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Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Ángel Noé García

June 2012

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The Thesis of Ángel Noé García is approved:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Coward	1
A Summer With Maury	2
In Passing	3
On the Bus	4
At a Stop Sign	5
Nickels and Dimes	6
Walls.....	7
Passing Pessoa	8
Rinconcito.....	10
Another Metaphor	11
Dinner Time	12
Nails	14
Fish Dreams	15
Un Nuevo Ojo	16
On Nights Like These.....	17
Beauty	18
A Few Minutes of My Life (Forty-Five to Be Exact).....	19
Sudden Downpour.....	21
A Dog Poem.....	22
The Beds of the Living.....	23
The Eternity of All Red Lights	24
Homeless, in the City of Angels	25
A List of Small Things I Was Afraid Of	26
Spanish Midterm	28
The Sheer Unpredictability	29
Night Sweats	30
Coming Home	32
Conversations With My Father	33

Insomnia	35
Masa.....	36
After-School Basketball.....	37
June Bugs and Mosquitoes.....	38
A Bit of Rain	39
Ash	40
Occasionally, A Poem Written On Bar Napkins	41
A Thirteen-year-old Boy Should Never Pity His Father	42
No Such Thing as the Tooth Fairy.....	43
Los dientes nunca duermen	44
Tacos de Lengua.....	45
Perfect Sleep.....	46
Too Much Sky	47
In the Dark.....	48
Falling Asleep	49
The Purpose of a Poem.....	50
Untitled.....	51

Coward

Finally. Someone says it and you wonder
if you're ready to turn around—this moment:
this minute: you've been waiting for half your
life. When was it you first realized the weight
of your hands clenched in a ball are more capable
than hands left in your pocket? Always fumbling,
looking for spare change that might, finally, be enough
to take you away from everything you have known:
this crowded bar, the darkened streets, even the woman
you have loved everyday since high school, when you
first entered her and whispered what you knew was a lie.
This may seem too much for you, a man,
who doesn't know about tomorrow, or the next town,
or the life you'll live if now, tonight, broke in a bar,
you don't turn around to face this shadow, this voice,
or maybe, no one at all...just the chairs already hung
on their tables, the jukebox unplugged and quiet, only
you and the small congregation of moths, still quietly
circling the light bulbs, which just now, have been shut off.

A Summer With Maury

I am fourteen when my father leaves. In another room I can hear him open and close drawers, imagine him carefully folding his clothes into a duffel bag: three pairs of jeans, several white undershirts, polos, briefs and socks packed in tightly at both ends. How little a man carries with him when he goes.

I watch TV in the living room of our small, second-story apartment, sprawled lazily across the sofa. I watch another Maury episode, something I've done all summer long, a mother and potential father yelling into each other's faces, the veins on their neck pronounced with each hate-filled word, while on the screen behind them a small child, too young to know what is happening, smiles brightly.

My father walks across the living room, to the kitchen, and opens the drawer to take out his favorite coffee mug and pours himself a cup, always hot, always black, the steam rising to his face as he takes a sip. He watches me watch TV and I know better than to say anything. "I'm leaving," he says, and when I am get up from the couch and he holds me firmly between his arms he tells me, "Tell *Mami* and your brother I left."

I follow behind him to the staircase and watch him descend step by step, his bag slouched over his shoulder. He opens the door, twists the lock, turns around and tells me to wash the mug in the sink before closing the door behind him. I walk back to the sofa and wait for Maury to pronounce his verdict, a verdict I've already determined from a summer spent in front of the TV, "You are *not* the father."

In Passing

Almost everything beautiful I've seen, I've seen through a window.
Driving home again from work, at the same hour, on the same streets,
I pass the flood canal that mocks a river. How many times I've been
tempted to stop traffic, get out of my car, and watch its current.
I have never watched a river. Never stood on a bank
with my pant legs carefully rolled up to slowly enter
its waters and watch the hundred-ripples reflect a horizon
of which I know nothing. Instead, I watch an elderly woman walk
past my window every morning, each of her small steps so deliberate
it takes her nearly 15 minutes to trek the front sidewalk. About frailty,
I know the world is absolutely unforgiving. One morning this woman
will not pass by my window. And I'll not know her name, or where
she travels everyday at 8:16 in the morning. What I know about heaven
is that it must be a much more beautiful place than this.
I wonder if I'm prepared to witness such beauty.

On the Bus

It is simple, really, how I have been boarding
the same bus my entire life: left my offering
of loose change, passed the seated bodies,
heads bowed as if in prayer. I sit in the back
of the bus and read the names etched into
the panes of glass, the false names of young men
who refuse to be forgotten, and who, long since,
have been forgotten. Scratched out. Written over.
Some of them dead, I'm certain, white-lined shadows
scrawled carelessly on cement around their limp bodies.

Frame by frame, I watch an entire city pass through
the windows until the bus cries out to a stop. A young woman
quickly boards, her black mascara tearing below her eyes.
A young man, outside, spitting out her name, his middle finger raised,
following her body as she moves through the bus and sits
down beside me. I tell myself, that aside from the slight
trembling of the bus, everything in the world will be okay.
I've come to the wrong place to seek forgiveness.
I push the yellow tape to get off, two stops before my street,
hold onto the rail and stare at my hands that have been
responsible for much worse. I catch my own reflection
in the door window, and lower my head, refusing to stare.

At a Stop Sign

A young woman leans her back
against a young man who leans
his back against a stop sign
standing at nearly

a
forty
five
degree
angle

illuminated by the shower of a street lamp.
At 12:43 in the morning, this is how love looks.

Arms slung around her waist
his hands meet at her front,
rest gently on her stomach. His fingers,
inquisitive, reach beneath her belt line and play
with the hem of her underwear. They want more.
He kisses her neck, gently bites the skin
behind her cheek and sucks the lobe of her ear.
He thinks he can feel her body quiver but is
uncertain.

Her hands find their way into his pockets.
Her fingers play with their contents, his keys,
his lighter, his phone that rings loudly in the night.
This moment must not be interrupted. When he begins
to kiss her her fingers graze his outer thighs. They
cling to the muscles of his young body. Later,
his inner thighs. When his lips reach her neck, she
thinks she can feel his body get harder. She is certain.

