

2011

Acts of Nature

Rebecca Tavernini
Northern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Tavernini, Rebecca, "Acts of Nature" (2011). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 514.
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/514>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

ACTS OF NATURE

By

Rebecca Tavernini

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH – WRITING

Graduate Studies Office

2011

ABSTRACT

ACTS OF NATURE

By

Rebecca Tavernini

This collection of poetry draws on themes of nature, evolution, impermanence and transience, presented in four sections. *The Eternal Flux* explores the magic and mystery of the natural world and our reaction to it, as well as the things in our world that are vanishing. *Humus* deals with disease, decay and death, but as the word implies, it is also this breakdown of material that creates a rich soil for the future. *Evolutions of Love* looks at changing relationships, with a sense of longing. The last section, *Regeneration*, is about childbearing and the wonder of what may lie ahead. The 31 poems in *Acts of Nature* are traditional and experimental, written in a variety of fixed and open forms, with vibrant language and sound as common denominators.

Copyright by
Rebecca A. Tavernini
2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks go to my thesis advisor and poetry mentor Beverly Matherne, who has warmly encouraged, educated and gently edited me and my writing for ten years. I am also grateful to NMU professors Austin Hummell, who taught me that it's all about the music, and for kindly serving as reader for this thesis; to Diane Sautter Cole, for giving me the courage and tools to write poetry on the spot; and to the late Phil Legler, for cultivating my early steps into poetry and advising me to finish what I start. Finally, thank you to my now long-ago University of Michigan life- and major-changing English professors Buzz Alexander, William Hale, Paula Rabinowitz and Michael Schoenfeldt.

Mostly, thank you, my Robinson and Tavernini families.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Works Cited	9
Thesis: Acts of Nature	11
<i>The Eternal Flux</i>	
The Eternal Flux	13
Hayden Valley	14
Caving Ground	15
Blackboard	16
Used to Be	18
When Paper's Gone	19
Dupont Circle	20
Distort to Real	21
What Pages Lay Between	22
Before the Thaw	23
On Seeing a UFO	24
One Habit of Highly Effective People	27
<i>Humus</i>	
The Bird List	29

The Biologist	31
After Your Cremation	32
After the Beep	33
Walking the Soo Line	34
At Ladybug Beach	35
Albert Street	36

Evolutions of Love

Queen Anne's Lace	38
Give and Take	39
The Ant Lion	40
Not Here	41
Snow Statues	43
Addiction	44
Inverse Coordinates	45

Regeneration

Lear's Mother	47
Motherhood	48
Morning Still	49
Microcosm	50
Monarch	51

INTRODUCTION

The poems in this collection, *Acts of Nature*, often touch on the themes of change and evolution, and at the same time demonstrate my own metamorphosis as a writer over the last four, and more, years.

As I sifted through, revised and selected poems to include here, the subjects I was dealing with, the language and metaphors I was drawn to and drawing from, and the emotional and philosophical wrestling I was engaged in, seemed to share a common DNA and together emerged as a creature of its own, with a shape that seemed almost predetermined. I suppose it is like a child's growth: You don't notice the centimeters slowly adding up, until one day he's half a foot taller, and his face has changed from a baby's to a young man's—and he's completely himself.

The individual poems here often use nature as a metaphor or background for relationships, such as the prose poem "The Ant Lion," in which two couples and a child watching 4th of July fireworks on a beach form a connection around an ant lion insect, whose habits also serve to show the erosion of their relationships; or a haiku comparing the nautilus pattern of the hair on a child's head to the Milky Way. Another prominent theme examines the transience, persistence and evolution of everyday objects of the current world—such as chalk on a classroom blackboard or the telephone poles along a roadway. Other poems delve into the universal experiences of life, such as a *boute rimé* about the birth of my daughter; the absence of my mother's voice on the answering machine after her death, in the ghazal "After

the Beep;” or a free verse poem capturing the ghosts of the far and immediate past in Washington, D.C.

I strive to present these vignettes with unique perspective, disciplined diction, thoughtful form and lyrical style. I often try to draw attention to the similarities and differences of individual words and play with their sounds, alternate and subtle meanings, and ordering of letters. For instance, the poem, “One Habit of Highly Effective People,” is written and read backwards and starts and ends with the first and last entries in Roget’s *Thesaurus*, indicating the full scope of ordered language and existence. I also use forms with repeating patterns, such as the pantoum, to narrate a routine, with a twist, as in “Caving Ground,” a retelling of the local Barnes-Hecker Mine disaster, within the frame of a Karl Marx quote.

Such philosophy and literary theory are the inspiration behind a number of other poems in this collection, as well. Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay, “The Will to Power” (Rivkin and Ryan 270), is the basis of my opening piece, “The Eternal Flux,” drawing on Nietzsche’s philosophy of “eternal recurrence”—of becoming and perishing—and his notion that the individual itself is constantly changing, and “in the smallest twinkling of the eye, it is something other than it is in the next [moment]” (Hatab 66). This often imperceptible, but potentially larger transmutation is a theme that I examine throughout these poems. I also draw on feminist theory (Adelman 104, and Nicholls) in the sonnet “Lear’s Mother,” to question the absence of maternal figures in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and theorize what effect the absence of a mother may have had on Lear himself and his relationship to his daughters. In addition, the Gestalt psychology concept of perceptual organization (Wertheimer), and how smaller things are grouped to form larger ones, which may in the end

be different than the sum of their parts, is the foundation of the visual poem “Distort to Real.” This poem questions our perception of the world. It uses references to surrealist, pop and Dada artists Salvadore Dali, Andy Warhol and René Magritte, along with American landmarks and word play to capture the devastating blow to our sense of order, concreteness and safety on September 11. The poem also creates a structural word image of one of the violated World Trade Center towers.

