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## ODE TO THE OTHER: DISPLACING SELF IN POETRY

Jennifer Joy Simula Yeatts

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ODE TO THE OTHER: DISPLACING SELF IN POETRY

By

Jennifer Joy Simula Yeatts

THESIS

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2008

UMI Number: 1452842



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This thesis by Jennifer Yeatts is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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September 10, 1981

## ABSTRACT

### ODE TO THE OTHER: DISPLACING SELF IN POETRY

By

Jennifer Joy Simula Yeatts

The use of first-person narrative point of view in poetry often creates a sense of intimacy between the poem and the reader. I used to write exclusively in first-person; it was a way to let the world in on my secrets. Eventually, though, I got tired of those secrets, and I began experimenting with the third-person perspective. I thought that by removing myself from my poems, I would stretch my horizons and discover new characters. The outcome of my experiment surprised me: while I did move away from some of my old sensibilities, I couldn't escape myself. The subjects of my poems began revealing characteristics I suddenly recognized as my own. In one sense, these poems are an expedition away from myself, but they also trace a path of discovery that leads straight back home.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Austin Hummell, for his unwavering encouragement and guidance throughout the revision process for many of these poems; Dr. Jim Schiffer, for directing this work with structure and grace; and Dr. Russ Prather, for finding time to read and respond when there was no time to be found.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

You can't return to a place unless you leave. This idea works metaphorically as well: in order to come back to a certain sensibility and view it from a new angle, a writer needs to abandon that sensibility and move into a different perspective. In exploring third-person point of view in my poetry, I originally intended to move outside of myself to discover and investigate new characters—other women with different experiences from my own, living different lives, existing within complex and varied relationships foreign to me. But in my quest to find these women, I continually found another self, emerging in shards from depths that I never expected. It became clear to me that this collection of poems would offer insights into the lives of women who are a lot like me—and maybe even some who *are* me. I needed to restructure my theme and organization to reflect that reality. By the time I had completed this collection, I had amassed a series of poems with myself as their center. I accomplished the opposite of my original intention, but by recognizing myself as the subject of these poems, I have gained a fuller, richer sense of my own identity.

In these poems, I use a third-person instead of a first-person voice. This shift has had a few significant effects on my work. The speaker essentially shares the mind of the subject, but she is also uniquely distanced from her, creating a clearer vantage point from which to speak. This distance works especially well in the poems about childhood, when the speaker has the advantage of age over the subject, but a subtle detachment is evident in later poems as well, such as *Because he'll stay* and *Frozen*. In these two poems, the speaker could easily be a neighbor speculating about the mysterious reclusive woman next door. Even though the subject herself *knows* the details mentioned, the speakers

highlight them in ways that the subjects may not think to consider. This tension is what makes the third-person perspective work within the poems.

Five poems make up “be,” the initial section of this collection: *Harlow Park*; *Looking Up*; *Girl, 10, orders four-leaf clover*; *First Deer at Thirteen*; and *Girl’s 5 weeks of hiccups finally end*.

These pieces paint a picture of a young girl at various stages of her childhood and explore themes such as death, fear, embarrassment, family and self-image. Sometimes the themes are obvious, as in *Looking Up*, which expresses the girl’s adolescent anxiety about being short. Other times they are more subtle, like the implication of death in *Harlow Park*, which shows the girl swinging at a playground as she watches a mourner visit a grave in the nearby cemetery:

Pumping hard she grips the chains, timing her eyes  
to open only when her knees tuck back  
the farthest from the ground, that blue sky  
  
second when she can see above the rail  
to curly maples keeping graveyard watch  
  
of quiet winding paths.

The echoes here are of plain and simple existence, life without complications or serious distractions, life in an idyllic world where the pinnacle of stress comes from being short or having hiccups for an unusually long period of time. There are instances of quietude and thoughtfulness that show the young girl in states of innocence, untouched by the harsh realities that life will inevitably bring in the years to come.

The second section is titled “wait.” In these six poems, *Concussion*, *Frozen*, *Because he’ll stay*, *Back to Black*, *So What*, and *Seventeen ’til Three O’clock*, the themes of solitude and strength emerge simultaneously. But these seemingly-positive moods are tempered by a sense of subtle pain. The subject of these poems has been bruised by past relationships

and complicated situations, and she has developed a tough skin as a result—a tough skin that gets her through moments of loneliness, like in *So What*, when she's alone in her apartment, having difficulty enjoying her solitary dinner:

Lemon stripes give height  
to stunted walls, but she knows better:  
even jazz can't make this house bigger.  
Raking rice across her plate in time

with Miles, she pens a fruit fly  
from the candle wax, smears it on  
the electric bill envelope and listens  
for a different kind of blue.