Nickels and Dimes

A homeless man, moving between the automobiles
cardboard sign in hand: *PrAY FOr ME*, a mere whisper,
a kind of prayer itself, nearly unheard and unseen
in the oppressive heat of exhaust and my own ambivalence.
A poet once said *everything we do is a form of prayer*,
and as I watch this man tap on rolled-up windows
I cannot help but wonder, though I don't necessarily believe
in such things, if somewhere angels have given up on us all.

Last night I sat at a bar and listened closely
as a drunk man beside me recited his own prayer,
about the brunette at the end of the bar
who gave better head than his wife, and perhaps
out of guilt or lust: the two inseparable,
he pulled out a picture of his wife and child,
both beautiful in the way they held each other,
his wife probably at home wiping shit from the ass
of their newborn baby, Julieta, and then without warning
got up from his stool and walked toward the brunette.

The man with a sign taps on my window,
right hand held out. I open my ashtray
to dig out every nickel and dime—quarters too much,
pennies too pathetic—ask no one in particular,
a quien le rezan los angeles, nothing prophetic or divine,
a simple prayer: that the ring of loose
change in a callused hand can change the day,
or better yet, the rest of my life.

Walls

These walls have not been painted in years.
On them: every stroke, every labored breath,
every fingerprint of the woman I loved.
I have tried to wash them all away. Dipped
the rag in scalding water, knuckles raw, to scrub
away evidence of her. But at night,
feigning sleep, there is still the residue:
the hours spent painting in the afternoon,
making love in the bare room, on the stained tarps, my hands
and fingers spotted green as they ran across her naked body.

Now, I stare at the walls for hours, trying to avoid
the perfect shade of her eyes. I am afraid to fall asleep.
Some nights she walks into the room. She lies down
beside me in our bed, the smell of her body clean
from the nightly bath, skin still cool. She covers
us beneath the blanket and whispers softly,
que sueñes con los angelitos, her breath warm against my ear.
Everything about it is too damn real. As real as 2 x 4
beams, new sheets of drywall, tape & compound,
as real as two fresh coats of paint that finally, cover nothing.

Passing Pessoa

"I never aspired to be more than a dreamer."

Fernando Pessoa

There is a child lost in the neighborhood.
I cannot recall his face from the missing posters
and yet I look for him, walking block after block,
all the neighborhood dogs barking between the slats
of makeshift fences supposed to protect us from something.
I want to walk to the beach, but a family of hyenas hugs the coast.
I see their furry manes wild with sand and sea foam.
They look for small dogs to prey on. Mine went missing last week.
I see bones still boiling in their stomach acids. Undigestable fat.
I watch the horizon and see that a hurricane is coming.
Great tides rolling over the horizon. I walk home slowly and fall asleep.

At night, a small child, with rotting flesh, perches on my chest.
As small as a bird fallen from the nest. The child drools green
slobber on my face and I imagine what it feels like to drown in algae.
Someone pulls me from room to room by my ankles, a ghost.

She was in my bed again last night, in the kitchen too, the bathroom,
all at the same time. When she made love to me the moon whispered
across her skin. Her entire body was the purple of plum and bruise.
When she spoke every word she uttered started with the letter "p".
I tried to understand, wanted and craved her words. I tried to speak.
My mouth was sealed shut. No lips. No crease. But mouth less.

There are reindeer sleeping beside me and some nights I fall
into bodies just before they die. I see what they see just before
everything goes dark. At night the lights flicker on and off.
Eyes open. Eyes closed. They flicker on and off. I'm an expert
of shadows. Sometimes I am the cat outside my window
bitching about desire or something or other. I want to scream.
But I am afraid I might wake the neighbors. I can hear them snoring.

When I wake for breakfast
I sit down on a chair of bees.
I hit my head against the wall
and yolk drips to the floor.
A spider crawls over my body
and it is my own hand
scratching an itch

from two years earlier.
I eat my dried toast
and hear a small child cry out.

Half of his thigh
already digesting.
I smoke a pipe
and watch the smoke
escape from
the back of my head.
Blood oozes down the wall
in rivulets thick as syrup.
I cry into a cup
and it tastes like the sea.

Rinconcito

A man rises from a bus bench
and quickly downs what is left of a 2-11
that sits cradled in a brown paper bag.
He walks toward what he assumes can only
be chaos & remembers a song in his head,
the same song he sang last night, drunk,
in front of the liquor store with his fellow
cantantes, a song about discovery, about
finding a corner in heaven in which to hide
with a loved one, and as he walks down Cherry
he begins to hum. He picks up a decent butt
from the curb & stops to light it, the flicker
of orange overpowered by the red and blue
which circles the darkness just a few houses
down the block, and he crosses himself, up, down,
right, left, because, he figures, someone has died,
& his nostrils flare as he passes a pack
of young men standing around the tail of a P-dog,
as if it were dipped in the substance of eternity.

Another Metaphor

Another day of rain and even now the persistent
drought of lovers with no where to go—except
maybe, the parked car where they quickly
discover the way to the backseat, to whisper the constant
litany of teenage love. *I want to love you like morning
dew*, he says: something he heard in a movie once.
I want to love you for the rest of my life, she says,
because from now on out, she has absolutely no use
for metaphor.

Dinner Time

Doors are not to be slammed
in this house. But closed, gently.
The final click of the door latch
before each room takes its last breath.
At the table, I sit in front of a massive feast.
It is only us three:
my father, my mother, and I,
each of us breathing slowly in our seats.
Sit close to the table. Sit up straight.
Finish everything on your plate.
Today, I want words more
than the mounds of food
shoveled onto my plate
and sit hunched in my chair
eating the minutes before bed,
starved. My father sits with his hands
clutched around fork and knife, his jaw
beating like an irregular heartbeat
even after the last morsel is devoured.
My mother stares off. Not toward

the dining room window, at the family photos
nailed onto the wall behind me, but at the wall itself.

Over the kitchen sink

I wash each utensil,
each glass and plate,
careful not to drop,
to nick, crack, break
or smash a single dish.

Nails

Because I could not tell my god-daughter her father got shot in the foot, I tell her, instead, he stepped on a nail, the stigmata of stupidity every boy must suffer when spending too much time in alleyways. When we walk my dog through the alley the next morning I feel her hand in mine go tense. Already she can more easily read the names of men scrawled on the walls, already knows the way men gather in circles beneath shadows, practices her colors on the shards of broken beer bottles besides the garage. We have to be careful not to step on a nail, nino. And I wonder if she is lying for my sake, or for her own.

