

MAGPIE

A Thesis

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By

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Magpie

Poems

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“I have a magpie mind. I like anything that glitters.”

—Roy Thomson

This past winter break, walking on icy serpentine roads in Colorado, I saw my first magpie. It was unclear to me at the time why the sighting so delighted me. I had heard only murmurs of the myths and aphorisms that accompany the creature. There is that English rhyme (“One for sorrow, two for joy...”). Symbolically, they are considered omens of bad luck or even witchcraft, at least in western cultures. People who encounter them often list “loud” and “territorial” before “extremely intelligent,” all of which are true. There is, of course, their reputation as collectors (or perhaps thieves), particularly of shiny things. On the whole, the magpie is not well-liked.

However, I was not considering these things when I saw mine flit out from a snow-heavy pine. What came to mind was an article I had seen weeks before in the *New Yorker*, a review of two recent movies that happened to feature poets as protagonists. One particular cluster of lines Anthony Lane had written struck me: “This movie has almost no bite but plenty of moseying charm, and what it does get right is the idea of poets as perpetual magpies. They pick up scraps of talk and offcuts of sensation, with which to feather the nests of their lyrical work. Nothing goes to waste.” The idea charmed me perhaps because of its obviousness. I felt instant kinship with this bird. Then the spring semester started, and I forgot about my new relative. For weeks I struggled to find cohesion in my thesis, the thread that would connect it all. I was not working on a “project” in the way some poets were. I felt inadequate because of this lack of “concept,” a unifying topic or narrative. My body of work remained untitled. I don’t recall what brought the magpie back to mind, but

one day it was there. Poet as collector. I realized my disparate subjects and voices could be their own feature. Suddenly, I looked at my poems like they were a real collection. What connected them was that, at one time or another in my magpie mind, they glittered.

During my first year in the Creative Writing Program, I felt lost in many ways. The graduate-level workload was heavier than anticipated. I was not writing many poems. Poets my classmates and professors understood as canonical, I had never read. I felt paralyzed by all I did not know. There was a real sense of “imposter syndrome.” At the University of Florida, my undergraduate degree was journalism, with a focus in photography. I dabbled in creative writing workshops, taking them as electives. I had to remind myself that these classes provided me with enough of an introduction to the canon to get me here, and provide me with a short list of influences (Bishop, Heaney, Glück, Plath, Justice) whom I refer back to still.

Elizabeth Bishop’s work remains, for me, the pinnacle of description. From her I learned that no detail is too small for a poem, that vast emotion can be expressed with restraint. As I look back on some of my earlier work, it is clear that I was also inspired by her sense of longing, either for what she once had or would never have, and her deep desire to belong somewhere. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, though at thirteen my family moved to Florida. That had a lasting effect on me. Even now, I’m not always sure what to tell people when they ask where I’m from. Sometimes they seem confused when I explain my affinity with the Midwest, as I’ve lived elsewhere for so long. For me, the move was more of an identity shift than for my younger siblings. I touch on this period in my life in poems like “The House on Oak Avenue,” “Going Home,” and “Michigan Summer Daydream.” The challenges that came with that rupture also provided me with things I understand now as assets. If not for that experience, I might have been too afraid to move to

France for a year after college, or commit to this program in the state of Texas, where I had never been (including airports). In my adult life, not only do I *like* moving around—collecting relationships and experiences—I have learned that the forced shift in perspective that comes from an unfamiliar place is critical to creativity.

In my first workshop in the Creative Writing Program, Roberto Tejada introduced us to the surrealist concept of “*dérive*” (from the French *dériver*, meaning to drift or divert), a psychological meandering that happens as a result of doing so physically, interacting in new ways with the pathways or obstacles of one’s environment. The surrealists would try to subvert these prescribed cues (for instance, by walking anywhere but on sidewalks) and let the disruption that occurred inform their writing. In Houston, even the sidewalks do not want you to walk on them, with their buckling and schisms that await the upward-gazing pedestrian. While this city is perfect in that sense for a morning *dérive*, I found myself revisiting France instead, which led to writing “At the Catacombs,” in which the initial deterioration of a relationship is exposed by the difficulty that comes from navigating the city of Paris. This poem is emblematic of what was happening for my poetics that first year in the program, and what I would continue to explore. I started breaking with traditional forms I knew and experimenting with fragmentation. I dropped punctuation just to see the effect, starting with commas at the ends of line breaks, then writing whole poems without any punctuation at all. Over the years I suppose I have also been influenced by my peers, namely the PhD students, who were at more advanced stages of their own experimentation, submitting poems to workshop that featured caesuras, erasures, and bold redactions in the form of black bars. It was a new way for me to consider what the limits of poetry can be. By comparison, I wouldn’t call my work experimental, but my own deviations felt radical when I was doing them.

While I feel I have more metropolitan poems to write, I have since become interested in the geography of the natural world, specifically the Gulf Coast. Taking the Ecopoetics course my second year opened up this region while introducing me to ecopoetry. On excursions to the coast, I was maneuvering a kayak through marsh grass instead of a car through traffic. I touched unfamiliar plants and learned the names of birds. I am still trying to write a poem that does justice to the roseate spoonbill. For now, the poems often have a speaker grappling with destruction or ignorance of nature (“Shore Ode,” “At the Edge of the World”), or meditating on something recently learned or witnessed (“Optimism”), or even defending nature’s presence as language in our lives (“In Defense of Anthropomorphism”). These poems take inspiration from precursors like Whitman (inventor of the “shore ode” poem) and contemporary poets like Jorie Graham (notably her collection *Sea Change*), while perhaps bringing something new to the genre.

