed diary of fits and starts.  
Our entries record improbable things:  
the broken blue beginning  
of a bird's shell, a stone  
polished by time and regret,  
a sighting of a rare bird in Whitman's grass,  
a thrush brown in autumn's color of rush.

3.

Every object gets a mat and box,  
elevated, stark. We hang our thoughts  
against blank walls.  
Archaeologists we all are  
as we learn to piece together  
a bone, a beast, a bowl from shards.  
We nod our heads, repeat ourselves,  
applaud the wonder of each detail.  
And then, one day, something unexpected  
arrives like rain in a time of drought —  
a silver coin in clover, a conch in the public sand,  
a writing spider's last word  
in the corner of our hinged eye.  
Something new we do not understand  
washes up on the shore of our mind —  
nothing rehearsed or choreographed.  
A pattern we have never traced  
or plotted like a graph  
or scanned into the dim blue light  
of a machine, comparing it with things  
we have held briefly in our hand,  
turning them over and over  
as curators looking through dim glass.

4.

We carved our names in our geology  
long ago — claimed a place  
as home — the way a creek accepts  
sandstone into its journey,  
wears away the callous of life  
into a stunning glitter of sand,

silt and salty eyes.  
Life turns a corner at the roots  
of the last American chestnut in these woods.  
Change moves us, even blight.  
We too fall into place,  
shift like sands in a thin necked glass,  
yet still dream like succulents  
from a different glassware in our lab,  
the cloudy jar, terrarium nest  
where everything circles back.  
Tears and dew circle through us too.  
Our dull blade wrote in Cherokee  
a cryptic love note on the sweet gum tree,  
a forgotten fossil now.  
We touched our names like the blind  
who depend on everything but what they see  
to understand – while inside the trunk,  
the hollow holds its own decay  
like a separate beautiful universe.  
What is broken still allows the green to reach.  
The blood-red star-like leaves will scatter  
and give back.  
We collected these patterns of stars  
since we were children. Noting vein, tributary,  
shore and scar. We pressed  
leaves in all our books, turning over everything  
in our small hands as currency.

## Being Social

Will you install me?  
Watch the horizon,  
a thermometer in the window,  
but not a sunset  
or yet a cliché  
where we leaned into each other  
on our bench.  
The valley's stretch ahead  
inevitable.  
I sent a request.  
Asked for a task mark  
in your list.  
I can't say for certain  
if you would find me  
improved.  
Updated, yes.  
You can scroll past me,  
hide me behind a globe  
like an eclipse.  
I've moved. I've shuffled  
through some groups,  
mutual friends.  
We once crossed paths  
in the Ukraine's  
common field, the trending story.  
I didn't wave,  
my hands so full  
of collateral, the world's S.O.S.  
Ours was a paper cut  
at every turn,  
a page of apologies  
I finally scanned,  
downloaded  
sent to archive  
among the leases,  
the family's incomplete tree,  
the inventory for State and Farm,

a renter's life of  
fine print policies.  
We once ate from the same  
full plate, passed bread  
and oil to each other  
like married priests.  
There's no going back  
we've both said  
though we once  
rearranged the universe  
in poems,  
in the attempt to attempt.  
I'm writing this  
as a metaphor,  
with a bottle of messy ink,  
from a white pillow  
that holds a cast  
of my changing profile,  
my best side  
and bedside  
and manners,  
and sent like all things  
blocked by regret,  
no script, no field where *Truly yours*,  
might flourish,  
reach you.

## **Haiti's Quake**

*Jan. 12, 2010*

With this news  
the house of cards  
I've used to build  
the chambers  
of my heart  
become  
a palace done  
of dust,  
a rubble  
where a dog barks.  
All is quiet  
the reporters are quick  
to report,  
not hearing the song  
of children wandering  
a poverty of streets  
breathing in and out  
the salt of the sea,  
the kinder rhymes  
when reason's rafters  
fall.

## How the War Came Across Our TV Set

1967

The TV in our living room  
said *RCA*.  
I polished it every Saturday  
with lemon-scented Pledge.  
On top of the set,  
my brother Ben's framed face –  
an Air Force eight-by-ten.  
I did not know him well.  
I was five. Too young  
to even have a school-day  
five-by-eight.  
My Mother underlined  
ominous news  
on the thin pages  
of her books – *Othello*,  
*Holy Word*, *Silent Spring* –  
were all the same  
to her. No one knocked  
on our door  
and that news was good.  
The static of the set  
attracted dust. Casualties  
were read, underlined  
by Walter Cronkite's liturgy  
as we all bowed  
and knelt around the coffee table  
that held a giant tray for ash.  
I enlisted in the altar guild.  
I emptied the anxiety as it piled up –  
a sacrifice, a heavy one.  
Our matching chairs from Sears  
were frayed with liberty bells  
and flags parading  
across the slip covers –  
the kind you could wash when stained.  
I remember the day we watched

*The News* in school, lined up  
in a kind of pew while MLK spoke to us  
from a black-and-white-screened  
world. He said that in his book  
the word "justice" rolled down  
many more times than "love."  
He had counted, twice.  
Would be cut down only once.  
That was the year I began my lists  
and underlined my books,  
learned by heart, mesmerized  
by the words we stood for  
at Westview Elementary School,  
our small arm across  
our chest like a Girl Scout sash  
a shoulder-strapped pocket book,  
We spoke aloud words we polished  
and were polished by,  
a slant-rhymed poem, a rite  
where silence serves me now  
as a place-holder in the mourning.

## With the Naturalist at Lunch

Who counts sparrows?  
Their flurry of faithfulness  
to hunger?  
So you wait  
for what is rare.

Here the sparrows  
find the table – are not the least  
shy.

A child too young for sentences  
speaks in laughter  
recognizes the image  
from her picture book.

Three men nearby are fluent  
in French, lift up the world  
as a toast.

I listen  
for the few crumbs  
that carry me between “desire”  
and “enough.”

They discuss all things  
except the weather, but turn  
their attention to the crust  
I’ve scattered at my feet.

They laugh at me  
feeding my flock,  
fluent in the ordinary.

They laugh at me  
watching them  
count the minutes  
in an hour.

## **Just Off Blythe Ferry Road**

*Hiwassee National Wildlife Refuge*

The farmhouse on the hill  
with slope of silver roof,  
hedge doorway in need of trim,  
barely enough view  
to let our eye catch the gingerbread.  
It's the one from those mournful songs  
where a rope swing tires the oak.  
So we imagine more from this home  
place of archetype, our own  
first recollection of sky, our childhood  
catapulted toward it with kicks  
and desire. These places we now call  
"few and far between." Thin places  
where I lift my lens past the sprawl  
as time waits like a passenger  
in the backseat of the car.  
But then a honk moves my pause.  
Not winged crane but truck and sway  
of trailer hitch and hunter brown  
camouflage. A parade float of bamboo  
bundles, cut vine that fades invasive plans.  
He will slip into the water just ahead,  
where the road ends, memory – a ferry.  
Even in this place marked with intention,  
the word refuge is a plea, a mere sign  
drawing all that migrates  
from the inner compass, even me.  
The man with the boat is in a hurry,  
as irony. He must drift far to take  
his fowl shot, to have the Sandhill cranes  
disperse like any frightened crowd.  
I watch the water lap the crags of cut  
karst, the garbage caught on the chiseled  
crooks. "Who does this?" any child  
would ask. Ruin all around. And yet,  
here the frail cranes echo loud

the shrill delight at sunlight, a feast  
of fish, their beaks as sieve of silt and sin.  
In the distance a shot rings out  
and will again, but I am not a part of that,  
apart I am, here,  
where my calm heart must trust the beaten path  
that tells me how and when to gather itself up –  
to lift.

## **Pilgrimage to Winchester**

*Father's Day, 2014, Winchester, Tennessee*

For miles no cars met me, no wave returned –  
miles marked by crosses, church and farm.  
Then my windshield framed The Square  
with neon coffee cups,  
the pole that spins the barber's chair,  
the movie marquee in lights,  
a bakery window of wedding tiers and bassinets.  
A hospice nurse was waiting when I arrived.  
She had a wake, a cake to go, but knew the graves.  
I came to find the hospital where Dad was born.  
With pause: "It's gone. Two oak trees hold the place  
behind the Baptist fellowship."  
The town's two stories were draped in skirts  
– red state as firework flags along 41.  
The pleats seamed pinned in place all year,  
framed in classic scenes, Lionel –  
landscapes held up for me and me to them.  
I saw beyond First, the century-old  
twin oak trees, silos without their barn.  
They stood with me, not pall-bearer or priest,  
midwives with reach. I pressed their green leaves  
inside the folds of Irish white-on-  
white, worn linen squares, hand-letter  
embellishment – his monogram as mine.  
A man saw me collecting my leave and waved.  
He wore a straw hat that looked, at first, familiar.  
Like one I've seen at the cabin in Lost Cove.  
There is just the one photo of my Grandpa,  
its frame of reverence and reference.  
He is with my father who was only five  
and fixed by him like lead, like print, a plumb-line.  
I've read that icon of patriarchs all my life.  
Grandma's shyness cropped by a salesman.  
This pilgrimage was once hers, an out-of-pocket  
price, an out of a wilderness trip to town by horse.

