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Eternal Twilight

Ashley Brooke Boulton
Northern Michigan University

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ETERNAL TWILIGHT

BY

ASHLEY BROOKE BOULTON

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

ETERNAL TWILIGHT

By

Ashley Brooke Boulton

Eternal Twilight is a collection of poetry that confronts a yearning for eternity that can be felt only in the essence of twilight, the romance, tension, and hesitation of days and nights passing in and out of each other. These are poems woven of light and darkness, love and loss, and the insatiable pang the heart feels when it reflects, and remembers. *Eternal Twilight* is a work of characters, voices, and experiences, many of which interpret Finnish themes and mythology, while all poems vary in their perspectives and voices. The collection marries sound and sense, and strives to stir anguish of loss and love in the reader. To recall is to remember—it is both gift and curse. *Eternal Twilight* is what we can never forget or let go—it is the script of nostalgia for lives never lived, loves never lost or found, and it promises renewal through self-awakening. The poems capture the immensity of the eternal, and as Edward Hirsch writes, “Immensity declares itself as a fullness that overflows, as an overbrimming romantic song, as an inner space breaking loose to obliterate temporal circumstance.” *Eternal Twilight* is a loose hold on what cannot be controlled or contained—small spaces of hesitancy: the suspension of light and darkness.

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For Brock, my eternal light in constant darkness

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INTRODUCTION

I have always found it hard to bear the hour of twilight. It is the hour of transition between life and darkness—a time when the fount of daylight is already spent, and when the other light . . . by which we try to protect ourselves from darkness, has not yet illumined human existence.

Nikolai Berdyaev

AESTHETICS

In an essay from *Dream and Reality*, existentialist Nikolai Berdyaev discusses the relationship between the experiences of anguish and twilight, and he most forwardly notes his issues with time and eternity. Berdyaev writes, “Anguish is always evidence of longing for eternity, of inability to come to terms with time” (319). The hour of twilight is a time when longing for eternity and eternal life are felt most intensely. As for poetry, it is attempted eternity, the immortal past, present, future, and self.

Poetry, therefore, is a craft of twilight. Poems exist as stilled moments of going into and coming out of: their movement is inhale, exhale, the hesitation in between. Twilight is the tide of time, the slow intercourse between day and night that pulls them in and out of each other. To capture twilight is to stop and mesmerize time.

My poetry gives voice to twilight, the crafted conjunction between light, which is to see, and darkness, which is to know. To know twilight is to know the anguish of loneliness, of truth, of knowing—I am alone. Being aware of this allows me to experience the pang of yearning for eternity so that I may feel what swells in me, love and love lost, forever, in that passing of day into night. Of love, Berdyaev writes, “*Eros* is

in anguish, for it is concerned with, and deeply rooted in, the mystery of time and eternity: it concerns time athirst for eternal fulfillment, and yet never attaining it” (319).

Poetry is a practice by which I interpret, know, and understand the world and my place in it. In the process of writing poetry, I lose myself further. The essence of twilight determines the depth of my self-awareness, and the extent of movement out of myself, both accomplished through reflections on love, loss, memory, and related themes from Finland’s national epic poem, *Kalevala*. The opening lines of the epic define loneliness of existence and establish a reflective mood I aim to capture in my own work. The lines read, “Yksin meillä yöt tulevat, / Yksin päivät valkeavat; / Yksin synti Väinämöinen . . .” (*Kalevala*, 105-107), which translates to, “Lonely upon us nights come, / Lonely, days dawn / Lonely born was Väinämöinen . . .” (translation my own). With these themes and moods in mind, the *Eternal Twilight* narrates two story lines that share a common purpose: rise in consciousness, the awareness twilight provides.

The first story line surveys and modernizes themes from the *Kalevala*. The runo I interpret most often is the story of Aino, a young Finnish girl who is forcefully betrothed to Väinämöinen, the great shaman and singer, by her brother, Joukahainen. Distraught by this impending union, Aino chooses to drown herself to avoid marrying a man she does not love. As a result of her suicide, Aino is reborn as a fish, and those around her must suffer among the constant reminders of her absence.

In his book *The Key to the Kalevala*, Pekka Ervast analyzes the epic from an esoteric, theosophical perspective, and contributes a shamanistic, consciousness-based analysis of Aino and Väinämöinen. Ervast writes,

The *Kalevala*’s story of Aino . . . [is] living proof of the Finnish nation’s developed sensitivity to beauty . . . we also admire that young, innocent girl

whose heart has not yet awakened to love, who so valued her own poetic comprehension of nature and humanity that she preferred to completely give up this life than sell herself (115).

In Ervast's interpretation, Aino represents the awakening of national consciousness in Finland, and in my poetry, I interpret Aino's consciousness, life, death, and reincarnation, from a contemporary perspective. I also intend to give Aino a strong voice, one heard above all others. Due to the musical qualities of Finnish language, I have also incorporated some Finnish vocabulary and phrases into my poetry.

The second story line in *Eternal Twilight* includes other Finnish-influenced poems that survey love, loss, and memory as they relate to my travels and experiences in Finland, as well as other mythological Finnish themes, mostly concerning the bear. Other poems in this story line share similar themes, but are not related to Finland, and many allude to the impossible vastness of Space and the difficulty of knowing oneself in the universe.

I previously referenced existentialist Nikolai Berdyaev, and aside from his theoretical influence, I have also been inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's existential humanism. In an excerpt from *Existentialism*, Sartre writes, "man is constantly outside of himself; in projecting himself, in losing himself outside of himself, he makes for man's existing" (296). Poetry is my search for self, above, below, and beyond.

While existentialism, the *Kalevala*, and other Finnish elements dominate my poetry, the craft of my poems has been influenced by a select few contemporary poets of Finnish, American, and Russian descent. Atmospherically, my roots still drink deeply from the soil of my youthful foundation: William Blake, Robert Browning, Lord Byron, and T.S. Eliot, to name a few. But poets such as Lassi Nummi, Anni Sumari, Sirkka

Turkka, Pentti Saarikoski, Stanley Kunitz, Ilya Kaminsky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Jon Anderson have been models of the craft. These poets make deliberate word and punctuation choices and focus primarily on techniques for how to progress a poem and defer its decent. I have explored these practices in my own work while studying at Northern Michigan University for the last three years, and reading these poets alongside critical texts by Edward Hirsch, Richard Hugo, Ted Kooser, and Erik Greinke has provided me with a strong foundation from which I have constructed and reconstructed my own poetic aesthetic and techniques.

My reading and writing of poetry has instilled in me the belief that poetry should remove us from ourselves and the world around us. It should pull us into someone else's moment and let us be that someone else. For poetry to be successful, the reader must be able to enter the poem and participate in its action and movement; in other words, it must be accessible, an element I have made central in my writing. For a collection of poems to be successful as a full experience, there must also be consistencies in theme, style, and voice.

By situating many of my poems in unfamiliar places, and by expressing awareness in as many lights and shadows as possible, I let the reader enter and experience what I have lived, feel, and ponder. *Eternal Twilight* allows the audience to experience a movement toward enlightenment that can be accomplished only by knowing the darkness inside oneself. As Albert Camus writes, "There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night."

Knowing and awareness, however, extend beyond themes of light and darkness and also enter my poems as stylistic components. For example, I am aware of language,

form, and rhythm within each individual poem's construction. Though most of my poetry is written in free verse, I employ meaningful turns and structures in my poems, from line breaks to stanza breaks, and I often write in multiple voices and from a variety of points of view and perspectives. One of my most critical accomplishments as a poet has been to write successfully from both male and female voices, and I believe that my relationship with and my interpretative work of the *Kalevala* have helped strengthen these qualities in my writing.

