

2015

## Fire in the Garden

Troy A. Myers MFA  
*University of Southern Maine*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Myers, Troy A. MFA, "Fire in the Garden" (2015). *All Theses & Dissertations*. 108.  
<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd/108>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

# FIRE IN THE GARDEN

---

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

TROY A. MYERS

---

2015

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2015


We hereby recommend that the thesis of Troy A. Myers entitled *Fire in the Garden* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
Jeanne Marie Beaumont

Advisor

  
Theodore Deppe

Reader

  
Justin Fussing

Interim Director

Accepted

 Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences  
Manuel Avalos

## ABSTRACT

*Fire in the Garden*, by Troy A. Myers, is a collection of poems primarily confessional in nature, that deal with changes during mid-life: moving to a new house, having a son go to college and the resulting pressures of the empty nest, and the subsequent abandonment of the marriage by one partner. The poems generally proceed in a chronological order although there is some movement in time, especially in the final section. The biographical experiences are often accompanied by landscape details taken from the garden and yard of the new house where the speaker lives. These landscape images are often used as symbols or emblems although sometimes they set tone or are provided merely for the sake of beauty (not unfrequently an image or set of images will perform more than one of these duties). While many of these poems are lyrical and focused on the immediate meditations and emotions of the speaker, some explore larger metaphysical questions as well. Most of the poems are in free verse, but a few are written in meter and make use of rhyme. Sound is important here throughout, and sound conventions like alliteration or assonance or near rhyme appear in most of these poems.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Jeanne Marie Beaumont, whose passion for and belief in Stonecoast and the potential of my own work convinced a terrified me to attend. Jeanne also served as my mentor for two semesters, and while my personal life became more arduous over the last eighteen months, she was both merciful and encouraging. Her skill as a reader is unmatched in my experience, and many of these poems exist as they do because of her suggested edits.

I would also like to thank Ted Deppe. Ted served as my mentor my first semester, and he was a perfect fit. He has a clear ear and eye and a noble and giving heart. My time in Ireland with Ted and Annie Deppe was one of the highlights of my time in this program. They are genuine souls.

I thank Tony Barnstone as well. He led my first workshop, and his positive comments on those first poems I will never forget. Annie Finch, Alexandra Oliver, and Cait Johnson were also early, encouraging voices.

The fact that I am in an MFA program is the fault of Jeff Knorr, my best friend and an accomplished poet and a colleague of mine at Sacramento City College. Before Jeff suggested the idea and told me about low residency, I had never considered an MFA.

Lastly and most importantly, I thank every one of The Original Firsties, my class at Stonecoast. They are an exceptionally talented group and beautiful in every sense of that word: giving, loving, endearing, and, most of all, nurturing. We all came to Maine afraid of being alone, afraid of rejection, afraid of failure. Out of necessity, we chose to build a family, and we have become inextricably close. My love to each of them forever.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	1
Thesis Poems	
I	
Leslie, 1983	17
Maples at Dusk	18
June	19
New House	20
A Mind at Night	21
Death in the Mountains	22
The Sea Is a Long Love	23
Jasmine	24
Short Sale in a Dry Season	25
Holly	26
New Year's Eve	27
The Work We Know	28
Snowtinis	29
No Meadow	30
Night	31
Depression	32

MFA	33
Empty Nest	34
Race Point	35
An MFA Student's Yard in Winter	36
II	
Poem of Separation	38
Spring	39
Nightmare	40
Grass and Fire	41
Sleeping Separate	42
Fire in the Garden	43
Summer into Spring	44
Date Night	45
Long Beach	46
At Wentworth Place, July 22 <sup>nd</sup> , 2014	47
Flight	48
Hydrangea	49
Astrifiammante	50
Drought Winter	51

II	
A Poem of Approach	54
Clearing Beds	55
Daughter, Rise	56
Freel Peak	57
At the Bluegrass Festival, Golden Gate Park, 2013	58
Lavender	59
First Kiss, Long Beach, 1996	61
Icare	62
Notes	63
Bibliography	64



## PREFACE

*Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough.*

Whitman, "The Sleepers"

I discovered poetry as an art form in high school when I took a mandatory eleventh grade American Literature course. Reading Emily Dickinson and Carl Sandburg, I knew I had to write back, dialogue with their voices, and the next year I was appointed the co-editor of the creative magazine at my high school. It was, for me, early success. I found my high school annual in the garage a couple of years ago, just before I came to Stonecoast, and, over and over, I found handwritten notes from students in my creative writing class: *Keep writing. Your stuff is the best I've ever read. I want to read your book someday.*

They were an easy and inexperienced audience; I am glad those poems are lost! Unfortunately, that promising high school writing period ended without any direction. No one showed me how to continue my education or how to find writing communities and new mentors. Many of the students in that class went to four-year colleges, but not me. One reason for that was that home life was very difficult at that time. My parents split when I was fourteen; my father remarried when I was sixteen, and the transition was tumultuous. My relationship with him has never fully recovered. My father and stepmother actually moved away when I was seventeen, and I stayed in Long Beach without any financial or emotional support. Nearly as bad, my first poetic mentor, the teacher for both my American Literature course and my Creative Writing class, made

advances on my girlfriend of more than three years just after she graduated high school. She became confused, and his behavior (he was 38) ended my friendships with both of them. Her family had been my only support, and this was a catastrophic loss.

With all that chaos and uncertainty, it is not surprising that I developed terrible anxiety as a teenager. I did not realize at the time that I was suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. That is a horrifying illness, and I thought, tearing my way through psychology textbooks as a teenager, that I was developing a psychosis and was doomed to a life of insanity. Amazingly enough to me now, I had a sense that I had to go to college, and I walked to Long Beach City College, just a couple miles from my home, and enrolled when it was still free to do so (had it cost money, I would likely not have gone). Although I missed a lot of classes because of panic attacks and anxiety, I managed to finish my freshman and sophomore years in five semesters. Then, when I was too afraid to transfer to the local university, my mother, who had moved back to Long Beach to house my brother and me and was working twelve-hour days as a clerk, pushed me. Even though I was nineteen, she went to the university campus and got me admitted; she also signed me up for financial aid. Had she not done so, I might now be working in a warehouse reading poetry on my lunch break.

I attended Cal State Long Beach for a few semesters as an English major, but my obsessions and panic came back at a debilitating level when a relationship with a girl got jittery, and I dropped out for two and a half years. My '72 Duster broke down, and I spent most of my time out of college trying to rebuild the motor (without success). All told, it took me eight and a half years to complete my Bachelor's Degree. Also, I had a very spotty undergraduate record. I say I dropped out, but I actually flunked out because I was

too anxious to attend class, and I was only readmitted after some of the worst records were expunged with the help of a kind psychiatrist. Once I was readmitted, all I had left was major course work, and I vowed to earn straight A's, which I did. Before I finished my undergraduate work, I applied to the Master's Program in English at Long Beach State. Where else would I go? I was accepted based on my recent grades and a critical writing sample.

In my five semesters of graduate school I wrote seminar papers, yes, but little or no poetry. I produced a handful of poems in graduate school, but these were all turned down by the campus magazine with a short note that began "Dear Pote:" I was deeply hurt. I felt there was real fire in my lines; that my poems were different in a good way from those they did publish. But then, the Creating Writing program at Long Beach State in the late 80's was the center of the Bukowski cult, and I was memorizing sonnets by John Keats and love poems by e.e. cummings.

My short, first marriage, unhappy as it was, ended with a deep betrayal, and I wrote no poems for years until my cousin drowned while boating at night in the California Delta when I was around thirty. I wrote a few more about a year later when I began dating my second wife. I would like to find some of these although I think most are lost. I showed them to Gerald Locklin, a creative writing professor at Long Beach State where I was by then an adjunct instructor, and dear Gerry told me, "Send these out!" Not knowing what that meant, my little poems went to the biggest magazines in a single batch, and all were rejected. I felt that meant I could not write. I actually believed that. I knew nothing about the poetry market. As I have said many times since, the poetic canon is not the market.

