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### Tame Dog, Wild Dog

Coriel O'Shea Gaffney  
*CUNY City College*

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# **Tame Dog, Wild Dog**

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

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“Tame Dog” and “Wild Dog” are titles of audio clips included on the Golden Record, which, at the time of this writing, is “in the 'Heliosheath'— the outermost layer of the heliosphere.” (<http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/where/index.html>)

Also, *Topdog/Underdog* is a brilliant play by Suzan-Lori Parks.

## HUNGER

I.

When I say *elote*  
I am trusting the spark of the *t*  
to transmit my hunger

*Elote*: this dripping thing  
I offer you

II.

Walk with me  
through the woods by the beach  
With feet striped in light  
let me “th” through your teeth

III.

Here is a bouquet of knotted shadows  
I salt your roots; you stir my seas  
Flip my tongue upside-down  
and bite it, remove me  
from sloppy language  
to taste you true

IV.

You drive, I lean into curves  
Sideways everything shape-shifts  
A field of eyelashes blinks by  
A picnic bench warbles, bursts into flame  
The sun bounces to stillness, curtsies, dives deep

V.

I've got a catalog of memories  
looking for a new home

A pale tummy untucking itself  
from an elastic waistband  
The smell of damp towel  
beyond clean or dirty  
My finger tracing an index  
Newsprint on my wrist  
Sunday comic strips

VI.  
I am an ant on my back  
Take me in your palm  
Let's live earnestly

**SUMMER OF ECHO**

We live in a sky cave; stories ricochet upward, warbled as heat off concrete.  
Corn chips soften, chocolate pools.  
The pigeons find their diaphragms and bleat like pregnant goats.  
A big whoop straddles the bricks, squeezes.  
Sun creams across windowsill.  
Heat is pornographic and I am hungry for juice.  
It's June; it's July.  
We are bodies within bodies fanning feet with feet.  
The mailman whistles and the children take him for an ice cream truck.  
A ceremony commences lick to lick.  
The mailbox floods with nickels and dimes.  
The day steals your pants.  
We meet at home unsure of where we've been.  
I peer into the dinner you're overcooking.  
A marching band emerges, disperses.  
I peer into their absence.  
In my dreams I speak distortion.  
A motorcycle fades; a bee yawns on a lip.  
A boy yelps at a cloud; I tuck a bouquet of beaks into his knapsack.  
You flicker between birds, laughing in pieces, carefully assembling joy.  
You want witnesses and who can blame you?  
It's a dangerous thing to be happy.

**SURRENDER**

Lanky men are bedding flowers in Brooklyn today.  
With bean-stalk legs and shocks of face, they pad the dirt  
and hike their pants. Children convene nearby, goading  
summer with Push Pops and coquettish *Shut uuups*.  
You would love this vision feeding me between errands:  
the van with pockets of trowels and split bags of soil  
leaving a trail of sprouts in its wake. The planters'  
wiry fingers whisking air, whittling earth.  
Tomorrow tulips will tantalize like bowls  
of sugar-cereal, violet and gold. The soil will grow  
contoured as roots web beneath. The sidewalk  
will erupt like your big-belly laughter and we will  
understand this stranger-love, how it buried you.

**GEMMY, I FULLY BLAME YOU**

for how often I must sit on my hands.

You answered the phone "Go to Hell,"  
tipped a quarter if the waiter was haughty,  
knocked your ketchup on the floor.

You took me in like a stray cat every summer,  
unlocked the door at sunrise, said *play*.  
You microwaved fish sticks, sloshed flat coke  
into a tumbler, set everything on the card table, said *eat*.

Your laugh, loose rattling rocks hinting avalanche  
Your bourbon  
Your black and white westerns and once, Casablanca

Nights you purred to Dusty the dog or was it Dusky  
against moths plunking into window screen.

I knew I was your student but I never knew the class.

Yesterday, back east, you could fry an egg on the sidewalk.  
I found your daughter sculpting wild rice mountains in the kitchen.  
She says your brain is a river now, a current  
of children and horses: some buried, some grown.

Gemmy, when I become river, I want to be the river  
of orange twine necklaces. Bury me in undies and mud boots.  
I want my last wisp of light to bend across the cover  
of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book.

Yours was the class of thunder and thirst, how to holler,  
door against hip, how to fall asleep on windy mountain passes,  
how the movement shapes the dream.

**SWIM**

In the basement, an album of old-world-thighs,  
pages of puckered white bowing to gravity.

Before unearthing the book, she never knew the Irish could swim,  
that the topographical map her body demanded she wear  
contained ocean. Why all that blue.

She proposes through thighs— from Down Dog, suspending disbelief.  
As her heels touch ground, a fleet of fleshy bottoms is unleashed;  
a row of sisters settle cheek by cheek on rocks by sea.  
Their bodies pool around the edges, soften the edges.

She says

Marry me, everything matters the same amount or not at all.  
Marry me; it's rhetorical.  
Marry me tomorrow as a girl gets into a car  
thinking of nicknames she'd like to shed,  
how to sandwich apologies between farewells.

Love, we have no control over the truly consequential  
so marry me. For stupid's sake. For fantasy's.  
For the vein-waves we've ridden through time.  
For Peggy O'Driscoll's immortalized thighs.