To describe a shift in perspective or viewpoint, like the ones experienced through physical displacement, we might employ photographic vocabulary: a different lens. For me, the overlap between the written and visual arts has only become more apparent during my studies here. I was drawn to photography for many of the same reasons I was drawn to poetry. A photo captures a moment never to be retrieved, one that otherwise would have been lost or, at best, somehow altered by memory. The way emotions are conveyed—wonderment of a parent holding child for the first time, horror of the Napalm Girl—is unique to this form of documentation. Poems leave impressions this same way, giving voice to emotion in their own right. A poem will never be a photograph, but it doesn’t have to be. These arts supplement each other, as we find with ekphrastic poetry. I have a background in photography, and come from a family of talented painters, which led to interest in this genre. The first ekphrastic poem I wrote was “Renoir’s Luncheon,” in which I imagined the

relations between and conversations of the subjects. In my more recent work (“In the Conservatory,” “Combing the Hair,” and “The Collagist”), I focused more on the artists themselves and the influences that contributed to the paintings. What ultimately unites these newer poems is their feminist critique of the tradition of ekphrasis. My goal was to exhume the voices of female artists and muses who often went unheard (or were less heard) due to the celebrity of the men in their lives. I became particularly fascinated by women who were both artists and muses of male artists. I wanted to find the tension that must have come from doing the gazing and being gazed upon.

The genesis of this series-in-progress came from a course with Lauren Brozovich last fall in which we studied female poets and their ekphrastic work. Before this course I had only a general understanding of ekphrasis. One of my favorite poems, an early inspiration, is Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts.” As I reread it last semester, a deeper understanding of its influence on me emerged. I realized the engine of that poem (and so many others in the genre) is perspective—specifically, a shift in it. When we look at a work of art, we are subject to the gaze of the artist. We understand immediately, because of composition and framing and color and contrast, where the audience’s eye is being drawn. What is so brilliant about Auden’s poem is the resistance to that pointing. His focus on marginal details (someone eating, children skating)—in other words, the slightest turn of the head—illuminates what Brueghel was doing. This is what poetry can do for visual art. Auden’s words become a legend with which to read the paintings, a way to unlock its mysteries. It is amusing that this same poet wrote in his elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen.”

While the poems I have included here do not radically depart from traditional ekphrasis, I was pushing against certain limitations of the ekphrastic as we canonically

understand it. Early scholars like James Heffernan and Gotthold Lessing laid out clear binaries between visual art and the written word (i.e. spatial vs. temporal, silence vs. speech). I could understand why certain binaries suggested themselves, like painting as spatial because it takes up measurable space on a canvas, or poetry as temporal because it is located in a certain moment or tells a limited narrative. However, I don't think there was a single categorization laid out by these theorists where the line felt uncrossable. As a poet, I felt more inclined to agree with W.J.T. Mitchell's writings on ekphrasis in the essay *Ekphrasis and the Other*, which criticizes these binaries I myself tried to subvert in my poems. Poetry can absolutely be spatial. Every poem has a form. Even not conforming to a traditional form is a kind of form. I have realized here, especially after attending more readings than I ever had before, that the way I perceive a poem on the page informs how I read that poem. When I hear a poem read aloud, I miss its visual accompaniment. I feel I am missing half of it. In my own poetry, form is not always of concern in the beginning, but I cannot call a poem finished until I have considered the spatial organization of my words, what its shape suggests. "The Collagist," which is addressed to Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, was the only poem that I let unfold a bit more abstractly. This was a conscious nod to the abstract expressionist painting that inspired it. I wanted the lines to feel chaotic and a bit random while still producing a rhythm or musicality, making the same gesture that Pollock's splatters made.

Another "rule" from these theorists I felt compelled to challenge was that of silence versus speech. Having studied the works of art behind many ekphrastic poems I admire (like Marianne Moore's "Apparition of Splendor," Jorie Graham's "Violinist at the Window, 1918," and Bishop's "Brazil, January 1502"), I can say that I don't believe visual works are strictly silent. I would argue that the creation of art is an act of discourse—with the

subject, with the audience, with the tradition of the medium to which it belongs. We even use the word “loud” to describe vivid colors. I suppose I subconsciously had this in mind when I chose to write about “Combing the Hair” by Degas. When I stood in front of this painting, on exhibit at the MFAH, it was like hearing emotion. All you can see at first is the redness—all different shades of it, some more crimson and others more orange—all of it hot. It is distinct from many of his other works because of his choice of palette. It is not too much of a leap to imagine the sound of a yelp or wince coming from the girl having her hair pulled. With Cassatt’s painting, the inspiration for “In the Conservatory,” it was the gaze of the little girl that was clearly *saying* something to me. In her unabashedly straightforward/somewhat curious/somewhat indifferent stare I was seeing innocence, and also confidence. This girl does not think about her effect on her mother; she is not pointing to her rosy mouth; she doesn’t even know yet that she is beautiful. She still exists in that finite moment of life for girls and women before they are taught to be aware of their bodies, to rein themselves in, to avert their gaze.

More overtly, Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm” suggests sound in the title. My asking Lee Krasner about the rhythm of that October was my imagining their communication as two artists as well as husband and wife. When I look at that painting I see beauty, but also violence. I wanted to hear the sounds of their household. I imagined her scrapes against canvas, the raising of voices. Pollock insisted he worked in a state of “controlled chaos,” but the story of his personal life is one of alcoholism and womanizing and ends in a tragic death. It would not have been easy to be married to him, or to live in his shadow.

Having taken a course on elegy with Sally Connolly in my first year at UH, I have become interested in the parallels between elegy and ekphrasis. Ekphrasis, as defined by Brozovich, means to speak for or to someone (or something), to envoice. Often, elegy does

the same thing, except the person addressed or spoken for is usually a fellow poet, or at least (more commonly in contemporary poetry) someone who meant a great deal to the poet. When a poet elegizes another poet, the chief motivation is to memorialize, to offer tribute. But there is inherently another layer to that inclination, a less noble one. The poet cannot put him or herself in conversation with another poet without suggesting that the conversation is deserved. It suggests comparable esteem and talent, or even a degree of oneness. The living elegist may seem to hold the fact of living over the dead, sometimes subtly, sometimes not, standing on the shoulders of the deceased poet, whom they may or may not genuinely admire. This is one of the long traditions of art: to build on what has come before and bring something new. A departure from or dismantling of a previous movement is as much an act of resistance as an admission of influence. I think very similar dynamics are present when poets engage with a work of visual art. The poet is announcing to the reader that they have something to say on the work that no one else can say. Even the choice of a certain artist or painting reveals a level of bias, suggesting a desire to be in conversation with a particular culture, usually associating oneself with the highbrow art world. This is not to say that these aspects of the tradition need to stop, but I think it is crucial to be aware of them. In my future additions to this series of ekphrastic poems, I would like to play with upsetting these expectations more overtly, much like Bishop did in “Large Bad Picture,” using her personal encounter with the art of a family member as the catalyst for the poem.