After teaching as an adjunct five years in southern California (at two of those colleges, in the same classrooms I sat in as a terrified teenager), I came north to Sacramento to take a professorship at Sacramento City College, where I worked, raised a son, and put my wife through graduate school. We lived a decade in the snow country of the Sierra Nevada, and I have many lovely memories from that time. It would have been a good place to write, but I was not writing poetry. Then, in one of the strangest twists in my life, when I was 45 and my son went away to college, we moved down to the foothills and into a house with a sizable yard to garden. Out of nowhere, to process the difficult transition of the empty nest, I again began writing poems. For the first time I felt I had found a voice, a fluency that was cleaner than my earlier, clotted poems in which I had aimed for a level of compression someplace between Emily Dickinson and Dylan Thomas, and where I used dated language because I had read almost no contemporary poetry. What I had been reading was poetry out of the *Norton Anthologies* for my literature surveys when I have been lucky enough to have them. Interestingly, part of what drove this shift for me was reading Wendell Berry's *Openings* and James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break*, both given to me by my best friend and colleague Jeff Knorr. Nearly all those early "new house" poems, my middle-aged poems, revised, are in this thesis. At the same time, Jeff Knorr, a published poet with six books, told me about low-residency MFA programs, and I decided to apply to get a raise at work and to do something fun with Jeff. However, Jeff was named Sacramento's Poet Laureate and decided he was too busy to take on another graduate degree. I would have to go alone. Certain I would not be accepted, I applied to only two MFA programs. Both were in New England where I had never been; both were on the lower end in terms of cost, and both

seemed to be inviting and kind. That last part was very important for me. I chose Stonecoast because of the Irish residency (which I attended as a student) and because of the kind encouragements of Jeanne Marie Beaumont, the finest teacher I have ever known.

Once Stonecoast began, I had to keep writing, and as I had no established writing hygiene and almost no exposure to contemporary poetry, I did not even know what to write *about*. My first mentor, Ted Deppe, wanted five poems a month with at least three of those being new, and I decided, and how wise this turned out to be, to write five new poems for each packet and revise none. At first, I continued the project I began my first year in the new house, which was to write a series of poems about objects in my yard, what I would now call emblem poems, but what at the time I thought of as object or essence poems. My motivation was, unusual as this sounds, significantly Platonic. I have been teaching Plato, especially the *Symposium*, for almost twenty years to freshmen, and I remain fascinated by Plato's Theory of Forms. If the Forms exist, then the lavender bush in my yard, the jasmine plants, the night sky...all these are representative of some transcendent metaphysical Essence. I knew Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* well, and in the same way that Emerson sees Nature, the world of natural phenomenon, as an emanation, a living Emblem, one could say, for the Divine, I believed nature, always a source of spiritual comfort for me, could be used as a set of keys, a kind of roadmap, for metaphysical growth. I also believed that that process could occur *in poems*. Writing this, I still think this is a good idea. My first "new house" poem, "Jasmine," starts with planting jasmine bushes in soil so hard I could barely dig it out (that is the Sierra Nevada

foothills), but the poem quickly becomes a speculative metaphysics reaching somewhere into the country between Emerson and Plato. Or so I hope.

Besides my interest in exposing undergraduates to Plato, I teach Robert Frost every fall, and I came up with another idea to manage my five poems a month—use Frost as a model! I decided to write about planting, gardening, and miscellaneous yard work and aim for elevated, lyric endings (I take this last from many poets; Frost certainly provides the key to entire poems in his endings, but he often does so casually, quietly). So, I came to my first Stonecoast workshop with poems like “Jasmine,” “Roses” (later “A Short Sale in a Dry Season”), “Holly,” and “Night.” What struck me about my first workshop was that no one but Tony Barnstone saw the Plato and the Emerson in the poetry; also, “Night,” which I thought was transparently about grief, was appreciated for its imagery and sound but understood without any human context whatsoever. Everyone wanted to know, where are the people in these poems? What is the speaker feeling? What is going on in his life? I was working with such abstractions in those early drafts that my emotional subtext remained hidden. In fairness, much of it was hidden from me also when I felt compelled, for no reason I understood, to write; the fact that “Night” was about my great sadness over my son moving to college only became apparent to me weeks after I wrote it.

My son’s first year at college, that first year in the new house, was one of great personal transition. It marks the beginning of the narrative that runs the length of my thesis, as all these poems but one, “The Sea Is a Long Love,” were written over the last four plus years in our Cameron Park home. The story begins with me, after ten years in a forest where nothing grows except 100-foot trees, marveling at the wonders of garden

plants and the fluid scents and sounds of the foothills. Then came another, completely unexpected and even more difficult twist. Just after I had processed, with some professional help, my empty nest transition, my wife, Stephanie, began her own change. Her experience has been much more dramatic, in some ways cataclysmic. After some hints I did not see at the time (but which appear in poems like “MFA” and “Empty Nest”) she told me, at the start of my second semester at Stonecoast, that she had to be separated. We lived apart in the same house for eight months before she moved out. I had been with her eighteen years. The shock and horror of that shift, coming from a person I thought was one of the most stable I had ever known, floods the poetry for the rest of this thesis. It *is* the narrative of this manuscript; it is also a continuing story. After eight months she moved out, and about three months ago asked for a divorce. I have no doubt, after standing by her as a friend for more than a year while she made up her mind, that she means it. The marriage I thought would be part of my life until it ended will soon be no more.

The fact that most of this thesis is about our marriage and its end still strikes me as remarkable. I was very clear when I came to Stonecoast: I would not write confessional poems. I remember, at my second residency and just before my wife told me how she felt, I stood with David Mura in the tavern at the Haraseeket Inn, arguing whether poetry should contain personal details from the poet’s life. I actually asked him, it amazes me now, “Do you think it is okay to share personal material in poems?” David immediately responded, “Of course.” It was a serious question for me. I kept thinking back to Frost, who shared so little of what *really* happened on the farm in New Hampshire where he wrote his first two books. David argued that Frost did write about

personal tragedy, and he countered with “Home Burial,” a poem about the death of a child on a farm. But I pointed out that Frost does not use the first person in that poem, and the wife in the poem is not named Elinor. Frost did not document his tragedies in the first person (even if the sadness and pragmatism resulting from those traumas underlie his entire body of work). Of course, Frost is writing in the early twentieth century, and few were writing poems with intimate details. I am sure Frost took not just the mundane activities of the farm (mowing, apple picking, birch swinging) but also tragic pieces from his own life. I was so impressed with his decorum that I was not sure I could do anything different even though I am writing a century later. I actually felt like it would be aesthetically weak for me to use personal material even if poets I admired when I came to Stonecoast, like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, do so with great force. Perhaps I was just afraid. My recent desire to move in the opposite direction is why I want so much personal material in my preface. Why not get these things out there?

Also, as Jaed Coffin says, “Ninety-nine percent of success in writing is not quitting.” It helps me to reflect on the hardships I have already survived. If I am nothing else, I am tenacious. Also, I have come to realize that confessional material is healing for many who read it. Talking about my struggles with mental illness, which I have never, ever done in public in any form, and sharing the betrayals in my life that have not destroyed my spirit, this can only be good for others.

With Stephen Motika as my mentor for that second semester, I again had to write five poems a month, only now from the back bedroom, once our son’s room, while my wife locked herself in the room where we used to sleep, talk, and make love. It helps me to write about these events, which is reason enough to do it. But I found I could not write



about *anything else*; my emotions, day to day, were so powerful. And so I began a series of “Poems of Separation”; I think I got to eleven before I gave each a title. Each poem chronicles an interaction, conversation, or event from the separation. I will not say what here is biographical and what is fiction, but most of these poems were written just after actual events. Details have been left out to protect my wife and our son and his family should any of these poems ever be read.

Two of my friends in my class predicted it early on in the program, but to my own surprise, I have produced a largely confessional thesis.

Most of the poems in *Fire in the Garden* are in the first or second person, but some I shifted into third. Why? Donald Hall does the same thing in *Without*, his memoir-book of poems written during and after Jane Kenyon’s illness and death. It seems artistically useful to shift point of view in a manuscript of this length; it provides variety for the reader. For some poems, a little narrative distance feels appropriate. For others, the first person was necessary to give the emotions in the poem full life. I can only guess at Hall’s motivation, but it seems to be the case for his book as well. Some of Hall’s most personal poems shift to third person. But not all. It is the same with this thesis.

One of the questions I came to Stonecoast with was, what techniques are available to end poems well? I felt that in a couple of the poems I brought to Stonecoast (and I had a hard time coming up with ten for the admissions packet; some of those were fifteen years old) I ended with power; “Short Sale in a Dry Season” and “Jasmine” come to mind. But I had no idea *how* that happened, and I wanted to gather a basic toolkit for poetic closure. I could list sound conventions (assonance, alliteration) or metrical feet; why not learn how good poems end?