A life bearing down – her seventh, their last.  
My father knew this place as makeshift  
a Bethlehem, a rural manger.  
The man who waved now drops more names  
like begats, like leaves, the kind that lengthen the table  
that hang from genealogy's grove,  
I stepped back from knowing more.

## **Drifting Along Mackey's Branch**

*Chattanooga*

A heron eyes our drought,  
dreams of fish.

The lean brown thrush  
entangles himself  
in dry debris  
along the suburban bank.

We drift on a tributary  
of ribbon, a well-creased map  
among clots of privet,  
invasive bamboo,  
our memory of dairy cows –  
now, a sprawling church.

You touch your palm  
to the dark water,  
as if placing it in wet concrete.  
Our faded field guide  
is open on my lap.

I lean toward you,  
begin to sketch  
with my wet fingers on your back  
the simple lines of native plants –  
wild ginger  
may apple  
rue anemone.

I sketch the endangered  
white scull cap's fragrance  
on the muscle of your arm  
and lift your sleeve  
to see it bloom.

## **The Barn's Slant Lines**

*Franklin County, Tennessee*

Silver soldiers of the South, we've moved.  
These old boards, like Old Guard, all ache.  
A child, I wrote my name in floors of clay,  
kept a fist of buckeye fruit for trade  
tucked between lines already loosening,  
boards shifting even then. The barn, an outlier  
beyond our claim. The woods and field compete.  
But I've come back to look upon cliché,  
the way the widows tend to other graves.  
Our mule slept upright below the hickory limbs.  
A lucky horseshoe swung on a rusty nail  
above my head. Oh, how I loved the ladder,  
the loft, reading books with a slant of light  
across my page. Oh, how I loved the barn –  
half-light, half-dark as sun sifted through beams.  
The barn still leans across fields of fog, lace,  
moth, mullein, thistle bell, finch all ring.  
Empty as the canning jars and rusting rings,  
the barn is placed in the syllables  
of Tennessee, in the sparse wilderness of Wallace  
Stevens. George Wallace campaigned across  
state lines, confusing the disabled, the Veterans.  
It's dusk again in Tennessee and I pull over  
from my life, dim my lights, listen  
for the swell of song, the frog's refrain.  
Slanted stripes once pinned me down as well.  
What's earned can prick as burrs across a sleeve.

## Heirloom Wedding Dress

I kept that dress a dozen years in a sleeve,  
in a box the size of an old Frigidaire.  
“Heirloomed Especially for You,”  
read my life in past tense prose.  
They guaranteed the fabric would not fade  
or fray or be damaged by fresh air.  
The box turned dull as yellow, showed its age.

“Who is that woman?” my daughter asks of me,  
Looking at the still – manicured, cropped –  
a lawn. It was me, standing in yards of bliss.  
I moved through, not down, the aisle,  
temporary, rehearsed as any other basting stitch.  
So much cloth, I thought. I had to be unzipped,  
heavy yoked yet made to sway like spider silk.  
In the avalanche, I drowned in a want of white.  
I became, instead, a delta, where all the damage  
and fertility would land, get lodged.

I began to dream of scissors, my mother’s sharp  
stitch picker, the beaks of birds, the cat’s front claw.  
Anything can be repurposed, I figured.  
Anything can be unraveled. Pearls can divide.  
One random day I placed a classified, a paper ad.  
I told my husband. “You did what?” he asked  
not looking up or listening for my answer.  
I opened the window of the box, like a prisoner  
who files the bars at night while the warden drifts.  
I let the air have its way. I recycled the box  
from Carriage Cleaners, with its logo that reminds  
“love and marriage, love and marriage, go together...”  
like a horse and fringe. Clichés get pinned down,  
by the alteration queens. The dress lifted like a cloud  
ascended like a Christ from the air-tight tomb  
of expectation: Always a martyr, never the bride.

There were no takers, initially. The first responders

come to gawk, to give advice on how to fold a bolt  
so large; how to keep a train in line; how to wrap  
our lives in tissue paper – the archival kind –  
with the hope of keeping ourselves from wrinkling.  
But they don't know any more than me  
how to get a genie back into luck's rubbed lamp.

I hung the dress in the tall window.  
For weeks it went unnoticed, camouflaged  
among the ordinary pulled curtains, the other blind-  
sided parts of life. The dress faded, softened with light,  
laced by silver maple leaves, the silhouettes  
that shaded our entry. I saw the way it changed  
day to day, hour to hour. I fell in love again,  
considered cases, shams, Goodwill – so many ways  
to let it go to seed. I did nothing to rescue it from change.

I let it breathe. I let it go unclaimed.  
Thinking it might have its own history,  
a memory, an album, I couldn't just give it away  
to charity with its timeline laced with bad luck.  
Eventually I sold it to a neighbor, a cross-dresser  
with a "sister" his same size. Traded it more for story,  
than any other tenderness. Told friends how he held it,  
lifting it like feathers to his chest, all pleased.  
He extended his arm like an usher to the limp sleeve.  
He came by twice to inquire about the veil, did it match?  
Then the size. That's been five years ago. Now,  
silver frames my face and the maple fell.  
I wish I had a photograph of the dress hanging like a kite  
even free of me. I can see the scalloped hem  
torn in one small place at the seam by a sharp heel  
the day we ran away from family and friends  
fisted only with petals, a confetti of tissue paper,  
matching china plates. We walked among theses  
fragile things for years, posed as that couple on thin ice,  
a tiered skirt of freezer-burned cake.

## Ode to the Faulty Microphone

*In memory of Claudia Emerson*

They fail with frequency.  
But when a poet speaks,  
the audience adjusts, leans in.  
Young techs shift gear.  
But she doesn't skip a beat  
which is how we recognize poetry,  
our heart, our mind's interior music,  
the living drum that offers relief  
with its pleasing a-symmetry.  
The voice can lift itself up.  
Has little to rely on, no default.  
Images cave when we outline a time  
before words, which we cannot imagine.  
The hand on the high stone wet wall  
may have been applause, not the story.  
Applause for the impeded poetry. The stream  
that sings in the underworld of history.  
Water is a kind of poetry, which is how we speak  
of the path from rain to bucket to cloud,  
from podium to crowd, to a coil of ears.  
Any crown of sonnets bears repeating.  
The poet leans into her reading, the same  
way she leaned into a blank page, the amplified  
ink. Mercury, that microcosm, rises in the young  
tech's face. He tries to follow her lines  
to follow the wires to solve his problem,  
to trace their source, which is wireless.  
He tugs at the cloud of manuals. He's still learning.  
As the audience presses its collective ear  
to the vertical ground, surround sound.  
We now write on walls, always have. Thumbs up  
to the young man who can stop thinking and begin  
listening. On the front row, young and old  
each lift a lamp, a smart phone to catch the moment:  
The poet singing, "Look, the machinery still needs us."

## Emblematic

Any metaphor you elevate  
has its scarred sense of place -

Wendell Berry's "Sycamore"

the Cherokee purple sphere  
the starlings pierced

Mary who lifts her lily  
on the catholic's back table,  
the one a child once waxed  
with crayon color,  
too young to strike a match

the barn with carved names  
among the canopy of rafters

the knife's two-edged DNA.

The particular  
is grafted by The Sea  
of Galilee as vines that reach  
across sun-bleached walls  
and beyond the olive wood  
trellis to Naomi  
Shihab Nye's sky.

## Three Spools

Three spools  
sit behind the chapel's  
familiar seams -  
royal, evergreen and flame

because the Damask  
runners inevitably fray.

Who threads the needle  
in this place, if not the poor?

Who makes the hem tear  
if not the graceless goats?

Who still reaches for the  
liturgy to blur the seasons  
from spin to mend?

Small things bring life  
to any empty place.

The sharp eye.

The match.

The frankincense.

## Anna Akhmatova on Film

Translations came with brushstrokes, apertures,  
lashes of a squinting eye,  
her posture like a first chair violin,  
a Stravinsky composition as a backdrop, cinematic  
black and white: stark cuffs unraveling  
from a raven tuxedo's wing spread. Her curves  
contrast to the straight back, crisp cuff,  
the Kremlin's imposed syllabus.  
The long-hem linen skirts of white stood out  
against raked coals, the dinge and dirge,  
Stalin's black raised brows against the page.  
A poet born the year Bartholdi's tower  
was praised, her country was composed of falling  
notes, streets of dark opera houses, window glass.  
A century was born in a mere hour, the time  
it takes to burn an icon with a single match,  
implode a church bell tower, recite her *Requiem*,  
hold a Mass. Film shows the Czars raise their last glass  
stripped of power, the shadows move to widows  
aligned with the street like stanzas,  
her country's new rough draft.  
The clocks watched as concentration camped,  
guarded time with a rifle at half-past the three  
across the breast like eternity.  
She walked behind the dead as orphaned child,  
Kremlin towers, hard lines against a headline sky.  
Thaws came and went like snow and tanks,  
a slow drip to the gutter, tracks exposed  
as men still wearing their reading glasses were buried  
in coffin trams because the world was frozen ground.  
The parallel lines of pall bearers were steel rails  
that took them out of town. Leningrad went dark.  
The radios tried to translate the interior of worlds  
as verses were scrawled on ration cards, the call response  
between prisoners and their silent guards with keys  
that hung like a crucifix on a priest.