Although she might seem to relish her moments alone, those moments are ninety percent contentedness and ten percent pain. The same tough skin that protects her is often a mask for her deeper feelings, which are particularly observable in *Concussion*:

She'd light it all  
on fire: these pallid walls,  
the crumpled skirt, every single

man in town who looks  
her up and down but doesn't

call. It's only ever oatmeal  
for breakfast, sugarless Earl

Grey, and who wants a morning  
like that. Not her.

In both *Frozen* and *Because he'll stay*, it becomes clear that the subject's loneliness is not a result of being single; she's not necessarily in a relationship or on her own. It's not the lack or presence of male companionship that defines her. Both *Back to Black* and *So What* show her strength of character; she carries her head high and goes about life with a

sense of solitary purpose. In an effort to define her physical image, she dyes her hair. In an effort to define her character, she cooks alone in her tiny apartment and turns up the jazz, determined to be content. Whether either of these actions actually accomplishes her goals is unclear. Finally, *Seventeen 'til Three O'clock* shows her desire to distance herself from a small country town that she feels has defined her for too long:

She looks at all  
the oaks beyond the track, knows she climbed every one,  
and all that she can think about is leaving here. She doesn't need  
a hand. In front of her, just the steady blinking.

As can be seen in later poems, it's not that she hates the country (in fact, she often dreams of it); she simply wants to be anywhere but where she is.

"Want," the third section and the longest of the collection, is similar to "wait" – but the difference is between *daydreaming* about living another life and actually trying to *live* that other life. The subject has reached a point of active frustration and eagerness; she is truly on a search for her best self. En route to that ideal self, though, she encounters several stumbling blocks. Sometimes it's a short-lived relationship based on physical attraction (as in the kitchen rendezvous in *What Happens Past Sauté*); other times she finds herself yearning for love from a guy who doesn't really know what romantic love means (when she tries to prove her worth in *Cooking for Clergy*):

She plants  
mums on his windowsill, ivy to frame doors.  
Counting the iambs in his criticism, she sees  
the Psalms dissolve for him, all of David's  
praise, into charts and lists and numbered pleas.  
She prays for January, for blizzards and hymns,  
his calloused palms resting on her knees.

She moves in and out of brief relationships, not realizing that what was true in “wait” is still true now: it’s not searching for a man that will lead her to her ultimate self.

To be sure, she has her good moments. *In Town, She Dreams of Farming* shows her at her best in this section, engaged in a physical activity that takes her mind away from other cares and lets her focus, where she can channel her energy into the narrow path of the bike lane. She again daydreams of living in a different place, but this time she doesn’t despise where she is now. *Studio* and *Dinosaur Dreams* capture her general dissatisfaction with herself, showing her anxiety and frustration. She wants to be satisfied and content all the time; she just doesn’t know how.

The fourth and final section, “have,” begins with *Now She Stands Barefoot in the Rain*. This is a transition poem, capturing the subject as she experiences an epiphany. Something as basic as a window washer manages to shift her perspective and help her see her own potential—that ideal self she’s been searching for. What she didn’t realize is that looking for her ideal self is fruitless; she’ll come when she’s ready, and she comes to our subject by way of rain. *Olives* also shows a personal change in the subject. She starts letting go of things she’s accustomed to and adopting the habits of a new love interest:

She’s always hated them,  
but lately they’ve made their way  
onto her pizza. She doesn’t seem to mind  
Miller Lite. He teaches her  
to pour it slow,

tilting the can  
as the froth floats  
and shrinks.

Some readers might wonder whether she actually finds true love with this person or not, but either way, the gift he gives to her is the ability to let herself stretch outside her comfort zones and enjoy new things.

“Have” doesn’t imply dramatic change, though. The subtleties of day-to-day life have shifted for our subject, and we find that she is more and more comfortable with herself. Consequently, she’s becoming more ready to contribute to a healthy relationship. In *She longs to move closer* and *After Thanks*, we see her asserting things that she wants and doing things for her own sake, but we also see her including someone else in her daydreams:

She longs to move but dreams of staying—

A voice not hers to plan the weekend,  
another mouth grinding teeth in sleep,

other unfiled nails to itch her impossible  
spots.

