The Loneliness of Gravity

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Dedication

To my mother for teaching me softness,
and my father for always telling me to “get the hell back on the horse.”
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"The Context of 'Nothingness': Minimalism, Naturalism, and the Politics of Identity"

More than a decade ago, I found myself wandering aimlessly through a used book sale. I was a regular at these sorts of events, always looking for the next cheap purchase that would spur my creativity and give me something of importance to talk about over coffee and cigarettes. On this particular day, I came across a dog-eared book of Minimalist artists. Images of paintings by Agnes Martin, Frank Stella, and John McCracken filled its large pages. The simplicity of each print was astounding: Martin’s lusterless cubes, the intensity and exactitude of Stella’s geometry, McCracken’s linear visions. These paintings translated into something profound for me: the process of articulating an idea with sparseness and lucidity in order to define the essential. Minimalist artists, along with writers such as William Carlos Williams, Elaine Equi, and Raymond Carver, attempted to convey significance using and text in order to place into a fresh context the self—the essence of one’s personality, ideas, identity—as well as the complicated, existential “nothingness” within each of our lives. This “nothingness,” which Jean-Paul Sartre defined in Being and Nothingness, as humanity’s endless emptiness in our search for “completion,” is the driving force behind many a modern minimalist, myself included. This conceptualized “nothingness” can act as a provocation and annihilate the artist-writer-philosopher’s idealism, thus enabling one to create work through a process in which form is continually reduced until the essence of a piece’s theme is found within the necessary elements of its structure. The dominate theme of existential “nothingness” within my own work, and, as the title to this thesis: “The Loneliness of Gravity” suggests, provokes a sense of heaviness that works to balance the diminutiveness of the minimalist form.

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I find it fascinating how a writer's creative process reflects her aesthetic influences. Not in some derivative way, but instead as a means of incorporating the knowledge we gain from, say, the simple intensity of a Robert Creeley poem into our own interpretation of experience. For me, this "transfer" occurs the moment I am met with something that is stripped of all contrivances. This is not to say that any piece of art is without some sort of preconceived scheme; all of one's work will inevitably lend artificial shape and order to selfhood and experience. But, for a piece of my own poetry to be truthful, insofar as it can be, it should proceed through an examination of personal minutia; how moments, memory, and even an awareness of one's surroundings accrue to create a greater whole.

For this thesis project, the minimalist form offered me a chance to use self-analysis as a way to filter my ideas. The poem "WE WERE YOUNG" began as a longing for the past, an identification with youth, and the unhampered feelings that typify such times in a person's life. That lightness I had experienced in much of my own coming-of-age translated onto the page as a memory of a single moment in time in which I jumped from a cliff into a reservoir in the middle of a balmy summer night. When I analyzed what I felt—my memories and sensations—within those few seconds of falling, the experience was aglow with an underlying meaning. The poem's composition, I tried to replicate those perceptions through a simplicity of wording and structure. The linear formation of the words not only simulates the quickness of falling, but also allows the reader's eyes to flow down the page with very little work, thus leaving one to wonder...
consider the “lightness” of the poem and what its lack of substantial definition is able to invoke in the minimalist form.

Robert Creeley famously wrote to essayist Charles Olson that, “form is never more than an extension of content” (Projective Verse 1950). As a poet, Creeley was strikingly accomplished at two things: creating formal structure in free verse form by throwing out the rules that had previously been established in formalism, while also allowing his temporal context, his day to day experience, to guide every aspect of his compressed, decisive writing.

For the generation of poets after him, Creeley’s almost methodical approach to poetry seemed strangely ironic. His signature style, while sparse and economic, was also highly praised for the powerful subtext that infiltrated each syllable. Take, for example, his poem “LOVE”:

The thing comes
of itself
(Look up
to see
the cat & the squirrel,
the one
torn, a red thing,
& the other
somehow immaculate.