**BAGS OF BAGS**

I wake you with my cunt, Buenos dias.  
My ears are too prudish for truth.  
Who can stomach the work of the body?

Buenos dias, mouth wants relevance.  
Body wants to be cocooned in guilt  
and thrown against a wall.

Sex invites the darkness to dictate.  
Your earlobe is smoked ham.

Sometimes we are a sliding door,  
bump shutting into a room of our own.  
Your chest hair catches me off guard.  
Often I think you are me.

Your face is sunny.  
Your eyes are squirrely.

You're rhomboid, rhombus. Fractal. Axis.  
Adenoid, adenoid, come along my spine.

Only one pleasure can compel me to cease wording words like *extricate*.

Your knee cap smells shiny like a brochure.  
Your vertebra? Nothing should follow vertebra.

Diane di Prima says the only war is the war against the imagination.  
We are married now.  
Thankfully, no one showed us how to do this right.  
In our kitchen, plastic bags of plastic bags, a carton of tangy wine.

## TALKING ROCK PARK

In Denmark *ol* is beer. *Tak* is thank you.  
This was all we needed as we roamed the clean-swept streets.

No one dashed anywhere; they pedaled, they strolled,  
they waited on corners for lights to change.  
We gaped at them like visitors from the distant past  
as we ate our lunches standing.

*Ol* we said. *Tak*, beer in one hand, hot dog in the other,  
both slipping from our clumsy grips.

We rode bikes to Kierkegaard's grave.  
I watched you navigate the windy paths,  
your shitty jacket inflate with wind.

We ran out of money day three, spent the remaining nights  
in hostels where I molded you into unnatural poses  
with too many props: children's book on your chest,  
box-wine in the crook of your elbow, cigarette  
perched on your bottom lip. Look pensive,  
I said. You raised an eyebrow.

The camera was disposable—  
everything came out grainy; an arm was lost to flash.

One morning, Madrid was bombed.  
We watched the BBC until our eyes were burning  
then went out to face the sparkling concrete.

I sat on a rock with a scarf up to my nose.  
The rock said something in Danish.  
(We were in *Talking Rock Park*.)

I said *what*—  
and you backed up against a fence to let a man pass by.  
He said *tak*.

You said *ol*.

**CHASE BANK**

You pocket a cloud of powdered milk.  
I swat at a rubbery whiff.  
Did I just speak?

A mute son pushes his chatty daddy's wheelchair up a steep bridge.  
It's my shin bone. A door is goaded shut.

Nausea is a place. I demand to be frisked.  
My nipples dock, your face liquidates.  
Each thought forms a picket line.

A woman sneaks into place, eyes our fistful of checks and truckload of debt.  
We've tried to be responsible but our credit rating keeps eating our dog.

Right now, somewhere in the world, a girl carries a turtle through traffic  
toward the rush of a river. His patchwork belly, a sharp inhale  
against the steady current. She lowers him to a soggy bank,  
turns back to road, can't bear to witness the water.

We are arbiters of joy, kettling revolutions of hearts.

I will never know how to be a person  
but I promise to work damn hard at human  
like the Postman who answers letters addressed to God.

**SUBJUNCTIVE**

If his license weren't expired, they'd stand before a judge.  
He'd receive them with a wink.  
Each stanza would contain a timely comrade.

If they were from the lands of their fathers,  
they would have a spare room by now.  
Each stanza would be a forgotten trinket in a dresser drawer.

He would wear mittens with flaps so he could flip them into gloves  
in moments that called for greater mobility.  
She'd wear two inch heels and tailored slacks.  
Each stanza would contain a leveled hem and a form-fitting fleece.

If she were amenable, she would get happy during Happy Hour  
with the office Aussie, the one who leans into cubicles  
and comments on the patriotism of others' afternoon snacks.  
Today: her pre-shucked pistachios.

If she'd gotten a decent night's sleep, she would not close her eyes  
against a pile of discarded shells high and rising  
like the mound of bat dung teeming with roaches  
in the cave episode of *Planet Earth*.

## HAVE A NICE

Most of my time I spend with strangers.  
 They title me. They talk to my chin.  
 I placate them. We do not touch.

Today I thought you were an androgynous string-hair waif.  
 Thought you were a drunk thermos swinging from a belt.

You were the shoulder who jostled me in the lobby  
 and you are this silly, pencil-tip bruise.

Heard you in the rising rhythm of the conductor's *Have a Nice*.  
 You were the thumb that cut off the “day.”

I thought my thought to you— I thought:  
*Each is now free to fulfill her own wish.*  
 I wished my wish on you— I wished:  
*Have a nice blueberry muffin, Sir.*

I smelled you in the lo mein fumes on the A,  
 felt you in the tremors of the violinist at Jay Street.  
 You were the tie-dyed bandana perched on his shoulder  
 like a parakeet. You are the experience of transfer.

Of listen-and-stir.

You were the old woman rocking with pleasure: a joyful apparition.  
 You are the dream that lifted the curtain.

Up close, you sound like you look like a mongoose.  
 I reach and never find you.  
 Your soft tissue sneezes at me.

