

HAPPENSTANCE

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
May 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Professors Jeffrey Bean and Robert Fanning for helping me to learn the craft of poetry, especially Professor Bean for spending these past six years guiding my writing. I would like to thank my friends, who, although they do not quite understand or care for poetry, encouraged and supported my writing. Finally, I would like to thank the men in my personal life who have had the most influence on and have been the inspiration for the poems in this collection: my son Andrew, my father John Voice, Scott Fraser, and Gregory Thornthwaite.

ABSTRACT

HAPPENSTANCE

by Nicole Voice

Happenstance is a collection of poems that focuses much of its energy on interpersonal relationships, love, loss, family, death, life, and origin. These and other themes are explored in poems based on moments that are sometimes overlooked, or shared by many, or experienced by few. Thus, the collection aims to connect with readers on the level of shared human experience. The tones range from humorous to morose, and the poems attempt to find the balance between the extremes that manifest themselves in our lives through such events as the birth of a child, the death of a parent, the beginning of a romantic relationship or the end of one.

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INTRODUCTION

My introduction to poetry began with my mother. She is not a poet, nor was she educated in poetry. But when she would read to my sister and me at the end of the day, she chose to read Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss. These bedtime adventures into verse were my foundation for understanding poetry. These authors' works are full of rhyme and have a lyrical quality, which made them easy and fun to recite as a child, and for me this sparked an early interest in poetry.

During my formal education, I did not encounter poetry until middle school, where my teachers professed their adoration of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. The lack of any contemporary poets on our reading list made it seem as though the writing of poetry was a thing of the past, a career choice that I was born too late to make. It was my understanding that poetry was written in one's spare time, a private affair. Poetry also was either written about nature or about love, and was written in a traditional form (sonnets, odes, rhyming couplets, etc.).

It was not until I came to college that I learned more about poetry and that poets still write and publish in our contemporary era. I made the decision to take the Introduction to Creative Writing Class my freshman year, and for the past six years I have worked on developing my writing beyond my efforts during my freshman year of high school, which consisted of writing love poems in biology for a boy who only wanted to be friends. At age 18, I encountered for the first time a poem that made me rethink everything I knew about poetry.

When I read Tony Hoagland's "America" in Intro to Creative Writing at CMU, I realized that poetry could be about more than love and nature and that it is a dynamic craft open to any theme or subject. I was astounded by the use of imagery in the poem to describe the "blue haired student" and the incorporation of relevant brand names such as RadioShack and Burger King. I also couldn't believe the comparison of America to a maximum security prison, the use of

dialogue, and the fact that the poem ends on a question. Everything the poem does and is goes against what I learned about poetry in high school.

At this point I started taking my writing seriously. My early work focuses on unrequited love, and that theme can still be seen in some of my recent work included in this thesis. One such poem is “La Douleur Exquise,” in which the speaker longs for something she cannot have: the boy next door. The spacing in the poem indicates the physical distance between the two individuals. It also affects the pacing of the poem, littering it with pauses to enact the speaker’s hesitation to divulge such a delicate feeling to the object of her desire. Although the theme of unrequited love is prominent in this poem—it is not clear whether the neighbor returns the speaker’s love—the poem lies partially outside the realm of unrequited love because the speaker does not reveal whether or not she is romantically involved with the boy, only that he is wanted. (I try to convey this desire through the repetition of “I want you here.”)

My poetry can also be characterized by my penchant for the unexpected. I attempt to create surprises in my poems through unusual syntax, line breaks that emphasize irony, vivid concrete images, and sudden leaps in subject. One poem in this thesis that does all of these things is “Burn this Poem.” The poem features surprising shifts and tumultuous imagery, such as in these lines:

I did not find you standing on the forever
running toilet tank screaming about the variety pack
of gummi bears having more red than white in it. I won’t remember
standing in the pool of what I hoped was toilet water mixed with red
wine and melting cheese.

“Burn this Poem” also leaps around between multiple subjects, from the couple negotiating on whether to get TiVo to the characterization of the couple as an “Antony and Caesar of the city.” The use of long lines and infrequent punctuation throughout helps to create a fast paced poem, which, coupled with the imagery, creates a wild and unusual “love” poem. The speaker’s repetition of “I won’t remember” throughout the poem also creates irony because these are clearly moments that the speaker cannot forget, and their memorability is emphasized by the vivid and disturbing images presented by the speaker.

“Burn this Poem” also avoids the use of cliché love imagery and instead makes it a point to demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of two seemingly incompatible individuals through characterizing imagery and diction. The speaker tries to create a rationalization of this bizarre relationship with the irrational idea that “If New York won’t burn then [...]” a series of events never happened. It is this knowledge, that the events happened but are being pushed aside, that reflects in the antics of one person “rearranging the shoes on the mat,” while the other lies “on this/ maple wood floor staring at the door to [her] room, searching / for signs of anything that may lead to the creation / of an empire of leaving the bathroom light on.” These unexpected and restless images establish the uncertain friendship and “romance” in the poem, and, partnered with the enjambment of the lines, reflect a unique and complicated relationship between the speaker and her friend.

As the examples above reveal, the primary focus of my work, especially in developing this collection, is on interpersonal relationships. These include platonic relationships, romantic relationships, and domestic relationships (particularly those between parents and children). This focus has emerged because of the many recent changes in my own relationships: within the span of a year my father passed, my first child was born, my long term relationship came to an end,

and I began dating someone again. I explore these changes in my personal life in poems such as “After Five Years,” “Happenstance,” and “Elegy for Strings.”