Here, Creeley’s frugal manner opposes the dynamic, and somehow delicate, feeling those same words convey. Readers decode Creeley’s unnamed “thing” by reading the title of his poem, and are then shown a stark scene of a cat versus a squirrel: one weak, one strong. Creeley’s capacity for finding the essence of humanity within the mundane yet vibrant portrait of nature is what defined his abilities as a poet; it is what is admired and imitated by the poets that have come after him. And this ability is precisely what brings the “nothingness,” the existential questioning
of everyday existence within the Minimalist movement, creating a discourse about identity within the endless abyss of human life.

For many poets, this discourse on humanity often involves discussion of the primal and how these base instincts can conflict with our ideological assumptions of self. Many of the themes behind the work of a Minimalist like Creeley and Charles Simic are the fundamental needs of humans, most importantly that of sexuality. Sexuality not only acts as a springboard into a discussion of identity, but also serves as a meditation on mortality and our human need to affirm life. I often find inspiration within the cultural implications on sex that French writers and philosophers have addressed for hundreds of years. Charles Baudelaire’s 1857 Les Fleurs du mal spoke openly of female sexuality and eroticism, resulting in the book’s ban from France for nearly 100 years. Baudelaire’s work was not meant to be viewed through a sociological lens, but rather as a discussion of the average, the “nostalgia de la boue,” or the human need to wallow in the decadent and base instinct (Lewis 2008). Taken in this context, and drawing upon two centuries of French philosophy, my own piece, “NOSTALGIE DE LA BOUE,” is intended to speak to this human need for debasement, and introduce a series of questions within the reader’s mind as to whether this desire is merely a psychological anomaly, or rather a larger abstraction of one’s necessity for pleasure and assertion of existence. The poem’s employment of stark minimalism also speaks to our control and suppression of these instincts. It is up to the reader to decide whether the “she” within the poem is better off with or without her desires.

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Poet Joseph Massey, who represents a modern variation of the Minimalist and Imagist past which included poets such as Creeley, Carlos Williams, Pound, and Kipling, is another...
example of subtle simplicity in style. He creates poems that are fragmentations of the artifacts that are merely part of our human landscape, the detritus of everyday existence. Massey's examination of these details leads his readers into a land of bizarre metaphors that ultimately make a statement about humanity, and the fractured, isolated world in which we all live. In his poem "POEM TO A SECTION OF WALLPAPER IN A CHINESE RESTAURANT," he writes:

Woman with a black fan and firm red gown, weightless over a wall

Face spent of fear, now the patrons
Now the gray air conditioner

Neither can read her loose panel of calligraphy

Settled in a pretense of respect
black fan poised,
It has yellowed through the seasons
And has sharpened

"Tell the truth
then run"

she seems to whisper over the shoulder of a glass-eared man

what fortune

Here, Massey's uncanny metaphors breathe life into his subject matter. From the specificity of his title, to his exploitation of everyday objects to denote importance and implication, Massey's writing not only addresses the precision of Minimalism, but allows minute details and metaphor to unite in a wholly unique way, as a sparse, controlled meditation on the "unbearable lightness" that a small frame of words is able to create.

The concept that Massey uses so aptly in many of his poems could be considered Object Trouvé, or Found Art. Though primarily found within the modern art world in the form of installations, objet trouvé can take any form. Think of Marcel Duchamp's 1917 "Fountain," in
which he placed a urinal in the center of a highly regarded gallery. Duchamp’s attempt to shock
the art world by simply looking differently at an everyday, somewhat vulgar object worked, and
the form has continued as a main medium for many of today’s most critically-acclaimed artists
such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin. Often the form allows the employment of
commonplace objects to suggest significance to human life. One’s capacity to find implications
within the trivialities surrounding us is a process that is important, in that it allows one to
practice comprehension and presumption of existentialist philosophy and expand our artistic
vision to even greater heights.

