2013

Things I Know

Tomoko Sawada
CUNY City College

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Title: Things I Know
Author: Tomoko Sawada
Mentor: Elaine Equi

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

December 10, 2012
Table of Contents

Endorsement 1
Things I Know about Words 2
Ode to Wall Street 3
Summer Vacation 4
Astronomy 5
In One Way or Another 6
(Untitled) 7
Winter Sky 8
Department Store 10
Existence 11
Hello Kitty Propaganda 12
The Chest 13
When I Cannot Sleep Prayer I 15
When I Cannot Sleep Prayer II 16
When I Cannot Sleep Gratitude 17
Things I should Be Careful Of 18
If I Talk about Small but Symbolic Thing in My Life 19
A Poem for Tina Marie 20
What Matters 21
Milk Fanatic of Our Time
or How I Stopped Loving Milk 22
Water Lilies 24
Mondrian's Flower 25
Dream/ Reality 26
To-Night 27
Haiku (Deformed) 28
Beacons 29
Perspective 31
Zubo Zubo 32
Erasure Poem (from Richard III) 36
Erasure Poem (from Tao Te Ching) 37
Iago 38
At Night He Dreams of 39
Everyday 40
Tangible You 41
The Shape of Love 43
The Stone 44
Ode to the Sky of San Francisco 45
Rain 46
Hiroshima-yaki, Mafia, Ford-Matsuda Factory 47
On the Galaxy Train 48
Undelivered 49
Endorsement

There are meditations on boundaries and deliberate intrusions in Tomoko’s poetry. I was also drawn by her unapologetic low self-esteem, which sometimes manifests as an aloof voice. It’s fun to read her cheerful accusation of propaganda in “Hello Kitty Propaganda”, but I don’t think she believes in the ideas displayed here. Rather, she attempts to warn, I suspect. There are hints of political discourse and dilemma, which she pretends to hide, but actually actively exhibits. I don’t know her, and we will probably never see each other. After reading her poems, however, I now count her as one of my potential friends. —Emily Dickenson

I’m a visual artist and a skeptic of literature. But I read Tomoko’s poems. She is a rebel. I liked that. —Taro Okamoto

Her poetry is good to read after one dies. I felt hope. —Basho Matsuo
Things I Know about Words

Tablecloths often eat our nouns and store them. Proper nouns are their favorite.

Last night, I saw a dinner jacket change its color, hearing the overly exaggerated adjectives.

You need a mask when verbs smell like smoke from chemical factories.

The mayor hides his secret conjunctions in his chest pocket when he holds press conferences.

Articles are useful when I am lost in a labyrinth.

My socks are made of prepositions. That is why I always confuse the right with the left.

Rock stars like leather jackets lined with adverbs.

Scientifically, words vibrate at high speed like atoms and conjugate a million times a second, forming fabric and webs around us.
Ode to Wall Street

Dark winds whirl under the bushes
around fortified castles

A moment before streetlamps are lit
    a moment after the last rain drop of this
    millennium is absorbed by the stone pavement

    I saw yellow rhinos
with black stripes plunging
into the marina

    A green aproned guy
selling canned oblivion
for a dollar and fifty

I bought a poem from a shoeless man
It was also a dollar and fifty
Grandfather laughed at me
my mouth was the shape of
a watermelon slice
when I grinned.

Maybe I was eight.
We ate watermelons
fully ripe in grandmother’s
garden.

I picked the slice like a shape of yacht
on the lake.
Too sweet. She should’ve harvested
earlier.

All are gone.
I still grin like a watermelon
drifting like a yacht.
Astronomy

When I’m born again and if my name starts with M
I’ll find Andromeda Galaxy with my naked eyes
and fly like a pancake to the edge of your dream.

Like a reckless poet who cares nothing about rhyme
I danced on the streets begging for food and pennies
when I was born again and my name started with M.

Three billion light-years are the same as no realm.
I serve a sage who nobody ever listens to and he teaches
me how to fly like a pancake to the edge of your dream.

When I was evil and condemned under the elm
you were among those screaming and throwing rocks.
I was born again and had a name starting with M.

Gods had a quarrel over the Nile River and I tried to calm
their follies in vain. That was when I gave up all the prayers
and flew like a pancake to the edge of your dream.