The concrete all around, the ephemeral told  
to get in line, filmed as light like women's hats  
or roses cut from their trellis.  
Her funeral a thorn allowed and poorly filmed,  
with so much to catch our eye in silence.  
We see the poet's body bound, lifted like a Gospel  
to the audience waiting with linen 'chiefs in the street.  
Candles flicker indifference as flames,  
the maple leaves she once pressed, dormant  
as a peasant's purse, as her blue-lipped child  
who slipped letters through the Gulag's gates.  
Candles lead to candles – scratch to match then flame,  
a life memorized and burned as cigarette ash and ink.  
Her blue hot flame naming disappearing names.  
In the crackling decline of hearth,  
wine stains too were purged  
with salt poured generously, so many wounds.  
The thaw brought her mourners to the streets.  
Her body of words raised, a river swollen  
over its banks, the melting ice underfoot as she slipped  
away from St. Peter's architecture, its narrative  
of collars, crowns, and thorns, the heavy white cross  
that we watch sway against men in black wool,  
the Gospel of tables turned, a lifeless parade.  
The old ones in their heavy coats shift their weight  
from foot to foot in bread lines at the altar rails.  
Coal black iron stars align on stable gates. And will.  
Old men with their rust, young men with their pointed spades,  
all mumbled briefly her words, could see their own breath:  
"our ruined house, defiled, the holy candle gasped for air,  
may my name be in the books of children playing in the street."  
They marked her place, a ribbon running down the page  
pale rose bouquets of lean long years.  
Girls with empty lockets gather in Ukraine,  
in Leningrad, and here, to figure her syllables,  
not as assembly line, but a Rosary  
to run their minds across.

## The Handmade Valentine

Literal as a paper cut,  
my outline of hummingbird  
held a sonnet in wing and throat.  
A paper back page torn from a dream,  
sketched midsummer.  
A ruby heart  
hovers to hear a phonograph's  
needle and thread.  
Cold gold stars  
from our childhood  
charts the blue sky moments,  
as garland, a constellation  
we both immediately recognized.  
Now all is folded away  
like other abandoned maps.  
Lost as the bee from the comb,  
a brush-off with the hand, *unrequited*  
we say of Valentines  
that arrive, shy of good timing.  
The corner of an eye sees the dart of wing  
the feathered point lost, mute  
at the center of the target's heart.  
the center of the bloom's bristle of seed  
requiring a long patience with the dark,  
The stamps of blue swallow tail moths  
play among our words,  
our paper legend of symbols  
you will unfold as a map on a gray day,  
I hope, and piece together  
the needle that paused on a disc of moon,  
recording the blush of exquisite rose  
clipped from the mean thorn,  
the bird that landed on my china cup  
the one the painter repeated  
flightless on the saucer.

## Morning Walk

Before work, before the lights of cars  
find their clear direction,  
the river and bridges are dark,  
having carried heavy burdens  
on their backs.

I walk this way each morning  
before the buildings draw us all by debt,  
by our life's sad mortgage,  
as the parking meter attendant  
cleans our slates of coins and sings  
in broken scat – *red dress on,*  
or *address gone,* or *princess,* or *success*  
or *excess.*

It doesn't really matter,  
only that he should sing  
at the chilly early hour  
while the mocking bird  
sings to sound like others,  
hoping to sound like more  
than his own rich gray color.  
We are all lost in a tangle of voices,  
birds among a city's  
ornamental branches,  
lost because we forget to remember  
when we began the day  
by listening  
to an old man singing  
of a woman that made him wild  
that make him remember,  
that wore the color of his desire  
on her body, the color of his bright voice,  
and to the urban birds answering  
to music that came from cold coins  
falling from our rented spaces,  
a brief song of how we are lost,  
in the sum of each small barter  
of our private longing.

## American Wife Opens a Package from Iran

Your mother has sent pistachios  
again.  
We snap their salty shells  
apart  
and taste the seed  
of homesickness.  
And there is a hard white candy  
whose name makes me choke  
when pronounced.  
I want to leave that language  
buried  
at the back of my throat.  
The candy is stale  
from its journey, like letters  
with late news.  
The printed scalloped lines  
are not words  
that I can read.  
They are more like yarn  
unraveling from the sweater  
your mother knitted,  
The loops  
connected together as a prayer.  
The same thick beige pullover  
a man might wear standing  
by the Caspian Sea,  
looking far away  
into the cold dark blue  
The sweater she packed away  
in your suitcase when you left home  
to study thick books,  
of technical words, numbers –  
a third language.  
But you've kept it hidden,  
folded away underneath a prayer rug  
and a box of letters,  
Their envelopes so thin,

your government shared  
all family secrets, the mullahs  
suspiciously listening  
from stamps.

## Three Men

The chemist  
lines up my disappointments  
on his counter in glass.  
He likes to observe,  
sees each test tube more toxic  
than the last.  
With his dropper in hand  
one careful word or smile  
can turn an acid into a base,  
his tongue a litmus test for lies.  
He can explain the color  
of the hydrangea in my vase.  
the blue bloom's need for good soil.

The archaeologist  
studies my past. Ropes off  
a place for the locals  
to walk around  
as if my heart were sacred ground.  
He will pour over my feelings,  
sift them with his wire mesh  
until they're gone.  
A few broken shards  
hint at a pattern. Artifacts  
we've both now lost  
to time.

The poet  
invites me into his boat.  
He takes my hand,  
wants to show me where the heron waits,  
to edit the word "fish"  
from the sheet of water.  
He turns our boat upside down  
and we both nearly drown.  
He takes me to all the places  
I try to avoid –

places I go with my eyes closed,  
my heart pounding  
against the smooth sandstone  
of my better judgment.

## In Praise of Now Discarded Books

The old mourn the fabric spines of books,  
with frayed edge, red ink stamp, now lined up  
as artifact, cloth soft with the poets' turns,  
the origami corner fold  
to mark a place, a professor's underlined phrase.  
In one, essays gather the grainy  
look to space, 1966 is a narrow slice of shelf,  
imagination could never again be  
contained.

In chapter twelve, May Swenson speaks of the moon as hers,  
her dark side,  
exposed. Confessionals fall like cascades.  
We can still hear Sylvia's voice downloaded  
like a falling star to earth.

Bob has reissued his timeless basement tapes.  
Ed Hirsch has a message in a bottle to toss into the tides,  
to land any place, get picked  
by hand like something made. I carry, as in I carry  
the archives in my pocketbook, is the new way,  
Ray Bradbury's best work.

Still, there's something about my hand  
against the formatted page, the numbers  
in the corner lower right, "date due"  
*date due date due* like skat, like  
diddly squat. We carry around thought  
in a clutter. The book was bound  
to get knocked off its pedestal. We look out  
our windows watching weather  
change.

It once took strength to carry ideas around.

Our heavy load, up and down.  
Consider *The Handmaid's Tale* – how heavy it was.  
"Thick" we said, Pregnant.  
We could not check out  
more than we could strap on our back  
a swaddled child, a hiker's pack,  
a parachute, a terrorist vest,  
the pageantry banners, stoles, girl scouts  
earning *emblema* in a secular church  
where we could earn our Badge of Courage  
in summer's long reading list.  
Do soldiers still read books?  
*The Things They Carried* – carried to the Gulf?  
A "body of work," we say, to the amputee.  
Little Brown Penguin Everyman Press and Knopf.  
They were the distant relatives  
my mother framed, placed  
like a crucifix to the wall.

## Hospital Walking Map

We walk slowly here.  
(The patient ones.)  
Staff hurry  
on the narrow corridors of light.  
It's out there – light.  
We look out for it. The window  
is full of reflection, wings  
that hold a specialty.  
Consultations.  
Layers. I recommend them here.  
It can be cold. Generally.  
Except for the receptionist  
whose job it is to shine,  
to ask me where I am from  
and hand me a walker's map.  
Her gold hoops hang from her ears.  
Chimes, glistening.  
I'd rather look and listen  
than ask questions.  
I'd rather note the couple nearby  
who ask each other  
where they'd like to sit.  
For a year they have orbited  
this room, waiting. Working  
the ring of chairs.  
"You decide."  
They carry politeness  
as a canister of oxygen  
strapped to their side  
like a spouse.

## **Union Station**

*Nashville*

We sit as a menu  
of archetypes.  
The traveler.  
The retired couple.  
The artist looking up  
at the stained glass.  
The window we choose  
is curtained  
and ornamental trees  
brush against the canvas.  
It is quiet as any hotel  
weekday.  
We too soften. Relax.  
I fold away the news.  
You have nothing to add  
to the litany.  
The traffic's shuttle  
hurries us past  
the unused cream  
in the small white pitcher,  
hurries us past  
the second slice,  
hurries us past  
the fresh frond in glass,  
hurries us past  
the cup and saucer  
that we've become.  
Our few words stack,  
are carried back  
and forth by waiters  
who watch for us  
to finish, pleasantly  
detached.