At night, our legs eagle-wrapped, our fingers  
 interlocked, I sync my breath to yours.  
 This si when I miss you most.

**J STIRS**

When you're asleep and your nose sticks  
and your mouth snaps open and I can hear  
your body fight for its life I think one day  
we will watch our mothers die  
and another day...and eventually the earth  
will reject us for our nearsightedness  
one day our skin will clutch to bone  
our knees will creak and even our cells  
may rebel against us I think those nights  
I will listen as you mine the air  
for what's left

**HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY**

Somebody's shaking  
the bony shoulders  
of a redhead  
who's not sorry.  
Somebody's drooling  
with such sincerity,  
Somebody's sure  
the spit is a clue.  
Somebody's had her  
ovaries removed.  
Each morning,  
Somebody pours  
the nothing they left  
inside her into a diet  
shake and blends.  
Somebody somebody  
loves is squatting  
in the woods.  
Somebody is mopping  
the floor with gusto.  
Somebody bursts  
into awkward applause.  
Somebody is  
tucking an infant  
into a jacket  
at such a high altitude,  
Somebody considers  
eating the child  
instead.

**OCCUPIED**

*If you love me,  
worship  
the objects  
I have caused  
to represent me  
in my absence.*

—*Rae Armantrout*

Anne Carson says “Liberty means different things to different people.”  
She likes to spring from bed on cold mornings.  
Janis said, “Nothing left to lose.”  
She liked to disappear.

The sound I make when I slide through the barricades,  
flanked by officers, into Zuccotti after the raid  
emerges from my transverse colon: dark and unbaptized.

*Uh huh.*

I sit on the ghost of a bed.  
A man in a fedora denounces the Thai King.  
He's “in bed with the Israelis.”  
Fuck is central to his story and so is fascism.

At the other end, a dozen people rattle cardboard signs  
with bold red slashes through “fracking.”  
The mayor. They want him impeached.

A cop rolls his eyes at the 10 person march  
circling the perimeter of the park.  
A girl in a turtle-fur tucks thumbs into fists.

I was in Ohio when George Bush stole the election.  
That morning, we knew we'd won.  
I called my friends. *Buy champagne.*  
We watched the returns roll in on the dingy floor of a pub.  
The new red-stained world spread slowly into my dreams.  
I had diarrhea that night and every night of the following year.  
When all hope is squandered, we empty ourselves.  
*Here, take this too.*

*Uh huh.*

It's the sound of a liver flattening, an iron singing through.

The first day I came to Occupy, I sat before a makeshift altar  
spreading out from the roots of a tree, unfolding love letters  
from Cincinnati, Colorado, Egypt, and France,  
poured through words so bullied into submission,  
they tinge this poem with their nasal insistence.

*This is already a miracle.*

In the background a woman worked 18 hula hoops  
around her hips, shoulders, and wrists.  
A Punk Rocker draped argyle socks along a fence.  
Tourists with teeny backpacks perused The People's Library.  
The kitchen served green beans and rice.  
Drummers beat visions into trash can lids and bongo skins.  
Dancers offered noses and kneecaps to sky.

The aftermath of a miracle is a cleanup crew in neon vests.  
The Thai king fucks an Israeli.

*Uh huh.*

How to love you in your absence.

**PROFESSOR LETTERHEAD REQUESTS SOME LETTERHEAD**

To Whom it May Concern,

No, I am not a certified reader for the new assessment test  
I called in sick to the training workshop  
To protest corporate greed  
Forgive me if Monday sounds like a board game  
For which I've lost the rules

Sunday was a girl with a red toy megaphone  
Lofted on her father's shoulders  
In the middle of Times Square  
The sun set on her forehead, stitched and sandy

When she is ready to speak  
She will not need a megaphone  
This crowd will amplify her to the moon and back

Slavoj Zizek warned, "Don't fall in love with yourselves"  
I am in love, can't help it

**HALLELUJAH**

All the unfunded, all the restless  
revolutionaries

Our shuffle steps  
Our collective keyboards tapping a flat rising

Hood laundromat, street's pocket church  
A belly grown into abstraction

Resignation's howl  
Dead knees touch on the train  
The weary young

Strange hush, a Harlem dressing room

The Jesuit who left the stage  
Frank O'Hara, Ol' Dirty, Uncle Rob

The intentional accident moving through throat  
Some call it proof

**WHEN YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A LECTURE AND YOUR OWN VOICE  
IS SUDDENLY ALL YOU CAN HEAR**

Like a public self-autopsy  
Part the pubes  
Poke the liver  
Something the nipple  
Do we need an action for the spleen?

Nouns, firm ground  
Formaldehyde  
Hypothalamus  
Stench

Better stick to verbs  
Stand stand stand  
stand stand stand  
flap flap

Let's find the pattern  
Let's find the breeze

There's the projector boring a hole  
Into your good eye

Pregnant pause

There's the student outrageous  
She's purchasing an upgrade

Wedge your buttox atop her desk  
Isn't this a language

Dear class, we've covered too much ground  
Disembodied

One two three  
Oceanic breaths

## GIRL SCOUTS MOTHER DAUGHTER SPA DAY, QUEENS

K.'s posted at the nail station.  
 Nails are claws.  
 Nails are comprised of the same tough protein as hooves and horns.