Fish Dreams

I was born in the mouth of the Rio Grande

first memory of fish and fin

I could swim and paddled down river

until my mother

reeled back the umbilical cord of wrought iron.

I suckled from her daily and chewed tiny fish eggs.

My father comes in dreams. I watch

the scaly scum of his skin

deteriorate from his flesh, clinging to stone.

Ravens peck at his leftovers and all that's left is bone.

I almost drowned myself at thirteen because I wanted

to once again breathe water.

The little droplets entering the soul.

Until I am overtaken by the riptide.

Un Nuevo Ojo

Allí estaba, descansando incómodamente entre los labios
de bloques de concreto. Tierra manchada por el iris.
Saqué un ojo, y lo reemplaze por uno nuevo.

Desde la puerta de mi casa veo el cielo descendiendo.
Algunos lo llamarían niebla. Pero no saben lo que dicen.

Desde la puerta de mi casa veo una bandada de angeles.
Un encanto de chupaflores, algunos lo llaman. Ignorarlos.

Caminando a mi recamara, veo los fantasmas de los amantes del pasado.
No es un recuerdo. No es un sueño. Los que lo niegan, no saben nada.

Finalmente, cuando duermo sueño con las pesadillas de mis antepasados.
Me paseo por los jardines de los dedos amputados, aún no florecieron.
Oigo los gritos de un niño pequeño que se arrastra en la selva
por las sombras negras de un jaguar. Puedo saborear la sangre en mi boca.

A New Eye

*There it was, resting uneasily between the lips
of concrete slabs. Dirt speckled around the iris.
I took out one eye and replaced it with the new one.*

*From the front door of my house I watch heaven descending.
Some would call it fog. But they do not know what they say.*

*From the front door of my house I see a flock of angels.
A charm of hummingbirds, some call it. Ignore them.*

*Walking to my room, I see the ghosts of past lovers.
Not a memory. Not a dream. Those who deny it, know nothing.*

*Finally, when I sleep I dream the nightmares of my ancestors.
I walk through gardens of amputated fingers, not yet bloomed.*

On Nights Like These

In a dimly lit bar where my face remains barely visible,
I could recount my entire life to no one, a story which
pours from my lips quicker than the time it takes to down
a beer, nothing left in my cold mug, afterward, except the quiet.
But tonight, I sit alone in a cluttered room, comforted by
a cold and sweating 40 ounce beer and a book of poems
whose words, word worn down by my own touch, whisper

who hasn't lodged in the belly of something?

who hasn't been devoured?

and in my state, intoxicated by beer and verse, both lethal
before sleep, I want to believe the wind outside my thin windows
is a young child who finds the greatest pleasure in tickling
the soft underbellies of the leaves, making them cry out
something like the start of rain. This is not about precision.
No. But what occurs in the darkness, so deep, so thick
nothing else can breathe except the poet who demands,
unforgivingly, a little drunkenness, a little metaphor.
On nights like this it is easier to sit in the darkness,
drunk, scratching out lines crookedly across the page
than to notice how silence consumes when it is so still,
so suffocating you could actually hear it, when a man
chokes up the pain of a clenched fist against the wall,
of crucifixes carved, unwillingly, into the flesh of a forearm.

Beauty

I know the moon is disturbing,
to stand beneath the shower of its brilliance
and have absolutely nothing in your pocket
except maybe, pocket lint or the few pennies
you've managed to collect off the cold concrete,
hoping because they're *heads up* something
about your life might change irreversibly,
& how enough of those pennies might buy
you something, or nothing, an air-conditioned
bus ride into the next town where men and women
pass you by while pressing their coats against their bodies
as if you were nothing more than a cold breeze,
how if you stood beneath the moon it might convince you
there's just not enough beauty in the world to go around.

A Few Minutes of My Life (Forty-Five to Be Exact)

Soon, I'm sure the whole city will be underwater. I watch it cascade off the tops of tenement buildings. I see water rise in sinks and toilets. I watch it crawl across linoleum floors and carpets.

There is no beginning here. There are only the small insects scurrying across the walls. The magic of being so small is something I have never understood. Only, I am small. The little boy inside my body is still trying to birth himself. He yells out my name when I am asleep and he wants only to know that he is still alive inside myself.

I played with barbies as a boy. I preferred them over GI Joes and the miniature army soldiers. The girl I loved in kindergarten, died unexpectedly. I wanted to go to her funeral, but my parents would not allow me. Sometimes when I am smoking a cigarette on my front porch I think of her. I flick the butt and watch the ash, the small moths being pushed from the flame. I wonder where they fly at night when the entire city seems to be asleep.

One night in Long Beach I walked along an unfamiliar street and tried to break every window I passed. Broke not one. I only know this because the next morning I woke up and my fingers were broken. I whispered in to my hand and it told me all its secrets. Every scar tells a sad little story of how silence overcomes me.

My own breathing annoys me. I hear it at night, mostly. And I hold my breath to remember what it feels like to be still. Quiet. My hands stumble over my mouth and hold it closed. I don't want to speak anymore, but words come easily to those who have nothing to say.

I cried last night while watching a movie. I can't recall the title, or the plot, of the actors in the film. I wasn't watching it exactly. I was watching memory pass over the screen and what good does it do to think about the past, passing shot by shot, in slow motion.

I feel more when I am dreaming. I watch you pace back and forth in my mind. I ask you something about something and you say nothing. Two weeks ago you promised to call me and I have been waiting by the phone to hear the church bells. I go to the sanctuary of shadows and pray to the dark. I turn off all the lights in my apartment. Make sure all the doors and windows are closed. I want to remember your exact face in the dark. The constellations of your moles dotted across your neck. I want to remember the taste of them. How my tongue charted the skies of you.

There are too many pages to fill. Though for the past several years I have avoided the spaces of my own mind. Shadow plagues me like a disease. I say I remember almost nothing about my life, and try to forget. I am the self fulfilling prophecy of forgetfulness. When I remember I drink. Ask someone politely, the next day, to recall what happened. I borrow the past like a loan from the bank. Knowing I cannot afford to pay it back. All the bills in my wallet are past due. I avoid the phone knowing that only the creditors call nowadays. I speak in the old language that has been forgotten. I want to speak about the wind and the clouds hanging over the horizon.