In my engagement of the themes of this piece, I happened upon the work of Joseph
Cornell, a mid-20th century artist who specialized in shadowbox object trouvé. Cornell’s pieces
are intricately constructed frames and boxes that address specific subject matter through
paintings, prints, and tiny objects glued, placed, and hidden within the work. In his “Medici
Series” Cornell worked to convey the fleeting and turbulent lives of the infamous Italian family’s
last aristocratic children. Each piece holds a framed painting of the child, which is then
surrounded by hidden drawers that contain items and words meant to communicate something
of the child’s life. I found these pieces haunting in their ability to express the pain and lightness
of childhood, and the complexities surrounding someone from such an unusual ancestry. While
searching through Cornell’s work, I began to contemplate whether one could find their own art
within an objet trouvé—whether it was possible to create my own complexities from someone
else’s life. In my piece, “THE MEDICI SERIES,” I chose to reform Cornell’s work, choosing
fragments and parts I found within his series to create a piece that directly addresses my
process of writing. Thus, when I finished the poem with the lines: “compressed/ in the frame/
of a box/ a book/ a feather," I was experimenting with the notion that my writing is simply an amplification of others, through both source and process. In ending with the image of the "feather," I am also able to imply weightlessness, or rather the impression of existential "nothingness" to the finished piece.

Later, I chose to continue on with this "found" process, borrowing the title from Tracey Emin's seminal "EVERYONE I HAVE EVER SLEPT WITH" to actualize my own abstractions. While Emin's "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With" was initially a bed scrawled with the names of her lovers, my own piece spoke to the trivial. I contemplated the bonds of closeness within the act of sleeping; how each person with whom I shared a bed had either extreme significance or diminutive impact upon my life. In the end, I find myself often searching for "vacancy" or desire to be alone—even in repose. In using a rather linear, minimalist form, the people serve as a list, a catalog of my experiences meant to suggest a ticking clock, or a timer winding down. Ultimately, the poem is meant to evoke the isolation and individualism of the human experience.

Beyond the slim, linear language of Minimalism, there are other qualities I look for—both in my own work and in the work of others—poets who discuss the politics of gender, marriage, sexuality, and domesticity through, at times, a tone that heavily uses nature. Poets such as Chase Twichell and Elizabeth Bishop inspire with their ability to convey meaning through the microcosm of nature. Both of these writers are incredibly adept at choosing just the right turn of phrase or unique metaphor to suggest a poem's intention and the ultimate revelation found within it, while still promising the reader something temporal within the confines of the poem's lines. Twichell, for instance, intentionally limits excessive adjectives,
while still presenting a clear, yet ethereal image. In her poem “THE YEAR I GOT RID OF EVERYTHING,” a powerful ode to the isolation of self, she writes:

A huge invisible magnet dragged me up into its powers. It lifted me high above the beautiful wool carpets and the books.

I put on a dress made of bones
And danced alone in the great emptiness.

Here, Twichell uses metaphor, the “dress made of bones,” to denote the bodily self. This hauntingly strange image of the bone dress is precisely why Twichell’s poems transcend the boundaries of traditional, confessional poetry; she can create sparseness while still maintaining power. Likewise, Bishop, a master of naturalistic observation, who was able to depict a subject with a minimal amount of manipulation, had an uncanny ability to find meaning within the layers of seemingly trivial details that surround human existence. Take for instance her poem “ANAPHORA,” which begins by using very simplistic language; it names and describes things exactly as they are, for what they are:

Each day with so much ceremony begins, with birds, with bells, with whistles from a factory;
such white-gold skies our eyes first open on, such brilliant walls that for a moment we wonder” Where is the music coming from, the energy? The day was meant for what ineffable creature we must have missed?" Oh promptly he appears and takes his earthly nature instantly, instantly falls victim of long intrigue, assuming memory and mortal mortal fatigue.
Here, Bishop’s list flows into a lovely description of the “white-gold” sky. She continues the poem, as she always does, by finding the obscured note of humanity within the confines of these everyday objects. Bishop is a master of taking organic, biological matter and tearing off its layers to uncover something of the self. This, I believe, is profoundly important in creating art, literature, poetry. It is finding the essence of a thing and displaying it in a way that demonstrates not only an original view, but also adds an element of refinement to that view.

Bishop’s and Twichell’s command of naturalism within poetry has often been a driving force in my own work. The essence of the natural world and its ability to channel one’s existential thought is a recurring theme in which I am able to find relevance within my pieces.