That led to my third-semester project, a critical paper of nearly 50 pages, where I explore the value of poetic closure. I relied heavily on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's book, *Poetic Closure*, and I looked at Lyn Hejinian's arguments against poetic closure altogether. I learned that, for me, some closural strategy, some setting of expectation and resolution, is essential for a poem's success. Closure can be weak, it can be strong (contrary to some opinions over the last century) but it must be present for a work of art, especially language art, to communicate.

I also made a short survey of particular techniques. Smith had already done much of this work, but I saw how Frost uses a single sentence or phrase to force us to go back and reread the entire poem. This is true in "A Late Walk," in "After Apple-Picking," in "Stars," and in many of his other poems. I saw poets end on the evocative image, a popular trend in the last century. Some successful poems end with a line of dialogue, or a question. It was a fascinating project, and I am glad I engaged such an important craft question in my own writing.

Has that research changed how my poems end? Maybe. Honestly, endings in my poems, like beginnings, sounds, and particular images, come from some trans-conscious place as I believe is true for most art. But a further awareness of my options and, more importantly, the understanding that the best poems raise particular expectations, establish tensions in the body, tensions which are resolved in part or at least addressed in the closing, has caused me to edit differently. I now look for such expectations. Did I have these in successful poems before? Yes. But now I will try and insert them if they are missing. At least, I continue to learn and reflect.

Most of the poems in this book are technically free verse although I tend to slip in and out of iambs. My first assignment at Stonecoast for my Rhythms of Poetry workshop was to write in the four most common metrical feet. I learned (I was so nervous) that I have a knack for meter. I haven't written in it since, or at least not pure meter, but I haven't forgotten that I can. I do find in poems from before and after Stonecoast that I often use the iambic foot. Sometimes, as in "No Meadow," the poem begins in a shaky iambic and then closes with a purely iambic line or two. I like that build, the gradual increase toward a consistent music and rhythm. Another poem in this thesis, "Death in the Mountains," was written in pure trochees and then broken up a bit for the version I have here. The mentor for this thesis, Jeanne Marie Beaumont, tells me I should write in form and use rhythm and even rhyme more. Since I was, I believe, technically the first person in Annie Finch's online poets' community (although I have been too busy to explore there) I am pretty sure some formal work lies ahead for me. Rhythm matters to me. As a lifetime Frost fan, form matters as well. There is an elegance to all of it that has been too much neglected.

Rhyme is another thing. Since high school I've been impressed by how T.S. Eliot uses rhyme in, say, "Preludes." Which is whenever he feels he needs it to move the music of the stanzas, not necessarily in a regular scheme. In this thesis, I have two poems where I use rhymes in a pattern, both true and slant, "Flight" and "Summer into Spring." It is something I'd like to do more. I have a bit of an ear for slant rhyme. *Sound*, in total, is very important for me, including, as I've said, the iambic foot. I can find end near-rhymes, embedded near-rhymes, assonance, alliteration, and iambs in almost all of these poems. I recognize these sound conventions in "Short Sale in a Dry Season,"

“Astrifiammante,” “A Mind at Night,” “No Meadow,” and “Leslie, 1983” among others. The music of the words is significant. I believe I acquired this taste reading Emily Dickinson as an undergraduate and chanting Dylan Thomas in the shower during graduate school.

Compression in poems still matters to me, and most of all, a sense of crafted language. I was fascinated in the early 90’s by some of the discourse found in the works of the Russian Formalists. Poetic language must be de-familiarized, estranged, acted on with a kind of aesthetically driven violence. Emily Dickinson is an excellent example of someone who does this well, but it is hard for me to think of a poet I like who does not do something like this. Poetic language should be changed and changed again, and for millennia in the West this was achieved through meter, syllabic pattern, regular alliteration, figurative language, and/or rhyme. It was also accomplished through ballad structure or consistent forms like the sonnet or villanelle. The last century of free verse, powerfully dominated by the concrete image (itself a form of estrangement for the quotidian) has produced many fine poems. The confessional poets of the last sixty years, who placed private material in poetry on a level that would have never occurred to Shakespeare or Milton or even Yeats, threw wide open the doors of what is considered suitable material for poems, but also, in some way, of how poets can use the writing process for personal change.

These are all admirable poetic achievements of the last century. But when contemporary poems become talky, estrangement, and hence poetic power, are lost. Alteration to everyday speech, the pleasure and resonance we experience in form, compression, and repeated sounds, this is inherent in Western poetry from Homer to

Spenser to Wyatt to Eliot. Writing this, I reflect on how little formal work is in this thesis. Of course, I am just beginning.

I have heard nearly every Stonecoast faculty say this: there is no substitute for time in the chair. I learned at Stonecoast that my earlier dire assessments of my writing, based on a handful of publication rejections, was not the final word on my abilities as a writer. I remember reading my first poem in any workshop ever, the first summer with Tony Barnstone; it was “Jasmine.” I could tell by the way he was looking at me that he thought there was something to the poem. He said some kind things as he made suggestions for improvement. I remember Cait Johnson pulling me aside after one of the first Rhythms of Poetry workshops, this was just before Tony’s, and telling me she would help me anyway that she could, that I had a knack for meter. Alexandra Oliver, co-leading that workshop, sat down briefly at lunch with me that first week and told me the same. And what did I do? I walked out into the brush a little ways from the Stone House and I sobbed. I called Jeff Knorr and left a message on his machine, bawling. I was so stunned that anyone would find promise in my work. (Jeanne Marie had said nice things about my application packet, true, but she was recruiting me.) I thought up until that point that my very few attempts at publication and those rejections were the final word on my ability to write. It is hard for me to believe this now, but this story is true. I have a long way to go, yes, but as I told Ted Deppe once: now I sit at the bar with the poets.

I have taken much from Stonecoast. I am a member of The Original Firsties, and I lean so much on their affection and love. I “channeled” Dylan Thomas at the Follies just before Brady Kamphenkel did his fantastic impersonation of John Berryman. I went to Ireland and England, my first trips outside the country. Naturally, I met professional

writers. I learned craft. And this is especially important for this junior and state college boy: I attended one of the top low-residency MFA programs in the country yet experienced no pretension. I worked with faculty and classmates who attended Brown, Columbia, and UCLA. I began to read my poems for an audience. I have a new friend and sister in Chelsey Everest. Brady Kamphenkel and John Nelson will always be dear friends among so many others in my class. I am a lifetime member of the Stonecoast community. These are all enormous rewards, even if three-fourths of my MFA was spent under the shadow of the demise of my nearly nineteen-year marriage. But I know I must spend time writing, *in the chair*. If I do not, Stonecoast will have been just a wonderful memory, this thesis merely a stack of poems, some of which show promise, none of which are ever read. How easily I could slip into total obscurity forever. It is time for me to go into the larger world, to honor Stonecoast by having the courage and persistence to *send work out*. I end with this fact so that I do not forget it myself.

May those of you who read the poems in this thesis find some pleasure, some grace, some music, and, hopefully, some love.

*caritas supra cantae*  
*caritas supra musae*  
*caritas supra artis*

**I**



## LESLIE, 1983

I had coaxed Leslie for weeks to let me come.  
She was three years older  
and dressed the prep I ached to be.

One April night near an empty park  
she lay in the passenger seat,  
perfume warming on her throat  
as I stroked her body's long landscape:  
tight Levi's over lifting hips,  
a pink V-neck cashmere  
on a girl's white oxford.  
She pulled off her sweater  
and hung her bowtie  
from the rearview mirror.  
I unbuttoned and caressed until  
I reached her front-clasp bra,  
a pull and pinch, the fresh scent of skin,  
and warm breasts,  
faint-lit by distant porch lights,  
tumbled out like dough.

That night was the first time  
she held a man in her fingers  
through his spasm,  
my madras shirt-front damp  
from waist to collar,  
her eyes on mine in wonder.

At nineteen, I left Leslie without ceremony.  
*Take space*, I said, and never called her.

How can a girl give so fiercely,  
from the self's bright floor,  
and a boy, without thought, move on?