I used to know how to play the piano. I would play for my grandmother when she was ill. Six years after she dies I woke in the middle of the day certain that she had kissed my forehead as I slept. I could smell rose petals and juan de noche. The scents so key. So distinct. I wondered if I had dreamt the smell of you or just imagined them. I haven't played the piano since.

There are pictures beneath my bed and letters I have written and received from women I once loved. I keep a collection of cut finger and toenails. They are not mine. I want even the little death of you. The little leftover bits.

Black widows congregate outside my front door in mourning. Their little egg sacs dragging behind them. I am tempted, always, to kill them. But there has been enough death.

Everyone, now, is whispering about the war. I hear a man talk about his friend on the bus who returned and want only to go back so that he might die. Everyone knows he is suicidal, but not willing to do it himself.

My mother once told me that I was special. Little did I know she told this to all her children. She took us into her room and whispered into our ears. I can still feel her warm breath on my lobe.

I have lived in the same house my entire life. Been surrounded by the same four walls, walked across the same floor. I have never called this home.

I have always preferred the night. I like seeing something during the day and noticing at night how the faces of things change when they are overcome by shadows. I like seeing bodies beneath the glow of streetlamps. I like the echo of voices when you cannot see where they come from. I love cold concrete and seeing the breath fog into the night.

Sudden Downpour

I am trying to be a good man. Yesterday morning, smoking a cigarette on my front porch, I watched a woman stand outside with her mouth open to remember the taste of rain. She was merely the neighbor whose slippers dragged from her front door to the mailbox, from the mailbox to her front door, always at twelve pm and in the same ridiculous bathrobe. But yesterday, in the rain, beneath it, without her robe, I watched her blouse become a canvas of breasts and flesh, her nipples darker than I could have ever imagined and what I felt burned hotter than the tip of the cigarette.

I am trying to be a good man. Now, years later, I have walked the sidewalks of an entire city, head down, to forget five minutes of my life. More than my own foolish desire, she is not mine. Next door, in her bed, I imagine her husband more than a ghost, the hairs of his chest slipped purposefully between her small fingers as they sleep. She in her bathrobe, more frayed, but now open in the late hour, shadows painted over her naked body. More than my own foolish desire, I am trying to be a good man. Outside, I smoke a cigarette, and suddenly a downpour. Nothing more romantic than a smoke in the rain. But perhaps, I am wrong.

A Dog Poem

This is the poem I've always wanted to write: it's about a dog a puppy, really
a small puppy who followed me to the beach one day in Ensenada
when I was just a boy it's about how we played on that beach how happy
I was both of us, really running in the sand playing in the small ripples of
waves it's about the smell of his wet fur all salty pressed against my
nose as I dried him with my own shirt it's about our walk home the game I
played tip-toeing on the curb my arms flung out as if in flight trying
not to fall and the dog behind me trotting along in the street
trying to keep up it's about the van that drove by the wheel that did not stop
the cry that shot out the small yelp of a puppy it's about his flattened body
the way his innards pushed out from his mouth his lungs his heart
laying there on the concrete road it's about the last breaths he took
the puddle of blood that pooled the way his small body twitched and finally
went still it's about how I cried on the walk back home alone
and thought, mostly that it was my fault for not paying attention
for walking too quickly for not carrying him for not stopping the van
somehow for getting home finally and telling no one about the dog
that followed me and died it's about how years later one day
I decided to write a poem about a dog a puppy, really
I still remember and can't forget.

The Beds of the Living

I believe the dead, somewhere
in the heavens, look upon me as I fuck
a young woman with whom I am not in love, though,
I don't know what happens after, after
we both come and breathe as if for the first
time, bestowing on one another whatever
bits of tenderness and patience time affords
us. What the dead might do beyond mere
observation is a mystery, whether they look
hopelessly for someone to love, or make love to,
or if they finally understand something
we might never contemplate: that we love,
or believe love, because we do not want to die.
And later, as this young woman leaves the cold side of my large bed,
feather pillows and silk sheets, what I once believed
was holy, as she walks down the street
she could be run down by a drunken driver
who has patience for neither time nor mileage,
and I wonder how I might take it: the fact
that a woman I spent so many years of my life with,
a woman I only pretended to love, is dead— if she will
be among those watching from an unfathomable height
my attempt to stay alive in the arms, between the legs,
of yet another lover, and I fear that above the beds of mortals
the dead watch and shiver with a cold pity for us all.

The Eternity of All Red Lights

I wait beneath a red light on Long Beach Blvd. and PCH
and watch through my rearview mirror an ambulance approach.
Still blocks away it races down the busy street
and the cars, like a procession of death,
pull over slowly to observe the crying lights.
This may not be the place for poetry, this intersection
or this city I mean, because all over people are talking,
music blasting, dogs continuously barking at nothing,
but I believe something must be understood about
the few seconds it takes for an ambulance to pass
with its red lights flashing as we drown out our own mortality...
As the ambulance finally makes its way to my car
a young girl, only six, musters the courage of centuries
to cry out one last time before dying, the final breath
that rises from her body, which rises to the medics
who calmly cover her in a plain white sheet, rises still
to my car, a breath I take finally, because,
thank God, I am not that girl, not that body
laying oddly on top of the stretcher.

A List of Small Things I Was Afraid Of

Ensenada, Baja California

Prone to hitting hammer against fingernail
& passing the paintbrush from left to right,
my father always demanded I play outside.
You are too young to work, he grumbled.

Relegated to the dirt mound beyond our front door,
what I did not tell him, what I could not tell him
was that I feared almost everything beyond the frame:
the unearthed tijereta, rear-end upright, legs undulating,
its pinchers trying to seize the flesh of my small fingers.
Or, there were the ninos de la tierra that crawled past,
their red horned mouth ready to inject poison
their very name and body a small version of satan,
the same small beast I was told cried out like a child before dying.

But it was me who cried on that hill, a few chewed-up
hand-me-down toys still held tightly in my young arms.

It was my mother who rescued me. Took me inside
and I sat cross-legged beneath the ladder as she worked.
Hammer and chisel in her hands she chipped away
at the excess lips of concrete on our newly dried ceiling.

I watched the small particles of powder fall to the floor
and pretended she was an angel sprinkling magic dust.
But when she descended and sat on the sofa, complaining
of pain in her arms, shoulders, and back, I noticed
how the concrete filled in the wrinkles around her eyes,
the wrinkles of her mouth, and how in a few hours
she had aged several years, her skin the gray color of age.
As I kneeled before her, looking into her face, I knew
that she would not live forever.