From a shooting star near Crab Nebula we heard the boom, boom
of Himalayas but you were so small mumbling about lobsters
when you were born again and had a name starting with M.
I can fly like a pancake to the edge of your dream.
in one way or another

you stamped on me
    because I’m penniless

I forgive you
    for you don’t know
I was born out of
    the buffalo’s belly
    guarded by the full moon

I dance in my
    turquoise lace dress
beside a crackling fire
    every other
    Thursday

I forgive you
    for spitting on me

I fall down on my bed
    in my little hut
where yellow butterflies
    swarm all year round

and cry like a new born
baby
    holding a stone
I found when

I was stranded
on this island

tonight
    I can see the rings of
    Saturn and hear turtles
racing to the shore bearing
    silver eggs

    in one way or another

we are all bridled
like that black horse you
own
I don’t believe when you say
you aren’t afraid of dying

When the sun set
I was alone
on the bridge.

The other side was
dark—I
needed to hurry.

That moment,
I heard you call
my name. I
looked back.

Then everything
disappeared.

I missed it!

Because you called
my name.
**Winter Sky**

Orion
holding his
left hand aloft
shied away
from Scorpio

but if you and I
never agreed
on their presence
it’s just litters of
stars

Ever since
Babel fell
we’ve been
confused in
floods of
phonics

We learned
how to speak
louder
just to be
heard
invented
microphones
and volumes

then we
plugged
our ears
craving
silence
even
our obedient
multi-lingual
androids
threw their hands
up and moved to
the M81
galaxy

Stars now
start to fall
we still
wait for claps
for our speech

even boos
can't be heard
Department Store

Lipstick grinning at the counter
You hate this pink, don’t you?
Color you found in the bottom drawer
of your mother. Golden lipstick grinning in the corner
You had to wait to grow older.
A rainy day in June. Dew on the window
Pink lipstick calling from the counter.
I know you hate this color.
Existence

Two Dandelions on the manmade lawn between the transit station and Route 17. Their maned little faces not golden seemed very strong and stayed with me.

Roses at the flower shops aren't the only beauty. Don't step on us, we are here for a reason.
Hello Kitty Propaganda

Oh, Mothers! What have you done to us?
This imprinted yellow nosed creature
with six whiskers we can no longer
resist even after we’re completely bored
with her empty look.

Oh, Mothers! Were you aware
her intentional primary colors
reject any unanswerable questions,
oval shapes decline any objections,
symmetries enforce conformities?

From blankets to billboards,
tea cups to t-shirts,

sending the red-ribboned message,
to be lovable, better to be
mouthless.
The Chest

whenever her
    mind begins
        to stamp
            and squeal

she crumples it
    and shoves it
        into the drawer

that is how
her mother
lived

    that is how
her grandmother
had lived

that is our way of life

that is how
we have been
cooking bowls
of soup
and cleaning
bathtubs
one day
to ano
ther

this wood chest
in her bedroom
filled with
clanched fists
dried and
wrinkled
I'm afraid of being a woman
When I Cannot Sleep

Prayer I

I want to be happy and rich and famous and loved and healthy and pretty and mysterious and beautiful and clean and young and private and abundant and unique and creative and professional and punctual and hardworking and laid-back and upper-class and working-class friendly and multilingual and generous and honest and frank and funny and funky and sleek and sly and philosophical and educated and ignorant and hot and warm and cool and sweet and sour and sensitive and fearless and deep and superficial and adventurous and moderate and white and black and yellow and brown and red and purple and dark and bright and dog-like and cat-like and bird-like and god-like and witchy and sunny and flowery and everything I am not.
When I Cannot Sleep

Prayer II

I want the world to be non-violent and warless and equal and fair and safe and peace and abundant and honest and blue and green and gold and silver and smart and fun and clean and generous and sunny and rainy and snowy and warm and windy and partially-humid and partially-dry and liberal and traditional and understanding and pure and whole and diverse and forgiving and disciplined and soft and technological and civilized and primitive and polar-bear-friendly and whale-friendly and nuclear-weapon-free and pollution-free and plastic-free and organic and long living and delicious and Ganhdi-like and Mother-Theresa-like and punky and funky and mellow at the same time.
Gratitude

I thank my heart for its heartbeat I have thought about killing myself a couple of times but my heart never took it seriously I thank for that I thank for T for not returning my phone calls after our third date I should apologize for disturbing his life with my insistent phone calls I didn’t mean to hurt him Ignoring my calls was a smart thing to do for him Now I have calmer nights and I thank for that I am grateful that my mother taught me how to make potato salad Girls don’t know how to cook nowadays I appreciate all the spiritual teachers in my bookshelf I still don’t get how to be happy despite all the insights I admire their awaking nevertheless I would like to thank Mrs H for teaching us about the war and misery at the elementary school I feel guilty of my misery in the safe time Finally I thank for the solitude and the silence of the night As far as I lie in this bed I am safe.
Things I Should Be Careful Of