## Hard Edges

*Sunday off Market Street*

Who doesn't welcome a gate?  
A trellis of fence and thorn  
the light still lifts?  
What owner claims the entire field  
if not the greedy and unwise?  
Who can walk the gleaner's  
narrowing path?  
To their left, compassion flowers,  
trails out from wilderness,  
turns the pages of our field guide.  
To the right, the ankle turns  
in titled soil the lawyers have  
surveyed and marked as chosen.  
What's left is lifted  
as day-old bread, bouquets  
of amber we sing aloud  
in our pageants and parades.  
Beyond all parables  
is another place  
beyond the caution tape  
and boarded window.  
A tree  
brings down the block,  
opens a back door to shelter,  
to canvas, to a clothesline  
of bartered goods dried and  
hung like thieves on a cross  
at the edge of the open dumpster.  
Cans of paint  
scatter a new vocabulary of icons  
as prophets play  
their game of tag.

## Commemoration

*50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Martin's Dream, 2013*

Today we lift up memory  
as if it were a child  
who has stood long in line  
to pull at the church bell string.  
It's always been out of reach.  
Justice, too.  
We explain that, fifty years ago,  
we were one or two or only a few.  
Fifty years out, our bell still serves  
as tuning fork in the road.  
Do our instruments lose their way?  
Like hollowed wood –  
what we say we play – what strays  
when left untouched.  
And yet again today,  
I am mindful and can say  
that air itself brings change.  
And change for some  
is late.  
Today a bell is news and nuisance.  
We rarely hear such a clock,  
as we've moved inside  
to our climate control box  
and the car's chosen isolation.  
But look up and listen  
right there, today, it hangs as icon  
on a high wire,  
center stage and stylized.  
First century. Collectively  
we step outside our selves.  
We dream.  
We step outside  
to the balcony  
of Martin's rented room.  
We collect our thoughts.  
Catch our breath.

The stairs where the bell  
suspends our busy day  
go both ways –  
down to where choir robes deflate.  
Hang limp as thieves.  
Down to where a boy's stone  
busted a star in the giant window,  
unnoticed for years;  
up to where the brighter panes paint  
a portrait of a lily  
bleached by our idea of passing  
peace and time. All flowers  
fade into the cycle of innocence.  
Nearby a two-edged sword of glass  
could cut down both prince  
and thief. The bell has a tongue  
and the text tells us the tongue  
is a sword. Two sides to every story.  
The just and unjust  
have swung on ropes.  
The same skein used for bell  
and fail. What twist of plot  
would you see in the knot, my Brother?  
The rafters of the church  
for some are cross, become a limb  
while for others, reaching vines with fruit.  
Strange, ripening and slow.  
All reconciliation swings back and forth.  
While gathered here we all assume  
we'd have chose the delicate petal-bell  
of Easter's sticky flower, its fragrance –  
the kind that takes over rooms  
where people mourn, and  
dreams are resurrected.

## Archaeologists Find Figures Posed in Sand

*Sahara Desert*

There is a narrow shift  
in the hourglass of sand  
that allows the mother  
to hold her child –  
to become a Madonna  
pressed in our mind  
like a leaf in a book,  
a field guide on a bed  
of bones and flowers.  
Who arranged them here,  
as universal, innate,  
the iconic gesture?  
An artist's skilled brush  
stroked the cranial brow  
of the fragile infant.  
All things get posed  
in death as still life.  
The anthropologist  
is one of the few who knows  
we discover what we find.  
She reads the enamel  
of the tooth that records  
the pearl of moon, the gritty tides.  
We can now calculate the calcium  
decay in days not years  
like radius rings that form a tree –  
even here, in the climate  
of scarcity. It's obvious  
someone cared, says the  
Narrator in our head. Who?  
Who arranged them there?  
Mandala of petals  
stems spiraling out  
we still read  
beginning at the child's crown.

## **Billie Holiday on the Radio**

*Whitfield Lovell Exhibit, Hunter Museum of American Art, 2013*

She's in the gallery show.  
Billy Holiday on the Bakelite radios.  
They stack like static  
compared to the movement  
of her voice.  
We lean in.  
(They want us to.)  
Invite our hands  
to touch, turn, fine tune  
those gestures of our past.  
It's a notched knob  
that moves the dial.  
We can still recall, a time before  
radios were embedded  
with clocks.  
Things were merely heard,  
herded about by sound,  
by notes  
that swayed in our minds  
like a woman in heels  
at a compromise,  
a woman with a flower  
in her hair  
and holding another kind  
of bouquet at her nose –  
a microphone she'd toss  
to someone else one day.  
The gallery is too loud  
to try and listen now.  
"Full" we say, full  
of people lingering  
about and fingering  
for their own last thought  
the one that they just had  
and lost.

The artist nods to Billie's day  
and my hand reaches for hope  
of tuning in to something  
some have called divine –  
A woman out on a limb  
about to learn she can fly.

## Variants: Quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama

Off-kilter from the patterns known  
as 'monkey wrench,' 'Irish chain'  
and 'drunkard's path,'  
the woman improvised  
ripping anything that was frayed  
to strips: her husband's cuff,  
flour sack, upholstered chair  
with Liberty Bells  
put out of the house  
like a man who failed.  
She wove in rayon ribbons  
a dead child carried in curls.  
Bedcover stains  
as a diary of dna  
are pulled and pushed  
yet somehow held  
their stripes, like flags  
in a plaza's gathering place.  
We pay respects  
to the parts that hold  
the whole. Only whole  
in retrospect,  
as any artist knows  
who sets out blind.  
These works of art  
are soft as laps  
that held us in the shade  
of trees on laundry day  
when the quilts were pinned  
by wood and spring  
in sunshine's gallery.  
A line we learned to cross  
and play beneath  
when we were called small  
or in our parent's way.  
'Variant' coins the curator,

the museum culture card  
as she links 'log cabin' quilts  
to these impressive  
'housetops'  
adapted from the lean  
times of liens  
when scraps are gleaned.  
But now we are warned  
"do not touch"  
with sticky hands  
or palms of oil.  
We must lean in for intimacy  
with corduroy wale  
and denim work,  
fine stitching with its stain  
of blood, a mitered point  
as precise as any handmade  
brick or rim of pie.  
These quilts skew and  
offer the eye relief with improvise.  
Some show signs  
of heat, shrink  
a wink from tired eyes.  
"The circles here are pieced  
like a pie," the older white  
woman says aloud, as if to me.  
She stood nearby  
without context to a mediocrity.  
"I haven't picked up a needle  
myself since I was a child."  
I became her priest and smiled.  
The red circles kept their bright eyes  
and we looked back  
wide-eyed and long and hard.  
Compelling was that particular quilt  
to me, spread as harvest  
across my August table, rich.  
Tomatoes with a dozen shades  
of blood and bruise,

like heirloom pin cushions  
remembered here like a fist of fabric,  
gathered like a strange fruit?  
The tomatoes pricked with pins  
and filled with dust  
from the saw blade's teeth  
that took down a racists' tree.  
These women witnessed that,  
yet kept their eye on Selma  
even as they tucked their grief  
inside the seams that covered dreams.  
Each quilt is a study in contrast  
between what we witness  
and what we hope  
like two stark seams of coal  
and limestone, war and peace,  
rights and wrongs, lies and love,  
red and green.  
Such color contrast forms  
an anthem that they raise.  
And I hear someone humming  
in the labyrinth of gallery stalls.  
The women of Gee's Bend  
stitches run like water  
through the cotton  
underneath what we see  
on the surface of all things.  
I could not, but wanted to,  
run my pale hand across  
that quilt – to touch the hem  
and listen for iconic Mary Lee  
to remind me again and again:  
"There's many ways to build a house.  
Child, just watch me."

## Fine Silver

I once sprawled  
across this table,  
was invited to every  
conversation,  
fell to the floor  
from the playful  
hands of children,  
shined like jewelry  
against the finest linens.  
I've stayed long enough  
in this cocoon of felt  
of the sideboard drawer.

I long for the oil  
of your hands,  
your particular prints  
to touch the thick  
thigh of my ladle,  
indeed, my matching set.  
I want you  
to dip me into a tureen  
of soup, wet your lips.

The garland of my thoughts  
flower delicately  
at the neck  
of my dozen spoons.  
I am a complete set.  
I can entertain  
anyone  
you invite into this room.

Deep inside I hold the heat  
of the furnace where I was cast,  
remember the cooling  
that followed  
as I hung like chimes

from the rafters  
of a dark, windless room.  
I know how to live  
with little light.

The patina of my wisdom  
could not be rushed,  
but earned  
through years of virtue  
and vice.  
You must agree,  
I am an astonishing  
set of tools,  
drawn from the elements  
of earth, hand cast.

Mine is a peculiar shine,  
having held your reflection  
all these years.  
My luster mirrors yours.  
I want you to see me still  
as a luxury,  
not sacrifice.  
I want to be hidden  
from those who might invade  
the house, the treasure  
you inventory at each return.