C. is running the yoga station.  
 The mommies are finding their inner frogs:  
 Legs splayed; cheeks puffed.  
 Now they're snakes slithering on bath towels.  
 Flesh is a colloquial term.  
 Flesh is tissue consisting of skin, fat, muscles, and organs.

A. holds it down by the food pyramid.  
 She's acting out the life of a kernel,  
 not to be confused with the life of a Colonel.  
 Brunch consists of instant coffee and apricot scones.

Across town, friends are advocating for a two-state solution.  
 Tell them a state is a mode or condition of being & go home.  
 See them drag their signs to the train like calico tails between legs.

*Signs up, ladies!* K.2. cries.  
 Ninety primped paws rise.

C. ducks, knocks her *Smart Water* over.  
 A puddle forms.  
 The girls traipse through barefoot, record a dance of aimless toes.

N. recalls scraping her initials into drying cement.  
 N. recalls N! A child on a rooftop.  
*Hello everyone in the whole entire world!*

**AFTER MATISSE'S "THE GREEN LINE"**

She is the mastered dull of *seen*.  
Limp eyebrows, a hem lifting.  
Seamless chin. What lips?  
Nothing profane, nothing holy.

There are places a woman stores herself  
while she's watched. Afterward,  
in the canvass's shadow, there is  
the unrecorded art of her retrieval.

**I'VE ALREADY HAD THIS CONVERSATION**

When he said hello, he meant I'd rather talk to myself.  
You look like my mother.  
You fizz my tongue like bad tap water.

He meant a bird shit on my bagel this morning  
& I had a temper tantrum on Fulton St.  
My fists are raw with shame now.  
What is this shame?

“Hello, I fantasize about killing you. Caught it from a bird on Fulton St.  
My mother, my bagel...WHY CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Hello, he said, you are bathed in light.  
He stole it from Rumi.

He meant: Our love grew from mutual hate of all things ivy or porous,  
round or obtuse, anything declarative, distilled, or flat.  
Hate thicker than clam chowder, he's purged himself of you,  
your way of walking with your shoulders sharp and hard,  
picket fences or daggers.

“Hello, you fucked backwards like you were trying to push me out.  
Like you were excavating a dig, shoveling me aside.”

“I don't love more now, I just hate less.”  
He always spits when he lies.

Hey, how 'bout this weather? This rain?  
I am shredded and you are a safety pin.  
I am a cult. You, a ballet.

**FOR TYLER CLEMENTI**

*Look, we were young then and the world would sway to our sway.*

*-Charles Wright*

We are meant to screw exes in backseats  
After our dates go home  
On the ritziest blocks in town

To show up late, apron strings dragging  
To work the next day with concealer caked  
In the infinite corners of our worst coldsores yet

There should be an abundance of nasty rumors  
We should fuck into or age out of  
We are meant to decide

To sob into uncased pillows every third orgasm, to convulse  
Release is not pretty, it's earthquake

We're supposed to swallow ourselves  
Thrash and betray  
Become body

We're meant to have somebody to bring us leftovers  
From the restaurant we stormed out of  
To know a love that watches us chew, wants us satiated  
No matter how foolish we are

Between the unbearable we're meant to celebrate  
To stand in the middle of at least one empty road  
Squeezing our eyes at the sun

You were supposed to have a youth, kid  
A world that would sway to your sway

You were supposed to love— at least once  
With abandon, Tyler

**UNWISH NO STRINGS**

The man in Pier 1 is holding a teal coat rack for his teal wife.  
We each carry two kinds of history, the one we have lived through  
and the one we haven't. Where a body hangs is where it asks  
to be lifted. Once, our city was a formidable opponent  
of the status quo. Squint through lights, betray my smallness?  
I am tapping my forehead, manning her beat.

**OFFICE**

1.

There is something frantic about her affirmations  
like she might soon vomit a nodding gentleman  
held hostage in her esophagus for times like these.

We are surrounded by violent key-strokes,  
music-box hooves, a muted riot.  
Her face, rotten kumquat in the raging light.  
Her eyes skip along mini trashcans, dainty mines.

Aisles of necks lilt toward wisp of exit.  
Feet scurry soundless on the carpet.  
Wide-leg pant. Cuff. Peasant blouse. Tasteful fury.

We are reaching out via invoice, team.

2.

She carts tupperware home, thinks of the childhood friend  
who appeared on the spreadsheet of executives  
to solicit one day, re-spiels perfectly in-house in-head, rebalks at:  
“Is this the first time we’ve crossed professional paths? Ha.” Ha.

She limps, curiously, to the elevator door, cannot locate the pain.  
On Earth Day, she joins the Green Team’s walk home,  
her thighs over-heating like the hood of an SUV.

Often she is struck with the thing she forgot  
and the thing she forgot is the thing doesn’t matter.