Caffeine intake  Pesticide residue on vegetables
My weight  My spending
Pronunciation of English words (especially the sounds like “R” and “L”)
Proposition of polite forms in Japanese language
Propaganda /Mind control
Mood altering substances
Cheap sushi  Radioactive substance
Strangers who speak to me in bad Chinese on the streets
Number of sarcastic comments and thoughts
Number of toilet paper rolls I store at home
Places with bad chi
My aunt  GM food
Good looking males
If I Talk about Small but Symbolic Thing in My Life

When we were ten or eleven, we used to pedal to a local mini-department store near Takano River and shoplifted a few things at a time every Saturday after our cram school. Hello kitty erasers, heart-shaped white chocolates wrapped with red-foil, little address-books...things we didn’t need and our parents would buy anyway if we asked. This was before all the stores started to arm themselves with tiny cameras and security guards—we knew we had little chance to be caught but my heart pounded badly every time I slid these trivial things into my pocket.

One day, when I picked up a small notebook, I noticed a sign on the wall, “SHOPLIFTER WILL BE REPORTED TO POLICE” I didn’t freeze because of the sign but something did in me. I stood there staring at the notebook. “What are you doing? Hurry! Put it into your bag. We are leaving!” my friend whispered from behind and pushed my arm. With that voice, I rushed to the exit like a horse whipped by a jockey without even hiding the notebook. We ran and ran to our bikes and then pedaled our way home.

And soon we got bored with all this and quit going to the store.
A Poem for Tina Marie

How could you believe in fairy tales

like magic wands
frogs turning into princes

think about how we’ve been killing babies

In a Japanese puppet play
a samurai kills his baby boy
for his master While his wife weeps
the grandfather praises his son’s
virtuous conduct

Bones of forty-four sacrificed babies
from the 14th century were found in Peru

Of course you can’t expect
applause and we aren’t in the 14th century

in fact
people seem to have forgotten you
On the internet
I couldn’t find much about you
except your TDCJ ID#
which is 00905058

Today I read your story
for my college class

I thought about reincarnation
and the astronaut who said
time could be proceeding in a circular manner

A sunny day like this is suitable to

think about the possibility
I could be you sitting in a dark cell
and you could be me
writing a poem
for Tina Marie

---

1 Tina Marie killed her two children (a three-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son) by throwing them off the cliff in 1999.
What Matters

I’m ugly
  she is fifteen-years old
  in her winkled
  pomegranate colored dress

She is thirty–seven
  in the morning subway
  on the way home from
  someone’s bed
  pondering
  about the definition of ugliness
Milk Fanatic of Our Time
or How I Stopped Loving Milk

Like well-trained
soldiers lining up
on bugle calls,
we drink Milk.

My brothers and I pour
the ivory odor into our cups
with comic manga faces.

Milk, Milk, Milk.

Never forget Mother’s mantra—
Milk is for bones!
A cup of milk every meal,

Milk with eggs and ham,
with curry, with fried rice,
with sashimi and soy sauce.

We wouldn’t complain—
flavor is secondary.

Don’t forget,
Milk is for bones.

A cup of milk every meal at home,
and a bottle at school lunch.

Teachers wouldn’t let us go
to the playground unless
we finish the day’s main dish and
a bottle of Milk, Milk, Milk.

Suzuki and I are left
in the empty classroom
with our half-filled bottles
and dreadful pumpkin soup.
The flaming afternoon sunlight
on our back,

we sing in tears—

Milk, Milk, Milk.
Milk is for bones
Water Lilies

The swirling lights, the melting lilies, a thousand strokes of blues and greens.

A man sits up straight next to me like a young monk, gazing at the lilies.

Downstairs the exhibition “Nation in War” flames like burning water lilies.

The condensed space and time form a momentary temple, blurring the lilies.

The magnificence on the canvas never existed on this earth, only in Monet’s eyes.
Mondrian's Flower

A white rose in an empty glass
amid yellow floods.
We don't talk about loneliness
anymore.

You were alone with a white lily.

Why didn't you put down
your brush even
for a moment?