Spanish Midterm

Last night I sat in a park among friends,
four of us each with a cold 40 in our hands,
our voices straining against the speed of the 710.
Jason and Romeo have finished their duty in Iraq
and tell stories of near death in the darkness
of another world I can only imagine. Jorge, in high school
a father, tells how last night, over the phone, his girlfriend
told him he would again be a father and how he wanted desperately,
then, to say to her that she had the wrong number or hang up
because, he thinks, he may be too much of a coward
for fatherhood, again, at only twenty-one. We each sit
on our special tree stumps covered in spray paint
and begin to recount the days in high school when we ditched
fifth period Brit. Lit. and drove to San Pedro
with pounds of carne asada and cases of Coronas,
days of innocence and ignorance, when we knew almost
nothing else except the city in which we lived.
And after? Always, our own inevitable silence. We sit
listening to the cars pass nearby, the children playing
near the park, until we are covered in shadows. The same darkness
that slowly fills the trees, fills the 710, fills the city, and the trash
on the floor around us. It darkens the countless cigarette butts,
the empty bottle of Jose Cuervo, and the failed Spanish exam
resting beside my foot, a midterm some high school student
dropped on purpose, I suppose, because of the red "F" on top
written with a care and carelessness I can clearly remember
because, I too, have failed. But today, here with my friends,
whose faces I barely recognize in the dim light of dusk
the darkness fills me with a desire, a desire which fills us four,
I suppose, the desire to carelessly, effortlessly, as if
it were that simple, drop all of our failures on the floor.

The Sheer Unpredictability

a black garbage bag suddenly spreads itself across
the windshield of a car that travels 80mph on the 405

or a porcelain toilet bowl falls onto the fast lane of the 605

then, an entire terminology of minor chaos

fish tail
rear end
side swipe
pile up
over turn

you get the picture.

What I don't understand is how language changes,
how after years an automobile, out of necessity or sheer laziness,
becomes, simply, a car. How much more quickly a car,
after its shell and frame are so badly twisted, becomes something
else entirely. And of the bodies inside, something worse still.

I've seen horrible things on the interstates of California.
Bodies laying oddly in the middle of traffic, loved ones
holding tightly the mangled bodies of other loved ones.
In this poem language will fail me. It's not an excuse.
I'm uncertain what you call something when it is no longer itself.
When language can't keep up. How do you finally articulate
what can occur instantaneously? How do you speak
of the atrocities that take place within the few split
seconds it takes to look through a rear-view mirror?

Night Sweats

There are serpents in my socks. I put them on each morning and they slither between my toes. I wonder what it might feel like to travel the world on my belly. Some say all I am looking for is love: the perfectly cut out hearts of it, the delicate paper mache. I like the nitty gritty dirt clods thrown at me like when I was a child.

There are eggs in the refrigerator that have sat there, cold, for three months. I haven't thrown them away because I am afraid of letting go. I am capable of forgetting who I am, who I think I am. The philosophical popeye dilemma of existentialism. I'm looking for spinach in my cupboard but have never owned a can opener.

Yesterday, I watched the world move so slowly, revolving. Seen the same shadows crawl over cemeteries. I am a man who craves sin. But does not want a son. I'd rather he not have my hands, or my heart, the dark places I have tried to shed light on. I bully the little boy inside me. Call him names like "dummy" and "stupid" because I don't have the courage to curse in front of a child. My lies get stuck in between my teeth. You can smell the stench of my treachery.

I keep asking myself all the unimportant questions because I am afraid of the truth. Ask me how I'm doing and I'll tell you I am as fine as wine. I am glass waiting to be fogged up by someone's breath. I want to curse the old woman crossing the street who paints her body in white each night so she might know what it feels like to sleep in heaven. I am piss drunk, pissed off because I only wanted to bite off a bit of your ear so that I might taste your thoughts.

City tenement buildings fill with prayer, humming, meditation. I blame the dogs and the postmen, who commiserate about my own destruction. My name goes out for a walk when I make love. It's polite that way. But it leaves me at home to do the dishes. I break a plate and glass because I have given up the martial arts expert in me. He's retired and dead. Buried beneath the dojo.

There are rats in the sewer of my soul only their ears are too small to hear me call out their names. The sheets are still undone and my cheeks are still stubbled from yesterday's 5 o'clock shadows. I know I'll never be a man if I can't grow a beard. My father is not dead. He's still a man. But his father is dead. I sit like a name tag on a large oak desk in a building that didn't mind its own business.

Death sleeps beneath my bed. He's a pretty quiet guy so I don't mind him, really. Except at night he moans out the names of the recently deceased and I dream of people I've never met before. I cry for them during ceremonies I attend in only my underwear.

The women I have loved are dead. I cry louder than their mothers, who are dressed in black and wear bonnets. They hate me because I am more dramatic. I cry at night and wake up with my eyes closed shut. I think I'm blind and keep my eyes shut for the rest of the day.

Yesterday feels like two days ago. Now is not now. I've been biting the end of my pencil for years. The consummate thumb sucker. It is moldy and wrinkled. Smells of self. Take it out only when I'm ready to hitchhike to the next town where memory does not live. I've been soaked through, spin cycled, left out to dry and lost all my color.

I dream that all the faucets are leaky. I crouch beneath them and cannot fix the overflow. I dream that I have a small child. She follows me to each sink, crying out how afraid she is of drowning. Her own eyes flood with salt. I dream of a young girl I loved in high school. Only I didn't love her. Only told her so. She was in my bedroom again and I made sure to close all the blinds before we made love, afraid to see shame tattooed on my skin. Soon all the city will be drowned. I sweat at night and wake up, washed up in the sand of my regret, in the middle of nowhere, untouched.

Coming Home

I am trying to remember the exact pitch of my mother's young voice
as she cried out—*chicles, chicles*—earning pennies in the *Plaza Municipal*.

I am trying to remember the sheen of my father's skin as he cut sugarcane,
the sweat of hours glowing on his body several shades darker than the soil itself.

So that now, I might take the box of gum from my mother's hand
and reach out for my father's wrist to take the machete from his.