Contentment comes in squares and circles that don’t connect  
and self-regard is a pool: filter in, babe, filter out.  
*Fuck you rising oceans, she cajoles*  
*and fuck me, melting ice caps.*

**WHAT YOU DO**

for dad

Some days you check tasks off as you complete them Most days are listless  
Most days refuse Most days are a series of furious moments unrecorded  
Most days are mid-week or this coming Saturday All days pretend to repeat  
All days are named arbitrarily, domesticated in arrogant sounds Most days  
we spend chasing down, calling back Some days our voices carry through dusk  
across sand-parks and highways Most days we summon only ourselves Some  
days are in offices Some in libraries Most talked or whispered away Most days  
there is a drunk stranger Some days you shake him awake One day his pants  
are soiled and he says "I'm cool if you're cool" Most days he melts back into  
the sidewalk Some days loneliness is a room Find a corner, settle Most days  
there is at least one gift One day the gift is wet is a dollar is discovered under-  
neath One day the gift is interrupted Some days you are alive Some days bring  
sheer joy, vehement joy In its honor some days you dance Some days are Mondays  
One Monday you find a trapped mouse that does not move once freed Another  
Monday your caffeinated heart skips two beats and you dedicate both absences  
and you dedicate both resumptions to him to him and to you to you

**DEMENTIA**

She walks into walls, I walk into caverns  
She forgets her social, her pin  
I sleep in tow zones waiting to vanish  
She stumbles on *stadium, exercise*  
I binge on tickets to one-hit wonders  
lap up the shallow end of the pool  
curse her blue-lipped in the deep

I am done offering words for her to rinse against teeth  
Let the window fall on my face when I lift it  
Let my brow grow fat and magenta

When she loses her wallet on a layover  
I feed what's left to a humming machine in the Navy Yard  
dollars and fingers, dissertations and vows

She planned for a second career  
I lug duffels of armpit-stained nightshirts  
to three snooty thrift stores, watch flat-faced girls  
examine each article against the light  
run fingers down each seam  
goddesses of trend and fabric

She rests, I walk  
from borough to cornfield  
through solstice, through swamp

**DEAR R**

Thursday E kicked our asses at *Scrabble*.

Friday, a federal court ruled the US Army Corps liable for the failure of the levees.

Saturday my sister visited the Holocaust Museum.

Sunday the neighbors played tambourines and drums.

All this after Wednesday at noon.

To say somehow life keeps on without you.

**PIGEON FLYER**

I forgot to miss the Pigeon Flyer.  
His coffee-ground-birds lump and scatter as if  
he stirs this pitcher of steel blue sky.  
He thinks he's training triplets, but it is our chins tipping at his whistle,  
our kneecaps locking on corners, we who are  
suddenly fluent in this elastic language.  
Every morning when he opens the cage  
the pigeon flyer says, *Git, git, git.*

Yesterday I attended a stranger's memorial  
He was uninsured, a good Catholic boy and an atheist  
and three days decomposed when the police broke in.

The Pigeon Flyer posted two videos on Youtube.  
For the haters, he insists, as his pigeons lift in unison to sweep the horizon.  
*All due respect, Son,* someone comments below, *you got no haters.*  
*We're all just waiting to watch them fly.*

**BATTERY LIFE**

Three days after my uncle died  
his cell phone battery had not.  
My sister and I sat straight-backed  
against a wall in a Wyoming hotel room  
scrolling through texts.

Most of his secrets were in my mother's shaking hands,  
prescriptions and unpaid bills, scalding evidence of *brother*.

The rest we deleted one by one  
as he had not, until all that was left  
was a phonebook full of silent women:  
5 sisters and some lovers

## NIAGARA FALLS

We drove to Niagara Falls from Buffalo  
wrapped in towels stolen from the conference hotel  
hip to hip smacking gum.

The sky spit back through cracked windows.  
Droplets skittered across your collarbone like flies.  
A border storm, a sideways storm.

It was the year of Outkast and Lucinda.  
The year of the car crash and the white jeans.  
Of party and lament.

I don't need to tell you the highway was like any other  
or that we leaned into the rail when we got there  
until deep grooves cut into our forearms and thighs.

How the water seemed to vaporize as we neared.  
All we ever wanted buried deep inside that roar.

**SISTER**

Some nights you arrive and settle in slow-mo, bird bones,  
bag on your shoulder, some nights you slide to the floor.

Those nights I feed you, watch you chew joylessly like I've served you  
your tongue, your fingers against the fork thin as the needles  
mom held in her teeth when she sewed.

Some days ours story seems incoherent and fantastical—  
I've got a cat in my eye; you've got the people's plight in your head.

Other days a series of preventable tragedies arrive on our doorsteps.  
The stampede in Cambodia on the suspension bridge.  
The uncle whose heart leaped from his chest, raced him to tree line.

Our talk vines around the night.

When is time for you to go, I circle your wrist  
with my thumb and index finger, make us mudra.  
I walk you to the bus.