In my *Kalevala* poems, I have taken the voice of Aino, Väinämöinen, Joukahainen, and Ilmarinen. Writing from these character's perspectives has helped me to remove myself as speaker and to extend myself into a variety of personas. Galway Kinnell, in his essay on "Poetry, Personality, and Death," says the following about persona: "A persona has its uses, but also its dangers. In theory, it would be a great way to get past the self, to dissolve the barrier between poet and reader. Writing in the voice of another, the poet would open himself to that person" (221). Kinnell continues by saying that a poet may choose a persona to avoid dealing with an issue, or to deal with it more closely. To me, this bridges understanding between poet and audience, because as a poet, I have the opportunity to play a role, assume a voice, stance, or identity, to understand something more deeply about myself in order to open up that exploration to the audience.

Even though I have been writing poetry for almost fifteen years, it has taken time for me to develop the poet-reader relationship. How a poem functions, how it is crafted, is what helped me successfully achieve this transmission.

Poetry is more than words on a page, broken up into lines. However, we recognize a poem because it *looks* like a “poem,” typically, a series of broken lines. Therefore, the difference in what prose says and what poetry says lies in how it is written. In their essay “The Line/The Form/The Music,” David Baker and Ann Townsend quote Stephen Minot, who says,

There are five fundamental qualities that distinguish poetry from prose: concern for the line as opposed to the sentence, greater attention to the sound of language, development of rhythms, a heightened use of images, and a tendency to create density by implying far more than is stated directly (65).

To achieve all of this in my poetry, I strive to marry language, structure, and rhythm to create a meaningful, musical experience for the reader. At times, as is the case with Lassi Nummi’s poem “So Often Leaving,” my words fall deliberately, and the pace is slow. An excerpt from his poem reads, “It’ll take you away. / When you’re calm, open, / its image fits you. Its / tremor of extreme light, / of most distant darkness” (113).

In other poems, my words nearly burn from the page in flight as I build momentum, such as in the beginning of my poem “Telescopes.” It reads,

He spoke of telescopes, how our bodies take shape of lenses
curved, convex, concave—how everything is a particle
of everything, all pushing and pulling, like gravity, broken,
scattered, bleeding black matter, all fractured in pieces
exploded like stars.

These are aspects I celebrate: my ability to write in a number of styles and from a variety of influences. In the discussion of my craft, I focus on language, structure, and rhythm, because these are the most successful elements of my poetry, all of which complement my aesthetic movement.

LANGUAGE

In his book *The Potential of Poetry*, Eric Greinke writes, “By conceptualizing the language and imagery of poetry in divergent ways, poets and readers expand their mental flexibility and move beyond old levels of awareness” (16). Awareness of language and the weight of word choice are what changed first in my development as a craft-based poet. As I learned to select my words more carefully, I became more aware of the importance of economy. Diction is the most crucial element of a poem because words carry significance of meaning as well as sound. Structure and rhythm merely enhance what could be derived from words. My transition into this deliberate, economic style began with verb choice because verbs assume economy. They convey action and movement. Furthermore, each line of a poem should progress the poem, and choosing active, effective verbs is essential to clearly delineate movement and progress.

In his book *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser writes, “Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum. . . . Many verbs also carry in their imagery or in their sound a suggestion of what they mean” (69). Most of my poems are written in present tense, another method by which I aim to retain economy, but present tense also indicates urgency, and allows the audience to participate actively in my poems. For example, in “The Pleasure of Dying Twice,” I narrate a somewhat violent act of love-making. The middle of the poem reads,

Her eyes tell me—make is so she cannot breathe.
I cleave her lips and pull the trigger,

stunt her throat, sore her tongue
and make it quiver, push until she shivers

to a freeze, her body locked and numb
under me.

The verbs are immediate and strong, however, they are accessible. I always consider accessibility in my poetic language because poems with unfamiliar content must be especially accessible to a broad audience.

It is likely that most readers of my poetry will not be familiar with the *Kalevala* or Finnish mythology; however, in my reinterpretation of some of these myths, themes, and characters, I combine sharp language and clear imagery to illuminate the circumstance of the myth or character, to make the theme accessible. A good example of this practice in my own work occurs in my poem “Väinämöinen Meets the Maiden of Pohjola,” in which I interpret the story of Väinämöinen travelling to Pohjola, the far north, in search of a woman after Aino has drowned. The second half of the poem reads,

She stops her washing, looks at me, her blue eyes
a gleam of twilight, braids trailing the lake
like moon-beams. Her words are strokes of dreams—
she speaks of a man, lonely born, who would meet her
by the sea, one sent to conquer love’s impossible feats.

Beyond the ability to access theme, however, the reader should feel connected to the poem on a personal level and be able to react to it.

By creating a personal tone and voice in my poetry, I utilize a unique trait because I want the reader feel as if he/she is the subject of the poem, or a character, or motivation. Language is the vehicle by which I accomplish this. In my poem “The Endlessness of Light,” I mostly write from first person plural while also using “you” to indicate “otherness” and direct address. A relationship is established and the tone is commanding.

A few lines read,

Oulu has never been more than a room
with you and me in it, separated at finger-length,

eyes trying not to meet.
Once, your shoulders pushed against dawn.

Wet, grey light honeyed your eyes, your face
taken by morning. We fought winter in heavens,

our bodies glares, sun spots deposing thoughts of us lost
against frozen window panes, thousands of miles apart.

This poem fulfills what Greinke calls the “transportation effect.” He writes,

It’s the transportation effect that matters. A poem should somehow enrich, inform or move one from a previously convergent feeling or thought. If it only reinforces or confirms what was already know or felt [by the audience], it can still produce that aesthetic movement of recognition (18-19).

The reader should be transported, and should be aware of it, and the themes in my poetry—love, loss, and nostalgia—aid in this journey.

Clear, accessible language and syntax are essential to meaning and progress in a poem, but structure shows visually how a poem moves, its momentum and rhythm, and is the result of how a poem breaks and falls.

STRUCTURE

Poems come when they are ready. They are not induced, but triggered. Water breaks and the poem begins to push itself out. Greinke says, “The aesthetic experience for the poet comes primarily from the birth of the poem” (19). Therefore, the mood, tone, or rhythm of this single line could shape those aspects of the entire poem.

In most cases, my poems are born from a single line, a trigger line, one that may be lost by the final revision. But the initial weight, meaning, and inspiration of that one line are usually enough to carry me through a complete thought. Lines are what separate

poetry from prose, and they signify the intentional choices the poet makes. Baker and Townsend note,

Of all the forms of writing, poetry is . . . the most aware of itself as writing. Poets employ a myriad of techniques to slow the movement of the text, to draw a reader's attention to the poem's method as well as to its message. The method becomes part of the message (62).

In my thesis, I have incorporated almost every characteristic of the line, including short, long, enjambed, and end-stopped. How and where lines break and stop directly influence my rhythm and heighten meaning. For instance, in my poem "*Love Waits for You to Speak*," I work with enjambment to create surprises, turns, and build momentum. Here is an excerpt:

She breathes apparition, knows your future
won't hold. This, she confides in you
and darkness, states her faith in failure, desire—
places you find each other. You inhale her
pause—hold it—wonder why she's there
within reach, half-gone, almost frozen, hung over
your small porch rail, hair strung out
like winter, damp and glittering.