So that I can lead them, across time, across land to the house
they will build, cinder block by block and let them walk across

the tile they will lay, square after square, and introduce the children
they will bear, boy after boy after boy after boy. The only house

they can afford built on a dirt road three toll-booths south of Tijuana.
Or this: a simpler truth. About how as a thirty-year old man I'll return

home, though no one has called it that in years, to a house covered
in lightweight blankets of dust, where the termites have done the work

of forgetting and what remains clings to ceiling corners like spider webs.
Now, with a broom held firmly in my hand I try to sweep the last silence

from a house long abandoned, like a child waiting for his parents to return.

Conversations With My Father

I sit across from my father in a *Chapultepec* restaurant and in our silence it dawns on me, how my father with his thin nose, pale skin, and white peppered beard, would have rode alongside the conqueror Cortez on horseback, and how because of my dark skin my father would have killed me without so much as a word between us. We eat in silence while the radio blares mariachi whose lyrics I do not understand when my father, for no reason, begins to tell me about his life... nineteen years old, I look nothing like my father, have lived nothing like this man who, at age seven, swam the Rio Grande, who every summer went home to cut sugarcane, who was raised without a father, and at sixteen drove across an entire country without license, without insurance, without citizenship. Yet I want to be like him. I want to build with bare hands as he does at the age of sixty. I want to hear the hollow beat of a hammer against drywall, to smell like paint and paint remover for days till the scent becomes dizzying. I want to understand the solitude my father endures while working, to know work so hard the varicose veins bulge from my legs until they bleed, and I want my back to hurt like his from a day spent erecting a second story with no help from anyone. Here at this table I realize how easy it is for a Mexican man to blame salsa or a spicy jalapeno for the tears building up below his eyes.

It was in an apartment on the corner of Primrose and Main, that my father, my brother, and I, learned to live without my mother. I remember how I hated my father working so hard, how he woke up at five in the morning to get ready, to cook us all breakfast, drop us off at school to spend hours in traffic to open his store in downtown LA. I remember how he cooked us dinner many times after work, the only father I knew who cooked, who wasn't afraid to work over the stove with all four burners going at once, grilling *carne asada*, *chuletas de puerco*, *frijoles de la olla*, and *arroz con elote*, who would pick up the dishes after we had eaten and wash them, work my father's father never did, and I remember how, intentionally, I never thanked him.

One night he came into my room,
the light from the hallway behind him.
He sat beside me quiet for a while and began to tell me

the worst thing in his life:

your mami says she doesn't want to be with me anymore

and he began to cry, his body shook, and I held him
like I know he would have held me, held him like a man would
hold a son, and yet I could not believe my father was crying, this man
who I had never seen cry before, and did not see cry that night,
because we sat holding one another in the new darkness.

Insomnia

I've only two dollars in my pocket
and the little leftover bits of tobacco
from two cigarettes smoked long ago
—my nightly vice before going to bed.
Sleep evades me, and restless in this dark hour,
I realize everything I want in this world costs too much.
For years, all I've desired is a new city.
Where the streets names mean
nothing and no one knows me.
I've dreamed up the small apartment, its walls
bare until I can afford the 40 inch TV,
its colored hues pushing back the darkness,
until its voices finally inhabit my dreams.
But now, in my new apartment, with everything
I want or need, I find myself alone. More than anything,
I want a woman who might love me profusely.
This is not the answer. I've no spare change for the heart.

Yesterday afternoon, waiting for the #1 bus,
I watched a man ride his bike down Main St.
and noticed from a distance how his erect body,
moving from left to right, pushed down hard
on the pedals—every muscle in struggle.
Shirtless, his skin was baked the color of homelessness
and on his head he wore a dirt bike helmet.
As he came closer, suddenly the sound of metal scraping
against concrete, his back rim tireless. The sound trailing
off as he moved down the street. Suddenly, it's clear to me
that I have no real knowledge of true want.

Masa

She keeps her nails clipped short,
otherwise masa builds and though the palms
of her hands are soft she is afraid she will never be able
to love a man, or that, a man will never
love her because her fingertips have become hard
& coarse after years of flipping tortillas over a comal,
and she believes, naively, that young girls should
have pretty hands and although hers are not
worn by age she believes them to be ugly.
She kneads the mass of masa in her hands
to the right consistency, knowledge
obtained from years of practice and begins
to tear off smaller pieces, shaping them into
round little balls, secretly caressing them as if
she held the privacy of a man within her hands.
She places them in the press, and gently works
the lever until the tortilla is flat and ready to be
cooked. She throws them on the iron, waiting
patiently until they begin to brown & bubble
and the unmistakable aroma fills the air.
Here at this taco stand, where the dogs meet
daily to find bits of pity, bits of meat, she serves
these silent men who come hungry and humbled
after their work, men who do not ask but demand
more food, each finger another taco. Though she
is young she has noticed how hunger enters their eyes,
how they look at her breasts and stare at her
hardened nipples as if they were the windows
to her soul, men who would not care about her
hands or her hardened fingers or her heart,
and though she has occasionally seen a man
who sparks the hope of love in her soul she
realizes she would continue to flip tortillas
and make meals, and tend children, and she
does not want this, now or ever. Her only
escape while working is to cross that vast
plain of her imagination, sometimes allow
herself to be loved by a man whose use of words
is like poetry: sweet Spanish whispered in her ear.

After-School Basketball

“so many silent spaces, bereft, like schools in summer.”

After Auschwitz - C.K. Williams

Only it's winter and the school children are gone. All the classrooms with their lights turned off, desks bare, their chairs tucked tightly underneath. The yard empty.

I walk the long corridor to the main office to make copies of attendance rosters and homework logs—the tedious tasks of after school—when I hear the steady echo of a bouncing basketball and laughter. Curious, I take a detour to the playground and see the shadows of young boys playing basketball, and then, the large shadow of a father. I watch the shadows of these young boys jump on the back of their father, a man I know nothing about, except for the few times I have called him in my broken Spanish to tell him his boys have misbehaved.

All semester, I have seen them struggle. Rosendo, the oldest, held back two years, does not like to do homework and instead cracks jokes in class. Julio, the most apt at schoolwork, tells me he secretly wants to be a magician and shows me his tricks when he is sent to my office. Homer, the youngest, is sweet but is prone to fits of rage during football and often sits on the field in protest, refusing to move while the game plays around him.

I watch this father play a simple game with his boys at this late hour when rules don't matter—their shrieks of joy, their happiness; one moment of pure love. I walk back to my office to finish my work, about to cry.