This collection features a series of poems for my father, both his presence and absence. “In Your Leaving” is about his passing, and about how the emotional toll is coupled with the financial one, an idea made clear through the images in the poem: “Inheritance meant poverty, / as unpaid medical bills / and funeral costs made permanent / residence on my kitchen counter.” These images also help to establish a larger metaphor of the “cost of death.” The emotional “cost” is reflected in the line, “I could not pack or touch your clothes.” It also emerges as the speaker reminisces about what their relationship was like before the death took place:

You once lifted babies and beer,
strummed the blues as daughters
slept, tapped sap for syrup to keep
traditions of your father alive.

After January, what is left is a box.

Another poem in this series that compliments “In Your Leaving” is the title poem of this collection, “Happenstance.” This poem reminisces on what once occurred on “a dead end street” during my childhood, and the house that became my inheritance after my father passed. What in another circumstance might be sentimental instead reveals the lack of a relationship between the daughter (the speaker) and her father “after booze beat blood / in that battle of rock paper / scissors.” The complex relationship I shared with my father grew out of our lack of communication for thirteen years, after his dependence on alcohol took over and we did not speak again until nearly a year before his death. This lack of communication is not present in the poem, but it was in my mind as I composed it. The inheritance of the property, with the duel play

on the speaker's "first home" being both her first home as a child and her first home as an adult homeowner, helps to underscore the irony of her situation and the burden of her new responsibilities, both practical and emotional.

Happenstance also features several poems written for or inspired by my son. "Junebug" was inspired by my pregnancy, and through its images conveys the waiting that comes with being pregnant. The child "crowded in my belly, having / buzzed for forty weeks in that dark space," is an image that reflects the limited amount of room the child has in the womb and also the expanse to which the mother has grown, stretched to her body's limits. The larger metaphor of the title, "Junebug," connects the child with the (rather annoying) insect. Each stanza in the poem is meant to be read with the title in mind to help establish this connection between child and insect, and the diction in the second stanza also helps to develop this connection. The speaker uses word choices like "buzzed," and the "folded wings of a blanket," to place the child into the context of the insect, while the images also convey that the child is being cocooned. This equation of child and insect is meant to show not only the annoyances that come with being the parent of an infant, but also the abilities and appearance of the child. The June bugs cling to the window screen, just as the child clings to its mother, June bugs are fat just as the child is fat, and the term "June bug" refers to the month in which these insects are most commonly present, which is also the month of the child's birth.

Another poem influenced by my son as well as the end of my long term relationship is "Seven Months Postpartum." This poem shows two impulses on the part of the speaker: the attempt to save the broken relationship, followed by the reflection on the impact the breakup will have on the child. This poem is written in a syllabic form averaging six syllables per line, meaning that the lines are determined by a set number of syllables per line rather than stresses

per line, which helps to create an idea of the emotional hit taken by the speaker in the poem by controlling the speed at which the poem is read. It slows down the reading of the poem and helps to establish more dramatic line breaks because of where the syllables fall. These qualities help to establish a serious tone in the poem.

There is a series of poems in this collection that would appear to be influenced by the birth of my son, but these were written long before he was conceived. These poems are “Before Children,” “During Children,” and “After Children.” In these poems, rather than drawing on personal experience, I drew on my own anticipation and excitement, as well as my fears and hesitations, about someday having children.

So far it would seem as though a majority of my poetry is confessional and autobiographical. But there are several poems in this collection that are not based on events in my life. These poems are more playful in terms of their content and imagery. “With My Childhood Ended, I Reminisce,” is one such poem with a playful atmosphere in which the speaker asks, “Don’t criticize what I wanted to be, / (Wesley Snipes in Drag).” Before these lines, the speaker whimsically reminisces (as the title of the poem would indicate) about a childhood in which “we would toss / up the light, the sun of all things,” and “waterski across the surface of the night.” The poem does at one point take a more serious turn in the middle, but this turn does not negate the playful atmosphere; rather, it demonstrates the transition into adulthood. This transition occurs because of a dramatic change in the speaker’s life: “Then my father passed in the night.” As the speaker suffers the loss of his father, the “buzz of the world” no longer seems as important. Rather, he and his friend part ways after the loss: the speaker goes searching for himself while his friend takes a position on Wall Street. This juxtaposition of the two friends also places into comparison the spiritual and the material.

Another poem that demonstrates the more playful nature of my work is “The Truth of the Matter.” This poem uses some alliteration and is filled with playful lines like “and don’t forget to sanitize, / vodka will do nicely. For father doesn’t want to waste the good wine[. . .]” Such lines help to create a “string of beads” connection between the images in the poem, as the images are loosely connected to one another. The images in this poem also allude to larger issues, such as organized religion, but that is not the purpose of the poem. Rather, it is meant to be funny and playful, using a rambling speaker to discuss the ramifications of kissing a particular type of woman.

This collection is rounded out by poems more serious and political in nature than “The Truth of the Matter” and the relationship poems. The poem “Sometown, Somewhere,” for example, looks at the Newtown Shooting and is written in two parts. The first part of the poem is told from the perspective of the shooter rather than a victim or onlooker, while the second section of the poem shows the aftermath of the shooting. It uses the repetition of the onomatopoeic “Bang bang” to emphasize the gun shots, slamming of doors, and the one track mindset of the shooter. The single stanza of the second section highlights the shock and disbelief of the survivors after the event.