**APPETITE**

I am kneeling before my backpack, knees to yellow line  
 The empty tracks are an altar to something called Thursday  
 My ear is blocked/The city softens/The things I have to say are clotting

A poison is eating her brain

My new therapist asks me to seat a piece of myself in an empty chair  
 A piece of me swallows the chair  
 Hi, I say to her appetite  
 This was progress

To grieve we must fragment  
 Plato believed we carry within us the memory of divinity  
 I prefer my afterlife in the past

Thursday meanders into Monday  
 The wind scolds me for forgetting my skin  
 Skin is the third lung and poetry's the fourth

Remember when I was a teacher  
 The sounds we made curled like ribbon  
 We spoke into the gift of ourselves

Losses accumulate and language arranges them into bundles  
 In my dreams, somebody's mother loves my white hairs  
 and the girl at the bakery laughs at my jokes  
 My knees lock at the suggestion of balance

There is nothing I want and one thing I unwant  
 My grief is a river and she is the bank  
 I rush to erode her

How will I live into her dying

When people say heal they think loss is a memory  
 The girl with the chair in her stomach sits upon herself

**FORK**

As a child, she'd lie awake  
staring through smudged glass  
at the warped halos of a street lamp.

She learned to love herself  
by imagining someone  
watching her watching

what? A father eyes her fork.

Minutes like wet laundry.

**THINGS TO DO BEHIND THE GUARD RAIL**

*On crossing to Jersey on foot*

Air kiss the Semis.  
Flash the flashiest rim.  
Toss scabs into pick-ups.  
Fist-pump the SUVs.  
Charge the Bugs.  
Butterfly-stroke through overgrown weeds.  
Recall hoards of teachers.  
Begin with the ones who mispronounced your name.  
Coriel like Venereal.  
Forgive them.  
Damn them.  
Alphabetize decades of debris.  
*Forty.*  
*Needle.*  
*Nip.*  
*Shoe.*  
*Tire.*  
*Vial.*  
Conduct noise.  
Screw up lyrics.  
Grow hoarse.  
Grow absent.  
Grow chipper and trip.  
Season blackened knees.  
Smell *Quinnipiac*.  
Spell *Quinnipiac*.  
Salute Stink.  
Salute Guard Rail, both bodies churning below.

**ERASURE**

*Time in the hand is not control of time...*

*-Adrienne Rich*

Maria says, Close the door to your past.  
Now close the door to your future.  
What's left?

1. A witchy, sleep-away game we once played.  
Our arms, stricken branches, press into a doorframe.  
Our cheeks, hot with effort.  
*Twenty-nine, thirty...*  
Stepping aside.  
Alien limbs rising.  
Heels lifting in solidarity.  
The ecstasy of dispossession.

2. Manhattan: a bottle of legs.  
Diving into crowd pockets to eat sandwiches and peel stamps.  
Eyes brushing strangers' contorted faces straight.

3. The sky, white as a winter wrist  
when I point to where the sun should be.

4. Leap Day, the form of the poem: erasure.

5. The radiator chortling.  
Dust swarming when I flick on the light.  
I am mounting this morning: a replica of now.  
I woke up alive with a name in my head.

6. New York is a dream of life. We speed around town  
with computers strapped to our backs like rockets.  
My eyes are tired of looking into other peoples' eyes.

7. You cross a room to a window.  
You forget why, your breath on the window.

**SUSTAIN**

When a little girl flecked with  
white bits rests what remains  
of her styrofoam block at  
your feet saying *snow*  
you/snow.

**HYMN**

My father was raised in a wooden pew  
Each night his mother kneeled at his feet and prayed  
for *MikeyJoeWhoDied*  
and the flat browns of Springfield  
for the O's that were dropped in the ocean  
Each morning he rose with welts in his spine  
In his absence, his mother stood at the stove  
fingertips resting on dials  
daring the fingers, daring the flames

**ORIGINS**

The morning of his brother's funeral,  
my father detoured through his childhood

Hungry Hill!

Home to Johnny One Can & Snots O'Connor  
The infamous Bottle Park  
Rec hall and clothes lines  
Prankster-ghosts and fire-pocked siding  
The choices and the postponements that like tumors  
fed on time and grew into choices

I come from soup drained of its broth and also a mountain  
where abundance is so thick it rings empty

I come from both sides of the coin; from the static smile  
of a gymnast after a spastic dismount

I was never as poor as my father but I still used  
dollar store spoons that bent in ice cream  
I'm from Waiting for the Softening

**THE MEDIUM MYTH**

I'm from the medium my parents  
 found between Colorado mountains and Massachusetts alleys      river stink, throat  
 frog                      I'm from these  
                                     United States of Water

Raised in the pew in the microwave  
 I believe in bathtub recitations—  
 memories which do not fold

with blind spots                      I commune  
 in shifty                                  I'm fluent

I commune

spots the                      bruise

I am Elm City not  
 Boricuan Connecticut I

two hips one sandal mental motorcade

I can *lean* on a payphone  
*lick* a cone like it isn't the burden  
 of a new thirst

I'm Hair Feels Watched Refuses Product  
 I'm Body Feels Watched Refuses Bread

I am the medium myth

## THE CHICKEN

1.

Around 4th Period, the two with the one-hitter circle the Atlantic Center, bored & arrogant as the rookie cops they keep passing on patrol.  
 Ana looks up at the clock tower.  
*Yo J, the bell is ringing. Right. NOW.*  
 Jonathon freezes mid-step  
 before the sliding doors to Pathmark.  
 Eyes twitchy, brow furrowed.  
 A retarded caveman resurrected.