*Dishes in December* clarifies the outcome of these dreams: she’s getting married. Do not be misled; marriage itself is not the ultimate goal of her journey. The subject has meandered from childhood through times of loneliness, confusion, frustration, and anxiety. She has dated and she has been alone, and she has searched for love. Ultimately, she does find someone to share her life with, and she feels more content than ever before. But while the marriage is important, it’s beside the point of this sequence of poems. These poems chronicle an individual journey, and they culminate at a monumental time in our subject’s self-becoming. More important to these poems is not who finally falls in love with her but that she is finally ready to give him her truest self so far. The reader is



left to speculate where our subject's journey will take her next. She may have reached an important point of self-realization, but her life is truly just beginning.

The final poem in the collection is *Baptism*. Once more we see the subject alone, but this time her solitude comes with a moment of rebirth and cleansing. She sits on the shore of Lake Superior, not frustrated, confused or anxious but calm and content at last, even in her isolation, watching the beauty of the night unfold before her eyes. Nothing she has consciously done brings her to this moment; in the grand scheme of life's turning, her time has simply come. She has found what it means to be herself, and she's ready to step forward through the twilight, into tomorrow.

1. be

“A happy life consists in tranquility of mind.” --Cicero

## Harlow Park

No one to push her so she swings alone,  
saddle-shoed, eyes and lips

shut tight to keep out sand. Barrettes label her  
temples with the days of the week, except she lost

the other Monday and Tuesday had to sub one side.  
Pumping hard she grips the chains, timing her eyes

to open only when her knees tuck back  
the farthest from the ground, that blue sky

second when she can see above the rail  
to curly maples keeping graveyard watch

of quiet winding paths. Paths that slip  
past tired plots and ivied gates, tombs

crumbling while nobody watches. But when  
she next peeks above the rail, she'll watch a woman

pause to lean plastic lilies on a faded slab.  
See her kneel and rest a palm on granite grey,

trace a name then stand and walk away.

## Looking Up

In third grade she fretted she'd have to get  
used to standing tiptoed in crowds,  
asking mothers to reach peanut butter

in the pantry. It helped that no one could see  
up her nose, that she could duck under low fences  
and walk beneath beds for hide-and-seek.

Limbo was nothing. When tall girls tugged  
their jeans down to hide white socks  
she laughed. At eleven she stood back to back

with Jeremy Stein and the ruler  
on their heads leaned down in his  
direction, the new shortest kid status

confirmed by at least four others  
who finally pointed and giggled  
at someone else. Three weeks later testosterone

broke and she reclaimed the title.  
By then it was given, she'd never do long jump  
or bump her head on door frames. Never be picked

first for volleyball. In group photos, she was always  
front row. Vertical stripes dizzied her, heels ruined  
arches, and she hated the sacrifice for height.

But when her brothers paraded her on their shoulders  
at high school basketball games, up towering  
bleachers, past pleated cheerleaders and pacing coaches

to the top riser next to the pep band, at last  
she was taller than everyone, and the piccolo shrills  
and saxophone drones muted every other sound except love.

Girl, 10, orders four leaf clover

keychain, waits six to eight  
weeks. Swathed in cellophane,  
it comes all cheap plastic, fake  
silver, but she holds it high  
in the light, likes the symmetry  
of chlorophyll hearts and one square  
inch of luck all her own. Threads  
it to her suitcase guarding  
spare Barbies and friendship  
bracelets safe from thieves  
and cousins. Years it secures  
gum wrappers dropped by boys  
she likes, notes in code and Newport  
lights. The thong she stole  
from J.C. Penney, a library romance  
novel two years overdue. By eighteen  
she forgets, stubs her toe  
in the closet, bends to find her old  
stash, but no green flash. Only empty  
plastic, a scratched name unclear,  
no lucky leaves to bless her year.