June Bugs and Mosquitoes

After the lights went out, as my brother and I tucked ourselves below several blankets, trying to keep out the cold and keep in our childhood dreams, a mosquito would pass our ears just as our small bodies became heavy with sleep, or a lazy june bug would grace the ceiling of our room, and afraid it might kamikaze-dive into our sleeping mouths or the mosquito might sting our closed eyelids, we quickly grabbed flashlights, picked up from our bedsides our homemade stuffed, dirty sock fly swatters, and in the shadows and dark places of our room we would search for, then kill, these nighttime fears. Later, as the sun slowly crept into our room and we wiped open our eyes, we would dress as if we had all week to get ready for school, eat from chipped cereal bowls cheap Corn Flakes our father would purchase, gather our empty backpacks, and kiss my mother goodbye to walk the mile it took us to get to school. Sometimes, though, we never made it all the way. On the corner of our block, because of some emptiness we could not understand, my brother and I began to cry. We would run back home with our backpacks flapping behind us and kiss and hug my mother goodbye again. As we wiped our tears on her sleeve, held her as if we were leaving forever, she would take pity on our pleading faces and let us stay home for the day while she finished getting ready to go off to work.

A Bit of Rain

Finally, the rain, with its little tap dance on the roof of my car, & the trees outside in such a frenzy. I watch students horde out the front gate, each of them with an umbrella or hooded sweater, pushing towards the cars lined unevenly along the curb, exhaust rising in fat clouds to welcome them from the rain. I wait for my niece, wait for the precise moment I spot her in the crowd, big-eyed and bright, wait for her to open the car door and smile as she says *Hi Tío*, the perfect pitch of fifteen.

When she was younger, she was obsessed with all things delightful, and one weekend came into the kitchen to ask me for a jar. She came back later and in its hollow space: some dirt, some grass, a small daisy & a butterfly. *Isn't it pretty*, she asked, its wings bright blue, more brilliant than any horizon I had ever seen. Together we poked holes in the lid, *so that it can breathe*, and she placed the jar on the kitchen counter, and stared at it for hours, pleased. When she left for the week, the jar stood on that counter and each time I passed it I noticed how the butterfly's wings expanded ever so slightly, like breath itself, and each day I was tempted to set it free.

But that was years ago. When she was only seven. And what was I to tell her about the butterfly kept in a jar? About how its color eventually faded and died. How was I to say goodbye to her, finally, when I moved away and lost so many years of her life? I wait for her to fasten her seatbelt so we can travel down the street to the 15 and later the 60, to my small apartment where she will work on her geometry and eat the sour watermelon candy I keep on the kitchen table, especially for her. In the car we talk and watch the rain somewhere between drizzle and downpour. I ask about the boy she crushes on secretly from the back of her Spanish class. A boy she has never spoken to but watches from her desk, because, she says, he is beautiful. Today, unlike any other day, she begins to sing along with the radio and I watch the rain fall against the windshield, the hundred-pupils quietly watching the world. This is enough, I think.

Ash

When children know nothing of snow
they dig in their thin pockets for change
and ask the woman pushing her cart for a *raspado*.
She works the metal scraper over a large block of ice
and with her other hand, grabs a styro-foam cup
and pushes the already-melting mound into the open mouth.
Every crystal is as white as the clouds passing above.
When they sit on the stoop to slurp the sweetness
their lips reveal everything: the green color of limes,
red strawberries, the blue of the stringy sky above
—nothing is as it seems. Today, the sky is filled with soot
and most of California is burning in the distance.
What falls from the sky, covers the sidewalks, and piles
onto the cars parked along the street is something *like* snow.
But no children run outside to roll snowmen, no child
lays down in a lawn, his or her worn coats wet with moisture,
to form angels. Not one packs snowballs into their fist
to throw at the kids across the street. Everything is quiet.
I sit on the porch beside my girlfriend and we watch ash fall,
covering everything in a soft gray. She has lived on this block
all her life and has never seen snow. The first time I saw it fall
I was only five and living in Texas. I begged my mother to let me play
outside, and after she wrapped me in several layers she let me out.
I did not play, I tell my girlfriend. I was convinced snow
was a kind of miracle, and I tell her how I kneeled down
to carefully scoop several handfuls of snow
into my mouth, and how my tongue,
for the rest of the day, kept burning.

A Thirteen-year-old Boy Should Never Pity His Father

unless that father lives alone in his van
after being laid off from a graveyard shift

at Northrup, and at night pisses into an empty
two-liter bottle and in the early hours of the morning

—the same hour the boy gets up for school—
takes that bottle and slowly pours it out

along the red curb where the van is parked,
drops of urine spotting his pant legs,

a ticket slipped beneath the wiper blade,
already wrinkled with dew, the familiar

goddammit escaping his lips, echoing
along the empty sidewalk. Again,

he knows that he'll have to move,
searching for another street, another

space, beneath the constant hum of a street
lamp that makes it almost impossible to sleep.

Miles away, his son drags from his room
the blanket he'll use to make a make-believe cockpit

beside the sofa, in the living room—no pillow, no mattress—
just a flashlight gripped tightly in his hand,

to be left on all night, while he dreams of flying
the jets his father built, even though he thinks

his father would disapprove of being afraid of the dark.

No Such Thing as the Tooth Fairy

As a boy, I never told my father I had a loose tooth.
Instead, I hid apples in my pocket before going to school.
Bit into them to dislodge the bone. Or in downtown LA
I asked for fruit cups filled with coconut.

The alternatives were the metal jangling of my father's tool box
as he rummaged through wrench and hammer
to find the needle-nose pliers he would put in my mouth
to pry the tooth—the tinny feel of steel in my mouth
before the pain rushed in.

Or tying string around my tooth, the other end tied to a doorknob,
the care with which he wrapped the tooth before slamming the door,
my tooth flying out of my mouth like a wild fish jumping out of a river of blood.

Los dientes nunca duermen

Simplemente seguen cantando
la misma triste canción de diente
molienda contra diente, la música
de la boca que nunca cesa.

Toda mi vida he tallado idioma
de piedra, y observó el exceso
caer como polvo en el piso en perfecto silencio.
Yo adoro a palabras como ídolos
sabiendo que son paganos y mortal.