One thing that this collection lacks is the use of fixed or received forms. It features a heavy utilization of free verse, and in my future work I would like to incorporate more traditional formal elements like I have done in “Seven Months Postpartum” with the use of syllabic form and in “This Poem is a Fiasco,” which is a cento. The prevalence of free verse in this collection may be associated with my concern for the restricted freedom that can accompany form. However, I am aware that form might also push the limits of my creativity, forcing me to use diction and arrange the words and lines in a manner that might change a poem for the better. I

would like to use more traditional form in the future in order to challenge myself in my writing, and also to better understand the foundations of contemporary poetry. I intend to add more poems written in fixed or received form to this collection as I continue to develop it in the future.

Also, *Happenstance* is rather one-noted in that it focuses heavily on romantic love, something that I would like to step slowly away from to discover new themes and topics. It does not stray far away from the topic of love, even in some cases bluntly using the word “love,” such as in the poem “Cattywampus,” in which the first stanza lists images that the speaker believes “were love.” This collection has the potential to incorporate more nature, political, and overall less love-filled poems: I intend to add diversity of theme as I revise.

This collection does manage to place into a more “universal” context the relationships that come to define the larger “us.” The relationships (or lack of) between parents and children, lovers, friends, the consumer and the product: all are well represented in this collection. The speakers are relatable, and the moments, although not necessarily experienced by everyone, are ones that I hope readers can sympathize with. And I hope these unique relationships reflect shared human experience because of the themes and experiences they represent.

I also feel that *Happenstance* succeeds because it delivers vivid and inventive images. From the disturbing relationship of the speaker in “Burn This Poem” and her friend “screaming on the back of the toilet tank,” to the melancholy of “In Your Leaving,” where “inheritance meant poverty,” each poem explodes with surprising images that I hope show the quirks of these unique relationships and make them feel real to the reader.

Happenstance is influenced not only by the events in my own life, but also by the work of other poets, such as John Rybicki’s *When All the World is Old*, which is a collection of

elegies that I turned to after my father died. Poems about my son were influenced by poems in *Tender Hooks* by Beth Ann Fennelly, such as her detailed poem “Latching On, Falling Off” in which she discusses some of the dilemmas associated with being a breastfeeding mother. These texts helped to influence some of the content and forms that are found in these poems. Music has also been an influencing factor for these poems as well, primarily in the placement of song titles or lyrics in the poems that help establish the voice of the speaker, such as in “Before Children” where the speaker mentions romping “in less than white sheets, rolling / to the beat of *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, [...]” and the end of the poem which brings in “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” and references the Beatles album *Help!*

Overall, this collection is the product of six years of study in poetry, learning the craft of writing. I have organized my poems from those years into a polished, yet not completed, final product that demonstrates how I have evolved as a poet. I hope my readers can connect with these poems, and I hope they enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Origins

I come from wolverines and cherry blossoms, a state
shaped like a hand reaching for a knife to fight off
badgers and buckeyes, aiming for the heart. I trace
Orion in that velvet blue summer sky and crisp
December snow. Hands lost in guitar chords, learning
the ache of melody, the happenstance of harmony.
A heart that has known only anticipation,
the product of a dreamer and a scheme, planning to
make it out of what's pleasant and to the city
of Saint Francis, to say goodbye to that eastern part of
me, dependent on five fresh lakes, peculiar neighbors,
and the smell of white pine filling every new car off the line.

I come from a distrust of brown eyed men,
distaste for cheap wine, a preference for
beer that leaves cheeks flushed
and deep sleep in bluebell eyes. From that bluegrass
twang, men who only sing the blues and reds of life
and demand that my light be the darkness, to find out
how deep it goes. A big breasted woman with a
predisposition for frail fingers that grope in the dark
for that box of condoms just out of reach, I come from moon-
eyed girls praying for the black and blue that love
can bring, and my gypsy mother who never found
quite what she was looking for,
birthing babies to see what they might bring her.

Before Children

we romp in less than white sheets, rolling
to the beat of *The Ballad of John and Yoko*.
We laugh at the Korean Translation books'
top three best translations:
“We should worry about AIDS,”
“Do you have a condom,” and “If no, then no.”
We stroll to the bar to slam Alabama,
meet Johnny Vegas, and sip slowly from
warm beers. You and I stumble home
and laugh it off, kiss it off, slough it off. I stay awake
to lick the salt from your upper lip while you stay
asleep, your grin crooked as the lampshade.
You walk with confidence and nothing else around
our place, cooking egg scramblers at midnight
and mixing Bacardi and orange juice to aid in
a quick recovery from damage done hours before.
We live for sex on fire escapes, for dopamine dreams, and
to find some sense of direction. Our faith is in
guitar strings. We hide behind
vinyl and the cotton-polyester blend, holding on
loosely, not wanting to let go of our Apple
Jack highs and Kettle One lows, singing along
to *You've Got to Hide Your Love Away*,
finding our way through *Help!*
falling asleep to *Yesterday*.

It Began

A year ago we drank till we flushed a little brighter
than the Jewel Osco sign I can see
from my Canal Street window.

Vodka pumped through our already
coke clogged veins, pulsing through capillaries
that could barely manage to contain

the thrum of our battery powered hearts.
We were overjoyed by the sound of our
own names spoken slowly in the haze

of the twenty-fourth floor, the electricity
in our brains pushing us forward to that moment
when we fell into what seems to be

a fluorescent love affair. We
danced to the radio, hoping that the DJ
would change the song to something less

Woodstock, hoping that it wasn't
all we had to look forward to on cold,
spark-less nights.