Was it too late
when you missed her?
Haikus

**Dream/Reality**

september beach
one-legged seagull shoots shoots
towards the twilight

red spider lilies
spinning under the half-moon
along carless highways

rain drops on my wrist
one-minute-late watch
refusing to keep up
To-Night

I wait for my poem
but she never appears.

All the philosophies about dollars
and yens and guans
I heard during the day
spin like a merry-go-round
in a desolate park.
Haiku (Deformed)

toads croak about
promised prosperity

fucking productivity
i zip into a nap
Beacons

my friend's crying as
his mom is dying. i
want to say something
but no words come to
my mind. So i'm
just sitting like
a rock sitting near my house
for two hundred years. i
want to say something but
what can i say when
my friend's mom is dying.

my mom
says she may die before
i come home cause i
live so far away and
don't come back often. i
can find nothing to
say. she is
not ill but my brother
called me saying she's getting old. my
heart creaks like when you squeeze
a dried lemon. i can find nothing
to say. so i just sit there
like she'll live for another three
hundred years.

my friend's
dying and she makes a list of
people nurses should
call when she passes. she
chooses a song for her
funeral and asks
her sister to pick the CD
up at her house when she
passes
and i sit
there with her in the nursing
home’s lobby not
knowing what to say. so i
just ask if i’m on
her list like it’s a home
shopping catalogue. maybe
it’s inappropriate but
what could i say
when my friend is
dying.
Perspective

You’re a shooting star!
I’m an empty bottle.
You come down to this rooftop swirling in fire.
I can’t fly up with you. If I try,
I’ll fall and be smashed. I’ll be a piece of shattered glass!

From this place, I look over the town lights in early spring

Ah, there’s no space in this town for us to place our love.
There’s no window to enter because we only bring them misfortune and unhappiness.
Oh drifting. The locomotive scatters sparks of fire.
We have to depart for the sky, This earth is full of shabby things!

If it were possible,
I wish we’d met and fallen in love long before we were born
and we were never born into a world such as this.
Zubo Zubo

1
One long path stretched through the grass field.
Four o’clocks bloomed ahead on the right,
clusters of goldenrods and cosmoses on the left.
I remember,
Zubo Zubo, dwarf-like, was always on the left,
crawling on the soggy ground
like a lump of foggy dark shadow on the wildflowers.
Whenever I walked the path,
I threw a small stone or two at Zubo Zubo,
and I forgot what I had done right away.
For some reason, I felt weary.
The low-pitched roaring sound
of the ocean waves was rolling
in the depth of my ears.
I would pick up stones at the railway track
and carry them in my pocket.
When Zubo Zubo was not around, I stoned
his house with all my strength.
Then I forgot what I had done right away
and chased long -headed locusts or hoptoads
that jumped out of the grass.
Or, I would sense a presence of something unknown
sliding swiftly on the ground through the grass
and stand frozen.
The presence freely transcended all that existed there,
and sparkled and leapt and dimmed and disappeared.

2
Zubo Zubo slept in a doghouse
which had been used by the champion tosa
of the dogfight tournament once held in the field. 

*Zubo Zubo* was infinitely ugly, filthy, creepy, and unbearably boring.

I was indifferent to *Zubo Zubo* most of the time. Yet, it was I who named him *Zubo Zubo*.

First, I called him “Crab spider,” but no one liked it. Around here, spider is pronounced “zpider.” The sound of “Crab zpider” wasn’t funny enough. Either “Crab spider” or “Crab zpider” classifies a spider objectively and doesn’t suit to ridicule others.

But, people loved the sound of *Zubo Zubo*.

Everyone rolled around on the grass field, laughing. So excited, they fiercely stoned the doghouse where *Zubo Zubo* fled, even though they had done it minutes before.

In a few days, he was recognized as *Zubo Zubo* by everyone.

To my knowledge, no one has ever called him anything but *Zubo Zubo* ever since. *Zubo Zubo* became a concept despite being an individual entity.

Mostly, *Zubo Zubo* crouched on the grass field, clasping his hands behind his lower back. He could have been contemplating something while looking down at the ground. But no one liked to think so.

We never heard *Zubo Zubo* utter a word or make sound like a word.

When a stone banged his curved back, *Zubo Zubo* shrieked once, “Gyieah!” like a raptorial bird. *Zubo Zubo*, however, was constantly moving his mouth either mumbling or chewing something, like a camel.