I will not be auctioned off –  
picked up, polished and placed  
in a rag of funeral clothes,  
or left to the moth's  
poor tending, tucked away  
to tarnish in the lonely dark.

Oh, I've heard the whispers:  
'Why brother with that?'  
I am described as 'too much trouble.'  
But I can never be replaced,

though others may cost less,  
know their proper place,  
have their own charms,  
still, I hold a sharpness  
to my knife's blade. The prongs  
of my forks are straight.

If you lift me, balance  
me like a hungry chopstick,  
you will feel the lightness  
of my weight, sense  
my inner artistry –  
my good taste.

My highest purpose  
is to feel the perfect beauty  
of your mouth.  
It is music that we make,  
my lightness  
against the rooted porcelain  
of your teeth,  
or the fragile edges  
of your life's full plate.

Tap me to a glass  
so we can make a toast.  
My presence  
can silence a room,  
prepare for celebrations.  
For I was wonderfully made  
by another's skilled hand  
to feed an appetite like yours.

## Older Congregation

Now, no one uses the front door,  
all weathered as a rugged cross  
and closed atop the abandoned  
altar of stairs. Here, is where  
the ladies of the Garden Club  
stood together long ago,  
each clutching a leather purse,  
their hands soft  
as white gloves.

Now, too many stiff hips  
and hands that cannot grasp  
or trust the changing loosened rail.  
So they go around back  
and find a way to toddle in  
past the musty rooms  
where silk flowers spread  
across the closed coffin  
of the upright piano's tomb,  
ubiquitous as all that becomes  
out of tune with time.  
They all are now, out of tune.  
The smaller group  
skews to the right  
of the pulpit near the heat,  
spending the morning  
adjusting their hands and ears  
with every anemic liturgy,  
every hospice minister assigned  
to pass the plate around.  
It fills with small change.  
One of the tribe drops in  
her grocery list  
thinking it her widow's mite,  
mistaking it in the dimming light  
for the crisp ten dollar bill  
she had set aside as parable,

among her bric-à-brac.  
She discovers her sin and rises up  
to fish it out from the net  
as it passes behind her.  
No one seems to question that,  
understanding our lists make up our lives.  
Blessed is the food for her pet Precious.  
Blessed is the Noxzema in the blue jar,  
A cucumber slice for tired eyes,  
a bag of rice,  
“The smallest amount of heavy cream  
that you can find.”  
The widows talk awhile and sing.  
One of their kind passed  
just last week.  
And now the others shuffle  
more awkwardly in their pews  
around her empty seat  
as if someone had broken  
a pane of the stained glass  
windows to the east. Gone is the pane  
where Mary’s hands took their classic  
Hebrew prayer of symmetry  
and gone the pane of bread  
that broke and left a place  
where our eyes can look past  
the table to the dome of sky,  
where are gaze overlooks  
the bony broken foot of Paul  
that Jesus himself had reached down  
to wash, now amputated  
by a lad with a sling and rock,  
not a child these women know or ever will,  
neither a David looking up  
nor a Goliath looking down –  
just a boy with no named enemy  
and too much time, and so much glass.

## Communion

She lifts the chalice stem,  
the moon of bread  
to the earthy rim.  
Vines appear on the trellis of rafters  
overhead  
where the delicate spiders  
spin web from silk.  
Heavy the rafters are with fruit,  
more than we can  
weather. And then the sun  
strikes the wheat,  
the grain of brittle brush  
gathered in my mind  
by Ruth, all the aproned ones.  
The ones who walk behind  
carrying a cross  
in our pageant like transplants,  
like young seminarians.  
We've seen the scene before  
in our months of Sundays.  
But today I noticed  
one thing more,  
something I'd call  
embroidery  
on the robes, stitches  
in all the banners,  
a crochet edge to the table  
knots all lined up like widows  
from the windows  
for this woman's work.  
All threads illuminated by the scroll of rays.  
But here, inside, the moon  
of the moment repeats an orbit  
round the room.  
The moon of bread becomes,  
small and luminous, with great pull.  
We taste our grafted worlds

where ritual and reality  
find more than a rhythm,  
finds more than us,  
as shards of clay  
are forced by spin  
and touch into the form of the cup.  
We become the pilgrim  
with a stronger scope  
amidst an ancient ellipse,  
a galaxy we first learned about  
as children describing the world  
as milky, like a spider's effort,  
like a froth on our lip,  
what has gravitas  
to hold the weights we carry.  
We observe what we can,  
believing there is more  
than imagined.

## Archaeology Site in Poland

*Sobibor, Poland*

The geese formed their loud *V*  
as eight ovens formed *infinity*.

Archaeologists did not need to dig  
too deep below the black oil asphalt  
fault line to find the Hebrew word  
*consecrated* in the circle wedding ring.

*Behold*, a verb that marries us to *love*.

The callous formed four straight lines,  
*angles* where *angels* too were burned.

## Supernova

Kepler's eye saw past the clouds in Prague,  
the gray of his own matter  
to tell us the star of Bethlehem  
was a word meaning born,  
his synonym for death,  
the small white one absorbed by red.  
We hold an illuminated cloud  
in our palm and read our past,  
which we believe will orbit  
have its second coming.  
Scroll through the center of the universe,  
dust off the artifacts as books of scope,  
naked eye, blind eye, glare.  
Stardust still settles over Prague,  
your hometown, the universities  
where we learn in sums and part, echo  
milky white men who drew maps,  
who spoke of the universal like the weather.  
Socrates, Plato, Aristotle  
still spin the globes,  
are stars on the library shelf.  
The poets who witness in the commons  
upload their telescopes, clean their lens  
with handkerchiefs,  
light their blue altar candles  
searching by squint, budding ear  
for Christ, for Kepler, for any  
new-to-us sparks of life in death  
that barrel us over the cliffs  
and through a waterfall  
of fledging stars.

## **Closed Crematorium**

*Noble, Georgia*

The Noble soil will always  
speak the names  
of those you stacked  
as if each a rusted cage  
of spent tomato vines  
or old ladders that rot  
at the lower rungs  
that wick the stagnant  
ponds of life.  
Did the oven fail to light –  
detached as a soul from  
bone?  
Your father kept things  
tagged: garden heirlooms,  
negative faces in a small  
grave box, drawers  
of a repairman's cache,  
screws, bolts, the dry  
and ready match.  
You resented the entire lot  
and offered fists of cement  
to those who came  
to claim their loss.  
You got away with this for years.  
The label 'trust'  
crushed to grit and sand.  
Did you not know  
our compost keeps  
all stories stirred?  
Your father's name, Marsh,  
further frays  
and falls  
from its once-sturdy  
rural post.

## **The Boy with Bread in the *Boston Globe***

*Cairo, 2011*

The boy carries a tray of bread  
to those with an appetite  
for change.

Hungry, everyone  
is hungry, and the triangles  
are broken many ways  
again today.

We look on  
from far away.

We too taste salt.

The boy elevated in *The Globe*  
spent the early morning  
away from Cairo's contraband  
of cameras and texts.

Spent his morning in a small kitchen  
just off Tahrir Square  
where his father whistled  
over his work, a new tune.

Some technologies persist –  
a father's hands, repurposed marble  
from the tombs of the past, and fire.

Desire drives our work. A song  
we sing with no one listening  
is still praise.

We pray: Give us this day  
our common pause and forgive  
those who trespass on old truths  
that while man cannot live on bread  
alone,

he cannot live together without  
the baker, or his son,  
who by the end of this remarkable day  
will have learned how to whistle  
with trial and error and  
a taste of satisfaction.

## Building the New Library

The cranes lift our eye.  
This new library is filed  
between the catalogs  
of *anthropology*  
and the splinters  
of *community*.  
Beyond chain link  
the rebar lifts like branches  
from the pillars of concrete;  
and beyond this  
is a hill with shade.  
Old gray graves.  
Old-school willows remain –  
a remnant who've earned  
their claim –  
Emeritus of Nature.  
No building design,  
they whisper,  
is engineered to contain  
what we have weathered –  
no building design  
can hold the weight  
of our loves and leaves.

## Summer Solstice at Chickamauga Mound

Here, where the turtles still  
journey the lowlands,  
where the Queen Anne's lace  
forms a garland  
at the base of a crown,  
is a looted grave  
we've walked around.  
Here, others have manufactured  
it's name in the name of industry,  
Roxbury,  
a carpet mill, its loom, now too, a grave.  
Here, where the creek and river  
meet. Here, where the mullein grass  
waves. We return to see how  
slowly and quickly life can change.  
We burn sage advice incensed  
at the robbers of these graves.  
A canopy of hackberry and hickory  
send their roots down into ours.  
This tangle is our life where we weed  
out the tendency to look away  
from the stratum of the past. We turn  
briefly as the sun rises again  
over the just and unjust, the  
tangled knot we all are and take pause.  
A pair of blue birds lands on the  
chain link of fence between where  
we are planted and the  
more pedestrian path.  
The sky allows all movement  
to flow without fail, no fence  
or wall or security gate to enter.  
The recent rain comes down to us  
and has washed clean  
the abalone shell that covered graves  
those I desire to cover mine one day.