2.

Pathmark: Sensory overload!  
 Anarchists and Hasids towing identical children,  
 dressed to the nines in philosophy, curled and safety pinned  
 into freaky little women and men, S.U.V. strollers,  
 junkies and yuppies on lunch breaks,  
 turd on lid of toilet seat, hoarse cashiers,  
 fat babies with candy bars big as their heads.  
 They try nine carts before they find one that rolls straight.  
 Ana climbs in. Jonathan pushes her  
 down the cereal aisle, guided by the mysterious rules  
 of Stoned Supermarket Sweep®. He throws items at her  
 with abandon: Lucky Charms, Toilet paper, Ritz,  
 head of lettuce, bag of lemons, box wine,  
 tampons, shampoo, herb rotisserie chicken—  
*WAIT! DON'T THROW THAT!*

Shattered: his stoicism; unshattered: his resolve.  
 He clutches the chicken in its plastic cage to his breast.

3.

He speaks.  
*Ana.*  
 She attempts a stern reproach.  
*Ana.*  
 Twice.  
*ANA!*  
 Thrice.  
*We have to steal this chicken.*

She lifts the lemons off her knee.  
What else to do but abandon the cart and follow him,  
holding the chicken like an offering  
past the registers, through the chaos  
out the doors, which part graciously  
as if in respect. As if in encore.

4.

They find a stoop in Fort Greene to tear it apart.  
*This is a primal experience*, he declares between bites.  
She uses his sleeve to wipe her chin.  
School's out. They leave the carcass behind.

5.

His bus comes first. As he turns to board,  
she spots chicken juice on his neck.  
He looks out the window.  
She pulls out her cell phone.  
*You know I like you, right* she types  
then, fuck it, hits send.

**GREEN LUST**

From a distance, tropical smudge.

He circles—  
closeted bee to flamboyant flower—  
as if his unequivocal belief in its bold abilities  
is enough to inspire a move.

He perches warily, not used to such perfection,  
expects splinters, discovers smooth.  
This is how the psychedelic green  
bar stool enters his life.

The boy is still young enough to believe such a find fate,  
to believe in a God who winks between miracles,  
a God with a hobby: furnishing new apartments  
for the semi-broke and semi-weary.

Carrying the stool home under one arm  
like a briefcase, he imagines his future

bar— sushi, tequila, seriously sharp knives, understated parties,  
undercurrents of drama, simultaneous love affairs.

Carried away by the certainty of his lust,  
he does not consider *heartbreak* or its aftershock: *logistics*,  
does not, thank God, factor in diverging tastes, subsequent  
moves, expanding bottoms, the ergonomic chairs of tomorrow.

**MARK IN THE BOOK OF SKY**

Brooklyn Tornado: a row of teenagers  
pointing camera phones to sky, an army of witnesses  
witnessing their witness, hankering to slander  
the reputation of wind, their arms waving like branches  
to whatever dared, to whatever would.

Aftermath: The men in the street  
and the women in the kitchen,  
everybody sweeping, ushering *after* in  
with the *sssshhhhhing* of their brooms.

Corrections: Everything, reader, can be rendered  
cartoonishly pliable. The storm was so wild it was sweet.  
The roof was just a mark in the book of the sky.

## FALL BLIZZARD

It's Saturday; it's quiet. The radiator and I click-clack into poem.  
I have invented a ritual: first snowfall, tea in a white robe by a window.

The people below, sound and blockish, shuffle to the corner  
for salt and coffee. A second, less complicated city blooms  
in the snow, the kind we'd architect as kids,  
though, even then, myriad complications crept in:

the shag carpet that swallowed whole towns, piece by piece,  
until only the people were left to contend with emptiness.  
*We'll make do*, Lego Mama would say,  
slamming the car door. Her shock of yellow hair.

When I say the weather has been extreme lately,  
it's obvious I'll soon be thirty. My recent memories  
are soggy and dim, cause and effect with no in-between:

a stylist tugging my hair as if requesting a bus stop;  
my cheeks, eggplant hued.

a bouquet of peonies on an empty subway platform;  
begging the leathered stems for forgiveness  
as I lay them in the trash.

The flakes are bouncing off each other as they descend.  
When I was small, the other cars on the highway darted into and out of  
lanes as if choreographed, my mating fish.

Tonight my father-in-law will fly here through the snow.  
I will ask him to explain things, how they work or why they're broken.  
He's Great with a capital G. I'm best at listening.

Outside someone is shouting; his vowels scatter and cease.  
He sounds like a man calling from another dimension.  
I want what he wants.

**MARCH 2011, JAPAN**

There is gentleness here, even here, in the face of this terrible assembly.

First the earth shifts and even the foolproof buildings sway,  
waving back with gritted teeth: *Yes, yes, ok now.*

Then the ladies in the supermarket steel their backs  
against shelves of pickles and wine, sidestepping  
the rioting lemons and defiant brown pools with grace.

Second the wave, an exacting tongue, licking earth's pocked surfaces clean.  
It must have roared, tumbled into and over itself, but from above,  
it was a quiet curtain of water. Everything in its path  
seemed to swoon and sink slow.