I have often drawn on Ron Padgett’s *Handbook of Poetic Forms* and Lewis Turco’s *The New Book of Forms* to discover forms that may not only be suitable for presenting a topic, but at times seem to be the only body capable of effectively possessing and conveying a poem’s shape, depth and message. These books are wonderful, easy-to-use resources not only for outlining the “rules” and standard operating procedure of forms, but also as a sort of grab bag with which to experiment, to expand my coterie of writing styles and challenge my usual ways of thinking on paper. For instance, writing “Inverse Coordinates” as a villanelle, “Where the first line and last line of the first stanza take turns repeating as the final line of the next four stanzas” (Padgett 197), allowed me to convey a routine of gestures and at the same time echo an argument of logic taking place in the narrator’s mind.

As David Baker and Ann Townsend write in their essay, “The Line / The Form / The Music,” in *The Eye of the Poet*, the more forms, and depth, a poem can exhibit, the better (82). There is not only the physical shape of the poem, but also the form of the lines themselves—the singular or combined styles of syllabic and accentual beats—the formal style (or lack) of the poem’s construction, and the rhetorical structure. In other words, by playing more “instruments” at once, I can create a richer poem. I can use these elements to

affect the pacing, meaning, music and sheer personality of a poem. These are useful tools I have learned to employ when I'm struggling with how to present a subject or deal with a line.

“Whenever a poem enacts what it is about, it creates a way for itself to live dramatically inside the reader. It becomes an experience unto itself,” writes Edward Hirsch in *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (45). Furthermore, form and language provide important clues to the reader, guiding one's navigation and understanding of a poem. In “The Bird List” I employ language such as *nest*, *feathers*, *eggs* and *twigs* to build on the narrative theme of the poem about bird watching and also to bring in the more subtle story of family, and home, or more accurately, loss of those things.

The use of form and pattern also forces me to think in unusual ways, which can create surprise—another essential element. “Reading poetry is an adventure in renewal, a creative act, a perpetual beginning, a rebirth of wonder” (2), Hirsch says. I have learned from his book and also from *Best Words Best Order*, by Stephen Dobyns, that poems need readers, suspense, surprise and a sense of a shared journey to discovery. That surprise can often be created by tension or conflict in the poem, whether it's in the story, the narrator's interior argument with himself or herself, or through subtle means of sound or image. “Interest is partly created by making the reader ask questions, by creating tension,” writes Dobyns. “The energy in a work—meaning whatever keeps us reading—comes in part from (1) the balance between what we know and what we don't know and (2) how well the writer has made us want to know” (44).

However, Dobyns warns, “It is always dangerous for the reader to think the poet is giving answers rather than seeking them. What we partly look for in a piece of writing is discovery. That discovery cannot be imparted, it must be enacted”(133-134). In “Monarch,”

the ending poem in my collection, I attempt to share that journey of wonder and discovery by taking the reader along in watching the emergence of a butterfly from a chrysalis, at the same time as my young daughter experiences it for the first time.

Hirsch is inspired by the poem that “initiates and instills a state of intoxication in the reader . . . the poem that desires to sweep the reader away” (115). Like Hirsch, I believe that a poem also needs to be passionate, ecstatic, transcendent and potentially transformative. And, as he says, unflinching and ruthlessly authentic (88). Although this can make writing an emotional challenge for the poet, without authenticity and raw feeling, a poem is just words that won’t take anyone anywhere. It is difficult for me still to read some of my poems, such as “The Biologist,” which are very personal and heartfelt. While I hope that the reader may be able to share in the emotion, I must say that it’s sometimes more important for me to have spent such intimate time with these feelings and worked to create a final piece that has lived and breathed as fully as its subject.

While such interior arguments, and the narrative constructs of conflict, and surprise, are important, readers also require a sense of predictability in a poem. That is often provided by “the music” —the meter, the rhythm, the syllabics, the lyrical construction—of a poem. This beat, this music, ties in with “wonder and repetition,” as Robert Haas writes in his essay “One Body” (151). He explains that we find pleasure in expectation, and in the realization of it, when what we think is going to happen, happens (152). In other words, good poetry should have a built-in orchestral conductor, directing the reader to the cadence, the pauses, the quickenings, the pianissimos, the fortés, even the “tone” of the emotion. Like a musical scale, we can predict what the next note will be, and to our delight, hear it.

Rhythm creates a physical reaction, harkening back to infancy, that can be trance-like, or dance-like. It can affect not only the mind, but the body of the reader. Sound and speech are physical. It's the way we move our lips, our tongue, feel the vibration, tap, or lick of a word forming in and exiting our mouths. "Mere air, these words, but delicious to hear," stated the Greek poet Sappho. Sound can provide comfort, and a predictable pattern can create an atmosphere of safety that may allow the brain to be more receptive to, and influenced by, the message being transported in music. Sound can "make forms the imagination can inhabit" (158), as Haas says.