## First Deer at Thirteen

Mucking 'cross the back forty after four days of rain, she pauses to duck low and tuck the extra-long laces of Sorels back inside her boots. Wouldn't want to trip and eat the mud, ruin the trail of tracks she's followed for a mile now, tired but full of fresh fall breath. First time in the woods without Dad but no time for nerves, left them at home with the brothers. Inhaled half a bowl of chili, swept her orange cap and vest off the closet hook, shouldered the bow and took off jogging towards the trail. Now dusk threatens more rain, forgot the flashlight, got to stalk fast. There—off the left, a snort. A spike on either side of eyes like shooter marbles, twenty yards of stare between them. She lifts the bow, lines the arrow straight.

*Girl's 5 Weeks of Hiccups Finally End*      –Associated Press, 3/2/07

As she lay there staring at the glow-in-the-*hic*  
moons she glued to plaster back when she was  
*hic*, even flannel couldn't soothe her back  
to sleep. She counted seconds in between  
each *hic*.

Her days became a game of forcing  
friends to guess exactly what  
she said. She learned to time precisely  
when to swallow so she wouldn't choke  
on every bite, when to raise her hand  
and when to speak at all.

Drinking from the wrong side of the glass  
spilled her nerves. Spoons of honey  
mixed in vinegar equaled fits of frantic  
cough. Held her breath, and herbal tea  
made her sweat.

Then one day in March she dreamt of breathing  
without pause. At six she sat upright expecting. Waited.  
No abrupt jolt, no haunting count to ten and then  
no jerk of tainted air.

2. wait

“I keep the subject of my inquiry constantly before me, and wait till the first dawning opens gradually, by little and little, into a full and clear light.” —Isaac Newton



## Concussion

Tuesday's sudden cold is gray  
against the pane, sleet pleated

like the skirt she forgot to iron,  
the one abandoned on her closet floor.

It's the most balanced day since June:  
alarm at six, her eyes adjust,

but she's not ready for the equinox.  
Would rather feel the wind

writhe against the storm  
window, shudder under flannel

and wait for sirens to start.  
She'd light it all

on fire: these pallid walls,  
the crumpled skirt, every single

man in town who looks  
her up and down but doesn't

call. It's only ever oatmeal  
for breakfast, sugarless Earl

Grey, and who wants a morning  
like that.

## Frozen

For all the ice she scrapes  
from her wipers and mounds  
of snow that stack to caves and block  
her view of town, it's not the cold  
that carves her bones to thread. Not  
the boots she bought for a buck  
at Vinnie's down the block,  
the way they slip and leak in drifts  
en route to Cal's for pool. It's no mail  
in the box, and now he's gone not days  
but all nights too. The burned  
out bulb in the fridge, stale bread  
and no cash for a smoke.

Because he'll stay

on devil's night, she doesn't carve  
the gourd. She'd rather look at crumpled  
sheets, the sunken imprint of his head

on one half of her pillow. Walk around  
the house to count the things he dropped.  
Oil change receipt. Scribbled list of time

he wants off from work. One double  
A battery. She'll spend the day  
waiting inside for dark and eggs

crunched in mailboxes, rocks tossed  
at cars along an unlit road,  
orange pulp smashed on porches. Then

there's tomorrow. She hasn't  
bought the candy yet. Probably she'll  
forget like all the years she's lived

alone and had to face the ghosts  
empty-handed, dug frantic  
through her purse, fisted fives

and tens into their pillowcases, then  
slunk inside to kill the lights and wait  
for trouble. This year the same

but better, and all she can imagine  
now is how again he'll leave  
his Levi's slouching on her floor.

## Back to Black

Five weeks before what would have been  
her one-year anniversary  
of red, she dyed again. Couldn't  
have been that Pantene commercial,  
the one with swingy midnight sheens  
careening past the camera lens.  
Not even the goth girl swimming  
in her torn and too-long jeans, all  
licorice and fingernails. Eye-  
liner like inky caterpillar  
larva. Must have been the street  
last night, when all the lights  
went out. How she was left to pedal  
blind, following the fluttering  
of moths. The occasional bat  
muddling her sense of sky, that  
firefly that set her ponytail  
to flame. The way she wished it dead.

So What

Arid fannings of Sri Lanka  
Ratnapura tea dust her kitchen  
counter, and she burns a pillar  
called *mandarin cashmere*. The only

day it snows in Scotland, she finally  
leaves footprints. The flame leans  
to her, a hula swoon, a swollen  
room, snowdrifts on windows.

Lemon stripes give height  
to stunted walls, but she knows better:  
even jazz can't make this house bigger.  
Raking rice across her plate in time

with Miles, she pens a fruit fly  
from the candle wax, smears it on  
the electric bill envelope and listens  
for a different kind of blue.