In the poem “LIFESPAN OF THE GENUS LYCAEIDES MELISSA SAMUELIS,” I hoped to evoke not only the fragility of life itself, but also to address the abstractions of the natural world within the concept of said existential “nothingness.” The endangered Karner Blue butterfly is representative of human mortality, our fleeting lives in which we search for Sartre’s “completion.” While the lifespan of this species is incredibly short, its stages are similar to that of humans: survival, copulation, death. While writing this piece I contemplated those phases and their bearing on human meaning and tried to use symbolism that would speak to individual existence. The poem’s final two lines: “before disintegrating/ as water to rock to sand” are meant to evoke not only mortality, but also a sense of the parallel between the negation of life and the balance this death provides nature.

Elizabeth Bishop’s poetic style was in sharp contrast to the work of confessionalist poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman. She often found confessional poetry to be too abrupt and sordid in its retelling of life (Travisano 2008). Bishop’s lack of sentimentality and
ability to write with sophistication about her own life is something I have often attempted to emulate. The title of my piece, “FALLING OF THE ROUND, TURNING WORLD,” is taken from a line of one of her most famous poems, “In the Waiting Room.” In Bishop’s piece, she recounts an instance from childhood in which she suddenly realizes the gravity of life and begins to question its meaning, all while battling the overwhelming feeling of “falling” that this recognition has brought on. While writing, I became obsessed with the idea of this psychosomatic sensation and how often I experience this myself. In my own piece, I have tried to build a poem around one of those moments, while still maintaining a sense of naturalism. The use of the line, “we are making quick, furious love/ on a freezing riverbank” is also an attempt to bridge the divide between Bishop’s lack of the avaricious and our inability to escape the sordid or sexualized versions of ourselves. Thus, my piece is meant to harken Bishop’s splendid use of the natural and still stay true to the book’s themes of identity and existential questioning.

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For me, a writing process that emulates both the minimalist and naturalistic ultimately becomes about editing, paring down. Starting with a line of poetry that relies heavily on imagistic description my writing aims to evoke that image with just a word or two: a change in form that conveys exactly what I am sensing, feeling, thinking. I want the reader to find each transition from scene to thought to image seamlessly justified, each poem to depart from the last in a way that moves as the mind does in questioning existence through process and form. To accomplish this, one must unravel the rhetoric surrounding not only the issue the poem seeks to explicate, but also their particular portraiture of existence and create an arc that
begins with a question—in this case, how does existential “nothingness” play out in human identity—guiding the reader through a series of doors, each one conveying something more of the poet’s selfhood, each on raising more questions, until a sort of resolution of that question appears within the work. The writing should manage to convey a sense of deconstruction of the self, while addressing larger conceptual issues, and in doing so, the poem aspires to be compressed and flawless. This tactic, obtained through naturalistic ideology, is then filtered through minimalist form. The two concepts of art are then able merge and create pieces full of intensity, tension and life.
Works Cited


THE MEDICI SERIES

The power of narrative
made
obsolete;
part invention
part reality
occupying a place.

Commingling,
fused in kaleidoscopic effect.

The object
of her words
becoming
symbol
and form

life repeating

spiraling

into fragments

until, finally
compressed
in the frame
of a box,
a feather,
a photograph of itself.
FALLING OFF THE ROUND, TURNING WORLD

1. Where we stay, 
the scent of waning 
rolls in noxious tides.

A black dog's tail dances 
between the water's primeval ledge, 
the balm of bergamot
and cow wheat—

leaving... 
like the suddenness of the highway 
turning to dust; 
like a memory of us.

2. The sky glares white through 
birch and hemlock.

We are making quick, furious love 
on a freezing riverbank, 
my hips pushed into the

earth's concave;

waiting for your pitch.

Waiting, like the black dog 
for whatever appears out of 
the underbrush—

A thrash of water on my skin, the discord;

of Osprey and Yellow Tail calls, 
bellowing wind, your sweat dripping 
down my shoulders,

formless and free.
PERPETUA AND THE SUFFERING

There was a day last summer when your white belly floated in declivity,

Your head tilted back toward the sun. The raft and water appearing like a guillotine around your vacuous face.

You were motionless even then.

* 

The wails of an ambulance fill the air now and I am wondering if that sound is for you.