There is one section in this manuscript that stands alone—the ten translations—though many of the same interests and influences in my other work carry over to this project, Raymond Queneau’s *Bucoliques*. If English speakers have heard of Raymond Queneau, it is not for his poetry. Queneau (1903–1976) is best known as a novelist associated with the

Oulipo, which he cofounded in 1960 along with fellow writers and mathematicians such as Jacques Duchateau, Claude Berge, and Noel Arnaud. Though he wrote for years before this movement took shape and was even loosely grouped with the Surrealists for a time, Queneau caught the attention of the general French public only with *Zazie dans le Métro* in 1959, which was made into a film the following year. In academic and artistic circles, however, some of his best-known works came much sooner. *Bucoliques* was published in the same year as *Exercices de Style* (1947), which experimented with telling the same story ninety-nine different ways and embodied what would be part of the Oulipo fascination with setting constraints and exploring new forms.

I assume that *Bucoliques*, meaning pastoral, was overshadowed by its more radical counterpart, never reaching as wide an audience and slipping quietly under the radar; I have yet to find another explanation for why so little has been written on it, in French or any language for that matter. It is hard to believe in this digital age that literary archaeology of a relatively modern text is even possible, but as far as I know I am the first to do any translation to English of this collection. My goal is simply to introduce it to English readers, while preserving as much of the content, meter, rhyme, cultural context, and Queneau wit as possible.

The poems I have included in this sample were not chronologically selected and are not fully representative of the whole of *Bucoliques*, which comprises forty poems in total. The version I have been working from also includes a separate section, “Pour un Art Poétique,” whose poems have been published elsewhere and, for some reason, have already appeared in English at least once. For this reason, I have not given them the same attention as I have others, but I may eventually include them. Though my translation is a work in progress, the poem that I feel is the furthest along and best encapsulates all of the issues I

have faced thus far is “La Centenaire” (The One Hundred Year Old). It is one of Queneau’s longer poems in this collection about an elderly woman celebrated for her centenary. Before I reached the first line I was met with the challenge of how to translate the title, which in English would most literally be “The Centenarian,” but that word is not widely used and felt too stiff. I settled on “The One Hundred Year Old,” though we lose the immediate knowledge of an elderly woman that comes with the gendered French word.

In the first line, it is unclear where this woman comes from. In the French it says, “la plus vieille femme du pays,” or the oldest woman in the country, town, or region (“pays” means many different things). When French people talk about where they come from within France, they say “mon pays,” my country, which shows how much pride is attached to the distinct regions whose cultures, dialects, and accents can vary greatly. I ultimately chose the word “around,” which at least suggests a sense of community and while leaving enough ambiguity to avoid giving the wrong impression. There is a play on words in this stanza with “bouclé la boucle,” which means to go full circle. I chose “looped the loop” in an effort to maintain some of the same vowel sounds, as well as to replicate parallel variations on the same root word (past participle and noun). Grammatical gymnastics have often been performed during the project.

The second stanza details the celebration that will happen, the food served at the feast, and the guests who will attend. I had the most trouble with this stanza. I realized from the line “la vieille de la panade,” meaning the old woman of bread soup, that this woman came from a poor background. Bread soup is a typical meal of Provençal towns in France and understood to be peasant food. From this one line the reader sees that she was poor, from the South of France, and that we should take this extravagant feast to be ironic, given that she has survived a hundred years on food much less elaborate.

The rest of the poem, where the woman is speaking, is characterized by a shift in meter and the use of rhyme. In my first version of this I did not attempt to recreate either, but after a few revisions I decided it too significant to let go. I have stayed as close as possible to the original syllable count for these stanzas, and, if I couldn't, I created a parallel pattern (i.e. the last stanza in the original 8/7/7/7 and in my version 7/6/6/6). Incorporating the rhyme contributed to more diverse and interesting syntax, and I think it preserved a certain element of the tone. At the end of the woman's speech, I decided to leave "mon amour" in French, as it reminds us that this was not originally an English-language poem, and it is widely understood by English speakers to mean "my love." As I moved through several drafts of this poem, I became aware of how delicate an art translation is.

When I think of the satisfaction that comes from finding the perfect words (which doesn't happen often enough), I am reminded of the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. Known for his black-and-white Parisian street photography, he coined the idea of "the decisive moment" in a photograph. His eye would be caught by some striking natural framing, like an ornate iron gate reflected in a puddle. He would set up his camera and wait for the right person to come into the frame and jump the puddle, then snap the shutter just before heel hit water, leaving room in the reflection for the most delicate sliver of space. In this photo there is tension, juxtaposition, constraint, mood, tone—things we might say about a poem. I sometimes feel as if I am waiting for a decisive moment when I write. Maybe I have a memory but no words, or a great line that needs a story, and I wait until something triggers the poem into existence. These periods of waiting have perhaps become shorter, especially in the last six months. I closed this manuscript with "America," partly because of its optimistic note, but mostly because I felt so satisfied when I finished it. Aside from an

errant comma, I haven't felt compelled to change the first draft. This is perhaps the second time in my life I have felt this way. The writing of it, though not without occasional cross outs and hesitations, is the closest thing to "pouring out" I can imagine. In the beginning of my writing career, I had no confidence in whether a poem was good or not. Now, regardless of how I might look at "America" in a few weeks or months, wanting then to change the title or alter a line, I know I am capable of feeling as if I am really on to something, which might be the most sparkly thing I have collected.