Streets

-After Nin Andrews

Streets, I learned, have history. What makes people attracted to a particular street? How could my parents have decided which street to live on? Maybe, I thought, it was like my Woodstock papa when he played guitar, plucking and strumming combinations of strings until suddenly the chords sounded like Stevie Ray Vaughn's rendition of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." In the same way he would say, *I reside on Happenstance*. Not Franklin Street. Thank God it wasn't Franklin. Franklin is everywhere and forgettable. Franklin is always plump and balding, wearing pleated pants with a leather braid belt. Franklins could travel to Paris and converse with government about navies and loans. But Happenstance is different. Happenstance is brilliant, though not as brilliant as Franklin that invents bifocal glasses. Franklin...even the street is filled with spectacled faces and newspaper stalls. Franklin was the street leading to the school. My optometrist built his first practice on Franklin, his vision chart spelled F-R-A-N-K-L-I-N every time I went in for an exam. Each Saturday the sidewalk would be filled with children making their way to the playground. Later, I wanted children to flood my sidewalks every Saturday. Sometimes I wondered if my parents had chosen the wrong street. Franklin had so much potential, everything was on Franklin. But Franklin was not where I lived. Instead I was on Happenstance listening to blues, pulling those strings.

To Prevent the Invasion of Your Body by Butterflies and their Offspring

Listen to Journey's Greatest Hits Album.

Listen to the fan blowing warm summer air into an apartment bedroom.

Listen to the cricket strumming his thighs.

Listen to the silence that replaces the cricket.

Whisper to the John Lennon poster on the ceiling all that you imagine.

Whisper to the cat perched in the neighbor's window.

Whisper to the fluorescent glow of the refrigerator light at midnight.

Whisper to the reheated chicken teriyaki.

Don't talk to anybody that you don't know.

Don't watch movies featuring Hugh Grant.

Or Gerard Butler. Or Anne Hathaway.

Don't listen to 1980's mainstream rock.

Sleep in a king size bed.

Sleep between the hours of 11 and 6.

Sleep without dreaming.

Sleep naked, sleep alone.

Dear Prose Poet,

I hate to say it. I want to stitch my lips together to prevent an utterance, go back with Doc Brown and tell my mother what a terrible idea it is to teach me poetry. To stick to history, study nursing, anything that would keep me from feeling the way I do. I HATE what you do since reading *Sleeping with Houdini* by Nin Andrews for my poetry workshop. I hate poets too lazy to build on line breaks, or stanzas, missing the point of poetry in the first place, to break away from the conventional method of writing, the typical paragraphical form. Prose poems are the NORM these days. Poems without form, redefining what poetry is.

I know that prose is another medium of writing, of expressing poetry. I also know that poetry is ever-evolving and breaking new ground. Prose reminds me of my first date. It was with this boy Scotty Joe. We followed traditional date rules, skipping dinner and going straight to the movie. He was so sweet, caramelized sugar on a confectioner's stove, paying for my ticket. Then at the end of the night, at the awkward moment of what happens next, looks of anticipation and the nervous *do you mind if I kiss you* squeaked out from behind his teeth. The hard knocking of noses and twisting of heads as I leaned was my answer: *yes*.

Otherwise, I couldn't think of what to do other than go home, which would put a quick end to a queer evening. I suggested going out again another time, hoping that encouragement would lead to orange marmalade sunsets sitting on the lake's edge instead of misdialled calls and hopeless infatuation. Something that would make that other boy jealous, and make me more untouchable than before.

Same time next week? All I wanted was to laugh. I think he did. I think that is what uncertainty is. Scotty Joe waved as he backed out the driveway. But poems like that are simply stories without a plot. I wish I could write it some other way. For this poem, my professor said to write like Nin. *Explore new techniques*, he told the entire class: *Write in a style that is not your own*.

Koi No Yokan

*(Japanese) The sense upon first meeting a person that the two of you are going to fall in love.-
bigthink.com*

He takes her into his hands,
folding her into an origami swan
and carefully pocketing her.

She is pink from his constant
creasing, wrinkled and ruined
as his ink stained fingers leave their prints.

He knows how to work her
into perfect points, but hesitates
before he puts any pressure on the edges.

And so she waits
for him to make a move, to pull
her out of hiding and show

his paper heart, her name
written in red letters on an envelope.
She pockets his heart.

I Watch Him Meditate Right Before Bed

My Buddhist ignites his roman candle
laughter throughout our first apartment.

I watch him on the kitchen floor glowing
jellyfish bright, my own personal moon.

His incandescence drifts lightly across carpeted
floors, mirrored only by the dust that floats

near a light bulb, and he drifts back to bed
with his blood-warmed body to hold

me tighter than the string wrapped
around left fingers. Together,

we shine brighter than the three
stars that make up Orion's belt,

our apartment burns up
the Chicago skyline, ashes drop

down into the darkness
of our dreams.

Direction

Many can find the North Star,
that point of light that guides
travelers and all who are lost
towards what they may or may not
want to find.

Others look for the constellation
Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper, as it
eventually ends at that very point
of guiding light, for those lost
and searching for their own way.

I have never been able to find
that brilliant speck. It has eluded
me; giving me the run-around
each time I think I have
sight of it.

Instead, I can point out Orion
and his mythical, if poorly woven,
belt. I can spot his arms
and legs, and the tip of
Scorpio's tail in battle.

Orion moves each season, taking
me away from what I thought would
be home. Frigid frost drives him
down near tropical rain, never lasting
more than a few moons before relocating

closer to humble northern lights.
My reluctance to find the most
northern point, my reliance on a man
who can't seem to make up his mind
drives me further than I ever thought I'd go.