Whether your car has wrapped itself around one of the walnut trees that line Small Road.

Whether you have given up.

Given in.

But then minutes pass, and you materialize in the kitchen, shaking off the fall.

Somehow that sickness in my stomach (that was just a moment ago here) is replaced with thirst and hunger and want for an end.
PERSEPHONE
(FOR KATE LAMONT)

I watched you write a song once;
your mouth running
like a river in the dark,

your voice a gift
to the gods.

Dear moon,
gripping nothing,
this voice that swells the air all around

me pierces the shadows,

like an elegy to our youth...

like a kiss goodbye...

I watched you write a song once;
a small pyre inside
your words,

igniting the past,

as a moth to a match,
or the flashpoint of air.

When we were more than just parts
scattered
inside pieces...

before our babies...

our stained lips...

our rise to the earth.

I watched you write a song once;
your fingers clawing the organ
like its keys were the thick
flesh of fruit

that had to be taken in; eaten;
THE WEIGHT OF WINTER

When the clutch of stillness
is denied, I chain smoke
cheap cigarettes
in our courtyard, staring out
into the dark woods, the
maples and birch—
their creaking limbs—
and I worry.

This disquiet is born
from genetics
and femininity,
the very nature of life,
the famines and floods,
of motherhood and family
(the wars, the disasters)
as a thick fog trails from
my wrung out fingers. . .

I fear for the doe and her fawn.
I contemplate whether or not

they will survive the inevitable harshness
of winter in these woods, or will they succumb.

And I will find their bodies curled together,
rotting in the wet warmth of spring

beneath the outspread branches of a great oak,
who has seen light and dark for two centuries

and whose roots have grown deep
in the funereal ground that now holds the pair as one

in their boundless sleep. . .
MY CONDOLENCES

Her mouth was a sarcophagus, dry as the bone beneath it. Breath filled with blight and a low, acrid sigh each time the chest fell. The seconds ticking by like apathetic voyeurs to an end. My hand only just touching hers, as if that sort of death might be contagious. Might be transferable in the fear that soaked the lurid room for days.

Later, in a twilight, I thought of those lives filling a log book. Check marks next to name tags. Identification all neatly packed away for a cellared departure...

*Number one*, who refused to see his beloved bird dog and whose grown children slept at his side for weeks. *Number five*, who never roused unless Vivaldi’s Four Seasons was playing. *Number nine*, whose hair I would
comb into ribbons and who died while standing. 
*Number twenty-one,*
a centenarian who fondled young nurses.

*Number forty-six,*
a pianist who, in the last moment, raised her spindled, crooked fingers and silently played the air. 
*Number sixty-seven,*
whose leathery skin and sclera were the color of a rapeseed field. 
*Number eighty-two,*
a legless beauty queen who thought we were secret sisters. 
*Number one thirty,*
whose anemic, mossy eyes were the only thing that moved in an adipose body. 
*Number two ten,*
my muted poet who gave us one hawkish song as a coup de grace.

*And many numbers later,*
the last, my friend, who died in the sun and loam.

In the full light of darkness, her shouted frenzy continued. 
*It will only be a few hours now.*
The door tagged and tightly closed.
This end, a lull in the numbing servitude of the departed.

An effort steeped in my skin. Soft as snow, like the walls of an ancient mosque, dreaming bound with blood.

He remembers her in the ocean of periwinkle blue.

The swing of positive and negative, of sky and throwing, as if in the endless water. Drift past the current that carries him away from there.

Scattered now, exploring leaves in talk.
VARIATIONS ON BLUE

I remember her
in the broken
bits of Prussian delft
scattered below.
Porcelain swimming
in water droplets
and stuck to the bottom
of calloused wrinkles.

Shards of an
old woman's eyes.

An object steeped in
icy evocation.
Egyptian blue,
like the walls of
an ancient mosque.
Midnight hounds
speckled with blood.

He remembers her
in the ocean of
parts and pieces.
The death of positive
and negative,
of Keats and Kipling,
of childhood lazing
on the cerulean water.
Drifting on the current
that carries him away
from then.