What isn't stolen  
or hid gleams in the morning sun  
iridescent as any pearl of a place,  
a specific place where  
anything might still surface with a story  
for those who watch and wait  
while others debate  
the names of tribes and date the years  
immeasurable.  
We could have told them this.  
We who walk with the child  
carrying the galvanized pail of utility  
that carries our offering of fragrance.  
Each of us blessed  
by such a ritual once again.  
We circle the place where  
desecration goes on and will.  
We breath in what heals  
as the morning dew and the angry ants  
both sting our bony heels.  
What have we not trampled underfoot  
of our past as we dance and march and pack  
the earth full of metaphor and clay?  
The mockingbird clears its own sore throat  
as we imagine together  
a world where each of us bring our own  
brimming basket of earth  
from the fields of home  
to add to the frayed fallow mound.  
One turtle shell full of earth  
in a child's hand  
is just the kind of faith  
these earthen works were built upon  
here, at Chickamauga, where the river  
and the carpet mill and the Woodland tribes  
are raised and eroded and raised again.

## After the Tornado

We see the forest, finally.  
Emergency alarms sound  
from all generators of energy.  
Our poems gather up the fallen limbs,  
look to the slap of concrete slab  
as it mirrors the micro-collections  
of bones, gravel, the tooth of the cone,  
cigarette white tails strewn as road kill.  
Everything eventually gets lodged  
in the broken lines.  
Everything emerges after a storm.  
Nitrogen blooms as a rose.

The outliers land in our lawns  
and from where we can only imagine –  
and that is our new task – to imagine.  
How can one gritty shingle or soft page  
journey by tornado across time –  
time as a line we speak of as ‘before’ and ‘after’  
the tornado. We bookmark this as drama  
only to find the ordinary moments  
are what we most mourn.  
We search the box of lost and found,  
the splintered grove, what we now are,  
as a rain of broken insulation falls.

Poets weave the web with tension,  
engage in silken imagery.  
Rarely do we get to see the world  
this way, so much light normally in our eyes.  
We began to prefer the refrigerator  
severed from its hum, the streetlight’s  
broken globe. Something transports us  
and is illuminated by the dark.

There will be a few who ask, “why?”

in aluminum-chair support groups  
that ring the lobby of the church,  
the trailer park pavilion, the tent  
with the ominous red cross.  
Survivor's guilt is handled with gloves  
like asbestos. Neighbors emerge  
from their basement, bathtub, stairwell,  
and restaurant freezer vault.  
The sawblades turn the trunk to sand.  
We speak of trees with favor, remember  
all they sheltered. Remember the interiors,  
how the light once shined across the table.  
Nothing is so sacred that it cannot change.  
Emergence again takes root in our world.  
It twines amidst our beautiful trellis –  
our "emergency" that may save us.  
All around we raise scaffolding, blue tarps.  
Though our blades have grow dull from duty,  
new work rises in us, as we plant a tree,  
a neighbor's limestone altar, notice suddenly  
what will outlive us.

## Wilderness

It's not what you think.  
It's not lush.  
It's dry. Rocky. Desperate.  
It's not what is saved.  
Not park or place for souvenir.  
It's everything else.  
It's what remains.

Stripped. Barren. If this  
were a room, there would be  
wires hanging where icons  
once held center stage.  
A caved roof. Fallen plaster.  
Bleak. It would smell of must.  
But it is not a shell  
that can be abandoned.  
It's more a world turned inside out  
that shows its seams.

It draws us in like a prophet's  
disgrace among the wealthy  
and learned. The elite.  
That's why we go there.  
On the off chance  
we can catch a glimpse  
of the hem of our own robe  
to see our reflection  
in the dry river bank.  
Our image as true grit,  
the possibility  
of what carved this place  
returning like a stream.

They fight over what  
is left. We all do.  
As if anything is left  
to gleaners these days.

The Syrians dam the place.  
Israelis divert the cycles  
as entitlement.  
The mouths of refugees  
all full of the wool  
of both wolves and sheep.  
Hard to sort.

Dry and choking.  
It's where we go to find  
ourselves because we go there  
alone and bitter as the soil  
that weeds itself.  
So those who emerge  
from the banks have no heaven  
to speak of much. Not a river  
to cross, to buoy themselves.  
They cry out like rocks.  
They speak outside themselves  
knowing what we cannot.

Wilderness demands solitude,  
yet, even here, a pit of stones  
circles us around. We are a part,  
but of a whole.  
We collect our thoughts, and more.  
Fire flames at our crude campsite,  
an attempt at 'tabernacle' in the dark  
side of our waiting –  
where wisdom is the crackle  
of dry branches pruned to ash.

## Possessions

*Grief and loss accumulate like possessions. ~Stefan Kanfer*

He questions himself.  
Why move the wooden crates,  
the dry rot of Latin books,  
clippings crumbled  
like communion wafers,  
the broken ones,  
a charred Bible, dark mirror,  
a box of Mason jars rescued  
from the barn's forgotten seasons?  
House to house,  
marriage to divorce,  
he can no longer hold  
his burdens with leather handles  
the oil of his grandfather's hands  
long gone, the straps frayed  
from their brass rivets. Still, he grips  
the past, looks through yellowed books  
to discover a postcard  
where ink spilled out sad news  
another death, a name, a love  
he will search for in cemeteries  
among old bookends. It's true.  
We all settle down with grief.  
He sets the table for grace  
using the chipped dishes  
that have slipped through  
the hands of many children.  
He fills the curio cabinet with loss  
and lets the light filter through  
the glass shelves to the lowest level.  
Alone, he is comforted by artifacts  
that he could never bury.  
He can't explain why he is drawn  
to the rows of radios, art deco dials  
he turns through the jazz static,  
searching for a voice that understands.

## **Felt Boards**

*An elegy for my Aunt who took me to Sunday School*

One last time, she gathers us  
like children in a Sunday school.  
Her silhouette placed alone  
at the center of the softened room.  
Robed in blue and white as a lily.  
as Mary who asked the angels  
for directions more than once.  
A Mary who felt widowed  
all the way to Bethlehem – that city  
the Hebrews named for “bread”  
but known to us by its onion dome.  
She wanted us to be prepared  
for a world of metaphor.  
So, she lifted the felt star to the sky.  
Gathered the dingy sheep  
long after the shepherd’s staff was lost.  
She placed all the tiny fish  
into the boy’s basket, the net, the Sea  
we learned in three syllables, Galilee.  
She sat the table and the scene  
with one cup and a loaf of bread.  
We lined up disciples like silverware,  
certain ones to the right, Judah to the left.  
We held up the thief each Easter,  
the tax collector, the wee little man –  
Zaccheus, who, just like that thief,  
found himself out on a rugged limb,  
curious to see what he could see.  
She found us curious.  
Hoped we might see  
the wealthy man cry at his own greed,  
and leave the scene empty.  
Tombs were empty. But never the hotels,  
the boats, barn lofts or tables.  
The camel brought the wise kings –  
the three with sequined crowns.

How hard it must have been  
for such a caravan  
to slip through the eye  
of the story's moving needle  
without stealing the stage and the star.  
There were always three  
in our pageant and they came from the left,  
meaning the East. The treasures  
were small as mustard seeds, as babies,  
as a slingshot and smooth stones,  
the frankincense cone, the widow's mite  
(and even Judah's fist of coins).  
Any of these can slay a giant.  
The felt board was always drawing us  
to clanging cymbals, rocky soil,  
the dozen disciples with their big feet  
tangled in the floss of nets as she wove.  
Water was in every scene  
we walked. But sometimes to be called  
as Good, we had a road to cross.  
We were all Samaritans.  
We all have things we carry, burdens  
cinched like a hobo bag, like Judah's  
purple Crown Royal velvet full of rage.  
Martha had her hostess tray  
while her sister meditated criss-cross  
on the floor. It was hard to know  
who was the over-achiever.  
Ruth had all that wheat to glean.  
The woman at the well had her long ladle.  
It's been forty years and more since  
I reached to catch the giant as he fell  
at my front row feet, but I can see  
each worn allegory cross my mind  
and stick with static in its proper place,  
like a bolt of purple passion unwound  
when Lydia converted the podiums  
to her colorful drape of liturgy. Purple  
was my favorite color then and now,  
the camel's saddle blanket,

the Silent Night cold sky, Lydia's catalog  
of fabric. In Lydia, a minor footnote,  
I saw someone cut from the same cloth as me.

## Walking Along South Beech Street

Exotic birds scattered on the sidewalk  
puzzle us. A die cut tool has cut them  
into shapes we immediately recognize.  
Early in life we learn how hard it is  
to put things back together again.  
The world as a childhood's nursery shell  
of rhymes. It's always Easter.  
I slow your stride, point things out:  
The single snowflake scrap – a crocheted  
knot that once dangled  
from someone's idea of an evergreen.  
It lays now in the mud, in the memory  
of its purity, unraveling  
like these yards along South Beech Street.