Happenstance

is a dead end street
where I learned to ride a bike
without training wheels
for the first time

where trilliums hide
in the shade of maple
trees, tapped every season
for sap to be made into syrup

by my father to keep a family
tradition alive where a generation
of men and their wives and women
with their cats came to die

and another came to raise
girls to fruition where family
was made and broken
and lost for thirteen years

after booze beat blood
in that battle of rock paper
scissors where at twenty two
I inherited my first home

Marked

Fragile: HANDLE WITH CARE.

Tiny, yellow package cradled
in your arms.

Contents: one screaming,
hungry, sharpie red, pudgy, bundle
of oh-no-what-the-hell-did-i-
get-myself-into type of joy.

Instruction booklet: none,
either lost in delivery
or never printed.

Advice given:

Don't Fuck Up.

When changing its diapers, don't look
away, for it will roll off the table.

Don't panic when it cries.
Don't panic when it doesn't cry.

Rough and tumble time is pointless from here on out.

After feeding, DO NOT hold over your head.

Don't crush it with the Pluto sized weight
of your love.

This Poem is a Fiasco

-a cento

How we endured it,
for the true spark of love (breast size unimportant). Please.
Death & sex tickle the same damn spot
better than you, but don't take offense – you are very good too!
That's not something white girls ask themselves,
what to call them, and they're all naked.
Love Have mercy Love have
unscrolling stockings, limbs complicated.
Forgive me. I'm from a state shaped like a heart.
We wouldn't have needed to fall in love
when I promised you a poem, I knew
as always, for the last time,
your current boyfriend gazed at you last night,
you who were good for a mere matter of minutes.
The slick prize. The nervous quiver
crushing us into the damp sheets.

Cattywampus

I allowed myself to believe that
red, the running of fingers along
the inner thigh, and the orb-eyed
look of the deer crossing the highway
were love.

I did not imagine
the pulling and pushing of the moon tugging
waves that kill sailors at sea.

Men dirty from digging graves by the white light
of that same moon, coloring it all in green and blue.

Now my hips are bruised,
palm and finger prints
have left their ridges
on moon white skin.

Junebug

swarms outside my window,
attaching their legs to the screen
that separates us from one another
at this in-between time when day
is slowly changing out of its sundress.

and the Junebug crowded in my belly, having
buzzed for forty weeks in that dark
space waiting to emerge from the warm
water of the womb into my arms,
into the folded wings of a blanket.

asleep on my window screen
I rock and sing the bundle
from my belly into the night
and the sky prepares for the labor
and delivery of a new day.

Remembering Lost Girls

-After Maurice Manning

The girl with pockets warm as hawkweed in the mid-day sun.
The girl with words like floccinaucinihilipilification clicking against her teeth.
The girl running home to Emma Rae.
The girl waking at five o'clock in the morning to crickets playing Mozart on the windowsill.
The girl swimming in the cold water river.
The vinyl girl popping her heels to Fats Domino.
The girl with lips like apple butter.
The girl searching the constellations for a star-eyed man.
The girl with moon bright teeth.
The girl whose naked toes never fit in store bought shoes.
The butterfly moment of the girl at quarter after three.
The girl with whiskey flushed cheeks.
The girl who sings head, shoulders, knees, and toes because it is the only French she knows.
The girl who is wanted like stars on a cloud filled night.
The new born caterpillar on a plastic plant girl.
The girl with lake brown eyes.
The girl with charms around her wrist.
The sun bathing girl on the lawn after noon.
The girl that balances on the edge between the sidewalk and street.

For Sale

We got it, you want it.
Whatever you're looking for. Come in a variety
of colors too, from hot tea to
sweet cream. We know you want it,
everyone does, and we can give it to
you. Let me show you what's in stock,
some luscious gems for you this afternoon,
Ruby and Opal. Just hold 'em in your hands and
see how smooth they are, how warm they can be.
Not into gems? Let me
find you a little Chiffon, Raschel perhaps?
Gentle, lacey things that float on the air
perfumed and painted, beg
for your touch. That little number there?
She won't cost you much. For a thousand you can
take her anywhere, try her out.
If nothing I got suits you, I got a buddy
over in Queens, if you like 'em used,
but I got the best goods you've ever
seen, fresh caught and trained to
please, to promise you
the hottest time in NYC.

His Grand Entry

I remember the burn of his
crown, and the warm liquid relief
after he entered the room.

My eyes strained to find him
in the crowd of masks, to bring him
to my chest and let him know

the scent of love is wild lavender,
the first feeling of skin to
skin, and a never ending hunger for milk.

But he too was having trouble catching
his breath. Like fireflies that refuse
to enter the jar, his soft, pink lungs

were hesitant to inhale sterile air.
I watched through pure oxygen
as he lay beneath an artificial sun

and was poked with nothing but
good intentions, praying for good
vibrations to shake his body into my arms.

I can remember life pressing down
on him full force, breathe baby breathe,
and then his chest burst into song.

With My Childhood Ended, I Reminisce

When we were boys, we would toss
up the light, the sun of all things,
watch it fall – we would try to
waterski across the surface of the night.

We got caught in the buzz of the world. (College bars and hookah lounges.)

Then my father passed in the night.

You followed the incandescent light bulb to a corner office on Wall Street.

I searched for a Bodhi tree to lay my sorrows beneath.

Don't criticize what I wanted to be,
(Wesley Snipes in drag) and bathe
in the luminescence of what I've become.

Outside of Oz

“Well, I - I think that it - it wasn't enough to just want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em - and it's that - if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with! Is that right?”-Dorothy

Tap, tap, tap those
heels babe but they won't
take you home. You're
going to have to walk back
to Kansas in those scuffed up
ruby heels and that thin
cotton dress.