As I became more aware of the importance of line length, density, and sound, my writing changed exponentially. "White space" became more than a medium of writing; it became an element of it. How a poem looks on the page may say something about the state of the poem. After experimenting with style and structure, I was surprised when I discovered that my poems were more powerful when I was able to convey effectively my thoughts on the basis of lines—I threw out experimentation and focused on how "satisfying" a poem feels when comprising a solid structure. If a poem has wild voice or

content, closing that into a tight structure could indicate that the poet is issuing “control” over the poem. My poem “Schism” is about letting someone go, the split of a shared existence. The poem’s structure could mock a “splitting-up,” but instead, I chose to keep the poem “composed” to express how hard the speaker tries to maintain composure. A few lines read,

In Kaamanen, I close your name into my throat, stand alone
on gravel shores of Kaamasenjoki. Midnight sun burns clean
before me. I dont know how it has the energy to stay,
or how I have strength to leave you in Suomi.

In its first draft “Schism” was over two pages long, but in the revision process, it was “tamed” to three small stanzas. When revising poetry, I am aware of how and where my lines break, but I concentrate more on these two concepts: what I choose to say and how to say it, and what I choose not to say. These choices relate to Greinke when he says, “I also think of poetry as mystery. Something needs to remain unresolved and mysterious. . . . At the same time, as a whole, there must be unity. . . . A poem’s structural integrity depends on how balanced it is” (38), on what frames and drives the poem down the page.

Additional points Baker and Townsend make about the line precisely define what I aim to do on a technical level, and their essay influenced the reinvention of my writing style. They state,

The line is a device to control the pace of the poem. . . . But to defer or delay its downward-falling fate, a poem may construct and then usurp any number of impediments—from lengthened or heavily end-stopped lines, stanza breaks, or rhyme (66).

I know when a poem is finished because it “looks” finished—where lines begin, end, and begin again, should satisfying meaning. Poems must be tailored, and the tailoring process includes considering diction, sound, and imagery. While revising, I have learned how to

let go of words, sounds, and images, even whole lines or stanzas, for the sake of what the poem wants to say as opposed to what I, the poet, need to say.

Therefore, poetry is a delicate balance between saying too much or not enough about a lived experience. As Greinke says, “poetry is . . . human reality, a subjective state limited by human sensual perception” (18). Poetry attempts to do the impossible—to convey what cannot be said in words, and with the exuberance of song, which points to the importance of rhythm and score in my poetry.

“Aino Sings,” a spoken word poem, is good example of how song, rhythm, and structure function in my own work. Aside from the influence of the *Kalevala*, the style and structure of this poem were inspired by two poems, Anni Sumari’s “Autobiography” and Rabbe Enckell’s “O Bridge of Interjections...” Both of these poem’s appearances and punctuation score their movement precisely. Here is an excerpt from the second half of the first stanza of my poem “Aino Sings,”

But you should never trust a boy
who can’t hold a sword
with one hand, who offers silver
but totes a sack of gold,
who can’t raise his voice without a crack—
did you believe that
 after all his weak recalls
of earth and sky and moon
that I would come to you?

My poetry professor Beverly Matherne once said, “let punctuation in your poems work like the notations on a musical score.” Punctuation, then, became the method by which my poems spoke. It gave voice, personality, inflection, and movement to my lines. The last element of my poetry to evolve was rhythm.

RHYTHM

As Baker and Townsend say, “the poet possesses the power to measure time” (70). Later, they write, “When . . . poetry is ‘musical’ . . . we notice its phrasing, its way of linking language to story to elements of timing and its use of rhyming or nonrhyming sound techniques” (115). In my own work, I have been known for achieving consistent tonality, voice, and music.

For example, in my poem “Salt,” I narrate Aino’s contemplation of where to drown herself. To justify the story, and to indicate her decisive movements away from the sea, I create this action in the rhythm of the poem. The poem turns as Aino turns,

Unable to chase the sun back down, she runs
against it, turns her back on salt, on fear
she might float, on fear
the salt will protect her, preserve her flesh.

Aino makes for lakes instead,
for not-yet-frozen streams and breaks
in ice she knows won’t hold.

The poem’s momentum continues to build as Aino runs toward inland lakes.

To maintain music, momentum, and economy in my poems, I integrate internal rhyme, repetition, and proper syntax and punctuation. My poems consist mostly of words containing only one or two syllables. Since a syllable works as a single unit or “note,” this allows me to control my rhythms more than if I were to use more polysyllabic words. This also assures the accessibility and readability of my poetry. For example, in my poem

“Light from Toppila,” much is accomplished in a few lines. There is movement, but it is precise.

Our heart beats quicken, even in this cold.

We stop, mesmerized by white.

Your black hair, its sheen, burns my eyes.

Neptune blue, a galaxy of light.

We are fixed in space, dark-matter blind.

We are everything, shining.

One of my most syntactically sound poems, “Khanty Reindeer Sacrifice of the Winter Solstice,” is a double Fibonacci, a form that requires a specific syllable count for each line, according to the famous mathematician’s sequence of numbers in which each successive integer is equal to the sum of the two preceding numbers. Here are the opening lines,

Skinned
skull
hangs high
in dark pine.
We offer antler
to earth, bone to sky, sacrifice

skins both black and white.

When working with a restricted number of syllables per line, I had to choose my words carefully to clarify action and meaning in the poem. It also meant that each word had to carry significant weight to push the plot of the poem forward. Working with this form helped me realize how insignificant articles, conjunctions, and prepositions can be, and since then, I have worked to eliminate these from my writing. Reading copious amounts

of Stanley Kunitz's poetry has also helped me to discover music in my poetry, as well as heighten my awareness of sound and sense. The second half of his poem "The Flight of Apollo" precisely exemplifies this pairing. It reads,

I was a stranger on earth. / Stepping on the moon, I begin / the gay pilgrimage to new / Jerusalems / in foreign galaxies. / Heat. Cold. Craters of silence./ The Sea of Tranquility / rolling on the shores of entropy. / And, beyond, / the intelligence of the stars (169).

I strive to create pleasure in the reading of my poems. I want the reader to delight in sound and emotion, to fall and rise with characters—I want the reader to know him or herself more after experiencing the poem. In his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, Edward Hirsch quotes Paul Valéry, who says, "A poet's function . . . is not to experience the poetic state. . . . His function is to create it in others" (115). Poetry is a way of knowing myself; my intent is to lead the reader in and out of the same light and darkness, until he or she is washed of reality, and reflects.

One comes into knowing through having loved and lost. Many of my poems are love poems, but for me, love and loss function simultaneously. Hirsch writes, "we not only find ourselves in poetry, we also lose ourselves to it" (88). One of the ways I illuminate aspects of "knowing" or "coming into awareness" in my poetry is through the Biblical sense of the term, which carries sexual connotations. For this reason, many of my poems work toward a climax, sometimes more than once in the same poem, and this climax relies on rhythm and measure of words. Hirsch writes,

There is a specialized version of the love poem that takes drastic measures to mesmerize time, to induce euphoria, that keeps opening and turning back on itself to create a sensation of enchantment. This poetry takes rhythmic measure . . . to imagine a world beyond measure (98).