Scattered now,
as glaucous leaves in fall.
black coal cars
on rusty tracks
65 mph
ripping my parents' pristine blue Chevy
in half
the half that lived
the half that died
steering wheel flinging my father's body out—
van fused to train
* 
He lived I should say
held together with rods
steel frames
face unrecognizable
a morphine haze
for months years
returning only
in pieces a bruise here a scar there
the half that lived
the half that died
A SACRAMENT

In all its infinite
temperatures.
the excruciating
lightness
filling the air;
heated
to its flashpoint
then
dissipated.
Stormless
and bleak.
Reticence
in the
questioning
between them:
what is
unsaid
and undone
in these moments.
Anchored
by the
pledge,
the albatross,
the innocent.

A cool creeping
in the bones;
setting
their faces
in a mold
of ambiguous
lines
meant to reveal
nothing
more than
the everything
that has
already
been given.
ONDINE

What can be
the ideal of
innocence
when all is lost
when all is
betrayed
An escape
upon a panther’s skin
Snow spread
beneath the stars

A legend kept alive
among sparkling stones
and artificial ice
seized
sought
declared essential
by a figure
of nuance.
HOMME MOYEN SENSUEL

Paul tells her, you are beautiful. He says her lips are like florid comfit, her eyes are polished lapis, her skin, soft white ash. He tells her these things before she has leaned back, breasts hidden beneath the lightness of the sheets. You are my divinity. She is not unskilled in how this goes. He is not all that is expected. But those bits of words all strewn together are moonstruck in the swooning sun. He is only a warm body to press her fury against, her barren hunger. In a few hours she will collect her senses, dress and leave for home. Paul will stay. He lies there, thinking well of himself, smiling past his reflection, the thinning hair and paunchy stomach, and believes the satisfaction was his to give.
C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE

She believes
the more
it changes
the more
she must
submit

le mariage,
l' enfante,
la vie bourgeois,
l'interminable vide
de la compassion
et donner

This life
was chosen

and its
sameness
is unrelenting

like the call
of a child
to the
breast

like the
morning
that happens
without
undoing

and the
edge of the
scream in
her throat
NOSTALGIE DE LA BOUE

She buries the yearning—even from herself

captivity of greed and degradation and flesh

captivity in the mire
There is a baby crying in the other room.

and I cannot think

cannot write

without this

thing

attached

holding hostage...

and it is only then

in weary consumption

she smells

my chest

my neck

bedding down beside me

my child.
AU MATIN DE SA VIE

There is something askew in the breaking of day

skin black and cauterized knuckles swollen

the irreparable unknowable nothingness that hangs from our window as a shadow of branches callow fingers aglow
SODIUM SKY

Thick leaves
thrash our legs
sulfur eyes
slow wing
the atmosphere
The wind pulsing
His voice tells
me to look up
to watch the blackness
* 
Sky in—
a meteorite
a bolide
a halcyon bird
* 
They fall
like burning bullets
from heaven
The vault
magnetic
full of white
holes and
empyrean dust
* 
He yips,
like a dark dog
in space,
howls a tune
to the moon
and her fleeting sisters.
THE ONCE GREAT MAN

In his eyes (my eyes)

there is a thunderous twilight
behind the milky blue glass.

It is but one-fifth the rage he felt in his youth.

*

In an instant last night, his plague descended upon me
like the whitecaps of a monstrous sea

as the bent ridges of a black hole, bend light with pure mass.

The fine rumpled skin (beneath those eyes)
twitching. Stodgy with crimson.

*

A hummingbird heart, the pith of a small girl (with her pale eyes)

that revs as though it might very well give out,
as his let go.

*

Somewhere
in the minutes
that follow
there is frailty;

though the voice
is the same;

the tone,
the fervor—

the very spark of madness—

are exactly as
they
were.

The old man is trembling;

fury tempered with dread.

*

I am remembering, now,

my small hands
clinging,
his steady shoulders,

his song low
and sweet;

an approaching storm

weighting the air
between us.

(byreched, cracked)
THE LONELINESS OF GRAVITY

The newspaper
printed a story on
ROGUE PLANETS;

giant balls of
stone
and magma,
swirling clouds
of toxic gas

which are no longer
bound
to a star.