Somewhere a Small Vessel

A young morning exhales the saline
smell of water before I can see it

and the navy dark glows from a sun
that's been burning nocturnal.

I flex my fingers around the oar,
my nails pearly scales in warming light.

A single laughing gull will punctuate
the sky as the purple gallinule

and her brood slip into the marsh,
not trusting the ripples I've made.

But I go on, parting the grasses,
pretending I'm the first one here.

In Defense of Anthropomorphism

I don't know how to
cut open a cantaloupe
and not see my own
body—fecund pulp of
string and seed cupped
in flesh, packaged in rind,
which is another word
for skin. The other fruits
are no exception; when
I touch the ruby dermis
of a blood orange it feels
the same as a navel,
conceals the same
arrangement of carpels
I expect in all oranges.
Still, there is room for
surprise. Forest law
dictates that trees
of different species will
shade each other out
as they colonize the
canopy. This is what we
know. And yet, if some
malignant beetle declared
war on every birch then
all the firs would die.
Only a motley forest will
thrive. Through thick root
systems the chemical
defenses fly like planes
on a flight map and the
beetle, upon tasting bitter
bark, will move along.
And despite all of this
we will argue the forest
does not have a brain,
that I am not a tree,
that you are not a tree.

The House on Oak Avenue

The morning was gaining strength, stenciling stripes
on hydrangea-blue walls. My room, suddenly foreign.
How does emptiness makes a place smaller?
I could smell late August.

Checking the closet one last time, pausing
in the doorway—a halfhearted filibuster as my parents
did their own shuffling downstairs. We piled in the car
and I envied the neighbor kids, still sleeping.

That evening, dusk fell on the house as it always had.
Perhaps people passing by remarked the absence
of lights. The heat lingered late, enhancing
the glow of lightning bugs floating in the yard.

Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party"
(Le Dejeuner des Canotiers), 1880

They lived for Sunday afternoons like this—
Nothing to do, nowhere to be but here.

Life's too short to waste such times as these;
The war's been over now for several years.

Sounds of laughter mix with clinking glasses,
Fresh music to the carefree boaters' ears.

Antonio leans over fair Angele,
But debonaire Gustave controls her gaze.

He's captivated by Miss Charigot,
Who's cooing to her dog coquettishly.

He smiles underneath his ochre brim;
Perhaps she'd looked at him that way last night.

Amidst all this, the actress sips her drink
And dreams of being human on the stage.

Alizarin is blended in her cheeks,
Her passion glows despite her aloof air.

The Russian in the top hat makes fourteen
(For thirteen at a supper wouldn't do).

A varied bunch, they lived *la vie moderne*,
Beside the river tinged with Prussian blue.

At the Catacombs

in Paris we were met
by a closing door, mere minutes
too late. You asked
the man if he could make
an exception.
He looked us over.

Non.

I say

I'm so sorry
then wish
I didn't apologize
so much.

You say

if only
I hadn't spent
all that time perusing
mezuzahs in the
Marais
and I don't argue.

Back on the metro
to the other side
of the city,
a different graveyard.
Like Pear-La-shez
I draw out for you.

I love
that place in the rain
how the gray light
is diffused, exalting
wet cobblestones
and emerald ivy.

You fix
on the workmen lifting
a slab of stone while I search
the names of the dead.

Reading Harper Lee in a Hurricane

If the sky could hold a grudge,
it would look the way it did that day.
The storm had almost passed, and yet
that rancorous gray remained.
A weather-made truant nestled
in the loft of our new apartment, I found myself
charmed by a nine-year-old girl,
wondering how it came to pass that Jem
got his arm so badly broken at the elbow?
The musty book smelled not unlike
the humid air—heavy with history.
There were thumbs that rifled
these pages before mine.
There were storms before this one,
my first. At some point the wet nose
of our dog must have nudged my hand away.
We set him loose in the parking lot, my siblings
and I, splashing shin-deep in puddles
left behind. It hadn't been what I imagined
hurricanes should be. There was no one out.
Not a soul to chastise us from shrieking.
I remember deep silence. Back inside, I read
to forget the tiny loft, and that I wasn't a true rebel
like Scout. Had such trials had ever occurred
at dad's firm in Chicago? Perhaps back in the day.
I still don't believe Ms. Lee when she wrote
that people are people anywhere you put them.

New in Town

A cold wind is swirling through
this place they call Boomtown
so when given the choice
I choose bourbon and shudder
before I feel the warmth
and think of the first time—
shaky hands wrapped around the bottle
overzealous with the first pull
spilling a little and trying not to cough
feeling my face burn as we stand
under palms in the shadow
of the boathouse I had never
been to, grateful for the dark.
I swallow months
of crushing on him and instead
let his friend lead my toddling legs
to his car where the seats
were already down
and I overlook this because
I'm tired of being sixteen
and unkissed. It was like kissing
not-quite-set Jell-O, definitely no
Taylor Swift song, but he did
drive me home. I sneaked back in as if
I'd done that before, too.
I am only now realizing I live
not at all or all at once.

To Love a Magpie

This is how I collect you:
I start small

your last American Spirit
making noise in all its loneliness

I keep it and the sunflower
yellow box under my bed

and I don't smoke
but I like the feel

of a ruinous thing in my hands
and pretty soon I graduate

to the corkscrew you spun
that first night

(do you remember?)
you fed me seeds

from your pomegranate mouth
and both our tongues reddened until

you fell asleep between my legs
I've decided to clear

your medicine cabinet
of your ex-wife's forgotten bottles

(it can't help to see them)
and maybe I'll swipe this book

you've already read I'm sure
I can get more from this

see look
you didn't even notice I was making

my mark in little erasures
but don't worry I will leave

all your jewelry and mirrors
I'll take only what you don't know

you don't need
yes I like a thing to touch

and a secret to keep
but really

it's the taking it's letting you
collect me too until

like magpies
we recognize ourselves.

Inheritance

Stand up, their eyes seemed to say.
My legs were always heavy with guilt
of yielding to the bench's temptation.