## MAPLES AT DUSK

As my first red sauce of fall heats on the stove,  
I take a light and knife to walk the yard for herbs.  
Our rosemary is thick and tipped  
with purple flowers, and the oregano is pale  
but gives an aromatic stem.  
When my hand is full, I turn toward the house.  
Under first stars, our maples loom red as blood.  
Only yesterday these trees were green with streaks of amber.  
Each year I forget the swiftness of their fire.

Twenty years ago this month I came home  
to a penciled note taped to the bathroom mirror,  
*do not try to contact me.*  
Holding that letter, I searched each room:  
cold bed sheets pulled onto the floor, a half-purged closet,  
pink plastic razors forgotten on the tub.  
I had chased her for five years, married her for three,  
and in a single hour she'd fled beyond all knowing.

My throat hardens as I watch the maples,  
their trunks outlined in the swollen moon,  
and I turn toward the warm-lit home  
I share with my second wife,  
whose breath has nurtured me  
in sleep for sixteen years.

Tonight, I could approach the closest trunk,  
lay my palm onto its bark to take its strength.  
But it is late, the air falls cold,  
the tree's green life draws down to its heart's dark core.

## JUNE

A week of clotted rain  
and now the first bright day.  
Lines of cumulus slide  
northeast beyond the ridge.  
Tomorrow will be warm,  
the jasmine sweet already.

In the foothills, summer settles quickly,  
and in two weeks will come  
the hottest hours:  
cherry laurel pungent in the yard,  
mint exploding quick as fire  
beside the jutting daisies.

Low, dry wind or none.

The sky a living fabric stretched  
beyond our human air.

## NEW HOUSE

In the mountains we locked  
only our doors at night.  
In the cedar-fragrant heat,  
our house slept unconcerned  
in the shadow of the wood.

Now, three thousand feet below,  
amidst the red branch of manzanita,  
the feathered splay of fennel,  
before bed we fasten every window  
even under summer's weight.

Whom do we fear will come?  
Why dread men more than darkness  
and the silence between trees?  
What have we done to live here?  
What would another do?

White lights in the yard, boxed gardens,  
high windows over trellised jasmine.  
From our sofa we can see, a hundred  
miles east, the long Sierra ridgeline  
dark as the sky in each of us.

## A MIND AT NIGHT

Insomnia lies beside me, whispering  
like a ghost, and I creep into the back  
bedroom to not disturb my wife.  
It is past midnight and a slender  
edge of frost outlines the window.  
Outside, in faint light, I see a hard  
sheen along the deck rail, the glint  
of crystals scattered on the grass.

The silence draws me, and I put on  
a fleece robe and shearling boots;  
as the dogs sniff and watch,  
I unlatch the slider and step out onto the deck.  
Our terrier slips toward the yard  
where a leaf-clump stiffens,  
and I am cautious of glazed patches  
on the boards as I choose a place to stand.

I look up, my breath a rhythmic steam:  
Orion spans as though a blue-white fire  
flares beyond a perforated depth.  
Rigel sears near zenith, and for a few  
seconds I stop breathing, awed by light  
which feels no awe: a mind at night  
is more textured than a cosmos,  
its tangled longings pierce beyond all stars.

## DEATH IN THE MOUNTAINS

Lightning hammers, arcing eastward,  
white fire splits the floor of heaven.

Hail and thunder drop like mountains  
over fir and incense cedar.

Half a mile from home  
we walk fast as boots can go  
into dark, electric air and terror.

Quick, quick we skirt the tallest trees,  
the ones most like to draw a current  
blasting flames and embers outward.  
Sleeping, we have felt the air and earth concuss  
and next day found a treetop  
lying blackened, five or ten feet shorn,  
a charcoal seam extending  
twenty meters down the trunk.  
But never have we felt the crackle in our hair,  
as, bare below a ripping sky,  
we brush death's incandescent hem.

Shrieking wind and hail cascading,  
breathless, vision tearing, linking arms  
and looking down

we run.

## THE SEA IS A LONG LOVE

We walk the bluffs just past  
the gray-wood barn;  
below us green force lifts,  
turns, and buckles white  
to slam the graveled sand.

*Isn't this where we cut  
back towards the car?* you ask.  
I am sure of farther on.

We move one before the other  
even on the wider paths,  
*like hikers*, you say,  
*or mountain people in the Philippines.*  
We turn our heads to speak,  
voices faint with repetition.

Forty minutes later  
through a meadow  
too tall to see the trail  
we backtrack;  
on every side wildflowers  
burn like stars,  
yellow, white, or blue.  
On each wave of air,  
the musk of damp grass,  
sea-bent pine,  
the ocean's fleck and breath,  
the fragrance of the floral constellations.

## JASMINE

*When a man loves the beautiful, what does he desire?*

*Symposium*

Two jasmine breathe  
over heavy, new drying earth;  
it took half a day to sink both,  
my fingers raw from endless rocks,  
my work boots red and sodden.

Below, the unmovable stone.

The late September air, pale and hot,  
is dense with the hammer of dragonflies,  
bees fierce on the lavender.  
Drawn by forceful sun,  
the sleep of eucalyptus falls  
across the yard in quiet coil.  
A hummingbird darts  
against a static sky,  
her frenetic wings a constant sound.

It is late for jasmine.  
Fall and winter  
we will water between rains,  
tie tender shoots to lattice,  
watch the full moon rise on the ridge, rise again,  
while we wait hungry  
for June's urgent blossom burst,  
the white flower breaking  
open in the shadow,  
its frenzied scent proclaiming  
earth below the earth we see.



## SHORT SALE IN A DRY SEASON

It is six months since the roses had water  
and longer still since they were pruned.  
Blossoms yawn,  
disperse dry and dark as leather,  
petals layer, crisp  
beneath red beetles' feet,  
so deep we cannot see earth's color.

The garden, abandoned with the home,  
contracts in windless, summer sun.

We know that to repair such isolation  
the shears must come in heavy,  
and so we cut deep down the stalks,  
pull brown-leaf stems  
from green, still-living fiber.

Wearing gloves, we stack the dead.

After sunset, sipping cups  
of cold, filtered water,  
we listen as the sprinkler lines  
chit and stutter.  
Scent of wet petals,  
new-raked earth.  
A sacred hour.

We let the timer run.

The moon lifts early.  
It rises on blue, faint as vapor.  
The soil settles black, fragrant,  
beads bright and heavy  
on the low-clipped stems.

A faint wind stirs, builds.  
As we sleep, roses murmur.

## HOLLY

Last fall we clipped the holly to the earth,  
pitched layers of shredded cedar bark above,  
the narrow below the maples red and clean.

But it wasn't long before all eight shrubs  
came back, green and sharp,  
growing formless, arcing and erratic.

Pushing bark and two years' leaves aside,  
beneath the first defiant wrack  
of stems I found the dark wood stump,

clean-sawn long before, four inches wide,  
by all appearance dead but for the jutting  
sticks of holly. And so I brought the hose,

a sharp-nosed shovel, pruners longer than a forearm.  
Through streams of clay, I stomped, cut and levered,  
tugged, dug, wet to my biceps.

A back grows tight pulling holly:  
feed stalks curve away,  
the tap root tunnels low. And yet no chaos

has its place below the April maples,  
whose narrow wrists rise,  
lit with pins of flame,

toward the dust-blue firmament.

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

After sliced yams baked  
in butter and Kahlua,  
after bone-in ham in its shell  
of sugar and powdered clove,  
after collards fried in bacon, onion,  
vinegar and red pepper,  
and after Syrah and Zin and ruby port,  
I push back from the table,  
gather up the empties  
and walk out into the night.

The glass clinks and thuds  
as I drop bottles in the bin.  
It's cold, perhaps thirty,  
and after a day in a warm, moist  
kitchen, such clarity is welcome.  
Inside the house, laughter  
and conversation continue,  
but I taste exquisite truths  
in the dry breath of December.

## THE WORK WE KNOW

We rake twice each autumn.  
Once after the maples drop  
their red leaves soft as cloth  
in layers along the drive.  
Once after the yellow petals  
from the elm are piled fence to fence  
across the garden stones.

The leaves neither sink for us,  
nor wait. And yet this is the work  
we know: clear a tract of ground  
beneath the leaden blue of heaven;  
open earth to reach the roses  
before winter's air drives low.

## SNOWTINIS

Four feet of snow and three days without power. The plows have scraped  
the mountain roads to ice. Two jugs of milk are buried on the deck.