Sailing through
space at
900 million
miles per hour

until they
collide

with
another planet,
in another
solar system.

Ejecting others
to make room
for itself

like ballplayers
or videogames

on an annihilative scale,
or the way in which
my mind romanticizes
the apocalypse.

A brand new life...

as though the drudgery
and mundane details
of the old
could not compare
to mass extinction
upon an orphan planet.
DAWNING

So I begin my poor impersonation of a doctor, Doppler pulsing over the ripe fruit of her belly until a soft throbbing can be heard.

Barely audible; just enough for the new mother and old mother to lock eyes... in this room where one lies dying.

*

Emanation tubes carry the last remnants of the elder’s being, like waste water travelling to dissolution.

A mottling creeping up her Legs, her ragged breath moves faster with the unborn child’s heartbeat.

Moves with some sort of insidious awe for what will be lost for the sound that constructs a juncture of generations, alive in the faintness between dusk and dawn.
MY DRUGGED UP LOVER

Eyes roll back in oversized sockets
snore rattling the bed frame

Henry murmurs:

zanax vicodin amben amphetatmine
gin

and then:

percocet depakote

and maybe:

a few crushed, snorted

He snores

The television fuzz is deafening.

Plasticized hands clenched as though death has created a blue-nosed version of life

the mincing our footsteps
the surly, heavy impermeable

grasped with memory

The staving wetland is sinking

There were ashes over the Hudson that day,
9-11 AND THE RELEVANCE OF ZERO

The trail is lined with milkweed, River Birch that hang overhead

in a sky so clear and smooth and blue

my sight is hypnagogic:

one thing melting, bristling into another

two black dogs tethered to my arms

a rat snake arched to strike

a painted turtle the size of a platter squatting on its limbs

My infant daughter being pushed from my body, as my foot, calf, thigh casts off the stone beneath me

The body of a lover, naked, coiled, imbrued

Plasticized hands cleaved as though death has created a blue-nosed version of life

The rain chasing our footfalls

the air heavy impenetrable

green with memory

The stinking wetland is sinking

There were ashes over the Hudson that day, the sky so clear, and smooth, and blue.
WE WERE YOUNG

once;
when
a
quarry
of
melanoid
water
lay
before
our
glossy
eyes,
as
always, then
a
peal
of
joy
wavered
in
the
zaftig
of
July.

Night;
dawn
brewing.

Our
bodies
launching;
the
cliff
giving
way
to
the
buoyancy
of
wind.
ADAMANTINE CHAINS

Frances stoops over
the patient to pull at
bed sheets—
military grade,
and tucked into corners
as her mother had taught.

The room fills with
pungent rot of excrement.
Her pink pant legs soon drenched
in someone else's urine....

Calls, always, from
other rooms,
other resurrections of pain
that she must tend—
must foster with her
diligent care until
they are carried away.

Frances's pinched brow
remains that way
throughout her shift.
There is no rest.
No resolution. The day
will begin and the day
will end as it has for decades.

The work provides—
it's sheer necessity—
and requires that the last
fading whispers of her youth
be filled
with painkillers and slipped disks—

finding Frances in the
same place,
in the same room,
with a young girl stooped over her
bed, tucking the sheets like her
mother had taught,

dead be bound
them both.
EVERYONE I HAVE EVER SLEPT WITH

my mother
father
brother
sister
grandparents

childhood friends

some random girl on the L

us two
stuck between cars
in the high heat of Chicago's
August

college roommates
sleeping off a high

in my twenties
5 random men

who lead to 3 more

and ended
with a
husband
a daughter

and finally

me

creeping through the night
to find a space where there is:

vacancy.
EVERY PART OF ME IS BLEEDING

I am losing air

His
weight
crushing
me

My
throat
between
fingers
and
thumb

His
arms
clenched
to
suffocate
and
beat
my
head
to
hear
the
breathless
voice
bawl