Then, the reactors, the plumes of smoke and, like a fable,  
the fifty who stayed behind to save mankind.  
Armed with flashlights, craning smudged necks,  
chasing each eruption on tiptoe, their exhales like radiators  
releasing pockets of steam into the stillness of winter night.

Idling helicopters dangling sloshing buckets of water:  
a wheelbarrow overflowing with poppy flowers  
to lay at a sleeping giant's feet.

The snow blanketing the rubble, the sky oddly  
out of sync with its counterpart, sea.

I say gentleness, which, as you know, is absolutely wrong.  
It's easy to moralize from higher ground.  
And yet there is something besides destruction here.  
Fifty men plod softly to the brink of disaster  
not searching for reason or language, but source.

In darkness they turn, erect, toward each explosion  
as a body greets a wave, fist to horizon, hope against hope.

## SOLAR SYSTEM DIORAMA ON SIDEWALK

*On August 24, 2006, the International Astronomical Union defined the term 'planet' for the first time. This definition excluded Pluto as a planet and added it as a member of the new category 'dwarf planet.' After the reclassification, Pluto was added to the list of minor planets and given the number 134340. –Wikipedia*

No Pluto. Not even Pluto, asterix, plus the dwarf planet Pluto.

"My Very Evil Mother Just Sent Us Nine... Nothings."

Minds, Very Educated, Mistakenly Jammed Senselessly, Uselessly; Not Pleased, Pluto.

Malicious, Vain Elitists Murder Joy, Security, Understanding.

Nihilism Prevails, Pluto.

Oh, Neptune: Who's to say there won't be a separate "Ice Giant"

classification someday, announced on the evening news via awkward segue—

*Speaking of the President's icy greeting..?*

Flash to snotty scientists scoffing at their predecessor's big-tent, planetary leanings.

Shit, Neptune! Who's to say the children won't lose your brethren, Uranus, too, the repressed giggles he invokes, the relief from thoughts of such gravity.

And Jupiter and Saturn? Who are you?

Gaseous orbs with elusive cores?

Only Earth, in her blissful ignorance, is safe, and The Girl of the Diorama, who will go to college one day with post-2006 Pluto: dwarfed, obsolete, stuffed deep in the duffle of her long-term memory, not-so-integral to the balance of things.

She will take Astronomy 101 (to fill a science credit), read the opening paragraph in her textbook, tweak out, and email her professor a love note.

*We are specks*, she will begin ineloquently, *but we are...*

Pluto, my Pluto, you will always be a planet to me.

## ZEROTH

This corner of earth is slowly inching away from the sun.  
 My hypothalamus memos my muscles; I shiver to regulate.  
 The future has programmed my brain to maintain  
 as much of me as it can for as long as it can.

The last law of thermodynamics is called zeroth.  
 Two systems exchange energy until they are in equilibrium.  
 If you need further proof that we live on the edge, take my zeroth.

I'm on the Jersey Side of the Hudson River.  
 Wind scatters a litter of leaves.

A group of hummingbirds is a charm while flushes travel in mutation  
 and plural snipes form one walk. Poultry run and sparrows host.

Today I will name the ample mysteries bebies and plumps.  
 To name is to concede.

Twelve-plus boars is a sounder; sounder lends the boars a howl.  
 Sounder commands surrender: Sounder, sounder the sounder!  
 Skunks don't forfeit; they surfeit, bobbing into pungent afternoons.  
 Rhinoceroses, duh, they crash.

I've never seen a spring of teals but I know in my bones  
 how they dust the horizon. A knob of pintails surely lope;  
 a covert of coots: shadows whisking past eyelids.

Night rings the bell.

(A brace of nights, a watch of fish.)

Wake up, baby, it's the buzzards.

**“TAME DOG, WILD DOG”**

*Friends of space, how are you all? Have you eaten yet?*

*Greeting in Amoy (Min Dialect) on the Golden Record*

*(Information and quotations from <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/>)*

Thirty-four years ago, Voyagers One and Two were launched into space.  
Both carry a golden record of sounds and images selected to portray life on Earth.

The audio clips' titles evoke a mysterious coherence:

“Footsteps, Heartbeat, Laughter.”

“Fire, Speech.”

Earth-people are recorded in 55 languages.

They greet the aliens with profound professionalism:

*Creatures in the Stars, Friends from Beyond, Residents of Far Skies.*

They wish for them longevity, home, and honor.

They send and request, ten times, peace.

Some, warily: *We are happy here and you be happy there.*

The Voyagers crossed the Termination Shock and are headed for the heliopause.

They are the farthest human-made objects in space.

As I write, a Mariachi band is flying toward interstellar winds.

Into the roaring darkness, we have delivered a trumpet,

its mouthpiece sandwiched between pursed lips,

elastic cheeks pocketing air.

Ribbons of blood coursing through puckered veins in violinists' necks.

The thin, clean lines of guitarrón strings indenting fingertips.

Into eternity we have sent our eternity, the wrinkle

in the singer's brow as he tips the mic

like a thing to be emptied.

The question of hunger.

“Tame Dog.” “Wild Dog.”

“Have you eaten yet?”