We have no land line, and storm gusts have dropped the cells.

Deciding against murder or divorce, we pull on boots,  
gloves and hats and take flashlights for the dusk.

Shoveling the walk, we move into the white

haze between noon and darkness,

powdered ground crunching,

our calves dull from

napping by

oil lamps.

We know

the road,

left turn,

and hike

less than

a mile to

the green

A - frame

on the right

where Allen is

about to invent *snowtinis*:

snowflakes settled into glasses left outside:

gin, vermouth, orange bitters; laughter, cards, a shimmering stove fire.

## NO MEADOW

*(for a student)*

There can be no meadow  
red with dahlia,  
no blanket and blue sundress,  
no cool Sancerre and salad,  
your long white limbs  
flecked by sun through branches.  
My fingers cannot move on fingers  
as your eyes, pale  
as river water,  
widen with the story of your day.  
I will not caress  
your belly's warm descent,  
nor savor musk of skin,  
nor distant bake of sage  
in summer's rainless air.

No landscape waits for us,  
no long grassland in the sun.

These words grow neither love nor sky.

These words grow neither love nor sky.

## NIGHT

Late dusk in early autumn,  
quiet house, my wife asleep,  
den windows all slid open.

The air beyond the house is still  
save for a distant dog,  
the strong throats of the jays.

Slowly, the night sky enters.  
High bands of white and blue  
fall to inchoate smoke-gray.

House lights, vague through trees,  
appear across the valley floor.  
Violet presses, sudden,

and then the landscape blurs.  
The darkness in the valley  
brings no fear, though the ridgelines

even now dissolve,  
the air between them deep as unlit water.  
Jupiter flickers, solitary.

Natural as sleep or lifting stars,  
the tremendous night must come.

## **DEPRESSION**

Eight stark weeks since  
my son left for college.

A stone absence.

My thoughts disperse  
from the concussion still.

The first day, tears.

Then dread as all the threads  
of meaning in me parted.

Now, mornings, in cold light,

I rise quick-pulsed,  
my wife's breath low.



## MFA

*They are yours, and be the measure...*

Frost

The windows of the sky are dull tonight,  
the mist diminishes, and the garden lifts  
its cedar scent to heaven's edge. We walk  
along the slender rows in drizzling rain,

the kale and lettuce thick with water, and speak  
of work, of home, of my admission to  
an MFA. This last brings quiet. Stars,  
beyond us in their canyons, simmer.

A wind cuts up the slope below the house,  
disturbs the roses, shakes the holly oak, and rain  
increases: drops grow fat and bounce with hail;  
we feel their splatter even in our hoods.

*Let's get inside*, you say. And as you turn,  
I take a kiss, or nearly, your lips slick  
in darkness. Then, we rush into the house,  
and, once out of our jackets, boil some tea.

*I start guitar next week*, you say, *with John.*  
*And hula, something for the weeknight hours.*  
I sip a scalding cup and smile, the rain  
now rising, gray as stone and from the west.

## **EMPTY NEST**

This is the silence of neglected rooms.

No one but the other  
to negotiate the winter day to day.

Not another human breath but ours  
in this stone-floor house.

The holly oak outside my window  
strikes dark, bare lines against a weighted sky.

The thin fingers of the grape cane  
are hollow as straw, as memory.

Our son's boyhood dog wanders  
through our kitchen, deaf.

His white flanks wasting.

## RACE POINT

Cape rain, warm in July, rinsing the air  
of heat, and wind leaning off the sea,  
brushing sand and long grass back  
along the Race Point road.  
In swishing coats, we hike its outward line.

Four days since I drove from Maine  
to Logan to find you after weeks of separation.  
Your eyes shone at the terminal curb,  
then tension in the car like brittle wire;  
your face turned, cheek hot, lips quivering,  
anger and a language neither of us knew.

And so today, afraid of that anger,  
I drove us east to the outermost ground:  
low-sloped dunes, the skip of cormorants,  
tumbling miles of sea and sky-washed air.

At first, I could say nothing. But seeing  
the pallor of my face, you asked and I told:

*My limbs lose sense when your voice hardens.  
The child in me wrings out like cotton.*

And your breathing slowed as you turned.

And rain moved across the sea like hands.

## AN MFA STUDENT'S YARD IN WINTER

It was Valentine's Day before I took  
the rake and plastic pan into the yard.  
Dogshit, everywhere, rank,  
each clump housed in fine white fungus,  
and wet leaves under branches  
downed in the winter storms.

The garden gate had blown apart,  
and our dogs had dug through  
layers of cedar bark and shredded  
strips of black weed-cloth below.  
The turds between the vegetable  
beds filled a doubled paper bag.  
The grape canes on the wall,  
five feet long, were thick as fingers.

This winter, I pruned twenty poems.  
My wife took hot, protracted baths,  
  
the water redolent of salt-lavender and rose.

## II

## POEM OF SEPARATION

He's already in bed when he hears  
three taps at the window  
of their son's old room  
where she has asked him to sleep.  
He pulls up the blinds  
and sees her on the deck,  
her fainter voice:  
*come and see the stars,*  
*they are beautiful tonight.*

It's warm for February,  
and they lie in dust-covered chairs  
beside winter's unkept beds.  
He points to the splash of the Pleiades,  
the dull glare of Betelgeuse.  
The clean scent of cedar  
hovers between their dim shapes  
and Taurus, whose tall horns burn  
through atmosphere as clear as glass.

They speak through shadows,  
and he cannot see the hemorrhage  
that burst in her left eye two nights ago  
when she told him she needed out,  
the night they wailed  
like belt-whipped children.

*It's getting cold,* she says,  
and goes inside to heat some tea.

In one year at this ascension,  
who will speak of distant fire?

## **SPRING**

Spring has come like a  
soft hand unexpectedly placed.  
Wands of lavender burn,  
and snap peas, soft and curling,  
wrap the lattice rising from the bed.  
Whole air moves  
through red-branched laurel,  
and the scent of eucalyptus  
wanders in the yard.

How is it that on such a day  
she will come home  
after the house is dark,  
eat the stew he made  
by herself in the den,  
hurry to what was once  
their room and shut the door?  
He watches the slit of light  
as he passes to where he sleeps,  
and hears low laughter  
as she murmurs on the phone  
with a voice he cannot know.

## NIGHTMARE

The first week they slept apart,  
she locked her room  
while he slept in their son's old bed.  
But then she left her door ajar as he did his,  
and down the darkened hallway  
he listened to her breaths, her coughs,  
each familiar brush of covers.

Now, after a month of numb gestures  
in the kitchen and dumb crossings  
on the stairs, her face turned away  
as he sees her in his nightmares,  
she has shut her door again.

Is it to keep out the light as he works late,  
or the roaming dogs, or the turns  
and murmurs of a lover whose skin  
swept hers in sleep for eighteen years?



## GRASS AND FIRE

His wife begs to be alone.  
She has snapped through a membrane,  
speaks of many years  
as though all was sand and shadow.

*Loyal as death*, he's said to many,  
her one certain trait.

He is fifty, and has known  
where she was every day  
since she was twenty-two,  
but he does not know  
where she is tonight.  
He heats chili verde, pours a beer.

When she comes home,  
she is not hungry.  
They talk about her day  
and she watches him warily,  
as though angry about a thing  
he cannot guess,  
then climbs dark stairs to bed.

Her love for him died overnight—  
fast as grass in fire.

## SLEEPING SEPARATE

Tonight she lights a cinnamon candle  
and makes his bed on the futon in the den.

*I know back pain, it can make  
you desperate for relief, she says.*

Nine weeks on their son's abandoned  
mattress and his old injury  
flares, clenches, bites  
like broken glass above the hip.

It's the first time he has seen  
her think of him in weeks,  
twenty days of Prozac blowing sand  
out of the corners of her mind.

When he thanks her,  
she says without inflection,

*It was a selfish gesture,  
I wanted a bed to myself.*

To which she again retreats, leaving  
husband, cinnamon air, flame.

## FIRE IN THE GARDEN

A crisp drift of woodsmoke in the house  
that morning. A far-off fire, they both guessed,  
perhaps a burn-pile in the valley.

He came home from lunch to find a note  
taped to the garage, signed by their neighbor:  
*My sons and I put out a fire in your garden.*

Disbelieving, he went to see: the cedar bark was charred  
over several feet, the weedcloth curled beneath,  
and two garden boxes black and splitting at their corners.