That yellow paint on black
pavement glitters gold.
You'll meet men looking for
a brain, a heart, and courage.
They won't know that what you're
selling they can get for free. And they'll
use you up, but you won't mind
the rough ride on your way to
the rainbow.

City lights shine brighter than
the wonderful city of Oz. The only
wizard here won't take you anywhere
you haven't already been, leaving
you alone with torn nylons in
the Emerald Hotel, which at least
has a color Tv.

A good time, playing
Dorothy for the private crowds, giving
your all to the Scarecrow, Tinman,
and Lion, anything to make it
somewhere over the rainbow.
While no one is watching, you
find your way back to Auntie Em,
Toto, and home.

Rainy Day Blues

-After Natasha Tretheway

My father taught me how to sing the blues.
My father only knew how to sing the blues.
The notes for the yellows were too high for him to loose.

Woodstock man, played his twelve-string when it rained.
Music, man, had to play it when it rained.
Follow the beat that those drops made.

Gave it all he had 'til those strings gave out.
Playing with all he had 'til his fingers went out.
He was flipping chords and tossing tunes about.

He doesn't play that twelve string anymore.
Won't part with his vinyl, but he won't play it anymore.
Saves his all for when I come knocking on his door.

His heart still pumps that music despite the pain.
His music-filled blood pumps through each of my veins.

During Children

I'll witness every Technicolor
sunrise paint the white walls
of my living room tangerine,
blood orange, and honey gold
while the sky blue and twilight
green remain in the sky.

I'll enjoy my coffee cold
and my showers long, and forget
what the slight tap of palms on backsides
could mean, trade in tap rooms
at midnight for a bath, book, and bed at nine,
lounging in my pajamas for an extra hour or two
while reruns of *Calliou* play in the background.
I will forget the words to *Here Comes the Sun*,
replace them with Dr. Seuss's *Oh! The Places You Will Go*
and my perfume will be Johnson's baby soap.

Nursing

His eyes widen
as my nipple meets his mouth
for the first time, and he gorges
himself on milk, filling his marble-
sized belly with what he knows
for the moment as love.

When his jaw slackens its hold
and milk froths from the tip
of his tongue, he drifts into warm
sleep against my breast, and I can only imagine
he dreams of skin and milk,
and, for the moment, love.

Conditions From a Dopamine Dream

-After John Rybicki

I want a ring made
from the filigree of fairie
wings, accented by Neptune
and Zeus stored in stones,
an apartment with walls
painted ocean blue,
and a man that sings
in the shower,
and with the curtains closed,
or the engagement's off.

Sometown, Somewhere

Newtown, Massachusetts, December 14th, 2012

I

Bang bang, they drop
nickels in a jukebox
playing *Helter Skelter*
on repeat.

They can't hear the song,
the beat and bass
pulsing through my veins
keeps me moving.

Bang bang, the record
reloads in the machine,
the needle scratches softly
against the vinyl.

I pound out the rhythm,
make sure their shuffling
feet move to the beat
of the song.

Bang, bang, and it's done.
The record rests back
in its place and silence
fills the building.

II

A silence unknown
to these halls reverberates
in the ears of the parents and police just now
entering through the broken door.

Elegy with Strings

Those six strings beg me

to strum my father's
rhythm.

They stare from the closet

where I set them in January
after he left,

because when I think of how

I never learned to play
my father's rhythm,

I am reminded of ramen

noodle nights with him
jammed out on the couch,
crushing those golden notes in his sleep.

Mary had a Little Lamb

knew those strings better than Stevie Ray Vaughn,
better than I knew my father.

Those six strings demand better
than to idly hum
with the vibration of the vacuum

cleaner. They yearn to buzz like an electric
bee to that classic wax
sound that fills me. But I never learned to play.

Sam Says to Stop Writing about a Boy

-After Meg Kearney

This one is for Sam, who begged me to
trade in my Prius for a Ford, leave the city's
glow and faded stars behind and join him
in the golden Michigan countryside, forget
endless roads and your father shooting whiskey, too,

and the boy you last saw standing under the maple tree,
looking like himself, so much like him that
you had to be near that body. Forget your last kiss,
how it felt like cherry wine and tasted like
a melting icecap. Stop talking about the Black and Tans

and one North Star or those songs you played twisted
with your pluck-it, pick-it strings. And don't speak of
northern nights, how you miss them or the winter one
which is so much a part of your work that it must not be
real, its cold wind blowing into morning.

Don't talk about bundling under flannel blankets,
calling that boy Honey Baby or Dear – how he almost
falls asleep. Just for Sam, this poem looks beyond
Blue Orchids and those rusted Shay Station tracks.
It takes the plane across the ocean, two years

of honest reporting and empty cups of coffee, poorly made,
delivered from downstairs. This poem is all alone,
where life does its thing. See, there's a poem drifting
down from an open window: its words, lines, corners
covered with fingerprints that used to be me.

Take it from Buddha

Mara, the god of desire, who knew that the prince was seeking to put an end to desire and thereby free himself from Mara's control, attacked him with wind, rain, rocks, weapons, hot coals, burning ashes, sand, mud, and darkness. The prince remained unmoved and meditated on love, thus transforming the hail of fury into a shower of blossoms. Mara then sent his three beautiful daughters, Lust, Thirst, and Discontent, to tempt the prince, but he remained impassive. – Britannica.com

Imagine as he sits cross legged, eyes on
the cloud shaped like a, well, he

isn't quite sure what it is. He worries
it might look like rain, foretell

death by suffocation, and then
hopes he has more than enough air to

make love to himself one last time
before the rain comes. Pouring down,

flooding his shoes with earthworms. It doesn't
help to drown his worries, not like a good

pint would right about now. Ease his worries
down his throat, past his spleen (the creative chakra), and into

the dirt floor of the local bar. It will take
months at first, but soon his worries

and his thirst will be gone like that cloud
hovering just above his Bodhi tree.