Miles above the angels hang
frozen on the ceiling like mosquitoes
trapped in amber. They saw everything.

As a child I'd scan the underbelly
of the great dome, the gilt mosaics
made from impossibly small tiles.

Sheets of alabaster cast soft light
through stained-glass windows
but couldn't soften the features

of those faces. I learn my religion
is not about being comfortable.
Back then we went to St. Sava's

only for baptisms and Christmas,
lately only for funerals. One night
we walked outside in procession.

I curled my hand like a wing
around my candle to shield it as we circled
in cold air past Father Milan's statue.

He stands just like the busts
of kings in marble-floored museums.
I am told by people I don't know

how he rebuilt the Serbs of Milwaukee
when he rebuilt their church.
They tell me how much I've grown.

When the priest invokes the Trinity
my hand naturally signs the cross.
I recite Serbian words I cannot spell

and didn't know I remembered.
In my head I hear my deda's voice
saying the only words he taught me.

Dobro. Mnogo Dobro.

Good. Very good. Here, I say
my name and it means something.

Pleasantries

You'll notice she is good at them,
my mother, queen of courtesy
but let's consider she gives you instead
the truth: father-in-law lost in February
the hospitalized mother-in-law.
Complications. And then
her parents who are starting
to forget themselves.
This is to be expected. Still
when her father says "train"
and means "chair."
No longer knows how
her children spend their nights.
Stooped back is muscle memory
of the shepherding. Soon even the dog
will leave her. Stay busy.
Wretched twilight promises to bring
the clamor as always, afterglow
just traces of another exit.
The bats wake. Split her
head full of wing beats and blare.
Wait. For the drink to hit blood,
for the waxy dark to seal the day,
for someone to say something pleasant.

Shore Ode

I know what I am supposed to feel
when I stand on the beach
and look out at the ocean:
small and irrelevant. And I do,
but only for a moment, because
then I will get in my car and drive
over what was once marsh and swamp
to my home where I don't have to feel
the rain as it falls for hours.
I watch the water mount higher.
"Poets are always taking
the weather so personally."
It's true—when it's gray outside
I feel my misery is validated
by whatever gods or force
of nature that may exist.
I came into a world of mountains
already circumvented and beasts
already tamed. Even now, I watch my cat
sleep under the sill and think how soft
we both are. There is neatly packaged food
a few feet away for when we get hungry
and I am still not content.
Maybe by taking all the survival
out of surviving we made something worse,
a kind of pain that doesn't sweat or bleed.

Spartina

We were once more than this

We eat the rays of the sun and we
do not sleep We take the changes

in the tide personally We fling
our legs like nets to undo all your

dredging We slowly close the gaps
We call a year a moment and our triumphs
are measured in inches We are friends

with the tiny sea snails that climb
our spines We are both children
and parents We are nurseries singing
anthems you can't hear

Animal Love

Not much but enough to know that
when you tell me you are made

of rainbows and Cheerios
you mean black ink and hot sauce.

Last call on a Tuesday and you're stuck
on the Past and her hip-hugging jeans so

I drive you home, hear you say
I love you a little from somewhere

in the dark, which means
Your jeans look good, too and also

nothing. Later I let you draw maps
on my skin, spindly roads from forearm

to fingertip, a city centered on my sternum
so you can retrace where you've been

see how you got here, which is to say
I like feeling useful, and also I like

an easy read. But here's the deep dark truth:
I am feasting on that "love" word

the one you won't remember tomorrow
and it tastes sharp like metal.

Combing the Hair

—after Edgar Degas

Here is something you were never
supposed to see: the nightdress
sure but more importantly
the let-down russet tresses
being pulled taut, a loaded
subject, a secret
and common intimacy
between girl and maid
so this breach is cardinal
and look how it shows
in the hasty brushstrokes
the pigment rushing
to capture something seen too quickly
to describe something not quite
right, not warmth
but heat, the gentle suggestion
of sadism embodied
in that clenched left hand
the incarnadined cheek
like you were trying to remember
or hold a moment already gone
but if there is such a thing
as punctuation in a painting you have
done it with that nostril, a full
stop. You, king of the latent menace
could not have underestimated them
you who gave your life to the dancers
the maids, the mothers
who saw every shade of red.

Respite

I know winter
is the deadest season but

I see hot breath all over
this city; even the salt crusted

taxi cabs, even the manhole covers
exhale tumbling white plumes

that swirl and dissipate in the night
like the clouds from our mouths

except when our mouths
are on each other. Someone

was buried today, but let's
not talk about that.

Let's go back to your room
and not talk at all, just

breathe, sweat,
breathe harder.

Realization Is Another Word for Truth
for Miodrag Brkich

I

What Socrates said
is not a matter of opinion:
By descending
into your mind you descend
into all minds.
In human form,
The Fallen State,
the mind can be unruly.
Listen for an insight.
(No one creates insight,
it is already there.)
The “All That Is”
does not interfere
or judge our causes
but simply watches
and waits like a loving parent,
knowing we may stumble
and fall, even experience
so-called death.

II

“Know ye not that ye are Gods?”

Gods do not die.

Gods do not exist
in space or time.

III

Before I left Hanover
three different professors stared
at me without speaking.
The only reason not to regret
is finding a greater purpose.
The deeper you go the less
you will be understood.

IV

Remember Diogenes who walked
the countryside while holding
a lighted candle searching
for an honest man
and not finding one.

Michigan Summer Daydream

It happened in the middle of doing something completely unrelated, which may be how such visions come. I wouldn't by any means say I have the "Eye." I was simply zigzagging around town on my Vespa: picking up a prescription, dropping off the lease for the forgetful landlord, taking a friend to Goodwill so she could buy a costume she would wear once. In Gainesville, theme-party stakes are high. I thought about everything I had to do before midnight. Stopped at a light, I ignored the stares of the man in his car next to us, who must have thought his bubble on wheels gave him permission. I closed my eyes and felt the hot pavement under thin-soled shoes. Slipping them off, I met scalding sand that was pleasantly cool a couple inches deep. I looked out over the lake and there it was—the Main Street Beach and its floating dock, an island waiting for someone to brave the frigid water and seaweed that would grab the ankles to get to its planks, warm on goosebumped skin, reprieve for heaving lungs. My friend's arms tightened around me and I realized the light had changed. On my last visit to that beach, the dock seemed so much smaller than I remembered.