Seventeen 'til Three O'clock

and all that she can think about is leaving. Here she doesn't need  
all this beauty: nights so dark she can't see  
a hand in front of her. Just the steady blinking

red that says the smoke alarm is working. Even afternoons  
are quiet, too quiet for the mind that wants distraction.  
All that she can think about? Leaving, where she doesn't need

windy fields with corners stalked by paints  
and palomino grazers she can ride bareback or guide with  
a hand in front. Of her, just the steady blinking

eyes remain here in the country. The rest of her  
is scattered east by way of scribbled plans, lately  
all that she can think about. Leaving here, she doesn't need

to pack a bag or say goodbye to anything except  
the lilacs, the only scent she'll carry everywhere with  
one hand in front of her. Just the steady blinking

light of the train approaches. She looks at all  
the oaks beyond the track, knows she climbed every one,  
and all that she can think about is leaving here. She doesn't need  
a hand. In front of her, just the steady blinking.

3. want

“We do not know what we want and yet we are responsible for what we are –  
that is the fact.” –Jean-Paul Sartre

## Studio

One mosaic slab on a speaker box  
makes a coffee table, another object  
she ignores. The stars become her clock,  
beam down on her tiny shrine and elect  
quiet as their monarch, a queen for time  
to reign above or wrap her in the hum  
refrigerators lend until she's gone.  
Gone outside to hitchhike, or lick her thumb  
and hold it to the wind to guess the current.  
Gone down the hill to hear the winter waves,  
how they echo all the way to Crescent  
Street and flood the moon. Not only tide she craves  
but all the amplitude of water, crest  
for lunar dark when she becomes its guest.



## Geology

She cleared a space above the twin  
for agate and hematite. Ditched  
him quick, swept her rocks  
off his shelves. Hung her coat  
beside a new bed, pockets heavy  
with amethyst. Every day she tried  
to fish it out, she'd dent her fingertips  
on rough edges, reconsider.

Kept it there to feel  
the weight of every day  
she spent with him, walking  
the dog in turns, watering  
plants named Cicero  
and Elvis. For a month, she still  
layered lasagna on weekends, woke  
up at three to see his muscles  
twitch in sleep. But he's  
not there.

So now she bums a light,  
picks up pizza on Fridays,  
and the leash hangs behind  
another door, one that opens  
to him on the far side of the queen,  
staring through the wall to deep  
dust on the empty shelf.

## Dinosaur Dreams

She says I've dealt with them a while  
while drawing tiny trenches in her mashed  
potatoes. Velociraptor swoops and I  
can only duck into the nearest alley.  
She can't say why she ordered garlic mash  
when every other time it kept her up till three  
with reflux. Or why they always seem to give up  
once they see she won't look back. The latest chase  
went all the way to Crystal Falls. Fork in hand  
she stands, can't look at the rows she's scooped across  
her plate. Those ditches, like when she ran in rain  
across the swamp and sunk in mud that filled her shoes.

## Elevators

always made the list of everywhere  
she wanted to have sex. That private  
air, smudge of sweaty fingertips  
on the mirrored wall, just to get  
away with it. When she rode  
them as a child she never spoke  
until she landed at the lobby. The smell,  
she said—like her mother's bedroom  
or a silent film she had the poster for  
but never saw.

She has better words for scent now,

but still she stands in silence, straining to ignore  
the gaze of every eye or better yet  
to catch a spy mid-stare. Paisley ties for lion  
tamers, faux any-kind-of-fur  
for corporate wives. Facing the door,

a redhead shifts her weight from hip to hip  
and glosses floppy curls behind a curve  
of ear. A tailored skirt slit too high  
for CEO, too low for hairstylist. Knees  
gleaming like peaches in the bubbled light.

Next to her a mess of hockey  
hair, a pair of well-lashed irises. Ears  
she wants to lick. He presses four. She's already  
committed to six and so she'll watch him go  
with her sticky breath. When she's the only one

on board she jumps during lurches down  
the shaft. But then others sidle in, forcing  
her to zip her smug. She wonders if they  
guess her life the way she estimates  
how many birdfeeders they own, the names  
for childhood pets, the fabric of their sheets.