Dear Writer:

Thank you for the opportunity to consider your work. We've read it with care but have decided not to accept it for publication.

Continue on with your work. Tenacity is vital for acceptance to any journal. Rejection we know can be a four letter word, can lead to nights listening to Savage Garden and eating chocolate gelato out of the container. It may cause feelings of anarchism and rage against the system that builds and tears down poets, and a fear of form letters that never seem to stop. You may begin to dream of becoming a librarian, where you can read works of those who seemed to know something about the craft of writing that runs and hides from you each time you submit. Please keep in mind that this is a phase and that soon it will pass like gas on a stairwell. Never give up dear poet, for remember we each have our own tastes, and while we may prefer the taste of grape soda, you will at some point submit to someone who prefers the burning taste of ginger ale.

Please accept our apologies for this form letter, but the volume of submissions we receive makes it impossible to respond personally.

Best of luck placing it elsewhere.

Sincerely,

the Editors

The Truth of the Matter

Don't touch and kiss that grimy gal,
for the risk of going blind my friend, and don't forget to sanitize,
vodka will do nicely. For father doesn't want to waste the good wine on
a dingdongditch of a girl with breath that could clear the fog of London.

Houston, we have Buzz Aldridge playing euchre against the Cosmonaut chimp,
and losing an A for what Neil was meant to say when he placed foot upon sand. Man
that ape plays dirty, his cymbals covered in matters that don't pertain to us, but while you are
over the moon and those big balls of burning gas that seem to be getting closer
and closer, don't touch and kiss
that limey lass.

Believe this Poem

Even now I don't believe
those three big words that are often whispered
into young lovers' ears and old women's caskets.
How they roll off the tongue, slip into something
more comfortable faster than a gun from a holster.
I end up in limbo, bending over backwards, the only
one playing something that those loves who whisper
into ears and caskets could never do unless they
hear those anthrax words that smell of babies and
silver bands, settlement and Seattle.

Even now I don't believe
those eight letters that spill like alphabet soup onto
the linoleum floor, flooding my kitchen with luke-
warm broth. I should run away and never return.
You could find me in the buckeye state, mingling with
badgers, and coerce me home with promises of
pumpnickel in Paris. I want something familiar,
the melted butter heat of your hands on my hips,
I want to believe your three syllable declaration.
You must know we are not young,
not lovers who whisper into caskets. Our
ears are full of wax, and even now
I don't believe.

Burn this Poem

And if New York won't burn, then last night
never happened. I never went upstairs, trudging
past the landlord with scraped knees, bare feet, and bruised
fingertips. I did not find you standing on the forever
running toilet tank screaming about the variety pack
of gummi bears having more red than white in it. I won't remember
standing in the pool of what I hoped was toilet water mixed with red
wine and melting cheese. I won't remember promising that the
best things in New York are on Broadway, and 30 Rock. I
won't ask you to get TiVo, or oranges, or to move to Chicago.
What is any other big city compared to New York anyway, right?
If New York won't burn, why should I want more
than I can clearly handle every time I
negotiate for more of you and less of the empty
side of the bed. I won't continue demanding that you and
I would make a great we, an Antony and Caesar of the city,
conquering the sidewalk from Queens to the Bronx. I won't
make promises that involve the bruising of crucial
organs in order to maintain that quality of life where each of
us is miserable, searching for the perfect stranger when
we could be all rainbows and sunshine with strangers
more like us. If New York won't burn, neither will
my fingers with each opportunity to touch
the apple you left sitting on the counter, the jar of peanut butter
you left sitting in the fridge, to tear apart your routine
in order to make mine. Instead, let me lie on this
maple wood floor staring at the door to your room, searching
for signs of anything that may lead to the creation of
an empire of leaving on the bathroom light to frighten away
invaders. If New York won't burn, you can't blame me for trying.

In Your Leaving

-For my father.

The space between
breaths seemed endless,
silence overwhelming until
we heard your lungs take another.

The waiting was not the hardest part.

That was after the room
had shaken itself free of you,
when you were more than motionless
in the hospice bed.

When books, glasses, and medical files fit
loosely into a box and my
tears fell faster than the night
sky in January.

I could not pack or touch your clothes.

Inheritance meant poverty
as unpaid medical bills
and funeral costs made permanent
residence on my kitchen counter.

You fit loosely in a solid aluminum box.

Your name engraved in white
on black, *John Edward Voice*,
to remind me that you once
were more than ash and dust.

You once lifted babies and beer,
strummed the blues as daughters
slept, tapped sap for syrup to keep
traditions of your father alive.

After January what is left? A box.

While Listening to Patti Smith

He cannot hear the thud
of his heart in his chest.

It is a rhythm I could
dance to, drink to,

fall asleep to every night. He cannot
hear it over the sound of his own

breathing and Patti Smith singing
Because the Night in the dusk

of our bedroom, light thrown
from the bathroom where I sip

vodka in lukewarm water,
shave my legs, and listen to his

body fail to mend itself from the hurt
of a lover I have never met, but hate just as much.

Seven Months Postpartum

I.