I strive to create this “world beyond measure,” especially in those poems with overt sexual themes. To build momentum before reaching a climax in my poetry, I employ enjambment more frequently and resist end-stops until it is time for the climax to plateau. I like to build rhythm within individual lines by incorporating slant rhyme, consonance, assonance, and repetition. An example of this in my own work is in the poem “Evidence,” where I plot a love affair between two employees at a bakery. The middle stanza reads,

We talk of yeast, I imagine

my back slack like a flour sack, humped
and comfortable, my legs, spread, dangle off
the table edge, round wood smooth, dusted. Needy
are your hands, we are deeper past our wrists,
both elbows bent, working. I am turning
every shade of red, fingers curling
into you, spilling every word I measure,
all because you smell like beer, taste like sugar.

Learning to speak Finnish has also heightened my awareness of vowel sounds, as well as enunciation, so I often rely on vowels to create rhythmic peaks in my lines, as can be heard in the foregoing example. Baker and Townsend write, “a line of poetry is a balancing act between vowels and consonants. Which of these elements gets more emphasis will determine the particular quality of the music in that line” (123). How well words exit the throat in sequence governs their clarity and function in the poem.

Listening to myself recite, I have learned which combinations of sounds to avoid, and which work well. Baker and Townsend continue to say, “If vowels get more play in a line, we hear a more melodious sound. If the line relies heavily on consonants, we hear a more heavily stressed music” (123). Therefore, vowels carry us. Consonants jerk and stop

us. In listening to sounds, however, I have also learned to appreciate the substance of pause, and how the absence of a word or sound is just as critical as its presence.

This can be seen throughout the *Kalevala*. The work is written entirely in trochaic tetrameter, and having read four different English translations of the epic, I have learned the difficulty of accomplishing the music of Finnish in English. What many of these translations have not considered is how to incorporate tension using pause as a method of metrical movement, and pause can be indicated in a variety of ways. In his book *Language and Metre: Metrics and the metrical system of Finnish*, Pentti Leino writes, “tension . . . is an imperfect correspondence between a constant and its variants, between the basic normative schema of a line and its realization” (25).

After working with Dr. Matherne, I also realized how important *proper* punctuation can be to the music/score of a poem. I use commas, em dashes, enjambment, end-stops, and stanza breaks as methods of pause that also create tension, crucial in my treatment of twilight as the hesitation of day giving into night, and again, just before dawn, of night giving in to morning. From a metrical perspective, Leino states,

It is not just a question of the absolute or relative stresses on rising or falling syllables, since the factors which create this tension . . . also include enjambement, omission of the first falling syllable of a line, addition of a falling syllable at the beginning or end of a line, iambic inversion, etc. (26).

Though Leino speaks of Finnish language poetry, studying his metrical theories has helped me to identify in my writing the relationships between sound, pause/tension, and sense from a more complex perspective.

I also use punctuation to build and slow momentum in order to reflect meaning. In my poems, the spontaneous rushing of waves and hesitant forward movement work together to create the tension that is critical to the fulfillment of my readers. For example,

in my poem “Mrs. Pääkkä, Winona Temperance Society, *Pöytäkirja: 1917*,” the pace of the poem reflects the economic and emotional state of Winona, Michigan, around 1917.

A few lines read,

Even in numbers our spirits deflate. Winona’s hope undulates
then fades, a skipped rock soon swallowed and lost

to a final breath. We thrive on stints, minutes that have never been
so calculated. I want to write *the grade of rock has dropped*,

or, *Kuukausi on Heinäkuu and the mine has closed*.

But I do not write this.

While I want my readers to long for the end of the poem, for its resolution, I also want them to fear it ending. I know a poem is nearly finished when language, structure, and rhythm come together in such a tide that the experience is one of resistance between the poem and reader, so that by the end, the sensation is so palpable that, like an insatiable lover, the reader will want to experience it again and again.

This is why I am a poet—so I that I may experience and share with others exuberance, loss, impossibility of beginning and ending, in an eternity fashioned entirely from words. As Edward Hirsch puts it,

The scandal of poetry: sacred pleasure, the words of praise coming alive in your mouth, in your body, in the euphoria of flight. It is always shocking, always transgressive, to call the words of passion holy. But poets will never be deterred from this intransigence. (93)

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I. Out of Light

A Distant Light, and Your Only One

A way out, a light
approaches. Nothing more
than a spark, just enough brighter
than space
behind the moon, her eyes
cut by candle flame, sunlight
capped by noon.

There are no shadows in the dark—
that spark could be anything.

Autochthonous

I was born to small hours of morning, to darkness
startled at my sounds of waking, my mother
whispering that my existence is no different
from stars, that I would find comfort only
in black miles between dusk and dawn.

I asked my mother why my body wouldn't fit
among stars, why my birth, bright
as a match-lit tomb in the sky, wasn't worthy
of a plot of night. *Close your eyes*, she said,
seek the unknown, woven darkness that sustains
the tightest hold. I close my eyes beyond stars,

their dissonant lights, beyond every cosmic dawn.
I close my eyes until matter reforms, until I—
blinded by reaches of space—find myself familiar.

Telescopes

He spoke of telescopes, how our bodies take shape of lenses curved, convex, concave, how everything is a particle of everything, all pushing and pulling, like gravity, broken, scattered, bleeding black matter, all fractured in pieces exploded like stars. We are particles of everything lost in vibration of each other, the pull of bodies, of force. But I know we have nothing to eclipse, nothing to rotate—
but your hips are like Jupiter, he says, wide and like a tempest.

There is a tide between us so he asks me of the sea.
He wants to know if he drinks the sky, will he swallow the sea?
Will stars stick in his throat, break and burn like salt?
Will winds of planet rings still blow? Will comet tails still trail inside the whole world reflected, aligned? Everything but black holes. He failed to fear for those. I know the universe will capsize, turn outside in. Black will be blacker, cold will be colder. *You'll have the universe inside you*—all the stars still burning, all the worlds still turning, all the forces pulsing.
Even your heart will echo throughout the universe you hold inside me.

A Prayer for Bundling

My first thought was *swaddling*, my second, *God*,
forgive me, for that impious association.

But if you could see how these sheets lace her body
corset-tight into me, you, too, *Lord*, would be praying
against resistance, the cold coif between her legs
I swear I felt my knuckles rap against . . .

And though I've long since released, stained her
grace at the sight of the flex of her neck
from which moonlight cannot shy . . .

Still, I want to breach her wall, *God*, part her
linen sea, rip the sheets from her, and with them,
brace the window, block sight of her
intangible labyrinth, your reachable wrath.

She lures me closer to you with temptation to know
her. I suffer for you, *God*. She could teach me
everything. Already, she is listening . . .

To Mark Antony

Your palms reach for silt of my skin
as you bury your head in the bed
of my chest. It once my heart, a beat,
a kingdom worth my keep.

I spread Nile-wide.

Lover, please, fill me with everything.

Evidence

We're past our wrists in flour, sugar, grease.
My fingers spread like wings, needy.
We leave prints, traces on everything. If you would
—*touch me*. Your body is a sugar mill, refinery.
Even the Salem's we share never taste of smoke.
From the table's edge I watch your tide of hands
on bread, smell your skin, like beer.
We talk of yeast, I imagine

my back slack like a flour sack, humped
and comfortable, my legs, spread, dangle off
the table edge, round wood smooth, dusted. Needy
are your hands, we are deeper past our wrists,
both elbows bent, working. I am turning
every shade of red, fingers curling
into you, spilling every word I measure,
all because you smell like beer, taste like sugar.

Your hands near me. I imagine you
gun-slung, hips loose against their weight, you
blowing smoke, blowing off some island,
boots cocked on a submarine deck.
I feel your arms like metal walls, bolted inside.
I am sweltering, a sprawled angel outlined by flour.
Pull my feathers—I will sink you.