Behind chain link a Guatemalan girl  
pushes her baby brother  
in a laundry basket swing.  
To her he is light as a feather,  
an odd bird, he smiles as he takes wing.  
We call out to the girl we've renamed  
Miriam – wave  
through the tangled curbside rushes.  
To us the boy weighs heavy.  
We pray the branch won't break.  
Together we all become a Nativity,  
The child in a cradle we are rocking  
back and forth  
back and forth  
between tired hearts.

Your hum becomes a chariot  
swinging low and sweet.  
We pass an odd-numbered street  
where lights blink across the face  
of each prickly burning bush, pyracantha.

It is dusk when we come across  
the memory of a home that burned –  
abandoned more than once – this time  
snuffed out –  
a stub of an advent candle.  
A fat Bible is left out, plopped  
on the pulpit of the porch, a ribbon  
tucked into what is left unread.  
I only recall that it was dark  
with reference thumbnails among the tissue  
pages returning by heat to ash and root.  
Words made flesh as they floated in the air  
where rooms were slow to cool.  
As if a swarm of bees had found a canopy  
of hand-hewn beams, a place where  
words like 'trespass' loom.

Here, along South Beech Street  
every thing is worn, and worn as layers  
by those left out in the cold.  
Here, everything is raw, gritty like a box  
of lost and found,  
glittered with the poetry of poverty,  
and shame that knows no shine.  
Here, where we are easily startled  
when a woman steps out  
to see what's going on.  
"What's going on?" the world hums.  
The commotion we have caused,  
what stirs all chained dogs.  
We look to her as more than lost,  
more than off-white-like sheep –  
Or, maybe not. Either way,  
she waves us on.

## Sympathy Notes from Italy

You offer sympathies to Mary  
as others drop their wants  
in a box like coins.

The Madonna is trapped  
in gilt and gold.

The flames of the needy  
nearly singe her robes.

She would rather  
return home to pick olives

in her village, sweep  
the porch, have another fat baby.

We spill out from her shadow  
to the lawn.

Here roots of trees dislodge  
ancient stone.

A small bird bathes  
where rain washed  
the chipped mosaic face.

You rarely see yourself  
among these protagonists.

Prefer the displaced,  
the winged brevity of birds.

## **Remembering Jerusalem**

*For Dr. Edward Said, 1993-2013*

Peace was more than a prayer  
for your Palestinian mother  
whose children left Jerusalem in 1949.  
She straightened her head scarf  
with her fine dark fingers and turned  
her best moments into intricate designs  
as she embroidered your names  
on the edges of her aprons  
as she planted you with stitches  
among the vines of native plants.

Peace was more than a promise  
as your Palestinian father  
carried you on his shoulders  
past the Church of the Holy Sepulcher  
when you were only five.  
He carried you like hope  
through that wounded Old City  
where the Greeks and the Coptic  
tended tourist gardens  
for those who came searching  
for Christ's last hours  
and like shoppers in a market  
they each had to purchase  
something they might carry,  
some kind of hope to take back  
but they settled for nothing more  
than those crude, rough garlands  
men had twisted into crowns.

But now all of this is memory  
from the point of view of exile  
and the only real sense  
is the taste of thin pancakes  
from Zalatimo's ovens  
their warm hazelnuts and dark brown sugar.

You hold this memory to your tongue,  
the sweetness of a childhood.

But there is more than one reason  
why you have forgotten that house near  
the bakery, though its pattern of stones  
must still be standing, stubborn  
as a father, unless like most others  
it was taken down slowly, chiseled  
at daily with the slow tools of economy.

But for now you want to get past the souvenirs  
of these recent headlines,  
and think about your life, and think about  
grafting, how this art began with the Arabs,  
the first to grow grapes of different colors,  
the fruit of Europe's wines. You think  
Jerusalem's tangle of family trees forget  
they touch their branches and their roots  
are delicately intertwined  
though they can seem to be grabbing.  
How the word, calendar, holds more than  
this passing of history, and it was indeed Arab  
scholars that once reformed time, with only  
a margin of error, just as their simple cures  
of camphor, cloves and myrrh healed both bodies  
and spirits with only a margin of doubt.

For a few moments you choose the past  
absent of your colleague's political  
conjecture, and speak of the kind barter  
that passed bread from house to house,  
or spoonfuls of saffron, a dark spice  
women took to their flowers, seeking a bright  
yellow color that would bring new life  
to their roses.

But these would be too much  
like parables for people who want promises  
to happen overnight, to happen with a handshake

among leaders of nations.  
Though this, too, is miraculous  
as turning grapes into wine. But something is missing  
in the spirit of this hour.

You have too many memories that never  
made the headlines, that last visit to your father  
in the well-meant Beirut hospital,  
where he looked toward a wall that held no  
lasting patterns, as he tried to remember  
the lovely scent of lavender by a blue  
tiled fountain, a bush his wife planted  
when hope was a fresh fragrance  
and pleasing to the eye.  
How he must have felt the coldness of his history  
take his body like a cancer,  
the last invasion  
he could tolerate in his life.

Yes, it all comes back to grafting  
of mending things together  
of mending this history of barter  
between those we learn are neighbors,  
how your mother's fine embroidery  
bought you sweet pastries,  
how this is what you now remember,  
what your father tried to show you,  
as he lifted you to his shoulders  
and spoke with integrity  
to the passing faces, how he lifted you  
higher than his own great hope,  
to let you see further than this tangle  
of culture, to let you find some pattern  
that cannot be destroyed, that still has  
value, more than cheap religious icons,  
those brief garlands of thorns, how such  
vines did not hold color, or any find  
fragrance, as they gave up their memory  
of purpose, forgetting how to flower.

## **Photograph, 1944**

*For my parents*

My father had not yet  
gone to war  
when this photograph  
was taken,  
his skin darker  
that the pale uniform  
he wears.  
He is standing by a girl  
from Kansas,  
my mother,  
half her face  
shadowed  
as if by shyness.  
Her simple dress,  
gathered at the waist,  
is printed with flowers  
I've always thought  
lavender,  
though the picture  
is washed clean  
of any color.  
She wears a locket,  
so small I've never noticed  
until now, as all her jewelry  
is hidden  
in cotton-lined boxes  
in the drawers  
of her dark bedroom furniture.  
They are standing  
on my great-grandmother's farm.  
There is hardly any grass  
in the yard  
and the metal frame  
of a windmill seems to turn  
only to stir dust,  
the sky a gritty white. The corner of the house,

the weathered clapboard  
lines, fade  
into a background of light.  
I hardly know  
my parents' past.  
When I show you this picture,  
you turn away,  
knowing the difficult years  
that were ahead,  
the way trouble like dust,  
covers our lives  
so that we can't keep up.  
It settles on our clothes  
and all through our house.  
It settles on the place  
where they stand,  
a place empty and flat.  
Maybe we shouldn't  
be able to see  
too far down any road  
or landscape.  
But look, they are smiling  
at whoever is taking  
this picture, someone  
who might have been jealous,  
someone turning away.

## Sweet Like Funeral Cake

Metal spoons scrape  
on the neighbor's plates.

Conversations, worn  
as old clothes, have all been saved.

My mother's soft voice breaks.  
*We have all that we need for today.*

My nephew builds a castle.  
The blocks fall with a clatter.

We stop our talk.  
Then look away.

The flag is a folded  
triangle on the buffet.

We remember the past  
with kindness

as the fragile,  
quick-cut blooms fade,

sweet and short-lived  
as my Aunt's funeral cake.

## What Is Left is Music

*An elegy for my parents, Joe and Lorna Perry*

1.

One verse followed another –  
a discography of affections,  
the chaos of music and love  
bound together in a rusty  
spiral composition book,  
songs sketched, then mended,  
stained with coffee rings –  
one line penciled in, an afterthought,  
a collaboration, a life of revision.  
A crude alphabet of guitar chords  
above my mother's careful script –  
whole notes, half notes –  
they rise, float, sink, a flurry of ideas,  
his, hers, improvised, then practiced,  
filling the hollow of our house,  
filling my head with lyric scraps –  
the image of my mother's open arms  
holding an ivory accordion  
as if it were a needy child –  
the odd breath of its fits and folds,  
how my mother seemed burdened  
to carry the oddity around –  
Scotch-Irish, Polish, Creole-French ghosts.  
In that same frame, my father  
leans towards the 1966 Kodak Instamatic –  
relaxed and handsome, hands folded  
on the top side of a prized Gibson,  
and there I stand at six, a child  
at the podium of a Sear's sparkly snare,  
metal sticks of brushes open, lifted.

2.

The round discs slide  
from tight paper sleeves  
recordings stamped *Blank Audiodiscs*

by a hand-letter press, stamped  
with a Madison Avenue address in 1956.  
At the center in cursive ink  
is a working title they confessed:  
*I Will Love You Anyway.*  
I guess it was forty years ago,  
no, longer still.  
Would not memory play best –  
even scratched?  
How does one prepare for resurrection –  
even one as temporary as this?  
We place the past on the worn turntable felt.  
Artifact greets artifact. And I,  
feeling old myself, lean in –  
begin to cup my hands around the sound  
of my mother's young voice,  
the way we shelter burning candles on a cake,  
make a wish as the wax quickly wears.  
But then we face that sad long scratch –  
And their voices fades away.  
But I am left, to remember the hospital's  
harsh ring – the phone calls of whispers,  
phrasing that sounds off-key, a voice  
that breaks.  
Every clipped obituary prose is both a call –  
and response that is hard to bear.  
His, then, in a handful of years, hers.