A Southern Gentleman

You are seventy something in your knees
but not in your mind, which is why
you sit next to me, call me beautiful
like your wife, who's five-eleven,
seventeen years your junior
and teaches yoga on Sundays.
You are candid about the face-lift.
You manage to drop Harvard five
minutes in and though
your alabaster smile is too perfect
against too tight tawny skin
there is nothing plastic about
your cheek. I might like you
and I know I like the attention,
which hasn't come from the age-
appropriate date to my left.
Your eyes are far away when you tell
me about the bipolar ex you still love.
There is more water than ice
in the rosé bucket now. I unstick
thighs from chair for another glass.

Tomorrow Is a New Day

So they say, but I am not done
honoring today's failures: a toast

to the grandmother I didn't call
and the sonnet that fell on thirteen

and the fake pasta that wasn't good.
If only time were measured

in smells of spice and blooms of flower—
cardamom o'clock, the witch hazel hour—

then the wastedness couldn't be counted on fingers.
Don't they also say that olfactory memories

are the strongest? I don't remember
the scent in the air when you said you loved me

but I know the grass was spring green,
my face wet with failure.

At the Edge of the World

there is a parking lot,
empty but for a red beater
that bakes in the high morning sun.
From the lookout point it seems
to tempt the water to come up
over the few feet of land
between them and swallow it.
But the man who drove here knows
these waters aren't vengeful,
at least not today.
Beneath the still
is a briny unquiet that cares
only to swirl on as it always has.
The man watches the skies.
There are no signs of eagles or hawks,
no great thrashing
of gator tails in the marsh, but there
is the steady drone from a charm
of hummingbirds that flits
forward and back between feeders
of sugared water, their tiny buzzing
bodies violent and impeccable.

Click Bait

you crash
your rosy heart
into mine
my heart
it roses so easily
for you I'll tear
from moral fibers
like the piece of trash
I am
ribbons of my constitution
can't tie this up neatly
but we
have the same fetish
of being the last
person someone sees
at the airport
between kisses
you tell me
your girlfriend is a playwright
and for \$29.95
you can buy
Kim K's crying face
on a T-shirt
in other words
nothing means
anything anymore.

In the Conservatory

—after Mary Cassatt's "Young Mother Sewing"

You watched her quietly
become a mother one stitch
at a time, effacing herself
against the girl in the role
of daughter, head down

maybe pulling back
her hands to save the project
not even aware of that
innate woman thing—the soldiering
in a body always shared.

But here's the question:
if a woman paints other women
in a country home in France
and none of them is wearing a tutu
can you call it a performance?

I am thinking of the Not Pictured
man in the role of mentor/
seeker in the wild somehow making
you the spinster lamenting
a childless life, all things

being equal. For now, linger
on that child, young enough still
to drape on this stranger's lap
all trust and limbs not yet laden
unafraid to look us in the eye.

Going Home

There are different children in my house.
This thought rising alongside a summer storm
more ominous than those remembered—charcoal clouds
bloating the Midwestern sky, made even darker
by tinted train windows. Metallic dirty train smell
is a thing I didn't know I missed.

We hiss to a stop at a station I don't recognize,
with its new brick façade and shiny sign
welcoming me back. People used to say Wheaton
is "the town with a church on every corner"
and I wonder if they still do. Straight-haired Claire
lived in that house, where I never spun any bottles,
and there sit the bleachers I never cheered on,
behind the high school I would not attend.

Driving down Main, a gleaming deli in place
of the diner and its square ice-cream scoops
I've never seen elsewhere. But sandwiched
in the alley—the popcorn shop still here!
Signature red door, floor-to-ceiling prismatic walls
of candy you could push against with elbows still bent,
every child's Corridor of Heaven!
At the end of the aisle that rotund man
with the same mustache who counts it all
swiftly, never checking prices. He barely looks
up. *"Don't you remember me?"*
The question stays unasked. It is foolish
to hinge all hope on a candy store.
There are different children in my house.

Chicago, 1871

—after the memoirs of Bessie Bradwell

We were awakened by the fire;
I saved my best clothes by putting them on.
Mother picked up Father's Mason hat,

declaring, "Masonry will certainly be an aid
at a time like this." She clasped her birdcage tightly,
the little creature gasping for air.

My father the judge worried over his law-books.
At the office on Washington Street, he took his time
choosing which to rescue.

Then I remembered Mother's list of
subscribers for her *Chicago Legal News* and
took it with me
to the lake, telling father, "This is a good thing to save!"

In the streets, the crowd pressed me on all sides,
the confusion made worse by a snowstorm of red flakes.
A few times, my coat caught fire; people helped me

smother it with their hands. One man nearby exclaimed
"What of the prisoners? They will burn in their cells."

As Chief Counsel

He deals in clauses, statutes, and ambiguities
that other people miss, agonizing
over contingencies that come with each draft.
Contracts passing through his office blur together,

the boilerplate outlining various benefits
of deferred compensation, things that cause
his children's minds to drift elsewhere,
much like his own at the end of the day.

He watches his inbox faithfully, stays longer
than associates he long ago surpassed in rank.
Sunset ignites the golf course through the window,
pinks and oranges burning. He does not see them.

He has a daughter who also deals in language,
whose mind is not unlike his own, could maybe
carry her through law school, if she chose.
Sometimes he reflects on his twenties

and all the regrets. He tells her not to be afraid.
Many nights he sits parked in the driveway,
observing his house from outside as if
it belonged to someone else.

Lament for the Child

I

I am weary with my growing
though the bones were fully
stretched by twelve, thirteen
when the first man lewdly

hung his praise on my frame:
"that's a great dress on you."
Back then I didn't have a
name for this but felt the
residue

of his slick words on my skin
which kept stretching to hold
new hips, let the thighs fill in
and breasts ripen. I am told

God only dishes what we can take
but God am I tired of this story
Don't tell me this cycle can't break
Don't tell me this, too, is your glory.