Another fifteen minutes and it would have touched the house  
or lit the thin, dry fence that separates the yards.  
Their neighbor could not say how it began,

but he saw the butts along the ground,  
the black shadow starting just beneath her chair.  
She did not plan this small disaster, he knows.

It was dark as they sat beneath the stars  
and talked about their day. She brought him  
a down throw, warm milk, and cried briefly

when he told her he was terrified to leave home  
for eighteen days because he didn't know  
who she would be when he returned.

*I don't have a crystal ball,* she said, and went inside.  
He stayed until wind hissed in high grass.

## SUMMER INTO SPRING

That summer she streaked peach oil in her hair,  
he rolled frankincense on his throat and wrists.  
Her toes clenched his chest as he knelt before her  
in candlelight, rocking, their bare legs glistening.

Mornings, their conversation slow, faint salt  
and sea-musk wandered on his tongue.  
Her dark hair spread disordered on his shoulder.  
White sheets held arms lit by early sun

as warmth sifted through her bedroom window.  
She breathed deep to hold the fragrance  
of his skin, he caressed slender, caramel fingers.  
How could he know, then, she held a quiet violence

nested like a pearl, or foresee the bitter spring  
long years of touching in the dark would bring?

## DATE NIGHT

Only the middle of June, yet hot air  
presses to our backs like felt.  
It is Wednesday, date night,  
and after a dinner for two  
with few words,  
we walk in the shade by unmoving rushes.

I stare at slow water,  
the mute drift of geese,  
and manage to say, *I am so sad*.  
You move on beside and give no answer.

Later, when we are home,  
you go into your room  
to change for bed.  
I call your name,  
and you peer around the door  
in the thin, flowered nightdress  
whose front I have unbuttoned  
and whose hem I have pushed  
above your hips unnumbered times:  
I recall the rose scent of shoulders,  
the tension in your eager tongue.

*I miss you in there*, I say,  
as you look down, away,  
and slowly shut the door.

We have slept apart for sixteen weeks,  
and in the scorch of early summer,  
I cannot tell if my body is alive  
or a bed of darkening ash.

## LONG BEACH

You were in Long Beach in January  
one year ago without me  
when fire crawled into your head.

One month later, bawling, your face  
turned to our bedroom wall,  
you told me that you had to be alone.

That May, we drove south and I read  
a poem for your mother at the retirement  
party she had planned for a decade.

After, we walked cold sand at dusk  
on Horny Corner, and sat arm against arm  
on the concrete step where eighteen years ago

I first watched you talk in starlight:  
the slope of narrow shoulders,  
the low glimmer of your smile, your breath

warmer than any girl's I had ever known.

**AT WENTWORTH PLACE, JULY 22ND, 2014**

Fourteen years ago today  
you waited at the door of a red-brick church,  
sea air slid through windows  
and brushed your lowered veil.  
Your son, seven, held your hand  
as you both walked  
with careful steps to where I stood.  
Your face was blurred through tulle,  
but as you drew close,  
I could see your smile, the warm flush  
on shoulders brown as eggshell,  
and hear the quiver in your breath, *Hi, Troy*.

Now, half the planet spins between us,  
and I wander the house  
near Hampstead Heath where Keats  
shared a wall with Fanny Brawne.  
I stand in her stone-floor kitchen,  
flip through fashion sketches  
in her bedroom and look out  
the wave-paned window  
that opens onto the garden lawn  
where the mulberry  
yields dark, wet fruit still,  
its dispassionate branches numb  
to our precious and our desperate hours.

## FLIGHT

The middle of October  
and a faint, temperate rain;  
brittle elm leaves chatter  
in the branches, on the lawn.

Lying in my little room I hear  
you act out what your pain  
has demanded for a year:  
hangers scrape along a rod, then

make-up knocks into a crate.  
*Nothing you could do or change,*  
you said. Will this anguished flight  
make my voice, my hands, less strange?



## HYDRANGEA

There are gray sticks in clay  
where I placed the first hydrangea.  
You potted the next one and kept  
it moist in the shade of the house.

Its wide leaves are deep green  
even tonight when I find it sitting  
in our driveway, left alone  
when you took your things.

From its black earth rise glass  
dragonflies on brilliant rods, and hollow  
spheres that glow in the dusk  
with light held from the afternoon.

It is all unbearably lovely,  
as gorgeous as the soap-scent  
of your hair when you turned  
for a quick kiss in passing

evening after evening  
in the kitchen, in the hall.

## ASTRIFIAMMANTE

I cannot recall the film—  
a woman potting in her greenhouse—  
in which I first heard the Night Queen's song  
vaulting from sky to earth.  
In my young man's mind a girl  
sat beneath a flowering pear tree,  
her skin bright as the blossom-cloud,  
each note a call to kiss her shaking throat.

Now, I know *Der Hölle Rache*.  
The dagger forced into the daughter's hand.  
*Verstossen, verlassen...zetrümmert*.  
*Hört, hört, Rachegötter...der Mutter Schwur*.

## DROUGHT WINTER

Another drought winter and an early spring.  
Hyacinth have come,  
but they lie low and soft.  
The lavender bracts are dim,  
without the purple fire  
that has stunned us every March.

We bought this home in a short sale,  
abandoned half a year.  
*A bad divorce*, our realtor said.  
The back lawn was white  
and crisp as straw,  
and grape vines launched  
forty feet below the maples.  
A mound of dirt had been thrown  
hard against the garden shed.

We lay in bed those first nights  
frightened of the strange, new walls,  
the half-white bathroom door and trim,  
the squares of old paint  
where we guessed  
the dresser and the nightstand stood.

You feared most the small,  
pink room in back of the house,  
with its white, broken ceiling fan,  
unicorn stickers by the switch plate,  
wire baskets in the closet.  
You felt something evil  
had happened in that room,  
and so I painted every inch.

Still, with its long view of the Sierras,  
backyard fountain,  
glass bricks above a whirlpool tub,  
this was our dream.  
We built raised garden boxes

and clipped the verdant hedge along the drive.

We sat in lawn chairs under blankets  
and found the constellations.  
Mornings, we stirred to the harmonics  
of long, steel chimes.

And yet this week, at last, you said, *divorce*.  
That astringent, terminal word.

If you had died, would I sleep better?  
I would plant a sapling,  
water it and weep.

But you live, and I live,  
our hours of love darker  
than the desiccated hedge along the drive.

# III

## **A POEM OF APPROACH**

Your wing lagging,  
I call to you across the sky:

here, the wide meadow,  
the lush grass lit  
with water bright as milk.

Here, the slow river's long line,  
the opening beech,  
the tender lawn.

## **CLEARING BEDS**

Those first weeks, when you texted me  
for curly fries as I drove home from boxing,  
it felt like taking breaths  
after almost drowning.  
Now, after five months apart,  
you have asked me to empty  
the garden bed-frames and lay weedcloth below.  
For months, the trumpet vine  
that climbs the fence has driven up  
and choked the beans, the kale.  
At first, you could not see  
what sapped such cared-for lives.  
Then the bright and urgent trumpet tips appeared.

It will reach 108 today, so I start early.  
As my shovel scrapes into the first frame,  
each push snags in ragged stalks,  
some thick as fingers,  
and dank root-balls larger than my fist.  
White fibers clutch the chickenwire  
floor to the earth, so it rips loose  
when I raise the square box-frame.

Gloves on, I yank the last intrusive strands  
from uncovered ground, measure,  
cut and lay the heavy cloth,  
re-tack the wire, drop and level the box,  
and return hand-sifted soil.

My face and arms are dark with dirt.  
My shoes are full of jabbing stones.  
Sweat hangs across my vision.  
I ask no other life.

## DAUGHTER, RISE

As our student group wanders a high  
Irish cliff-head,  
I notice inked letters  
on a young classmate's calf.

*What does that say?* I ask.  
She looks down, pauses.  
*It says, 'Daughter, rise,' in Aramaic.*  
And I, who know the Gospels well  
but am jet-lagged beyond coherence  
respond, *Are you Jewish?*

As she walks away, I recall the words,  
speak them softly, *talitha kum*.  
Jesus, raising Jairus' daughter.