Even if his mumbling was a physical reflection of language, nobody dared recognize such a thing in *Zubo Zubo*. 
"Zubo Zubo" inhabited the swamp of everyone's unconsciousness only as an undefined manifestation of a creature that obnoxiously crouched with a curved body and didn't think. "Zubo Zubo" could be an imaginary artwork of the people who saw him as well as an embodiment of himself. Probably, it was not allowed for "Zubo Zubo" to be more than our artwork, and such a chance was unimaginable. Yet, I once saw, a dayflower in August quietly deepened its clear pale blue shortly after "Zubo Zubo" had stepped over it with his mudded feet when he had fled the stones. Blue like a delicate twinkle water drop. It was also the presence in the grass field, and "Zubo Zubo" might have something to do with its genesis. But I denied that thought right away. "Zubo Zubo" had to be what I could despise, nothing else.

4
Stoning "Zubo Zubo" intensified at one point. Almost every child who passed the long path through the grass fields threw stones at "Zubo Zubo" or his house as though it was their duty as a passer-by. I was one of those habitual stoners. The size of the stones depended on one's strength and mood, from a pebble the size of a quail egg to the size of a rice ball. Stoning had the following characteristic features:

① Stoning was conducted by more than two persons in general. ② It was rare that a loner who does not belong to a crowd threw a stone at "Zubo Zubo." ③ Stoning started capriciously without a cue and ended capriciously. ④ Generally, a stoner barely paid attention to the arc of one's stone. Rather, one did not think that was "one's own stone." It was understood that the stone thrown at "Zubo Zubo" was "everyone's stone." "Everyone's stones" could not be personal stones.

"Zubo Zubo" died after a while. At school, we had a class on the discussion of "Zubo Zubo"'s death. Everyone confessed that they had stoned "Zubo Zubo" and added that they were
not sure their stones had hit him. I also said something. We wrote about our memories of Zubo Zubo. I wrote about my sadness of losing an object that I could stone and the emptiness of the world without Zubo Zubo. Then, I forgot him in three days. The dayflower still reflects its color in the river of my memory.
Sorrow breaks seasons and reposing hours,
Makes the night morning and the noontide night.
Princes have but their titles for their glories,
An outward honour for an inward toil.
And for unfelt imagination
They often feel a world of restless cares,
So that betwixt differs but the outward fame.

King Richard III (I. 4)
Colors blind the eye.
Sounds deafen the ear.
Flavors numb the taste.
Thoughts weaken the mind.
Desires wither the heart.

The Master observes the world
but trusts his inner vision,
He allows things to come and go.
His heart is open as the sky.

Tao Te Ching
Translated by Stephen Mitchell
Iago

Your doubtless wickedness & fearless manipulation are somehow comforting. The hardest part is not questioning. I’d rather be you than Othello if I could choose.
At Night He Dreams of

a black and white film,
only with reeling sound,

    of a man— a familiar face,
    maybe his father or
    is it himself?—

bathing in the Ganges River,
waiting for an aurora shivering
in Iceland, snorkeling across
the Equator and whispering
over a Turkish cup of coffee,

    and all the unlocked doors he dares
    not open to save another promised
    golden coin and avoid the scoffing of
    nameless faces.

Furious arms sprang out
of the screen.

    A hoarse voice,
    *Let me live.*

    Taste of tears
    are they his?

*FIN.*
Everyday

You take language lessons
and invent your second-self.

You say “N” instead of “I”
like Malians in West Africa

or speak without subjects
like in Japan. You say

“Dropped the box,” skipping I,
when you break the brand new TV.

Then you become primitive,
not brushing your teeth

or eating raw meat. Of course,
it is easier than trying to scrub off

your old scars with a brush
or having another tattoo

or finding a hairstyle that fits you.
Then, when everything fails, you cry

and say it’s all your
‘is it “my”? fault."
Tangible You

I leave the door ajar

for the distant laughter
from the late night t.v. show
you half-smile at

in the living room

proof of
your presence

I'm amazed
how far
we sometimes
need
to travel
just to have
this glimpse
of assurance

*

I'm eight
in a bed
in the dark

the half-opened
window above
the door
downstairs
my parents'
nightly drama
with scolding and
heartless apologies

like volcanos
which never erupt
under the sun

I turn on my t.v.
in the head
* 
But how can we prove 
all of those moments 
(or even this very instant 

and you) 
actually existed?

when the debris 
disappeared 
in the morning
You’re enthralled by UNESCO’s
map of endangered languages,
especially Peru and its sixty-two
dying tongues.