Los pequeños trozos de hueso que trago
durante la noche son los pequeños fragmentos
de la muerte, y en la mañana
me despierto muriendo de hambre.

Teeth never sleep

*they simply continue singing
the same sad song of tooth
grinding against tooth, the music
of the mouth that never ceases.*

*All my life I have carved language
from stone, and watched the excess
fall like dust to the floor in perfect silence.
I worship words like idols
knowing they are pagan and mortal.*

*The little bits of bone I swallow
during the night are the small
fragments of death, and in the morning
I wake up dying of hunger.*

Tacos de Lengua

I tease the tongue
from the cave of my mouth

I tease the tongue from
the cave of my mouth

I tease the
tongue from
the cave of my mouth

wrap my body
in cool slick goosebumps
snaking across my skin

taste pore and salsa

machete the meat

and taste everything

I have ever eaten.

Perfect Sleep

Mostly it's been cold since you've gone
& the nights seem excruciatingly long.
Four o'clock in the morning and I cannot find sleep.
Outside the trees are absolutely still—not a branch,
leaf, or limb moving. Which is, I suppose, a kind of sleep.
For hours I study them as if they might finally reveal
something. Nothing. Only my own breath rising
into the night. Awake, too. What we perfected,
finally, was not truth, not passion, not love, but sleep.
How many nights did we spend doing absolutely nothing?
Except, discovering all the infinite and intricate ways two
bodies can hold one another: one night your head nestled
between my arms; or my hands dug in between your thighs;
or my fingers cupping the warmth of your left breast; or your
toes, those little orbs of flesh, pressed softly against my lips;
our hands becoming entwined magically in the night; our
bodies finding not an inch between them when we slept.

One night I dreamt of my grandmother who has been
dead for several years. In the dream I was crying, asking
her for help. *Ayudame, Abuelita. Ayudame, Abuelita*
I cried out. And I woke up crying around midnight,
sobbing so much like a child. She woke too and asked me
what was wrong. I don't remember what I said,
if I said anything at all. What I do remember
is that she held me through the night until I had finished
weeping, and I fell asleep clinging to her body, my head
nestled between her breasts. The most perfect sleep. But,

here's the simple truth: a woman I have loved
for more days than I can remember is in love, now,
with another man and is asleep at this hour in his bed,
across the city—her gentle breath warming the back
of his neck. Not my memories. Not my love, None of this
makes the slightest bit of difference. Mostly, it's been
cold since you've gone. And I can't sleep without you.

Too Much Sky

Tonight, I saw the most beautiful night I've seen
in years. It was the kind of night before rain.
The sky dark and the clouds several shades darker,
so that it wasn't patches of clouds in the sky,
but rather, patches of sky—the night struggling through darkness.
Yesterday night turned twenty-eight years old.
Became, because it happened just like that: a flip
of the switch, the second hand hitting twelve.
Now I've been told many times—by older men
mostly—not to compare myself to others, not to think
about life too deeply, not to side too heavily with petty sentimentalities...
but I wonder what I've accomplished in this life.
I've been kind in most my dealings with people.
And...so what? Driving home from work tonight, staring
into the horizon, I was overcome. I'll tell you now,
with a bit of embarrassment, I began to cry.
Maybe, you might understand all this
— how true beauty, beyond aesthetics,
can make you hurt, how you might feel
so small beneath too much sky.

In the Dark

We lay in bed next to one another when she tells me she is pregnant. And I imagine a small body, tight as a fist, floating in her belly.

Ángel, she says, I'm not ready to have a baby. I rise up and sit on the edge of our bed, cover my face with my hands. The boy in me still believes a man should not cry in front of a woman, even in the dark.

She sits beside me and searches for my face. Gently, she peels my hands away, finger after finger. She places her hands in mine, the small cocoon: warm, wet & empty.

Falling Asleep

A lemon falls from a tree
—the first half of a heart beat.

Then the rattle of a neighbor's AC.

A car chokes on the cold of early morning,
wiper blades cut through mist.

The soft cries of my mother in the next room,
who hasn't dreamt of her dead mother in months,
who hasn't dreamt of her dead brother in years.

Nothing disappears, I'm convinced, but simply lingers.

The lamp turned off. Eyes shut. And still, hints of light.

All the world is asleep and I dream the flesh of ghosts:

—the tiny, womb-wet body of an unborn child asleep in my palm
—my grandmother's thumb rubbing the sign of the cross along my forehead.

Finally, silence, though I have feared this all my life.

I tell myself, over and over again:
Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

But I can't stop the quiet.

The Purpose of a Poem

Downtown Riverside

Everything is a mystery: the marble statue, warm still, hours after the sun has set; the filaments of streetlights still flickering, whispering in a soft moan, all through the night. Even the leaves in the middle of the plaza do a little dance while no one is watching.

I sit in front of the water fountain for hours, always looking for patterns, and discover only the cool mist spreading across my face. There are certain parts of the spirit that must be dead. I watch a young boy run across the water, the sheer delight of him, as he shrieks to his mother and father, his hair dark and matted, his laughter spreading like an echo across memory.

I have failed to remember most of my life. Shadows, and darker still, the pit in my stomach. But the poem serves its purpose. There are things that won't be forgotten. The leaf, the soft steps of a child running through water, the warmth of marble I was tempted to press my cheek against but did not.

Untitled

after John Murillo after Larry Lewis

Buried in a shoebox beneath my grandmother's bed,
for more years than I have been alive, I read the worn
and yellowed postcards my great-grandfather sent her,
in search of metaphor. Within the beautifully intricate
coils of a cursive long extinct I discover the ghost of a man
who abandoned his children in search of words.

I remember a summer spent in a cemetery in Progreso, Mexico
searching for his grave, his final poem supposedly etched
into his tombstone. Beneath the shirt soaking heat of the Yucatan,
my shadow laid down in the shallow graves as I recanted the names of the dead

—Alvaro Yepes, Humberto Estrada, Armando Velasquez—

their bones resurrected after years of rain and erosion,
never my great-grandfather's name, Narciso Palma, never his bones.

I've been told that he died alone, in a dilapidated shack,
his body wrapped in the cocoon of a hammock, the fluids
from his body, mostly cheap tequila, puddled beneath him.

Sometimes, I feel, I may not be strong enough for poetry
and spend nights imitating the scrawl of my great-grandfather,
my hand trembling across the page, these hands, that sometimes are not my own.