In my sound-heavy poem "Not Here," I try to relay the deliciousness of simply saying a loved one's name: ". . . I touch tongue / to palate, aspire your first consonant / and trailing vowel from my pharynx, / as if constructing your parts / from archeological holes, / *m* my lips and let an *s* slink through my incisors"

I have learned the importance of reading poems aloud to find and accentuate the music in them and to ensure their perfect syntax, that each word creates an appropriate and intended beat. Similarly, I have seen how line lengths, along with the careful employment of enjambment and/or end-stopped lines, can influence the music, and meaning, of a poem.

Richard Hugo, in *The Triggering Town*, has also provided many tips for looking at the small details of a poem and the way they can make a big difference in sound and surprise. "Don't put signposts to relationships," he writes, suggesting to be aware and beware of "words of temporality, causality and opposition," such as *yet, but, meanwhile, while, because, so*, etc. (40-41). His fine advice for revising a troublesome section of a poem by looking to either side of what seems to be the source of annoyance, or maybe just changing a letter in a word (39) is also a neat trick. So is switching out verbs to their root forms instead

of ending with “ing,” when possible and when it makes sense. This can instantly add a sense of immediacy and movement. When I changed a line in “Dupont Circle” from “Lincoln staring with his permanent pupils” to “Lincoln watches with his permanent pupils” I was nearly able to bring the seated statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial to life.

Meaning—or rhetoric—is where my greatest challenge has been in writing, and where I think I have made headway. As Baker and Townsend state, rhetoric is a poetic form of its own: “The shape and pattern of the thinking itself. A primary reason for the failure of a poem is that it hasn’t come to grips with the argument, the shape, and destination of its rhetoric: It hasn’t decided what it wants to do” (101). As poet Linda Gregerson writes, there needs to be “a crux which the poem must discover and without which the poem is merely a series of verses” (104). By realizing that a poem’s purpose, or rhetoric, is an integral part of not only the presentation of the poem but also of its creation, my writing has become more accessible. I have realized that there is a place for perhaps “mundane” words needed to clarify a narrative and characters within a poem in order for it to be understood.

I do not necessarily need to present answers or definitive conclusions, but show I am “headed somewhere, with a goal or a destination, even (maybe especially) if that destination is the open space of the unknown” (Baker and Townsend 112). This also invites the shared journey of discovery with the reader.

I hope you enjoy discovering these poems.

Intention

To create a book of poetry,
skirt secrets,
de-scribe claims
in margins
set by waves.

Rescue poems trapped
in chests, mildew-dank
as costume dresses,
combs, trumpets, photos
in the attic where
you pull down
the stairs.

This book is grandparents
and grapefruits, fathers fading,
mothers dying, husbands sleeping.

Daylilies crown, though, and children,
cardinals, blueberries, outrageous love,
grow intense as spring wintergreen.

Antique mourning doves
moan on telephone wires,
ore boats float impossibly
on waves,
as if yesterday
happened long ago.

This book travels
souls, I hope.
Etches with a stick
in the sand,
takes a breath
before a wave.
Leaves grains.

WORKS CITED

- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Baker, David and Ann Townsend, "The Line / The Form / The Music." *The Eye of the Poet*, David Citino, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Dobyns, Stephen. *Best Words, Best Order*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.
- Hass, Robert. "One Body: Some Notes on Form." *Claims for Poetry*, Donald Hall, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Hatab, Lawrence. *Nietzsche's life sentence: coming to terms with eternal recurrence*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1999.
- Nicholls, Inia James. "Resurrecting Lear: Opposing Feminist Criticisms of Shakespeare's Greatest Work." *Academic Review of Norway* 1 (date unknown).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Will to Power." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan,. 2nd ed. Medford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Padgett, Ron, ed. *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, 2nd ed. New York: T&W Books, 2000.
- Turco, Lewis. *The New Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986.

Wertheimer, Max. *Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms*. Trans. W.D. Ellis. New York:
Harcourt, 1938.

ACTS OF NATURE

The Eternal Flux

The Eternal Flux

“The world as it ought to be exists; this world, in which we live, is an error.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche

In the space between starfish, seahorses glide like meteors,
pipe their head coronets as individual as fingerprints,
steer with fins behind their eyes, look in all directions.

In the isthmus between Lake Muskellonge and Superior,
an eerie Miocene rattle, long-ago libretto, echoes
from the throats of sandhill cranes, in crimson crowns.

In the shadowy forest between lichen boulder and rotting log,
lily of the valley bells ring their heavenly scent, transform
Mary’s tears, golden beads returned to earth.
Rhizomes intertwine with invisible life “beneath the eternal flux.”

In the willed world between the Milky Way and molten core,
along the twisted ladder, chromosomes break and recombine,
silent and faster than when we parted from chimpanzees.
By accident and careful selection, we are becoming something else.

Hayden Valley

In Hayden Valley, hundreds of buffalo graze in the wide green plains,
roll in dirt wallows, snort and saunter, shed strips of hide from their sides,
musky and wide, impossibly narrowing at the hind.

Along a ditch of fumaroles smoking sulfur, they paw the ashen earth, disappear in steam.
They swim across the Yellowstone, where pelicans cup quiet water. The river flows
serpentine,
speeds upriver, turns to rapids, rolling, roiling—plunges down the canyon crevice.