Overture

We fight the kind of fights that break furniture
and bones. We make the kind of love

that rips sheets, your lips
puckered like a fist, bleed, my neck bruised,
incisor-nipped. Neighbors stopped calling

the cops. We used to ask them in.
Black, sleek batons inviting, angled clutch
of the guns.

The Pleasure of Dying Twice

At her request, I place one hand around her
neck, slide one between her legs. I test

her fresh-grave damp, arrest two fingers
on her trigger. She is a figure of want

and wet and sweat, a chandelier of sunrise.
I squint at her light, both of us nearly blind.

She calls on me to subdue her
shine, overcast her in clouds bent to break.

Her eyes tell me—make it so she cannot breathe.
I cleave her lips and pull the trigger,

stunt her throat, sore her tongue
and make it quiver, push until she shivers

to a freeze, her body locked and numb
under me. When her chest is taut in rise and fall,

air short and quick and sharp,
her moans more monstrous than divine, we fly

into the sun, burn brighter as a wingéd pair,
melt into one wax, a casket-mold of lasting light,

two wicks scorching toward each other.
We die each, once, twice together.

For as Long as My Father was Gone

In June, my mother stopped singing.
I feared she had forgotten how. *Like this*, I said,
mouth open, my hands motioning vowels
up and out. But my mother would not sing.

She spent afternoons silently shaking
our blueberries clean, her footsteps carried
by snapped birch twigs, the rustle of leaves.
Her cardinal lips no longer opened like wings.

For weeks, I rowed to Alttarikallio, scaled tangles
of alders and reeds, let the rock-cliffs cradle me.
I cried like a loon for my mother, blamed the birds
for stealing her voice, the wind for breaking her
wings. Among trees, I sobbed eager words, sang
of iron and blood for strength.

I did not know the heart caught in her throat
could break, or how one beat there in the first place.

The Bear & His Bride

I veil my face in moonlight, my shoulders cloaked
in coarse fur. My neck and wrists laced with pine.
My lips, alder sap, tint of forged wine. We meet
under Otava in the northern sky, join
paw to hand. On the edge of winter, snow falls
like sleep. We curl into rocks and wait for spring.

Let Us Die

If our bed were forest floor, soft needles of pine,
curled skin of birch, our bones would burrow home.
Damp mud: hold us in. Let winter come
bury us in cold, keep us under snow, let us root there
'til spring. When it's time, let sun grow bright,
blind our eyes.

Early Thaw of Karhupääsaari

Ahava chimes through clattering trees, her warmth stark—blood on snow.
Winter shudders. Impatience shakes Suomi awake, sun setting the island alive
with shadows that imitate spring. Ice grates the shoreline. Bears rise to winter
floating in April's tides. They rear their stone-stiff necks, fur thick with melt.
They bow back to their dens, withdraw their eyes, sleep until crags ripen blue.

Waking the Bear

She tills the scruff of my neck, fingers sap-stained,
her lips open to my fur. In her whisper, lost rustle
of autumn, salmon-tinged. Her breath, a season
I remember. And I forget. Spring sounds
click and tick to my body's clock, (alarmed, eager),
echo wet through these rock walls.

Her legs saddle my waist, heels digging into my hips
like stirrups, she, the reins, guiding me to come
with her. She is lovely in the dark—no mess of shadow
or sun-cut skin. I take her, our sweat still spiked
with winter, and pass through her into spring.
We break the stone, haunt-out the dark, let light invade
places even she cannot wake.

The Insomniac

He counts her ribs like sheep: 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . .

Pushes his thumb into the dark

button of her middle, pushes until her eyes jump open.

Then, he counts the stars.

Moving into Space

I remind you:

When oxygen ceases to exist, flesh unzips.
Blood bursts like fireworks, Pollock-pocked
splatters on white canvas of dwarf stars.

Connect the dots, read between the lines:
that's your heart beating up against mine.

And when we float beyond earth,
our lungs concave, our livers blown, we lock
in pulse and bone. Home is only atmosphere.
We're here.

From: The Midnight Sun

To: Space

—*For Laura Breen*

It's hard to write from here, this place
is never dark. There are no stars.

I still contemplate snow in Arizona,
how black ice and headlights took you
to eternal night. We spoke of death at thirteen,
you meant to navigate the stars, truths
darker than the mind can perceive. But not like this.

I keep digging graves
in search of wormholes, your universe
of subjects I cannot find. I cannot see a difference
between black above and below me.
When dirt receives a body, it takes the light
and won't let go.

Tell me, how long for a dying sun to fade,
dead stars to disappear from night?

II. Bring Her Down

Aino Rejects Väinämöinen

Wind breaks across the lake, steals her voice.
She talks with her hands, her eyes—all but words.
Late sun weaves between her fingers, sets

her hair alight. I want to throw myself into her
flames, be with her every rise and fall. She leaves me
burning before winter, when light and lake ignite.

Aino Sings

No, Väinämöinen—I will not go with you.
You should have known Joukahainen
just wanted a rise out of you,
just wanted you to rise him up from the muck,
reverse your songs and spells, chant backwards
so he could tell you
about me. But you should never trust a boy
who can't hold a sword
with one hand, who offers silver
but totes a sack of gold,
who can't raise his voice without a crack—
did you believe that
 after all his weak recalls
of earth and sky and moon
that I would come to you?

No, Väinämöinen—I will not go with you.
No, I'd like to raise a point about promises
made by a boy who said I
would be honey to your bread—
 my sweet, sticky center,
 your soft, warm middle—
I would
knead your rye, drop caraway seeds,
lead you to my bed—

I bet he said I would heat your sauna,
sweat to your breath, beat you birch-clean,
pray for winter
so I may tend to your fire,
smoke in my chest, breast rising—

Väinämöinen, I bet he said I would keep you
burning, hot sting of my lips, my tongue
flicking your skin like flames,
you and me, panting with stone steam.

This boy lies.

I'd rather sit here on this rock,
cry my eyes into this shore,
 shed skin after skin in sun after sun—

I'd rather give myself to water,
fingers and toes to the fishes,
unlace and lose trace of blue and red ribbons.
I'd rather strip myself of all seven skirts,
my mother's borrowed belts and shirts,
let these silver chains rust around my neck,
choke me as I fall, drag me down below,
sink me—

sink me like golden rings so you may see them shine
beneath and think you've found me.
But there will be no hand to hold—
only slick scales to slip your grip
long after you've forgotten me.

All of this than be with you, Väinämöinen,
because this is not about you
and Joukahainen. This is about Aino,
and this is what I know.

It's my turn to show you how to sing:

I want to be
my mother's daughter,
bringer of birch bouquets for sauna days,
kindler of her fire, gather her switches.

I want to be
the lovely of my father,
grow my braids longest for him,
tie them in silk of red and blue
and never let them down for you.

I want to be
the younger than my brother,
keeper of my secrets: whisper words to woods
that no one knows.

I want to cry
and forge new rivers, lie
behind my tears, rush straight up to my mother,

promise her

that I will drown in my own sorrows
if I have to go with you.

Salt

Aino stands at high latitude
on Pohjola's dark coast. Winter brinks,
but the sea has not begun her arctic swell.

Aino hints the grit of salt
that drifts on humid air, feels the sun tremble
east. She fears the salt like she fears
sunrise—all beyond her control.

Unable to chase the sun back down, she runs
against it, turns her back on salt, on fear
she might float, on fear
the salt will protect her, preserve her flesh.