I stand here as my tongue
falls through the floorboards.
We watch it *slide* through the
cracks smoothly, it is
battered by blood and tears
I crafted just for you.

Say nothing, say something.

Silence overwhelms us.

And I know you are not
coming home again.

II.

I hold him close tonight
as blue electricity
illuminates his dreams.

When he is older I'll
tell him how I tried to pull
the moon down from the sky.

When he is older I'll
tell him I was not strong.

When he is older he
will not understand – I'll
tell him what he needs to know.

What 300 N. Canal Street Apt. 2410 is Like

Like gluten free macaroni and cheese.
Like painting the walls cobalt blue.
Like the Beatles before Yoko.
Like the dustless square on the nightstand where you keep the clock.
Like Chicago on fire.
Like Mr. Bean on Holiday.
Like a button on the pants of an ever fattening man.
Like the left bank.
Like sleeping on glass.
Like Freud and Jung.
Like nights in a crowded bar.
Like trained mice.
Like finding *god*.
Like losing faith.
Like doubling back.
Like construction on the freeway.

Attention:

The Chicago fire marshal has **advised against sex on fire escapes**, despite the effervescent echoes of rose colored lips against cold granite bricks, wisps of which warm the elderly through their barely opened windows (their upper body strength just not what it once was) as it may have implications of applied love. Which is not practical in any way. Such acts of **public passion** promote the feeling of when a squirrel pees on you while at the zoo, or when the electricity goes out and the apartment is filled with you and your fish Indigo to pass the time. **Not everyone** is able to experience the rush of blood to less familiar body parts, those with lonely hands that have given up the search for that loving feeling.

So for the safety of you and your loved one,
please avoid sex on the fire escape.

After Five Years

my Buddha no longer
meditates on my kitchen floor.
His luminescence lingers
in the dust drifting past the night light.
Now, a brown eyed man extends
his hand to me, offers me a second
chance at a lifetime together,
of family dairy farms, late night
hockey, and shoes perfectly arranged by the door.

Dibs

on your side of the bed now that you've decided to live with bears and their cubs, and I will lift the blanket of your smell to my nose as I sleep. When I dream of babies born in December days, of snow blown in through windows, I promise to wake with the comforter kicked off.

on your coffee cup, the one I made you for your birthday. I will drink chai from it, chip the rim while washing, and only use cream and sugar when I make my coffee, because I know you hate it when it is anything but black. I will sip the sweet from your bitter cup.

on your car, the 2004 Dodge Stratus. I have learned to drive in order to whip through crowded streets, to race to trains and airplanes, to find you again I will take up mastering the art of cars, of pumping fuel and brake repair.

on your guitar, that six string natural wood that rests in the closet, wanting to be held and strummed and play the chords of every Beatles song, that you used for a door stop, a one stop pick up line that won me over in the middle of a blacked out night.

Mamihlapinatapei

(Yagan, a language of Tierra Del Fuego) The wordless yet meaningful look shared by two people who desire to initiate something, but are both reluctant to start.-bigthink.com

I get caught up in the moment where your fingers intertwine
with the steering wheel, let myself
be driven to the edge, sinking into your front seat,
and let a sigh hit the floor.

Your omniscient eyes blink at me in the darkness of the car,
and my heart has supernovaed through my chest.
You can only reassure me I will be okay.

It seems like you are where I am supposed to be.
And all I want to do is hold your hand.

I am afraid you won't understand.

The Fiasco in Illinois

-After Jeffrey McDaniel

I want to tilt my head at you in nothing but your
skin, crooning *hey baby, why don't we grab the keys and*

go for a stroll in the park. All that electricity pumping
into the flush of rose lights conducted by fingertips playing

the xylophone of my spine. I want to tilt my head back to that moment
when we raised the curtains on the stage of my couch, reciting

Whitman from the tips of our teeth, the words falling
smoothly into their niches like frogs and flies in a swamp, or the fiasco in Illinois,

when you shimmied down the fire escape,
and all the women stared at you, like a ticking clock

they were worried would leave them with no time, and neurons
exploded in my spine, and a woman in yellow

crippled your heart. Blue Bedlam,
Marathon thighs, each moment my mind slithers

back to you, Reality smacks the ruler
down on already bruised knuckles, because your frostbitten

lips left me shivering, and I still haven't
lit a fire to warm the places that you kissed.

After Children

I may trip into writing poems about parenthood, those poems filled with tepid trysts into parks to watch their little carbon images play on swings, baking cookies for school lunches and the difficulty in removing grass stains. I may lose all interest in my husband's shorts, evade him in the hallway and forget to rendezvous with him near the dryer after dark. As we find constellations in the sky, I will hide that Orion makes me hotter than those three stars that are his belt, and I will dress the Pleiades in elegant gowns so not to titillate my young son. Pajamas are no longer optional, and I have new reasons for sleepless nights.

Blue Voice

-After Terrance Hayes

I come from happenstance,
first daughter of a rock n' roll momma
born on a peridot hot summer morning,
and a Woodstock wishing papa
who preached the rhythm and blues.

I come from a dead end in a lake town,
a patch of maple and birch trees that can
still be seen from the expressway. I grew
gills in that town, spent nights glowing
in the dark of the forest, days being kissed
by fish searching for a bit of salt.

I come from scratched vinyl, a celebration
of a belly filled with beer that glistens
in the heat coming off guitar strings.

I come from a fear of worms, of what hides
with the hangers in a closet, of white walls.

I come from nudity, cigarette smoke
and long distance calls on a temperate
Michigan summer night.