Unseen but for the sway of grass, a gray wolf stalks an ochre calf in the seeping twilight.
A velvet elk moves through trunks of lodgepole pine at the edge of the wild pasture.
And when the moon, a slice short of full, crawls up to the sky, a grizzly tears open a tent.
Magma simmers just below, ancient and alive.

Caving Ground *

“As individuals express their life, so they are.”

—Karl Marx

It is an ordinary morning,
I pack his lunch and he goes to the mine,
and Aili off to school,
the gray November sky like snow.

I pack his lunch and he goes to the mine
like he doesn't mind every day being the same.
The gray November sky like snow
or something I don't quite know.

Sure, he doesn't mind every day being the same—
underground there is no time, just a carbide sun, veins of ore,
or something I don't quite know.
We immigrants are used to strange worlds.

Underground, where there is no time, just a carbide sun, veins of ore
fill with water, it rushes through shafts, branches of lungs,
like immigrants to strange worlds,
so loud you can hear it above ground, at 11:20 a.m.

Lord, when the veins of 51 men fill with water,
bells ring in town and the women howl
so loud you can hear it above earth, at 11:20 a.m.
Husband! Father! Son!

Bells ring in town and the women howl,
and Aili in school, with the other children, cry
Father! I kissed you goodbye
like any ordinary morning.

* Barnes-Hecker mining disaster, Nov. 3, 1926, near Ishpeming, Michigan

Blackboard

You don't know where the chalk goes
after the passionate scrawl.
Words, theories, formulas, sinographs
vanish.

Does it seep and appear on the other side,
backwards?
Drop into wall joists like used razorblades
slid through a slot in the back
of a medicine chest,
week after week, stacked edge on
rusted edge,
like a tangle of letters' descenders
and ascenders,
t's, p's, pi's, cosines,
quotes of Descartes,
legends of Pocahontas...

Whatever it was, it was
so important
it couldn't just be said.

Look. Look.

Before it is forcefully erased,
ignored, or half-heartedly swiped with felt,
left in faint pattern, a timid x-ray for days,

for people to wonder
what does *hypermasculine* mean?
Can I have some *jouissance*, please?

Whatever was there resonates
like bacon, F sharp, fingerprints.
A long ago wrong.
What you were
going to do.

Did you know chalk is gypsum, calcium sulfate,
($CaSO_4$ as it's written on the board)?
It's crystals like dahlias, roses,
mined from Parisian quarries of Montmartre
or the poles of Mars.
Alabaster ghosts of electrons.

They dance on porcelain enameled steel.

You cannot deny
the chemistry
of the world.

How you soak, haunted,
in the clawfoot tub,
confident of the floor.
Aware of the bodies who
have soaked there before.

How your dreams fall
to the mattress
like earwigs to a drain
and grow a field
of eggs.

Used to Be

Soon, there will be no telephone poles, lined
along the trees they once were, drafted to
another life, like trees often are, pining
to drink from the earth. We miss what we know

after it's gone. Sperm whales will haunt oceans,
their songs cradled on currents, like clicks
on a rotary dial or slow-motion
breath tilting the flame of an ambergris wick.

If the moon suddenly disappeared, we'd
hardly notice, until we searched the sky.
Fields swallow barns. Language dies without need.
The place where the cat used to sleep is empty.

If I had never known you, would I long
for your eyes, your vacant tongue, not know why?

When Paper's Gone

We'll stare through the moon
roof and drive to the empty drive-in.
Read the ancient stars in Braille.
Crickets will perch on the silver speaker.

Shapes in the heavens will tell their tales
we'll watch like a movie. Venus will scream
like a Hollywood star. The gods,
pinholes in unexposed frames,
never change, just roll on with the sky,
a player piano scroll.
We'll feel the breath of an abandoned swing,
as your legs pump, straight out
and in,
make tracks
the gravel won't keep.
Though the rusty chain continues,
continues to creak without you in the seat.

You know, there will be no more perfumed love
notes with x's and o's. Just ones and zeros.
At home, no newspapers to carry to the curb.
Nothing for the men in trucks,
who honk in response to boys
pulling pretend horns on their way to the bus,
in the transparent day,
under faded constellations.

Dupont Circle

I don't believe in ghosts.

But my transparent projection in the hotel window,
my polka-dot shirt Lichtenstein reflecting over
D.C. row apartments makes me wonder,
why I don't believe in ghosts,
but I see them.

58,250 names on Vietnam's black tomb plunge in
and out of December grass, my finger's flesh forming
to their graven ligatures on the glassine granite.

Lincoln watches with his permanent pupils
the dark silhouettes of pilgrims climbing his stairs.
Truman in his tiny kitchen-chair wheelchair
limned by a path of gnarled cherry trees.
That lonely gaslight on James Madison's house.

Even you, my love, I see you here
in someone else: navy jacket, blue Oxford,
petting a dog at the bookstore café in Dupont Circle.

As if atoms of our spirits were feathers that fall
and float forever in the Potomac.
As if we were waters of the WWII fountain that shoot
and fall, shoot and fall. Pink blossoms that come and go.
As if ghosts were present even when
we don't see them.

The traces of our accidental history. The thoughts
we try to remember.