Tonight, far from home and a wife  
I no longer know, I type a prayer:

when every network in my body  
darkens, when every glint is cold,  
may I feel fingers on my face  
and hear a voice:  
*I have come far to find you.*

Wake to eyes of fire,  
the warmth of endless bread.



## **FREEL PEAK**

this high up, sky cracks  
rock to scree

Freel is blast lightning hail  
flagrant sun or blizzard

always

in August points  
of draba mustard yellow

burn hard as stars  
between flakes of stone and wind

**AT THE BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL, GOLDEN GATE PARK, 2013**

A short distance from us, a young couple,  
each perhaps twenty-years-old,  
carefully steps across a lawn of blankets,  
countless bodies lounging on the grass.

He goes first, and she holds his hand.  
They are confident and altogether lovely,  
their faces brown and lineless in the sun.  
She has tied four yellow daisies

across her ponytail, and a handful  
of white iris rises from his backpack.  
All day, on young couples, we see flowers  
pinned to skirts and circled into hair.

How wise they are, these new to loving,  
to bear the textures of the garden,  
to embrace the decorations of the earth.

## LAVENDER

1

They were the first life we dug  
into the ground  
the long, dry summer  
our son moved off to college:  
six shrubs lifting  
gray and green,  
their long stalks delicate as water.  
After, lush oil rose from our palms.

New to planting,  
we expected florid color  
once their earth  
was fed and settled.  
Yet three weeks later,  
under severe September sun,  
the bracts remained dull,  
crisp as wasp wings,  
and autumn's cold rising in the maples.

After autumn, winter's saturated sky.

2

We drove to Chico once a month  
his first semester,  
our windows down,  
my wife's long, brown feet  
bare on the dash,  
I-5 arcing through miles  
of walnut and apple orchards.  
The valley's auburn soil  
fragrant between rains.

Shopping for shelves at Wal-Mart,  
he wore a shirt I had never seen.  
Fresh, black hair

crisscrossed his calves  
the day we replaced his battered Vans.

And through each dark drive  
back to the Sierras,  
the earth spun  
below the thrum of tires,  
quiet stars.

3

At Easter, he and I shoveled  
a persimmon tree  
into the slope by the drive.  
We worked the clay  
with water, amended soil,  
reeking scoops of bone meal.

We stacked the unearthed stones.

Shirts damp, we stopped to rest  
in March's cool, uncluttered air.  
Glancing across the yard  
to last year's lavender,  
we paused, caught by the rise  
of the flowers' new grain.  
For the slender stems,  
after months of silent turning,  
had unspooled to violet fire.

## FIRST KISS, LONG BEACH, 1996

It was Mike, I'll give him that.  
*You should put your arm around her bro, she'll dig it.*  
And I, almost trembling, did so  
as we four drank gin tonics and played pool.  
A taxi back to his apartment, and Mike again,  
*Let's take the girls for a swim.*  
As he tossed me trunks, the girls,  
face to face, made their gorgeous conference:  
*I'm going to wear a t-shirt,* Betsy said,  
and you said, *Me too,*  
so Mike found white t's for you both.

We walked across the street to darkened sand,  
down to where low waves  
nudged, touched, retreated.  
I pulled off my shirt, turned away and waded in  
as you and Betsy stepped out of skirts.  
I looked back to find you just a foot away,  
a t-shirt to your thighs,  
your face and forearms glistening.

You saw the phosphorescence first, emerald,  
glowing through low crests.  
Then I took your arms and kissed you,  
the strong lines of your mouth  
damp and grasping.  
The slick touch of tongues.  
Our feet an inch into the silt  
that marked the ocean's edge.

*ICARE*

My face and arms rise  
through a pond of stars.

Cool air. Dusk-blue.  
Rapture.

A red-dot heart  
in the shadow of my body.

## NOTES

Astrifiammante is another name for the Queen of Night, a character in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). The German translates: *Der Hölle Rache*, the vengeance of Hell; *verstossen*, disowned; *verlassen*, forsaken; *zetrümmert*, shattered or destroyed; *hört*, hear, or listen (to me); *Rachegötter*, Gods of Vengeance; *der Mutter Schwur*, a mother's oath. The Queen of Night calls down terrifying curses on her daughter if the daughter does not kill the young man she loves; this demand is communicated in some of the most beautiful music in the world. The poem is not meant as a comment on the particular narrative of the thesis, but rather a reflection on the complexities of the human experience.

*Icare* is written in response to Henri Matisse's cut-out of the same name.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agüeros, Jack. *Correspondence Between the Stonehaulers*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1991. Print.
- Ali, Kazim. *Sky Ward*. Middletown: Wesleyan, 2013. Print.
- Aristotle. "Poetics." *The Internet Classics Archive*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.
- Auden, W.H. *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 2007. Print.
- Barnstone, Tony. *Tongue of War: from Pearl Harbor to Nagasaki*. Kansas City: Bk Mk Press, 2009. Print.
- Barry, Kevin. *City of Bohane: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2013. Print.
- . *Dark Lies the Island*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2012. Print.
- . *There are Little Kingdoms*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2013. Print.
- Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. New York: OUP, 1966. Print.
- Beaumont, Jeanne Marie. *Burning of the Three Fires*. Rochester: BOA, 2010. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1985. Print.
- Berry, Wendell. *New Collected Poems*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012. Print.
- Birkerts, Sven. "James Wright's Hammock: A Sounding." *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry*. New York: Morrow, 1989. 139-51. Print.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927 – 1979*. New York: FS&G, 1984. Print.
- Blake, William. "William Blake's 'The Tyger.'" The British Library Online Gallery, 26 Mar. 2009. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.



- . "Holy Thursday." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition, Vol 2*. Ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2012. 127. Print.
- Bosselaar, Laure-Anne. *Small Gods of Grief*. Rochester: BOA, 2001. Print.
- Brown, Deborah, Annie Finch, and Maxine Kumin. *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005. Print.
- Campo, Rafael. *What the Body Told*. Durham: DUP, 1996. Print.
- Cannon, Moya. *Carrying the Songs*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007. Print.
- . *Hands*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2011. Print.
- Carson, Anne. *The Beauty of the Husband*. New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Caston, Anne. *Flying Out with the Wounded*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. Print.
- . *Judah's Lion*. North Haverhill: Toad Hall, 2007. Print.
- "*Coccoloba Unifera*, Sea Grape." *Landscape Plants*. University of Florida, 26 Aug. 2014. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. London: Everyman, 1997. Print.
- Cook, Eleanor. *A Reader's Guide to Wallace Stevens*. Princeton: PUP, 2007. Print.
- Cording, Robert. *Against Consolation*. Fort Lee: CavanKerry Press, 2001. Print.
- . *Walking with Ruskin*. Fort Lee: CavanKerry Press, 2010. Print.
- Deppe, Annie. *Sitting in the Sky*. Kilcar: Summer Palace Press, 2003. Print.
- Deppe, Theodore. *Beautiful Wheel*. Dublin: Arlen House, 2014.
- . *Children of the Air*. Cambridge: Alice James Books, 1990. Print.
- . *Orpheus on the Red Line*. North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2014. Print.
- Dickey, James. *Poems 1957 – 1967*. New York: Collier, 1968. Print.

- Dickinson, Emily. "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers." *Poems: Packet XXXVII, Fascicle 10*. Houghton Library, Harvard University., n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.
- Doty, Mark. *My Alexandria: Poems by Mark Doty*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Print.
- Dunbar, William. "Lament For The Makers." *Representative Poetry Online*. University of Toronto Libraries, n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
- Dunn, Stephen. *New and Selected Poems: 1974 – 1994*. New York: Norton, 1994. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. "Preludes." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 10 May 2015.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. New York: Penguin, 2013.
- "The Epic of Gilgamish: The Twelfth Tablet: Gilgamish, In Despair, Enquires of the Dead." Trans. R. Campbell Thompson. Sacred-Texts.com, n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.
- Espada, Martín. *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982 – 2002*. New York: Norton, 2003. Print.
- . *The Republic of Poetry*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- Finch, Annie. *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Print.
- . *Calendars*. Dorset: Tupelo Press, 2003. Print.
- Finch, Annie, and Kathrine Varnes, eds. *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. Print.
- Finch, Robert. *A Cape Cod Notebook*. Cape Cod: On Cape Publications, 2011. Print.
- . *The Primal Place*. New York: Norton, 1983. Print.

- Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.
- Frame, Janet. *An Autobiography*. New York: George Braziller, 1991. Print.
- Frontain, Raymond-Jean. "When First And Last Concur: Closure In John Donne's 'The Annunciation And Passion'." *Anq* 25.3 (2012): 175. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Frost, Robert. *Poems by Robert Frost: A Boy's Will and North of Boston*. New York: Signet, 1990. Print.
- Fu, Tu, Li Ho, Li Po, Li Shang-yin, Wang Wei. *Five T'Ang Poets*. Trans. David Young. Oberlin, OCP, 1990. Print.
- Glück, Louise. *The Wild Iris*. New York: Ecco, 1993. Print.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Two Poems from 'The Day'" *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
- Grimm, Susan, ed. *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*. Cleveland: CSUP, 2006. Print.
- Hall, Donald. *The Painted Bed*. Boston: Mariner, 2002. Print.
- . *Without*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. Print.
- Harrison, Jeffery. *Into Daylight*. North Adams: Tupelo, 2014. Print.
- Harrison, Jim. *Just Before Dark, Collected Non-fiction*. New York: Mariner, 1999. Print.
- Hass, Robert, ed. *The Essential Haiku. Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. Print.
- . *Praise*. New York: Ecco, 1979. Print.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Field Work*. New York: FS&G, 2009. Print.

---. *Poems: 1965 – 1975*. New York: FS&G, 1980. Print.

---. *Station Island*. New York: FS&G, 1985. Print.

---. *Sweeney Astray*. New York: FS&G, 1983. Print.

Hejinian, Lyn. "Continuing Against Closure." *Jacket 14*. Jacket Magazine, July 2001.

Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

---. "Elegy." *Poetry Foundation*. n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

---. "The Rejection of Closure (1985)." *Poetry Foundation*. 13 Oct. 2009. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

Higginson, Thomas W. "Emily Dickinson's Letters." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.

Hugo, Richard. *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo*. New York: Norton, 1984. Print.

---. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York: Norton, 1979. Print.

Jarrell, Randall. *Poetry and the Age*. New York: Vintage, 1953. Print.

Jauss, David. "Wright's LYING IN A HAMMOCK AT WILLIAM DUFFY's FARM IN PINE ISLAND, MINNESOTA." *Explicator* 41.1 (1982): 54. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.

Johnson, Walter, ed. *Journals of Gilbert White*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1971. Print.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Dover, 1991. Print.

Kavanagh, Patrick. *Collected Poems*. New York: Norton, 1964. Print.

Keats, John. *Selected Poetry*. Ed. John Barnard. New York: Penguin, 1988. Print.

- Keegan, Claire. *Walk the Blue Fields*. New York: Black Cat, 2007. Print.
- Kelly, Brigit Pegeen. *Song: Poems by Brigit Pegeen Kelly*. Brockport: BOA, 1995. Print.
- Kenyon, Jane. *Otherwise*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1996. Print.
- Kinnell, Galway. *A New Selected Poems*. New York: Mariner, 2001. Print.
- Kitchen, Judith. *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction*. New York: Norton 2005. Print.
- Knorr, Jeff. *Keeper: Essays and Poems*. Dubois: Mammoth, 2004. Print.
- Kooser, Ted. *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon Press, 2000. Print.
- Kunitz, Stanley. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Norton, 2000. Print.
- Levine, Julia. *Small Disasters Seen in Sunlight*. Baton Rouge: LSUP, 2014. Print.
- Levine, Phillip. *Breath*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. Print.
- . *The Mercy*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Print.
- Levis, Larry. *Winter Stars*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985. Print.
- Lowell, Robert. *The Collected Poems*. New York: FS&G, 2003. Print.
- Marquart, Debra. *From Sweetness*. Long Beach: Pearl, 2002. Print.
- . *The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere*. New York: Counterpoint, 2006. Print.
- Matthews, William. *Search Party: Collected Poems*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Print.
- McCarriston, Linda. *Eva-Mary*. Evanston: Tri-Quarterly, 1991. Print.
- . *Little River: New and Selected Poems*. Evanston: Tri-Quarterly, 2000. Print.

- . *Talking Soft Dutch*. Lubbock: Texas Tech, 1984. Print.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. New York: Anchor, 2003. Print.
- Meyer, Leonard B. "The End of the Renaissance? Notes on the Radical Empiricism of the Avant-Garde." *The Hudson Review* 1963: 169. *JSTOR Journals*. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
- Milosz, Czeslaw. *New and Collected Poems: 1931 – 2001*. New York: Ecco, 2003. Print.
- Milton, John. "On His Deceased Wife." *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.  
Bartleby.com, n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.
- . "Paradise Lost: Book 12." *The John Milton Reading Room*. Dartmouth College, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Moor, Indigo. *Taproot*. Charlotte: Main Street Rag, 2006. Print.
- Motika, Stephen. *Western Practice*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2012. Print.
- Neruda, Pablo. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- Niedecker, Lorine. *The Granite Pail*. Ed. Cid Corman. Frankfort: Gnomon, 1985. Print.
- "Office for the Dead, Matins, Third Nocturne." *A Hypertext Book of Hours*. Ed. Glenn Gunhouse. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
- "Office of the Dead." *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Catholic Online, n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
- Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems. Volume One*. Boston: Beacon, 1992. Print.
- . *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harvest, 1994. Print.
- Parini, Jay. *Robert Frost: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999. Print.
- Paterson, Katherine. *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: Harper Collins, 1977. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.

Print.

Plato. *The Republic*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Print.

---. *Symposium*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: OUP, 2009. Print.

Poulin, A., Jr., and Michael Waters, eds. *Contemporary American Poetry*. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation,

n.d. Web. 10 May 2015.

Quinn, William A. "William Dunbar's Fear Of Fame." *Essays In Criticism* 61.3 (2011):

215-231. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.

Reichhold, Jane. *Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide*. Tokyo: Kadansha,

2002. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974 – 1977*. New York:

Norton, 1978. Print.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell.

New York: Vintage, 1980. Print.

Roethke, Theodore. *On Poetry & Craft*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2001.

Print.

Scott, Grant F., ed. *Selected Letters of John Keats. Revised Edition*. Cambridge: HUP,

2002. Print.

Selby, Martha Ann. *Grow Long Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India*.

Oxford: OUP, 2000. Print.

- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. New York: Mariner, 1981. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Folger Shakespeare Library: King Lear*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. Print.
- Sholl, Betsy. *Rough Cradle*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2009. Print.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. Print.
- Snodgrass, W.H. *Not for Specialists: New and Selected Poems*. Rochester: BOA, 2006. Print.
- Snyder, Gary. *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. San Francisco: Pantheon, 1992. Print.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Trans. J.E. Thomas. Clayton: Prestwick House, 2005. Print.
- Springer, Mary Doyle. "Closure In A Half Light: Wallace Stevens' Endings." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 16.2 (1992): 161. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Stafford, William. *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1998. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.
- Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild*. New York: Vintage, 2013. Print.
- Theune, Michael. *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2007. Print.
- Thomas, Dylan. *Collected Poems: 1934 – 1952*. New York: New Directions, 1957. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Cape Cod*. Stilwell: Digireads, 2007. Print.
- . *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. New York: Signet, 2012. Print.



- Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers. Third Edition.* Chelsea: Sheridan Books, 2007. Print.
- Walcott, Derek. "Sea Grapes." *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns.* New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2007. 26. Print.
- . *White Egrets.* New York: FS&G, 2010. Print.
- Watten, Barrett. "Two Early Poems by Barrett Watten." *The Compass Rose.* N.p., 12 Jan. 2010. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.
- Weinberger, Eliot, ed. *The New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry.* New York: New Directions, 2003. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. "The Sleepers." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Volume B.* 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Ed. Paul Lauter. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 2982-2989. Print.
- Wilbur, Richard. *New and Collected Poems.* New York: Harvest, 1989. Print.
- Williams, William Carlos. *Spring and All.* New York: New Directions, 2011. Print.
- Wright, James. *Above the River: The Complete Poems.* New York: FS&G, 1992. Print.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Poems.* Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: Scribner, 1983. Print.
- Yip, Wai-lim. *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Durham: DUP, 1997. Print.
- Zucker, Rachel. *Eating in the Underworld.* Middletown: Wesleyan, 2003. Print.