You choose the one that has only two
remaining speakers and look up
the price of air tickets
to be a savior.

Let it go. An electric shock won’t
revive a mummy, I giggle
from our green couch to your back.

You throw a look of reproach
and I returned to the television.

You know
we won’t fly to
Peru or anywhere
before we find jobs.

After new jobs,
you’ll forget
these freaking
two
Peruvians
left behind
with
their uninhabited
language.

I adore you, still.
The Stone

You won’t find a new country,
won’t find another shore.
Constantine P. Cavafy

You carry a stone you found in the ruin

where you left only to return,
where you hate so much that you don’t forget,
where you return only to leave again.

The city of debris you call home.
Ode to the Sky of San Francisco

Hue of Optimism above
    the airport window
    obscures the memory
    of Asia

Sniffing around
    briefcases on the floor
    sneakers and ragged
    bottom of jeans

Oh, I’m a stray cat
Rain

Craving coffee, I enter the coffee shop. This used to be my favorite place to smoke cigarettes after walking around the city. A small cup of coffee on a tray with a wet towel in a tiny plastic bag. Stainless ashtrays are ready on the counter although I don’t need one anymore. Everything is so amazingly neat in Japan. The second floor is almost empty. It started to rain again a while ago. Women sitting in the other corner, whose faces I can’t see, are chatting about radiation and the plant in Fukushima. I sip coffee and try to read a book, but somehow I am restless.

Here raindrops
fall like thread of spiders
from heaven

It has been raining for five days since I came back. European tourists are waiting for the bus when I am outside again. Without umbrellas, they shelter under the eaves.

Here we are
500 km from
the site

I fear to be wet, knowing radiation falls with rain. I stop a taxi. The driver says there are fewer tourists this year.

All that we have:
sounds of the car wipers
thread-like rain
Hiroshima-yaki, Mafia, Ford-Matsuda Factory

Years ago in Japan, I had a chance to talk about Hiroshima with my customer. He said that he couldn’t believe people in Hiroshima ate Hiroshima-yaki for lunch. Hiroshima-yaki is an omelette-like food often eaten in Hiroshima area. It is made with eggs, cabbage, pork or shrimp, and noodles. The special sauce is added on it. My customer, from Tokyo, thought it was too heavy to eat for lunch. So, Hiroshima can be about Hiroshima-yaki.

On another occasion, I talked with my roommate from Hiroshima about the Japanese mafia’s headquarter in Hiroshima. He said Hiroshima was famous for its yakuza. His words reminded me of the t.v. news on violent wars between mafia groups. So, Hiroshima can be about the Japanese mafia.

In California, I met a lady whose son lived in Hiroshima and worked for the Ford-Mazda factory. He lived there with his wife and a child. She said she wanted to visit him. So, Hiroshima can be about the Ford-Mazda factory.

Of course, Hiroshima can be about August 6 and the A-bomb although we often avoid mentioning it. We all know what happened there. Our careful avoidance is probably not because of our indifference, but because of its overwhelming implication. We say Hiroshima on August 6 1945 was bad but the degree of its badness is beyond any words. Hellish, awful, horrible, terribly-bad, stunning...any word doesn’t seem to be enough. So, we talk about something else, Hiroshima-yaki or mafia or the Ford-Mazda factory, not because we forget it, because we remember it.
On the Galaxy Train

After all
I am stronger than
I expected—

I withstood
facing her Death,

like pebbles
in a river.

Even when she gabbled
about her in-laws and friends,

how they disappeared
in the face of mortality.

I wasn’t afraid.

She cried saying the nurses
wouldn’t take care of her
as she stopped tipping them.

It wasn’t as bad as I’d expected
after avoiding her for months.

Now on the subway home,
I think about
the old sci-fi cartoon movie—
about the train to
the planet where
you can buy
an immortal
machine body
for yourself.

The jaunty soundtrack
I used to sing with my brothers
rings in my ears.

The train squeaks away.
Undelivered

June stretches out
demanding recognition
like an abandoned ancient city
between your birthday and mine

Where I was born
it’s the longest month,
wet with long gray rain drops
before cicadas’ summer

Here it’s sparkling soda
with peppermint ice cream
and white laces

but I resist the celebration
missing the muddles

I know June for you
is the wind from the dune
you’re raised with

I salute another June
we manage to
travel through

Let me know
how it’s like
where you are now