Distort to Real

Dal i dri ps . Di nosaur s rear along 66 . London Bridge is fine in Arizona .
Ceci n'est pas un pipe . Andy Warhol does not make soup .
Money is paper . Paper money . Buildings rubble . Planes bombs . Surprise .
u mo q e q i z b n
the world enters our eyes the way it really is . Our common fate , so perfectly odd .

What Pages Lay Between

Reading a *National Geographic* while Dad naps
in senility, his fingers working
as if tying a fly for fishing, I am struck
by how boyish he looks, despite the lines of time,
slack lip of sleep, gray hair
cut short for the nurses' easy care.

I turn to a photo of a thoroughbred foal, 85 days old,
porcelain white and precise as a collector's figurine,
its legs like slender fingers, but tipped with hooves
sculpted by DNA. Peaceful, afloat in formaldehyde.

Another story shows mummies in the catacombs
of Palermo. Drained and dried in limestone tombs,
the men, all friars and priests, hang like coats
on a wall, stand as if in line for a show,
wear full-tooth grins or last grimaces,
dressed in their best lace and velvet.
Beards, full heads of hair,
skin intact over forearms and foreheads.
On other parts of their bodies, skin flakes like the crust
of a desiccated wall or lichen stone.
There, too, in a little box, is the embalmer's daughter,
two-year-old Rosalia, taken by pneumonia,
blond curls, a yellow bow, her complexion plump,
as if she's only napping.

My father chuckles at inaudible jokes, twitches.
The veins on his hands cross over his bones
like ancient routes, the blood traveling them
part my own. I have his lips, his nose.
Features determined in my first few hours,
before I even slept in the womb.
Will other cells he gave me carry on?
Transform in my own arteries?
Or am I adapting like Darwin's tortoise to outwit
his brain's disease?
Is this same chair waiting for me?

What pages still lay between
the front and back of the magazine?

Before the Thaw

(Ictus: the instant at which a beat occurs)

Worms inch closer to the frost limit,
their eggs deep within the earth freckle tunnels. They wait
for the melt drip to thread needle-thin young to life.

Ice on the lake clinks like champagne flutes.
A coyote skips along the pockled blue
horizon, the way Jesus jumps through puddles.
Anyone can walk on water when it's ice.

Veins of thick sap sleep.
Birds' beaks sniff the unscented north.
In homes, curtains open, curtains close,
by the sun's monotonous metronome,

Our faith in a coming ictus,
frail.

**On Seeing a UFO in the Sky above McLain's State Park,
Copper Country, Michigan**

In the giant darkness of that night,
when my husband and I,
around a campfire
on Lake Superior's vacant shore,
watched a blazing light,
seeming high as stars,
zigzag across the sky,
I thought, maybe,
everything
I believe
is wrong.

I had been swimming
naked in the body
of the lake
when the eyelid
of night
lowered over its
sinking red pupil,
blurring definition
between water and sky,
liquid and gas,
in the gray twilight.

In water's arms,
my weighted body
was different then,
and disappeared
to my husband on shore,
With a dive, I
would vanish into the long,
blanket of gray,
although I was there,
beneath.

We had been staring
at the transforming fire,
finding faces
in waffling logs,
mass becoming ash,
finding shapes
in waving heat
of reds and blacks,

as if we
were looking
at clouds.

We had been making
love on our Chief Joseph blanket
within the breath of fire,
under multiplying stars
that seemed to stare
like glowing eyes
of animals in dark woods,
when we realized
a raccoon was on
the picnic table,
watching.

We had been talking
about galaxies,
the age
of the colander
of stars
around us,
not even
tonight's sky,
but one
from millions
of years past.

I had been thinking
of Carl Sagan,
how his Atheism
was questioned,
especially on his deathbed.
How friends wanted him
to pull someone close and whisper,
"I was wrong. God is there."
How I like him
for just dying
into the darkness.

When we saw the UFO,
wordlessly watched its crooked path,
we looked at each other
as if we had seen
a pterodactyl, or mermaid.
We looked at each other

to see if we had changed.
We searched the sky
again for the light.
But the stars just burned
in their places.

I thought of military
experiments, meteors,
satellites, science.
Of solar systems spinning
in worlds of their own.
Of our little campfire,
invisible from space.
Of how a force
could ever
control
all this.

We shooed the raccoon,
went in the cabin,
and flicked off the flashlight.
My husband waded into
his private universe of dreams.
In darkness, I lay in bed, eyes wide
as they go,
looking for my hand,
that I knew was there,
but buried
in the thick,
old night.

!rocketborne ,in strapped
,ready but
Nervous .97, 98, 99 to 100 sheep counting
decades traveling voices holding
,die will you
how considering once Not
.become will you
who ,like look will you
what Wondering .future

the anticipating voices Muffled
.calm womb's the Recall ?positions
fetal in Sleep
?digress never
,destination our know
Always ?course off
veer to not we Are.

?we do why But
.order need Palindromes
?God see geese
Do ?Tylenol lonely
is direction any In
.reverse in
hides Evil
!near is end The
!back look Don't
!ahead Think

?energy equal
centimeters two do Or
.2cm=E
.space and time through
moves algebra And
.backwards count
sleepers and astronauts Though
.a to z alphabet the
recite showoffs Only

.lasts and firsts
,finishes and starts ,order birth a
have words and letters
if As .("a" counting not)
Webster's Merriam in aah to Zymosan
.Roget's in birth to Rocketborne
.say they ,mind
in end
the with Begin

People Effective Highly of Habit One ← **START HERE**

Humus

The Bird List

American crow.
Mallard.
English sparrow.
Canada goose.
Rock dove.