II

I wonder if, years later, she will see
what everyone else saw: picture of
the perfect family, all taupe-clad and smiling on some beach,
her child self sandwiched
between parents still young and beautiful.
Her mother—now a painter, then a fashion designer, once a photographer,
bird bones always garbed
in the latest gossamer trend—earns no money
but as long as she has her daddy's, as long
as she can keep disappearing
feed on the wafer
thin compliments from other mothers (that dress just *hangs* on you!)
and they commission her overpriced pastels of sailboats
for their nurseries and foyers
because this delusion
is symbiotic. When she goes away for a while
they tell the girl that mommy is getting her hair done
and she believes it.
You, flaxen poppy-cheeked child
won't remember the crying wolf, the police
indulging her at first, but your brawny-bodied father
and his lambheart stayed, even after papers were served.
You won't have noticed that his hand was never empty
of drink. You'll remember
just that they were together.
Look here, in this photo, how their arms
wrap around you, how their hands
almost touch.

III

Strange now to think not even my sister
knew as we sat around the Thanksgiving spread,
November's berry only just sprouted
inside her. Weeks later, we cry on the phone.

Can you miss what was never had?
We cannot imagine its face any more
than we can picture God's.

Because of her poison blood my sister falls
into Category X. I search "methotrexate"
and "pregnancy," find

*bilateral hip
dysplasia deviated
mandible dysmorphic
sacrum*

among the things I can pronounce.
No good would have come.

I'll tell no one of this, not even
you who sees me crying, tells me
all grief is a prayer.

The Collagist

—after Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm"

Tell me in your words
what was the rhythm of that October?
Would you call it
a cadence of controlled chaos
as your husband did
when he poured and stippled
thinned paint to the unprimed, unstretched canvas
flat on the floor?
Did you wonder when you first watched him
come at the fabric with full body force and from all angles
how the cigarette stayed put?
Could you stand before the finished canvas
trace a given tangle of pooling lines
in heavy black or spectral white
and see yourself, your collages
in shadow?
You don't have to tell me
it was hard to watch your love
drink himself to death
and find the "death car girl" beside him
had survived.
I would not condemn you if
once you buried him
your house of grief was livable.

When Jacarandas Bloom

I was wrong about spring.
February in Texas was too soon

for tepid wind to wake the azaleas,
which bloomed and fell without

word from my father.
In Chicago they are basking

in single-layer weather even
if it means the end of the world.

My sister had a flower etched
on her side to try for permanence.

Two Februaries ago my father's
father was buried in cold earth.

In Arkansas the rain turns to hail
without us noticing.

We are swooning over the pinkly new
bundle that is your nephew come early

though in this case we praise God.
The blossoms that are left

on the Japanese tulip tree outside
the window are brown at the edges.

Only after returning from Mexico
do we learn the jacarandas bloom

just two weeks of the year,
bestowing lavender petals equally

on churches and construction sites
as if the whole city were blessed

by flower girls. To be somewhere
at the right time is no small miracle.

Optimism

I am embarrassed that I never
considered the sand dollar
until the skeleton at my feet;
the pleasing radial symmetry
and those evenly placed notches (perfect
for stringing up in my house or on my body)
must have distracted me. And that delicate
center imprint like flower petals
pressed in clay– I never knew
it was a mouth that breathed and tasted,
or that–alive–these urchins are velvet coated
in skin made of millions of tiny hairs,
helping them tiptoe across the ocean floor.
And if I didn't know these things
about a single sun-bleached bone
there must be more to learn
from two hundred and six of yours.

America

Mid-afternoon on the kind of cloudless
winter Sunday that calls us to the park.
We claim a plot of sun between the pine

shadows. You read to me the one about
bananafish. For the first time I think
there will always be children tumbling

down some hill or praying upon a kite.
On this hill, in orangine light, we recline
and flip the world. Bodies bob in the blue

and their mothers are never far. This one
with her magenta hijab makes me want
to be a painter. She is everything

and nothing like my mother. We pick out
from disquiet the Spanish words we know
and I wish I knew more. We both realize

we are cold and see the sun has shifted.
A metal building catches glint and blooms
all the faces marigold. To his son

a father walking past says *look at the*
lovebirds meaning you and me and we are
blushed by a truth we didn't know. This is

all the hope we need: parent showing child
people not his color, saying look. Love.

Translations
from *Bucoliques*

by Raymond Queneau

TIME

Dawn
a trail of clouds all gray and soft

morning
the sun like a fresh-baked crumb

noon
it rains

evening
the midges wash drops of air

night
the moon dries

LE TEMPS

L'aube
le train de nuages tout gris tout mou

le matin
le soleil en mie de pain

midi
il pleut

le soir
les moucherons lavent les gouttes d'air

la nuit
la lune sèche

END OF THE YEAR

Odd number Eleven. Time's detention
December before us completes a procession
Far from a thousand but more than a hundred
Not yet snow but rain and mud

Still from denouement until the end
The tree waits for fruit and lava for rock
The scythe upsets the termites' den
Star chases silly song of the cock

All will come to pass. Dawn beautiful bitch
Peels back the universe throws off the murk
The witless fowl shouts its head off and smirks

The seed goes to work after it splits
The year births its alexandrine

The sonnet ends at number fourteen

BOUT DE L'AN

Onze nombre impair. La retention du temps
Décembre devant nous achève un cortège
Assez loin de mille et un peu plus de cent
La boue et la pluie et pas encor [sic] la neige

De l'achèvement toujours à la limite
L'arbre attend son fruit et la lave son roc
La faux se détourne du nid de termites
L'étoile court après le chant niais du coq

Tout vont arriver. L'aube belle charogne
Épluche l'univers rejette la nuit
La sotte volaille s'égosille et luit