## In Town, She Dreams of Farming

If it wasn't for the bike lane, she'd want  
to be a cowgirl. Sawdust froth & lathes  
spinning chair legs in a woodshop out back,  
none of this sidewalk politic—never knowing  
when to sidle right or left to make way for suits  
and skateboards. She'd take her supper on the hay  
wagon, a blanket spread for tuna fish & bright  
beefsteaks sliced wide, extra salt for sprinkling.  
Watch the newest gelding canter past the edge  
of hemlocks, round again to nudge the fence  
for clover. She'd coax him back & comb  
the burrs from his mane, slowly, her only  
calendar the sun to warm her mug of cider  
fresh from pressing. Break a stalk of timothy  
to gnaw, lean long against the bales until  
the sky grew dim.

But there's no prairie here.  
Instead she brakes at stop lights & it's stale  
city water in her battered Nalgene, warped  
from heat. Sucks spearmint Altoids for politeness  
she won't need, yards away from any breath  
but hers. Pushes hard up Third, no shifting  
gears, then crosses east to coast with evening  
traffic. There's something about the shoulder:  
clean space between engines and commerce,  
narrow friction for her pedaled tread. Six miles  
to work and back each day, & she keeps  
her steady pace, matching the stampede.

## Cooking for Clergy

Slipping something in his soup, she rhymes ginger  
with celery. The last pools of broth tip  
onto his spoon, and she measures the seconds  
between his swallows. Dessert is a ghazal  
with lemon meringue and after he licks  
his lips, clicks his tongue to the rhythm  
of forks she drops in the drawer. She plants  
mums on his windowsill, ivy to frame doors.  
Counting the iambs in his criticism, she sees  
the Psalms dissolve for him, all of David's  
praise, into charts and lists and numbered pleas.  
She prays for January, for blizzards and hymns,  
his calloused palms resting on her knees.

## What Happens Past Sauté

He has his mother's nose for trusting early  
in a curry simmering on the stove:  
the faith to let it be there long enough  
to stew just so, without the sticky crust  
that forms along the edges every time she  
tries the dish. She sees him step away and wait,  
wooden spoon in hand. Wants to claim it  
quick and stir herself into the pan,

the remedy for overcooked. He stands there  
naked underneath the apron she crocheted  
for him last Christmas, the only way he'll cook  
since then. She steps up close and puts her hand  
on his chest, curly bristles pushing out  
from narrow thread. Her fingers grip  
the tiny hairs, pulling. Before he shouts  
she's gone into the pantry, ducking behind cans

of tuna and mixed nuts, leaving him  
to stare. Twelve minutes pass  
before she stands to brush the flour from her  
knees and hand him oil-packed albacore.  
Goes well with coriander, she says.

She knows it wasn't right to doubt his cooking,  
the way he pours Merlot into her favorite  
glass while tapping Sinatra rhythm  
on the counter with his other hand,  
but apologies are stuck behind the pantry  
door, her mouth a stale saliva pool too numb  
to ask for grace. But still he holds  
the dripping wooden spoon in his left hand

and lifts the can away from her. Slipping  
from her hand it hits his toe,  
bare on muted tile. Nothing flinches  
but she blinks, not ready for forgiveness  
and he wins the staring contest, like always  
when they fight. His hand on her ear erases  
the apron between them, the only thing  
he'll leave behind for her to hang  
unwashed beside the fridge. You can cook  
anytime, she says, and the curry burns.

4. have

“If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.” —Sir Francis Bacon

## Now She Stands Barefoot in the Rain

She thinks to take a risk is ignorance,  
a guarantee to lose it all. Hates cats  
because the black ones run  
across the sidewalk when she strolls,  
skipping dreaded cracks. Shudders  
at the shatter of any mirror.

But then she sees the window washer,  
calloused, lean, who smiles shyly  
from his perch eight feet above  
the street. Climbing ladders  
all day long, he grips shingles  
for extra balance. Before storms, he  
never trembles on the creaky  
rung, just curls his toes tighter  
at the sway of wind, keeps erasing  
streaks.

She wants to be  
like that, unmoved by threat  
or superstition, at the mercy  
of drab clouds that mull a squall  
and hover long, coaxing mechanics  
into garages. They'll wait  
for the gale. It might drop. Or else  
the haze will pass, unleash the heat  
behind and move along to scare  
another town. Next time it rains,  
she thinks, she'll leave her boots  
at home. Umbrella too. Just  
to see.