Birders call it a life list,
as many different species of birds
identified with certainty,
but you and mom never took that seriously.
Birding was just what you did.

Slowed the car to 20 on the highway.
“Is that a red-winged or a broad-winged?”
“A kestrel or a merlin?”
Remember, you said, “the great blue heron crooks
its neck when it flies; the sandhill keeps it extended.”

In the backseat I could have died,
and cared less, motorists honking,
Sibley Field Guide consulted,
and finally, the damned
bird’s name written

on a lined page in a little yellow
spiral notebook pulled from a nest
of butterscotch circles
and lemon drops
in the glovebox.

Years later, Dad, I’m riding in your car.
You open a list from your shirt pocket,
that you come upon,
like a piece of twine, a rubber band or a clump of grass.
Something about the handwriting—
reminds you of Mom, the person who used to
sit in this seat, before the disease—
but you can’t identify the careful script, and think it’s yours,
now that your own disease
has spread its wings
across your memory.

But all the same, when you read “red-necked grebe,”
you see *that* red-necked grebe, hear its call,

in the lower harbor or Penobscot Bay,
recall how both of you delighted in its water-V,
the pencil glide of its etching
when you write its name.

Few people care that everything
has a name
and want to know what it is.
But you two knew—
this is what a biologist does,
what an English teacher loves.
How loose scraps weave a bowl,
warm eggs, wrest a marriage.

Today, your own name, your words
have flown. You no longer know
or speak them. I wish they'd return,
rest in branches of a white pine.

Here at the nursing home, you will not enjoy
invitations to wrap yarn and feathers around twigs,
make dreamcatchers,
though your dreams need
to be caught and categorized.

You will not like your mumbling
roommate, or the absence of the dog
you used to walk, her not napping on your feet.

Though the piano made of seven letters
you will never forget.
How fingers have their own memory.
You'll like that.

And maybe some day, through the window by your bed,
not your old bed, not your old window,
you will see a flush of wings.

Note the forehead markings,
shape of the beak,
color of the underside,
camber of the call.
And on a sheet of paper
write its name.

The Biologist

You liked to search for morels in shadow
of decay, along the edge of dry river beds,
streaked with memory of flowing.

You strapped radio collars on wolves' necks,
untangled birds from mist nets,
tracked deer on St. Mary's Island.

Do you remember the thimbleberries you picked,
boiled with sugar and sealed in jars with wax?
Your fried woodcock and sweet pickle sandwiches?

You smile, but the ebb of your eyes,
your recent past life, wanes like wild berries.
Now, in the veteran's home courtyard, we pluck

cherries, ripe and sour, and I show you how
to bring them to your mouth. As you always knew,
the perennial world will take you.

Some morning in your window bed,
when gurgling memory of river wakes,
you will become a rainbow trout,

wriggle into an empty estuary,
where leaves dapple the shade
of your escape.

After Your Cremation

You moved a block from your blue house
to this blue water. Swim currents,
amniotic winds, never still
in your liquid cell.

You feed a ring-billed gull,
become blue ice floes,
a minnow.
You find the best agates,
sail into castle moats,
ride on dogs' coats.

You would think it's a gift,
all of this.
Say, "Oh, sweet love, isn't it wonderful?"

As you slip into the sheets
of sand.

I listen on the shore.
Wait for you
to tell me more.

After the Beep

Your death first struck me when the answering machine message played, and your voice didn't leave a message.

Tell me a funny story about the kids, you would have said. I need a baby fix.
Leave a message.

I'm just calling, sweet love, to see how you are.
Leave a message.

Just want to let you know about the bed in the living room. Don't be alarmed.
Leave a message.

You've reached the Taverninis,
leave a message.

Leave a message.
Please, leave a message.

Walking the Soo Line

I walk the tracks, rusted veins that once held trains,
disappear in the distance, like you did.

I need to run your ghost along this stitch,
pull a zipper up these creosote teeth, fasten in my mind

clacks of time we walked this line, carried your cancer.
Remember how the rabbit squealed in your dog's jaw, your scream

to stop? It hangs like milkweed silk on thistle.
The train takes nothing away, it stays

long after rails rest below old layers of purple pellets,
lilacs turn to brown carapace.

I'll weave along uneven ties as if they were still there.
Iron artery. Fragrant flower.

You are. You are.
My steps will make it so.

At Ladybug Beach

Overnight, the lake moved
every stone
somewhere else.

Its fingertips reached
way up
to the veins

of dogwood,
pulled the blonde
dune grass to tangles,

licked the long toes
of birch peeling
to skin,

laid a robe
of black sand,
opened it.

*Here, the best coins
rise from deep ago,
grandmother crows.*

*Here, is where gemstones
appear as bones,
mother whispers from the surf.*

Iron ore freighters
wait out waves
by ribs of the red dock.

Raccoons and I search
for treasure
in the storm's dying wake.

If any of us
believed in after
I might

find a buffalo nickel
or agate left
for me.

Albert Street

Without her tending,
him charting
seeds mating in ground,
in brown notebooks
I hoped were his journals,

will the lilac let go its tight fist,
rhubarb coil its calyx?
White roses splay wide for her backhanded praise:
“Oh, those things. I didn’t even plant them.”