Aino makes for lakes instead,
for not-yet-frozen streams and breaks
in ice she knows won't hold. The air is heavy.
Meeker waters will embrace her, change her.

She heads inland, where she knows the weight
of braids will sink her
like silver chains, where waves won't fight
to save her.

The Dawn of Aino's Death

Aino cries.
Light and death will liberate her
from a union she rejects.

Alone and vanquished, the only place she knows
to go is down to the western shore, where the sun falls.
She listens every night. . . .

Hears the sun cry—*Suitor*
Hears the sun cry—*Lover*
Hears the sun fall silent.

The sea cannot recant the sun's cries
of *Suitor*, *Lover*, but offers Aino *Joyance*, bliss
of eternal sun-less mornings. No reason to rise.

Aino attends the sea's shifting weight.
No mother, no brother, no Väinämöinen
moving among the waves

to catch her wrist, to stop her. No one to change her.
A million shadows consummate her final darkness.

Väinämöinen Seeks Aino

On hands and knees, I scrape to find you
to relieve you of your grave, white-washed plain
of Tuonela, land of death with snow-piled years.
I brush them away, the months, the days, I dig
my fingers deep into cold—

with frozen fists I beat and beat, know the waves
rock down below me, know you spin
throughout those waves, swim out your days
with ringless fins, scales that cannot meet the sun
to turn and keep them blonde.

But ice won't crack. Your coffin lid won't budge
beneath my screams

Aino, missä olet?

Aino, where are you?

Let light defile your grave, melt the hinges
of your soul. I will catch you in my shadow,
dress you in blue, run ribbons through your scales,
throw you into the air, take your place
in Tuonela, if you'll swim in my eyes, forever.

Her Place in Tuonela

I know I'll find her here, where water rests, unless disturbed by tips of wing, by fish that rarely break the surface. Aino sits in the distance and I enter her gaze, the lake. My soul lifts, spreads like rainbows, like gasoline. Beyond, illusions of winter swarm the forest floor, as though sun will not let go of white, the landscape glazed like ice. I squint at the dazzle of sharp pine. My flesh flashes, peels like scales, like birch bark down to bone. My body, a runoff of long-stunted streams.

Aino waits for me, her body wrung against rock, skin doused in blue sky. She is the light, her legs neatly sewn like fins, hair so long it disappears. She cradles my face. I seek her black eyes, unknowable, my name on her lips. The distance between us remains

impossible. She thrusts her palms into my ribs, sings through my fall, recalls origins she never could have known: birth of earth and sky, egg-shell hemispheres, dividing. My heart splits over bone, synergy of water and sun, death exposed. Summer burns into autumn, shivers to black winter. I spiral in a grey-lit limbo, wait for the first crack of ice so I may gasp at summer's dawn, fill my lungs with light. When I rise, Aino is nowhere in sight. I take her place in Tuonela.

Ilmarinen Constructs the Sun

In the middle of night, cold wakes her.
She tells me: build a sauna, work
by moonlight, first light—til dark.

I do—work my hands blue, my heart
burning for her.

As the sauna warms, I knead her naked skin,
mouth hot promise to her lips, sustain her
in heat. We whisk in birch-leaf sting,
her hair steaming like wet wood.

Still, cold takes her back to sleep.

I shelter her in fur and coals, surround her
in fire, blocks of ice,
in the middle of winter, of night.

She sleeps.

I hunt dark forest alcoves, a site to build, wield
hammer and burn, hammer and burn.
In a lightless womb, I work
to her likeness, construct the sun. I return

the dawn, ablaze on my shoulders.
I say to her—*burn with me*.

Joukahainen Speaks to the Waves

Sister,
I fear to say I sang away your innocence.
There was a man to whom I spoke of you.

Sister,
I fear to say I sang away my pride
in spouts of ill-formed truths I could not undo.

Sister,
There was a man to whom I spoke,
his songs, stanch as stone. He knows loneliness
of the eagle flying treeless, tides on moonless nights.

And sister, I,
buried to my waist in blame, my neck
restrained by beautiful rhyme, could only think of you.

And Sister,
while sung under earth, I learned how to heal
the Old and Steady, set to light his dark hollow,
and to clot his knowing flow.

Sister,
I forsook your life in a word.

Aino.
I spoke your name too soon.
There was a man to whom I promised you
whose heart now weeps offbeat. No tune will carry,
no words will keep. Your song is one he cannot sing.

Väinämöinen Meets the Maiden of Pohjola

Her motions are old, but winter keeps her young
as dawn. Wind ribbons to the rhythm
of her voice, songs I recognize, and sun shines familiar
in these northern skies. Pine-scent rolls from her
scrubbing hands, fingers strumming prism-spun fibers,
rainbows foaming through their strands.
She stops her washing, looks at me, her blue eyes
a gleam of twilight, braids trailing the lake
like moon-beams. Her words are strokes of dreams—
she speaks of a man, lonely born, who would meet her
by the sea, one sent to conquer love's impossible feats.

Väinämöinen Remembers Aino

I still recall your scales. . . .

How they flash
slate-blue, silver
plated, slick as wet
glass in my hands,
the whole sky in your air. . . .

Your eyes seize with shine,
flicker infinite black.

I cry, wrench the nets,
but not fast enough
to catch you. . . .

Now, I play my kantele
in tune to your shore,
imagine dawn weeping
on your shoulders,
my notes unwinding
your sun-wet hair.

Together, we drown
in the music of waves.

III. Into Darkness

How Slowly the Sun Rises Between Us

When you woke me, your eyes claimed winter
mornings would never be the same.
Dawn's blue flames haunted your gaze, eclipsed your face
with loss long before I had gone.

There is no rush for us to wake
in the same light, or dream in shared darkness—but
how we paused in doorways, our veins surging
unfit warmth, proves we are ravished.

Now alone on the southeast bends of 41, my eyes glazed
and wasted in white void, I imagine how you might ebb
then flow into me, and I bridge our silhouette among stars
to keep us as we are, changed, against a night that remains
the same as it was before I knew you.

Wolf Drawn

You sense I am broken, so you hunt me
over miles, years. I can smell your traces
from here, crystallized in cold.
You cover your breath with snow,
but I've preserved your taste like stone.

So come. Sharpen your senses on darkness,
bare your moon-stained teeth and let me
catch your breath, whiskey-stale, hint of blood.
I'll melt snow from your open mouth
into mine, let you hold me deep in your throat.

But before you take me, remember
my blue eyes. Howl, and break our silence.

Khanty Reindeer Sacrifice of the Winter Solstice
—*Double Fibonacci*

Skinned
skull
hangs high
in dark pine.
We offer antler
to earth, bone to sky, sacrifice

skins both black and white. Ursa's smooth cranium heavies
our palms, dons night's clear reflection, Aurora's crimson-bent glare, her cold, silk traces.
Bear, North Star, winter light's guild—shine here, out-gleam the moon.

We sip vodka, sweet beer, pass blood
from jaw bone to mouth.
Fresh snow falls.
We drink.
We
sing.

(Dis)illusion

When I close my eyes, I see Lola standing
by the sink, holding a bowl
too-full of water. She fixes her face on its surface,
her hair glimpsing sun—it rises
red and gold, catches in her crown, exploding softly.

I watch her, my spoon suspended, elbow rested
firm but slack. I can't imagine she will drop it.
Or spill it. I prepare and wait
for neither of those. Her dress hangs on her
like *it* has been spilled, the stretched neck drooping
down her shoulder. The bracelet I gave her
on her birthday dangles between her elbow and wrist,
the small, silver 6 chiming lightly. But—

Lola is not six. She is eight, back at the cabin
on Torch Lake. The nearest doctor is fifty miles away,
and the vomiting, the fever, the delusions, the illusions,
they are all too much for someone my age.