She's knitting gloves on Sunday  
when the drizzle starts. By noon, leaves  
caren across the street amid the downpour.  
She drops the needles quick, steps outside  
to stand in wind and count the thunder.



She longs to move closer

to monks and hailstorms. Rows and rows  
of tomatoes next to nothing

but more tomatoes. Gravel every day.  
She wants away from air-conditioned rooms,

from clock radios and three-dollar water.  
To move closer to a new favorite room

she hasn't seen, to paint each wall  
a different color.

She longs to move but dreams of staying—

A voice not hers to plan the weekend,  
another mouth grinding teeth in sleep,

other unfiled nails to itch her impossible  
spots. Bristly morning beard, and blueberry

granola in her tiny kitchen where each day  
is counted perfectly the same.

## After Thanks

### I.

The hollow in her belly isn't hollow  
anymore. Never mind nine pounds

of leftovers to dole into  
freezer bags, dishes stacked

so deep she can't see the toaster,  
that movie four days overdue.

### II.

Dinner is leftover pie and she slides  
a wedge of custard next to raspberry  
next to rhubarb.

### III.

Runs into an old boyfriend  
at the movie shop. He's browsing  
foreign films, the kind they played

for background noise. She doesn't  
care who's in his car, but wonders  
if she rubs his back until he falls

asleep. Sucks in her bloated  
belly, wishes him a Merry  
Christmas, doesn't say it.

### IV.

The first real storm slips ice under  
polar fleece and her wind-stopper

shell, buries the old Mazda, extra  
socks and late for work. Unapologetic,

she knocks her snow-caked boots  
against the boss's desk. What's

(stanza break)

wrong with you, he asks. Studies  
the blushed cheeks, mascara

smudged from sleet. Nothing,  
she says, reaches in her bag

for Tupperware. Hands him  
the last of the pie.

## Olives

She's always hated them,  
but lately they've made their way  
onto her pizza. She doesn't seem to mind  
Miller Lite. He teaches her  
to pour it slow,

tilting the can  
as the froth floats  
and shrinks. She watches  
the way his hands pass dirty glasses  
from basin to basin. When the last bowl

is rinsed, his television awakes  
in manic piano to Zooey Deschanel  
braiding her hair. Inches away,  
he twists radishes in salt. Back

at home, she stays up to scrub until her own  
sink is empty, bites her brackish tongue,  
hums the movie theme.

## Dishes in December

With fingers chapped and dripping  
bubbled scum, she grips the steel wool  
tight to coax the shards of peppers  
from the wok. No window view of icicles  
like when she did the chore in Mom's  
sink back at home, just a six-inch  
print of Hopper's old gas station  
by an empty lane and wallpaper  
with upright stripes the hue of ripe  
bananas. Married in five weeks  
and out of stamps for invitations,  
no heels high enough, and the leftovers  
are gone too. She'll have to cook  
tonight, parsnip soup or veggie pizza,  
a complicated recipe so she can make  
a list, draw her little squares beside  
the steps and make an X inside each  
one to mark her progress. There's  
satisfaction there. She glances  
out her only window to the snow  
that's started now; her car's been icing  
up again and those new bedroom windows  
weren't enough to stop that stubborn  
draft. Next month she'll be a wife  
and keep this house for more than one,  
scour another plate and dust an extra  
time each week. That bottle of Syrah  
will only last an evening, and she'll burn  
her candles every day, buy another pack  
of hangers, stock up on tiger balm  
to knead into his knotted shoulders.  
Sometimes she thinks it can't all  
be so easy, asks him what he thinks  
will scar them first, but he just palms  
her cheek, pulls her close and she stops  
waiting for the answer.

## Baptism

Superior is a cross of continuous change in May, cool bless

of dusk curling her toes to stone. Charcoal-strips of watermelon  
sun settle in the west, and the current employs sudden strength,

dousing ankles, receding just as quickly: Ice. Thaw. Ice.

Ten o'clock wind whisks mosquitoes away, a fair  
trade. No stars yet, only varying sediments of night.

Marshmallows of grey stretch into nighttime

taffy and she hovers between birth and cleansing, nestles  
in volcanic rock, follows her breath. A witness of white

lights parallel to the water wakes

her from herself, an ore boat sliding on the horizon.  
When she dips her feet again she is refreshed.

A new sky sings of mercy.