Daylily bulbs she buried
will glow in June without her.
But the shed, the push mower, Maxwell House tins,
turn to rot, Fourth of July’s picnic table stacked aside,
and the boat he made, its own square room.

The grass sheds its blanched sheath,
like gray hair. Her winter skin turns
to dust, the green dress she wears inside
the coffin, rich fertilizer.
Now, she’ll lie next to him in the sweet earth,
in her own bed, in her own room,
like at home on Albert Street,

where she and he will always sit at the kitchen table,
two grapefruit halves, two coffees, two swirling Winstons.
in their hands.

Despite his stroke, the till of years,
incessant springs, he never tired
comparing cucumber sprouts to last year’s
or 1955’s, remarking on starlings, late rain,
a watch found on the beach.

Peonies will bow
their heads, with ants
active like thoughts,
absorb whatever is left of you both
from the soil around your house,
and shout petals.
Brilliant
and fading
as fireworks.

Evolutions of Love

Queen Anne's Lace

Late July, you are dangerous.
Your lace over shoulders
of the road flows like sleeves
on a wedding dress.

Purple lupine spears the swamp.
Your red-winged
blackbirds sway
on cattails, unsteady.

If I could lay in the thatch
of your earthy beard
and look up into an apple tree,
I might be happy.

In your lace, Queen Anne's, a miniature
universe of stars and space and stems of feather-
wing leaves, there's a spot of blood,
the prick of her finger,

There, nerve endings splay,
like fissures in ice, maps of nowhere
I'm ever going. Synapses of a thought
gone. A dress yellowing
in the closet.

Late July, you are dangerous.
How you open, ripen,
and wilt.

Give and Take

I said
something. But your
mouth was open and my
words flew into yours, like they meant
nothing.

I heard
the moon groan, as if it were tired
of the earth, the slow dance,
endless music.

I eat
lettuce from the
cemetery garden,
its compost souls, of who knows who,
become me.

The Ant Lion

To escape the lawn of bodies lying and ooing beneath explosions on Independence Day, they drive out of town to the first turnoff on M28, to the winding fuse of beach and slide down the bank. They place their blanket at a respectful distance from the couple kissing on their own blanket, and sit for a second measuring the dusk, at this edge of eastern time, at this near orbit of summer, when dark holds out, more than ever when waiting for fireworks.

The mother and her son toss a Frisbee while the father drinks a beer on the blanket. Someone yells, "Hey, have you ever seen an ant lion?" The kissing man kneels on the bottom slope of the dune. The woman and her son go over to see the spiral in the sand leading to a pit. "Inside that fierce, stone-colored bug waits for ants to slide into the trap," the young, blue-eyed man explains. As he does, the woman looks down the gap of his t-shirt collar. Her heart spins at the sight of his chest hair. His hands are strong, he wears tan work boots, probably his only shoes. But he doesn't seem to care, or think about those things. She imagines he goes to work at different construction sites, has a good time. He wouldn't mind making more money but it's a job, his boss is decent and he has the weekends off.

The ant lion doesn't move, so the blue-eyed man asks if they would like to try the new Frisbee he just bought for his niece. The mother and her son and he toss the disc to each other, a hollow ring that glows in the sunset as though it fell from Saturn. It is mesmerizing, and they throw it well to each other, they barely think about the father on the blanket or the pretty, thin girl on the other one, who probably smells good and is easy to kiss. There is something like touching without touching, atoms swirling in the air, switching rotation between their palms. They visit the ant lion again, his angle of repose, the sides of his pit as steep as they can be before collapsing. Soon he'll change to a lacewing, slender and transparent, and fly in search of a mate, only at night.

The fireworks start and they go back to their blankets. It is strange to see them so far away, barely larger than fireflies above the city that looks so small. The sound of explosions are delayed as they travel across the lake, so at times it's unclear whether they're the muffled boom of what just happened or what will. The child says the fireworks are not very good, and the father makes fun of them, but the mother likes the distance, the separation of parts that usually go together, the feel of the cool sand in which she digs her feet. The blue-eyed man lights some fireworks near the water, which must be from the tribal store, because they spin and fly up in the air and shower down stars.

When the night quiets and a few bonfires and sparks are all that alight, the mother, father and son fold their blanket and clamber up the caving dune. "Happy Fourth!" calls the blue-eyed man, and they reply. As they walk past the parked cars, the mother guesses that his is the small truck with bags of powdered cement in the bed, and imagines him mixing it with sand and water, how it binds things together that usually just coexist. How fireworks are purely paper, clay and powder waiting for flame. How back on the beach, two bodies twist a whorl into the surface of the earth while the sky rests on the bottom of the transparent lake.

Not Here

Loved lover, losing lover, let it not be
lost lover, laying on my tongue, lover, let me
taste your name, let your
name be taste on my ripe buds, let it be
vescence to effer
nescent to lumi
phoria to eu
and leave me
smerized.

Had the Khoikoi still spoke of quagga,
a zebra gradating to horse,
would it still trot
on the African Karoo?
Or the archelon turtle flap
its mammoth carapace through
shallow Cretaceous seas
of South Dakota?
Would voicing alone
zeitgeist a zeuglodon
in Egypt's Eocene
Valley of Whales?