It's my thirteenth birthday. I wanted to see the cabin
in winter, but the twenty-mile drive from the highway
makes for tough going on roads of snow
on snow. Dad says, *it's so far, the plows don't even come.*
This year, they cleared the snow
just for me. Now, I'm sick as death, curled in the seat
of a ninety-four Chevy, watching curious sun flicker
through trees. It is early February, too early for sun.
Lola, the only vision that comforts me.

Fever makes me see
changing trees, bursts of leaves opening like quills
over branches, writing something
like fire, inking something like blood.
The colors lapse. I close my eyes: I think of Lola
holding a huge bowl of water.

The bowl cracks
half way down the lip. When I was five, I drummed the bowl
like a gong. I believed it would make a significant sound, like a voice
I would listen to. Only, I heard the bowl crack,
the mud-brown ceramic split like parched earth.

Lola ignores the crack, recognizes it
by pressing her tiny palm over most of its groove.
I am my thirteen year old self.
It is too early in the morning to be thirteen.
That is how I know this isn't real. And because Lola is six.

I face the window where the sun rises behind her.
Today, it rises big, so I know it isn't winter.
My cereal bowl overflows—my spoon is big
enough to hold the whole sunrise.

Lola wants to be just like me. She wants to have cereal too
but she can't and I don't know why she cant.
I think it is because I want to see the deep insides of the bowl,
because I want her, when she looks down, to see herself in it too.
Lola smiles—she is pretending. She inches toward the table
in un-socked feet, moves her eyes to me, smiles
so big I see her teeth. She pulls the bowl close
to her mouth, as if to hush herself, as if the sun may glitch
should anything disturb this.

Strands of hair dangle heavy past her eyes,
into the water. She looks down. Hair curtains her face.
She is lost in the dark.

When her head bends, I see the whole sun
has been sitting just above her shoulders, stuck in a mess of hair
so wild for a six year old.

I open my eyes.
I see a swirl of seasons, a jumping sun I can't quite focus on, laughing
through the trees, Lola's hair—I swear to god—tangling past the window
as I lean-up before losing consciousness completely.

Antediluvian

—for the S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald

Damaged by storm, you rock with tired bones.
You scream against wind, joints bent.
You've fought the rush, defenseless, all slipshod
metal. Out here a lighthouse doesn't matter.

In the dark calm of a blink, Superior heaves
three waves high into a swag of low clouds.
Water, now the freight. You split at every seam, snap
before the sink. Broken, your ribs jut into sky
so black, it's night, and twenty-nine bodies fall
through the dark, like stars.

The Winona Mines, c. 1917

His light pinched-out. For the dust, I could not see,
could not breathe. With less than two feet between us,
death should have taken me. But my light kept shining.

In the town, bells rang, hands wrung, waiting
for light to shine again. Still, we were told to dig
deeper into the mines, until we struck

a promising lode. But the fissures were all empty
rot, so we bound ourselves to founded grit,
our hands, basalt-stained. Their friction gifted

no spark. Pale, impatient faces faded
from Winona's red-dust windows. Even debris, poor
rock piles, could not bury their graven traces. So we dug

until light no longer reached us, until flint would strike
no kiss goodbye, no tears.

Mrs. Pääkkä, Winona Temperance Society, *Pöytäkirja*: 1917

I stretch their words thin to fill lines. Pen is so permanent,
yet we never intended to be erased. What they want and need

to say are two different things, so they turn words
into numbers. The cost of copper is *this*. I write: *Less and less*.

Even in numbers our spirits deflate. Winona's hope undulates
then fades, a skipped rock soon swallowed and lost

to a final breath. We thrive on stints, minutes that have never been
so calculated. I want to write *the grade of rock has dropped*,

or, *Kuukausi on Heinäkuu and the mine has closed*.

But I do not write this.

When we sing, I count beats, syllables of words, listen
for the exhale of pause. In silence, I write what their faces say.

The Winter Moon

I open my door to the dark around her,
the full cold moon. We are alone.
Shadows have yet to drape the lake.
Stay, the first word I've spoken to her

in weeks peels from my throat like birch-bark.
Her light reflects dependency of tides. She is held
beyond her will, crowns my tallest pine, a jewel
betrothed to night. I want to bind with her

golden ring of light, but I am owned by darkness.
My ebb and flow are forgive and forget.
Amnesia, my punishment. Memory, my only sin.

I don't know why she comes, never stays.
I blame myself for why she leaves, taunts me
with fractured glow, her essence of unknown.

I clutch my axe, brush through black wood
between my door and shoreline. The lake is quiet,
unmoving in the held-breath of coming dawn.
My axe splits silence. I fell the tallest pine.

There is nothing left to guide her
lonely glide except my eyes. I lean into her light,
say the word again—*Stay*.

Salvation: Closer, Colder

Light leaves us soon. November takes it.
Dusk urges our eyes to yellow, pale

as they darken. We swarm lamp-lit streets,
warm by moonshine. We wait.

When we need them most, fall leaves fail
to protect us. We cross ourselves

in snow, its glow cold, a galactic pulse
closer to soul. We fade from darker days

into darker nights, rely more on what we cannot
see. Faith is oil and wax, anything that burns.

Our hope, split wood.
Prayer, silent friction of voices, remains

salient, unfelt. Numb hands break
birch like bread, our lips blushed with wine.

We soak ourselves in sin, bait immolation.
Months and days we wait—until light

of snow melt, of white mountain avens, takes us,
and we no longer need what burns.

Sauna: Early Winter

From the small window, I watch winter come.
Cedar walls dim yellow. I inhale the whip of vihta,
hot sting of branch and leaf. My sweat silent

and clean. By noon, tired sun spins kaleidoscopic
through galleries of trees. Their shadows yawn
over lakes, wait for white to quiet their sighs.
At night, cold is enough for fires.

Soon, days will scatter like dust disturbed in light.
From the window, I lose count of fallen leaves.

IV. Odotus

Light from Toppila

Our heart beats quicken, even in this cold.

We stop, mesmerized by white.

Your black hair, its sheen, burns my eyes.

Neptune blue, a galaxy of light.

We are fixed in space, dark-matter blind.

We are everything, shining.

The Order of Things

I write again—*minä rakastan sinua*.
Stolid words on a page.
Their syntax and tone never change.
I don't know how these letters sound,
how the syllables peel-out
from a hollow throat, fall into words,
into voice, how they echo into sense.

I write one hundred times
minä rakastan sinua
but I don't know how to say it,
or look you in the eye, whisper
that it's morning, you should rise—
we'll share toast, discuss Foucault,
the order of things.

Teach me,
reach across the table, hold your fingers
to my tongue, help me form the words.

In the Wake of Hibernation

The sauna's stove-fire dies in your eyes.
Sunset caps them. We stand in shadows
of darkness and light, one waiting for the other
to give. Spring returns in days.

We step from sauna into wind,
our heat swept by winter's frigid cries.
I embrace your leaving warmth, cast my gaze
over your shoulder, beyond skeletal trees,
the frozen lake. We leave our footprints, evidence
of where we never should have been. . . .

In my fear of winter ending, I pull you tighter,
force my vision further, past islands, hills that rise
to soft mountains before they swallow the sun.
It's nearly gone, save a gasp of cloud-cut veins

bleeding light too alive for winter nights,
a sudden cumulus spill of loose seams too real
for any dream. I start at your mouth on my neck
like unexpected sunrise, your request
that I come inside and wake to a stronger burn.