you
don't
know
what
fucked
up
is
THE TEMPTATION TO DIVERGE FROM THE PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The roan mare’s
skin is folded
over
exposing
tissue
a gaping
hole
that leads
to bone
female
horseflies
circle the
blood meal
ripping
at her
flesh with
their scissored
sheaths
until they
have filled
themselves
of
her
sinew
and
flown
into the
distance
their eggs
a gastropod shell
laid on a slip of greenery

a dead spot on the front lawn.
PIECES OF NON-FISH

There is an accident ahead
a semi jackknifed in the night

fire brimming
along a path of gasoline
to the lonely man inside

* my bare feet running

like prey fleeing
the marauder

* the cab is a detonation vessel
doors and windows and flaming
steel land as ruderals colonize the soil
with the fierceness of breath

* (that shakes)

* wrapped in some stranger's coat
his leftover warmth
trenchant in
the atmosphere

that feeds this wreckage.
LIFESPAN OF THE GENUS LYCAEIDES MELISSA SAMUELIS

3-5 days
to list
through the wild
blue lupines
feeding
on horseweed
beebalm

a light
coating of sweetness
from their undersides

rising
in mass
to copulate amongst the ants

and
kiss
my cheeks with their lavender wings
before disintegrating as

water to rock to sand.
ANNA

She was always
this pale thing
birdlike wrists

that stretched into
gangling fingers

To me those fingers

*that tugged at blonde curls*

told a loose version of the truth

a free adaptation

eventually
meant
to wipe the sudor
from some man’s brow...

the one
who died in her arms
the one
who fathered her
the one
who married her
the ones
who raped her

*disposition*
of any sense of self

The bottle of cheap brown liquor pinned between her smooth thighs and bitten nails
HERE LIES KARENIN:

the
last link between
Adam and Eve’s abandoned paradise

who never asked

and never begged
for the licentious
or passionate

only
knowing
that
I
would
come
home

and
scratch
her soft belly.
SCOPOPHOPIC

It terrifies me how much you are able to see the pictures that no one box from France no one reflects else can.

staring out the window half scale light listening the street on which a yellow bus has just carried her now teenage daughter away each day grieving over homework soccer games reading her own selfish silent work
PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER IN MOURNING

She sits
on an
immaculate
beige sofa

surrounded
by
excerpts
of her
journeys

the pictures
of Budapest

limoge boxes
from France

books
on architecture

artifacts
of her past—

staring
out the window

fall’s pale light
lessening
the street

on which
a yellow bus
has just carried
her now teenage daughter

each day

grieving

over homework
soccer games
recitals

her own selfish—
selfless work
the years
that have defined
this room
with its pictures
we are facing
the back 40

mementos
relics
in time
slipping softly
carefully
away.

Bye 50

Other
apples

her copper hands
grilled in your
hands

under chaps

along the broken fence line
along the edge of the fields
along a hollowed corridor of shade

where you will
to stop and rest
the horses slick
with sweat

I want my ashes scattered here, I say.
THERE

We are riding
a ridge of
the back 40
my old chestnut
gelding leaping
over small
ditches made by
tractor tires

Olivia
galloping
beside us

her copper mane
gripped in your
hands

under crab apples

along the broken fence line

along the edge of the alfalfa

along a blameless corridor of shade

where you yell
to stop and rest
the horses slick
with sweat

I want my ashes scattered here, I say.
NOTES

Wording of “THE MEDICI SERIES” found within the work of artist Joseph Cornell’s “Medici Series.”

“FALLING OFF THE ROUND TURNING WORLD” is a line from Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room.”

Wording of “ONDINE” found within the work of artist Joseph Cornell’s “Romantic Ballet.”

“ADAMINTINE CHAINS” title and “death be bound” line from Alexander Pope’s “A Sacred Eclogue In Imitation of Virgil’s ‘Pollio.’”

“EVERYONE I HAVE EVER SLEPT WITH” title taken from a Tracey Emin objet trouve installation.

“EVERY PART OF ME IS BLEEDING” title taken from a Tracey Emin objet trouve installation.

“PIECES OF NON-FISH” is a line from William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying.

“HERE LIES KARENIN,” is the inscription on the headstone of Tomas and Tereza’s dog in Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being.