3.

I hold my breath as the record spins,  
and the silence settles in my shoulders,  
the familiar dull ache of grief,  
remembering at first the stark graveside dirge  
that gripped our throats in its tight fist,  
as we took our seats, a polite audience  
gathered around a quilt of funeral bouquets  
we watched as others folded things away  
like a veteran's flag  
with no wind left in the blanket,  
or any of our instruments for praise.  
We held our words, as those we loved  
were lowered into cut clay.  
The quieted tambourine of my childhood  
sat in my lap, a grief that takes decades to shake.  
So suddenly, my mother's young voice  
translates *surprise*.  
I listen, reach inside my life's pocket,  
a worn gesture, a habit of clutching  
the cotton handkerchief of despair  
the way others reach for a rosary bead,  
cold coin or filtered cigarette.  
And my fingers find the smooth artifacts,  
the warm rosin of three Fender guitar picks,  
a trinity I went searching for  
the day my father passed.  
I wanted to hold on to something,  
something he once held – to rattle and click,  
turning each smooth corner end to end –  
because in the end, that's exactly what we do,  
turn our house upside down  
looking for something we thought we lost –  
but there, spinning at the center of the room,  
round and round as the moon  
in each of their poems, my late mother  
belts out her own jazz, nothing that was ever written down,  
or would be reproduced again, like any moment  
when we let go of the past and begin to live,  
and so I lean further in, glance at your astonished face,

and find myself fingering my thoughts for  
the perfect word, because *grief* no longer works,  
no longer fits inside my pocket  
starched, folded and monogrammed,  
as we begin to rise, to move, to make  
our smallest gestures of praise,  
freed by the music that remains.

## Watching Ron Howard's *Apollo 13*

Geologists loved the cold compost  
of the moon. A conglomerate  
picked apart in search of chlorophyll,  
a hint of water.

This movie contains elements  
of our childhood, a fascination  
with wings and sky, with Ron Howard  
who had a dream.

This astronaut's son could be him,  
meaning Opie, the boy we watched  
fish every day with his Dad.  
All boys, we once believed, want to sit  
in the hammock of the moon, dangle  
a line into the sea of galaxy.

You watch with me and annotate  
each scene. The mother in the nursing home  
is Ron Howard's. In real life.  
She is trying to get better reception  
on her vintage TV. She lives to watch  
the world change. She looks to me  
like Mayberry's Aunt Bea.

Tonight, everything becomes familiar.  
Everything holds something else.  
The astronaut's cabin is a vase  
of oxygen that blooms in their lungs.  
My hand in yours, as we ration affection,  
breathe in scarcity, defy gravity.

I remind you I have a son, how you cannot  
see me clearly without that lens. This movie  
is really his. I recall the small bright white  
rockets, his carpeted crash sites, pieces  
I picked up daily, small American flags

and landing gear he liked to plant.  
Dime store toys came a dozen to the bag.

Once, when weeding the garden,  
I came across the stars  
where he had explored and claimed.  
There, among the monkey grass, artifacts.  
Metaphors turn up.

This troubles you, just like love  
troubles the astronaut's wife. She hesitates  
to arrive at the launch site, to wave,  
knowing she could become a widow  
with no grave to weed.

We watch wrapped up in old questions –  
What would we do  
if we were pacing the clock in Houston,  
or three homesick men in a chariot;  
or the footnote of a man infected  
with survivor's guilt; or the mother  
telling a story within a story to her son  
whose footed flannels are covered  
in a field of stars that can't be counted?

## Farm Dedication

The barn leans in to our idea  
that life is an open field.  
Here, where bluebirds catch the fly  
of winged pests. Here,  
where the land will once again  
be picked  
with the shovel's edge,  
and later with our eyes.  
We will learn to search for what is ripe.  
We can imagine holding summer squash,  
a Cherokee purple tomato, a garland  
of red runner beans in our trellis of arms.  
We, who have tended to live apart,  
will become infatuated  
with the green onion stalk.  
We dip it gently into the salt  
of our satisfaction. Taste and see.  
Taste and see – a brief benediction  
we sing, a method of science  
we rightly praise.  
Our shalom – our peace – is an open field,  
but also the passion flower that coils  
and blooms at the narrowing edge of pin oak,  
poplar, sweet gum and elm.  
May we each come and go from here with the gift  
of play and pleasure –  
exploring this place like children.  
Collecting their metaphors of sandstone,  
the wild turkey's feather, the snake's  
shed skin. Artifacts. Memories. Treasure.  
May we each dig deeper,  
to find shards of health in our remnant.  
The wise warn this is not work for the weary.  
Slow work it is to wait upon the reach of vine,  
the taste of corn, the okra's fragrant rose.  
Doesn't it take patience to watch any quilt  
of clay and compost straw unfold? –

or the barn of history to get its mending?  
This barn will always lean and need forgiveness.  
Though bent, though weathered  
it is offered once again as shelter,  
as it long ago gathered up the nearby slope  
of trees as a scaffolding of rafters, to shelter  
the silver queen, the ass, the grass of hay,  
the gleaming atlas jars of glass, even dry  
seeds that hold a sermon in their frailty.

## Seam Allowance

The edge is not the edge,  
but close,  
as close as a finger  
between stitch and fray,  
between an empty pocket,  
spare change.

A needle is in the arm  
of the Singer, our machine  
is set, allows the margins  
their error. The patterns  
shift with improvise.

On plaid planes, tight weaves,  
breadth of broadcloth, mitered muslin,  
angles, alliteration,  
homonyms all get pinned down,  
pressed hard, ironed.

There are flaws in any pattern,  
a selvedge, salvage,  
selfish and salvation, one pattern  
leads to another. "Cut here"  
we are commanded with an icon.

We sharpen the scissors.  
Darts curve around us,  
dull hooks reach for their eyes,  
all arrows point to flesh,  
to a body of ideas. How easily  
tissue, paper patterns tear  
and will. Fabric has a face,  
a facing, an opposite side,  
a usefulness.

The vintage hand knows how  
to smooth and place the parts,  
a puzzle, a body of work,  
a lost art. We spread things out  
on the table of altar cloth,  
all alterations come with cost,

the beauty of our fits and darts,  
the matriarch's tan tissue, a layer  
of skirts in a collage. We skirt  
around the truth, the edge,  
the change of hem lines,  
the poetry of hymns, hem and haw,  
and hum of machines in our mind.  
*His* becomes *hers* and *hers* vs. *his*  
We measure twice and cut loose  
a world we wear and fold away,  
hand down as *hand-me-downs*,  
a world we pin down  
at the pressure points, our mouth  
full of pearl tops on quiet pins  
the ones others drop, we listen for.  
Apprentices, listen now:  
The edge is not the edge,  
but close.

## The Mending

You go back  
where the land  
holds your family  
where the land  
holds your memory  
like a grave  
stone marker

where your last  
living uncle  
shows you the barn's  
slow suffering,  
a history  
he must tell  
someone

since the bank  
knows his number  
and cash is only  
worn green paper  
not the color  
of his crops  
not the color  
of tobacco.

He takes  
his hammer  
and mends  
the barn boards  
as you talk.  
Dust falls  
from the rafters  
from his fist's  
even pounding

and he tells you  
arthritis

holds his own  
bones together  
like that nest  
of dirt dabbers  
keeps the old  
boards from falling  
and he scrapes  
away the hollow  
mud houses  
of those winged  
dark wasps.

It is not  
how you remember  
from the stories  
of your father  
about a place where  
children scattered  
from the house  
every morning

looking for  
their future  
in a blue sky  
over farmland,  
or in the power  
of the tractor,  
that like brothers  
they fought over

longing to turn  
the fields  
into a new season,  
never able to  
imagine that green  
could hold a horror  
though they would  
find their way  
through jungles  
in the country

of Vietnam

where they lost  
their belief  
in the ground's  
firm message  
as they saw it  
swell with water  
and the festering  
of bodies

while back home  
in Ohio, the barn's  
boards began  
rotting, began  
their own first dying.

This is what  
he must show you,  
how a place can  
remember,  
how a man  
bears more burdens  
than the ache  
in his back,

how the fields  
have their story,  
how they must  
lie fallow,  
must stay quiet  
to complete  
their healing,

how he, too,  
is longing  
for his own  
best season,  
when he can rest  
from the labor

of all that he has  
planted,  
of all that he has  
damaged,  
of all that he has  
mended.

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## VITA

Laurie Perry Vaughen is the recipient of the James Dickey Award for poetry and the *Greensboro Review's* Amon Liner Award for Best Poem of the Year. Her poems have also appeared in *Lullwater Review* at Emory University, *Chattahoochee Review* in Atlanta, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Other Side*, *Kalliope: a Journal of Women's Literature and Art*, and *Poetry Miscellany*. Poet Joy Harjo selected Vaughen as a finalist for the Sue Sanial Elkind Poetry Prize.

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