We pretend we never existed here
in a collide of summer and winter nights.
We'll sweat our impurities again, wash
and rinse our trace. But no matter how we try,

we cannot cleanse ourselves.
Our skin retains *tervas*, like memory, aromatic
birch-breath sigh under fire's constraint, season-less,
nostalgia potent enough to taste. We cannot hide
or strip all of what remains, so we forget
spring, and stay.

Love Waits for You to Speak

She breathes apparition, knows your future
won't hold. This, she confides in you
and darkness, states her faith in failure, desire—
places you find each other. You inhale her
pause—hold it—wonder why she's there
within reach, half-gone, almost frozen, hung over
your small porch rail, hair strung out
like winter, damp and glittering. She sings
Kärleken Väntar in Swedish she can't speak.
She is honey in your grip, but you let her slip
like memory. Her ghost, stunt of breath and exhale.

This, I Know, Would Make You Happy

We see each other in trees—your silhouette
pale, wilted violet, a bald oak at dusk.
And I, a willow, weeping. I remember

how I snuck inside your coffee breaks, cigarettes
in mid-day dark, your fifth-floor room, the elevator
cold. We stood close. One October night

we wrote our names in snow.
You took my hair down, and, faces flushed,
we shed our winter skins on a boot-damp rug.
I remember December's sudden melt the day I left. . . .

I walked your forests, followed you through ice
and rain. We traversed words, mouths open
to strange sounds, nuance we did not understand.

I remember . . .
Minä muistan . . .

You spoke of squirrels, how their fur turns
red in summer, grey in winter.
You could not shoot them when your father said to.

I wanted to marry you then.

The Endlessness of Light

Oulu has never been more than a room
with you and me in it, separated at finger-length,

eyes trying not to meet.
Once, your shoulders pushed against dawn.

Wet, grey light honeyed your eyes, your face
taken by morning. We fought winter in heavens,

our bodies glares, sun spots deposing thoughts of us lost
against frozen window panes, thousands of miles apart.

Once, we shared the soup of dawn—sun rose
from our opens mouths, spilled into one

white, encompassing light. Our final sighs were moonset
and we kept our eyes open, knowing the space of years

is blinding. Lips twisted, our mouths turned to black holes.
Years of gravitational silence, and words

no longer equate what it means.
From a distance, thoughts of love disturb our memories,

echo strange origins and bindings. Still-beating hearts
are difficult to ignore, they cannot be fixed or forgotten.

Schism

In Helsinki, your hair frames every face. Your voice, every word.
In Oulu, streets radiate with sun.
I expect you in every face—anticipate your voice.

Past Rovaniemi, trees wake, stretch for old sun.
Evening sighs with winter's weight, and I no longer look for you
in stars. I want to forget you
somewhere between Ivalo and Inari.

In Kaamanen, I close your name into my throat, stand alone
on gravel shores of Kaamasenjoki. Midnight sun burns clean
before me. I don't know how it has the energy to stay,
or how I have strength to leave you in Suomi.

Traveling: Leaving Helsinki-Vantaa

So much of my pain is contained by airplane seats, plastic window panes,
and in altitudes of 30,000 feet my tears never freeze.

I plant my face on flimsy trays, let my neck take the weight, the strain
from my heart.

I shake and wake and think:

Shit, I'm still breathing . . .

Blood thumping, tears falling
into the napkins *this* was written on.

Their words blur:

*Ole hyvää ja Kiitos Lentävät, and thank you for leaving
so much of yourself behind that you'll soon be dying
and this will be a funeral flight to scatter your ashes to flames,
the northern lights, as they flare some rare SOS distress,
a silent farewell*

but I digress . . .

So much of my pain is checked in . . . the rest
sags on my back, my coat drags like a bride-less train.
But I try to keep calm, carry it all on
because
the weight won't fly.

Who knew there could be limits to pain?

I'm kept in check by security points reminding me

I am so insecure

Language gets so mixed in a week . . .

My tongue tied too tight, shoe laces loose as my hair,
mettle beeping, clenched in my absent grin, some woman
touching, feeling, keeping me behind,
these under wires gripping like polar magnets, pulling me back to you.

God, just let me go. Just let me let you go.

Traces of my pain are outlined by footprints
you made me brush away.
Here, I watch you walk away, the amble of your gait

rocking to the rhythm of the music in my head . . .

I try to play it off
like I would never see you again.
But here I am.

I knew too much so soon: Your son's name, birthday, name day, how your face molds
to shadows cast by midnight sun and noon. . . .

What did you think yesterday, when winter's unrelenting breeze lifted my coat tails
like a tease, snowy dust of your exhaust lingering
like a last breath?

Did you play *Apulanta*, throw shit to the wind
and pretend that you would never see me again?
Tell me . . . do I return in spring?

You are gone
and I am leaving, my pain seated, upright and locked
so tight I cannot breathe.
All I need is sleep, a few beers, a shot of whiskey.
Maybe three.
Then I can think . . .

I know, I promised you I wouldn't drink . . . but I miss the warm swell of you, of beer
in my mouth, foam pricking its roof like stars among a firmament I can never forget . . .
a rush like sauna heat, like ocean waves, your taste
a tangible memory to which my whole body can relate . . . so I swallow
the whole fucking sea because by now,
and not by god,
I am drowning.

As this plane goes down, you *can* save me,
because my last thought will be of you, beneath me,
and we are riding each other's waves in the roll and break of white light,
and once inside, you will be my only taste, my final sense, a bitter memory.

Alone, I will wash upon a shore not yet lost to sea.
The coast and I will know the same grease.
The slick of what remains.
How roads turn to spring.
Amazing how well salt keeps.
How it won't let go of anything.

The Loneliness of Latitude: A Lament

—*For Marquette, Michigan & Kajaani, Finland*

The same grey overlooks our rivers, and all rivers run
to the same skies and seas. They taste the same rain.

Trees all rot in rooted graves, no matter here
or where. Another year turns over, another month

without. All my rooms fill with empty nights.
My own sounds. I read aloud.

Being alone has perks—loneliness isn't one of them.

Hirvensalmi: Late Summer

She leaves after the lilies bloom.

Pink: resistance, her face flushed
then darkened by knowing. Not love.

Red: lips smoked raw from muikku,
from giving in. She knows she is beautiful.

Yellow: wisdom never to return,
the lily that never bloomed.

Finland: Late Return

As the Bothnian Sea opens
to speak—I know it all already.

I lie on the dock in Nallikari, recite songs of shore
from long ago—but I cannot recall

this grip of wood, this salt on palms, this wind
that will not calm. I no longer recognize this rush of waves,
but I know your cry. You once said,

Come here, be my wife, and I will build a home around us.

I have failed enough to know
your voice, dark lure, and I have come

to know your loss
and mine.

So I release this air—let go this ghost. I return home
to walls of water under roof of sky, draw shut
my windowed eyes, their light weak as the horizon.

We Never Learned to Swim

I lost you, drifting
at the brim of Hietasaari's waters,
grey slit of the Baltic eye.

In the fringe of island, tangled
in ice and wind—in the sky

constellations I cannot count.
They flicker dimmer in early winter.

I turn from the glow of lighthouses,
flow and ebb of moon

on waves, where boats skim
the troposphere.

I dreamt we could swim into the sun.
Guilt calls me deeper.
To find you would be drowning.