Coal bins, carbon paper and phone booths,
I worry about you.
Lackaday, prithe and yar
have left already.
(But returned just now.)
What I can't recall
I cannot say.

In the epochryphal gloam
of my bed, I touch tongue
to palate, aspire your first consonant
and trailing vowel from my pharynx,
as if constructing your parts
from archeological holes,
m my lips and let
an *s* slink through my incisors.
Let me form your creature
in my mouth.
Let your name float on

my breath,
mix with your breath,
somewhere
in the atmosphere.

Snow Statues

The snow weaves its arms around me
where your arms used to be
then it's gone, as quickly as you,
leaving a ghost trail.

Where your arms used to be
like that statue of Aphrodite with its marble
chill, ghost trail of phantom limbs,
muscles still resonant, intention implied.

But you're that statue of David with its marble
detail. Your torso has lingered through history,
muscles still resonant, intention implied.
No matter how intimate we have become, it's still new,

the detail of your torso lingering in the history of my hands.
We change but remain ourselves.
No matter how intimate we have become, we're new
to each other, each time.

We change but remain ourselves, our souls
buried in snow woven around us,
we sculpt to find each other through time,
before melting, crumbling molecules are gone,
as quickly as you.

Addiction

In my morning bed, thoughts of you
wake me like three sips of coffee...

the way you tell a story intently, gently
unearth a joke, stall a smile, your eyes the color of coffee.

But what I've said and undone, undressed
in the armchair, its leather cold as an old cup of coffee,

swirls on currents of dreams,
black and bitter.

Inverse Coordinates

for every x coordinate, there is only one y coordinate

We can't be together.
Life would be heaven.
So I think of you whenever

I sniff the scent of a book you borrowed,
spread open on your chest as words steeped your sleep.
We can't be together,

your voice excites my every cell
when I phone your office at midnight just to hear your message.
So I think of you whenever

the elevator doors close,
and I'm alone with our falling kiss.
Oh, why can't we be together?

Flying over Texas,
one earbud in your ear the other in mine . . .
Do you think of me ever?

I'm on a tightrope in a dream
falling in between our distant points.
We can't be together.
So I think of you whenever.

Regeneration

Lear's Mother

*"When we are born we cry that we are come
to this great stage of fools."*

—King Lear

Mother, in the wood, in this mad cave-womb,
I remember clear milk drip from your breast,
—the way nature's tears fall into this damp tomb—
as you hand me to the wet nurse, my nest

of silk, a future king's cocoon, protects
me from you, you from me, prevents the bond
of unnatural nature. And now rejected
I am, too, from my own nurtured, who fond

I felt they were, but a crown makes a fool.
Even the black sky alights on this night,
and my eyes with closed lids see it's not the jewel,
but the egg we seek, cradled in gentle might.

The art of our necessities is strange,
and can make vile things precious.

Motherhood

Sure, I'll have to stop smoking,
and the pairing of x's and y's will form fear
unlike the usual xylophone or xylem and phloem. I'm joking
you know, but not about that first part, my dear.

And really, my vascular, magical self will become a mime
of a trilium or redwood, a tiny highway of water and nutrients pushing through the fog
of my inexperienced womb, the graffiti of my mind, the grime
of not knowing what I'm capable of loving, despite creating it. But the clog

growing above the plugged drain, the mingled hairs, shed cells, soup of the mishmashed couple at the door,
is what gives rise to this strangely natural girth.
Now, simply the fact of farm fields, down beds, hospital halls, the abiding, eternal circumstance of rich and poor,
makes this pain endurable, the miles that must be traveled before the destination, the hard-earned, red neon birth.

Our empathetic history, of women I mean, though your hand is good to squeeze, keeps me in Lamaze breaths,
until the rose is cradled onto my stomach, and unfolds, as though there never was a doubt about love, or its brilliant
proximity to death.

Morning Still

The three of us
in this bed
where we mixed
the simple ingredients.

Now he is here,
between us,
arms up
alongside his head.

Like a deep diver,
he whispers ether
into our half dreams,
inflates the membrane

of a bubble wand,
our brief,
evanescent
pearl.

Microcosm

The whorl of hair
on my baby's head spinning
like the Milky Way.

Monarch

The green chrysalis, bound by one thread to a blueberry branch in a planter of moss rose, opens.
A folded monarch emerges, an exotic woman in orange gown enters an unfamiliar room.

My four-year-old daughter's blue eyes grow big, mouth goes round. We've been waiting weeks.
"I can't believe it," she whispers, as if a loud word would send the lady back to her closet.

The newborn butterfly's proboscis spirals out, coils in. Our faces reflect in its mirror-ball eyes,
where we are made round like the world.

Outside her shell-skin, threaded with a gold ribbon, her plump, black-and-white abdomen slims and lengthens.
Her wet wings dry like sheets on a line.

Her antennae sway as my daughter hums. I sit and stare in wonder, remember *her* body, as it first unfurled
upon my stomach, a rose. How her eyes found mine, and in my blood, a tangible rush of ancient love.

"Do butterflies know what they are?" she asks.

"How do they know which way to go?"

The monarch bends her slender legs, fans stained-glass wings, and flies
down, grasps a spire of grass, rests. Something mysterious calls her south.
In an orange flash, she dances, above cedars, over roofs...
becomes the sky, invisible in us.