La graine éclate et se met à la besogne
L'année accouche de son alexandrin

Le sonnet s'arrête au numéro quatorze

SUNDAY

A bath of weeds and stones
soap of the sun
robe of clouds

the tulle and the heel
the downward arrow
twenty drops of blood

with or without
dagger and shell

DIMANCHE

Un bain d'herbes et de cailloux
le savon du soleil
le peignoir de nuages

le tulle et le talon
la fleche du bas
vingt gouttes de sang

avec ou sans
poignard et coquillage

THE ONE HUNDRED YEAR OLD

The most venerable woman around will soon turn one hundred
One might wonder what she is still doing on this earth
One obviously being the heirs who are concerned
For the others think simply that she has grown old
that she is just a prized keepsake
and that as soon as she has aged a sufficiently long time
and looped the loop of a hundred years
it will be time
high time by God
to celebrate this feat

There will be fanfare there will be speeches there will be feasting
the mayor will be there the deputies the bigwigs
they will serve bisque, soup, bouillon and chicken
pears and cheese
to the old woman from the slums
to the inheritors of gruel

You have seen, they will say, your due of eight hundred thousand hours
you have seen, they will say, three billion seconds
oh since for you time abounds
tell us then of its richness
that which you remember

"I recall without difficulty
the bygone days filled with glee
but there is nothing remaining
of my hate and suffering

Of the seasons spring and summer
nothing of note stands out to me
but of Pluviôse and wintertime
there's nothing at all I remember

The fruits and boughs and posies
I remember fairly well
but I have nothing to tell
of defeat or enmity

In my memory there wanders
the glimmer of certain showers
there will subsist evermore
the glory of *mon amour*."

Bravo bravo they'll shout hence
how delightful her speech
and they will recommence
their gorging on the feast.

LA CENTENAIRE

La plus vieille femme du pays sera bientôt centenaire
On se demande ce qu'elle fait encore sur cette terre
On c'est évidemment des héritiers qu'il s'agit
Car les autres pensent tout simplement qu'elle vieillit
qu'elle est un ornement fort appréciable
et que lorsqu'elle aura vieilli suffisamment longtemps
et bouclé la boucle des cent ans
il sera temps
grand temps ma foi
de fêter cet exploit

Il y aura fanfare il y aura discours il y aura banquet
le maire sera là les adjoints les notables
on servira du potage de la soupe du bouillon et du poulet
de la poire et du fromage
à la vieille

Tu as vu, dira-t-on, échoir huit cent mille heures
tu as vu, dira-t-on, trois milliards de secondes
oh puisqu'en toi le temps abonde
dis-nous donc de ces richesses
ce qu'il te reste

« Je me souviens sans nulle peine
de la joie aux jours anciens
mais il ne me reste plus rien
de mes douleurs et de mes haines

Des saisons étés et printemps
il ne me reste pas grand'chose
mais de l'hiver et de pluvieuse
je ne me souviens nullement

Des fleurs des fruits et puis des branches
je me souviens assez bien

mais il ne me reste plus rien
des défaites et des revanches

Dans ma mémoire se disperse
le souvenir de quelque averse
il y subsistera toujours
la gloire de mon amour »

Bravo bravo s'éciera-t-on
elle a très bien parlé
et ils continueront
l'absorption du banquet

THE TOWN SIMPLETON

In his head live half-formed ideas.
Fingers in his nose or dick in his hand
He strolls around the village.
His father is dead. His mother was a whore.

A burning ulcer eats up his story.
He drools in the sun, smiles at dung.
Sometimes a stone will stop him in his path
Which he searched for yesterday and fears tomorrow.

To him everything looks like food;
His stomach swells; he grazes on nature,
Chews the flesh of all four seasons.

Then he sleeps without dreams or delirium
And into a big black hole he tumbles
Heavy with the weight of digestion.

LE SIMPLE

Des projets mous logent dans sa mémoire.
Doigts dans le nez ou le sexe à la main
Il se balade à travers le village.
Son père est mort. Sa mère était catin.

Un chancre vert dévore son histoire.
Il bave au soleil, sourit au crottin.
Parfois la pierre arrête son voyage,
Que chassa hier et redoute demain.

Toute apparence est pour lui nourriture ;
Son ventre s'enfle ; il broute la nature,
Mastique la chair des quatre saisons.

Puis il s'endort sans rêve ni délire
Et c'est dans un grand trou noir qu'il chavire,
Lourd de tout le poids de sa digestion.

THE TEACHER

Miss Teacher has little ta-tas
that go tweet tweet
and lead us south
Miss Teacher teaches how to draw
about cuisine
and arts of the mouth

L'INSTITUTRICE

Mademoiselle a de petits seins
qui font cui-cui
quand on les touche
Mademoiselle enseigne le dessin
la cuisine
et les arts de la bouche

THE REBEL

An apricot
who sat in a tree
all at once asserts
I am not of masonry
and out he blurts
Hurray! Hurray!
the apricot
who sat in a tree

LE RÉVOLTÉ

Un abricot
qui était sur un arbre
tout à coup dit
Je ne suis pas de marbre
et il s'écrie
Cocorico cocorico
l'abricot
qui était sur un arbre

CLEANLINESS

The rooster washes his crown
the chicken her feathered gown
the duck his gloves butter
yellow the cow washes her
posterior
the horse his long
coiffure and the trout her
roe
the house washes its weather
vane the train its window panes
the truck its tires and its
jack the café its billiard
tables the school its
tadpoles
and the hospital its dipsomaniacs

all this world is nice and clean
its runoff dumps along the
river to loud slams the
washhouses and the
laundresses

keep quiet

HYGIÈNE

Le coq lave sa
casquette la poule sa
liquette
le canard ses gants beurre
frais la vache lave son
derrière
le cheval sa
crinière et la
truite son frai
la maison lave ses
carreaux le train ses
hublots
le camion ses pneus et son
cric le café lave son billard
l'école ses tétards
et l'hôpital ses éthyliques

tout un monde bien
propre sentine le long de
la rivière à grands coups
de lavoirs et les
lavandières

se taisent