

A HARD WORLD FOR LITTLE THINGS

By

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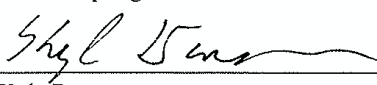
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ABSTRACT

The world is composed of little things: beads of water in a hurricane, particles of dust before a drought. Nature's violence begins on such a small scale, all we can see is the aftermath — the miniscule becoming magnificent. *A Hard World for Little Things* is a study of individual lenses and the intricate distortions that shape our lives. As the environment creates and destroys itself, we do the same, constantly, adjusting our views (of the world and ourselves) in search of a clear focus; one that will allow us to see the storms, the rainfall, and our hands as we catch each tiny drop.

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AN EMBER ON THE BRINK OF SPARKING

When I burned my hand, I remembered
the lake, and the sticks we used
to hook bits of campfire and pull them out,
tearing flame from flame and waving them
through the cold.

Memories live in objects, Proust said.
My memories live in accidents
all around me: ladies in waiting.
But I can't hold onto them.

To live in the past and the present
is to be an ember on the brink of sparking.

I tell myself, inhale. Draw, with your breath:
the room, the city, the whole world,
into and through you until it's all space,
and you don't matter. Wait, I say,
for every thought you've had to combust.

THE STORMS

i.

Dustbowl Noise

Between storms, the starving jackrabbits scream
in their pen, where we beat them with clubs,
shovels, rakes, and pound them into the ground
they've ripped raw. They come in thousands,

pouring from the hills, eating the ghost of our wheat.
We herd them every Sunday. Shut the gates. Strike.
Their bones crack in mine; pain and panic

gnaw my ears. At night, I sit on Dad's sharp knees,
staring at the ceiling. The wind moves through every beam –
a parasite causing the wood to groan.

A storm's on the horizon this morning,
just above the trees. I toss a bushel of legs
from the rabbit pen, and the birds fall silent.
I look everywhere for them, but what I'm really trying to find
are the rabbits I love.

For now, I wait for dad to come back in,
and for the rearing dust storm to land
and gather us up – that rough and crashing cloud,
our Lazarus earth, returning.

ii.

Old Science

The storms rolled our farm dead –
that's what I thought. But I had a watermelon

out in the field, and it was caught in the dirt
that shot between our crop and the sky,

barreling through a sideways tunnel
of wind and static electricity.

That dirt was alive – everything was. Everything
was friction in the storm, and my watermelon

was burned black as tar from the voltage. Sometimes
when the dust storms crash over the land

and the clouds move through our dead
crops, snapping the grass, I see her:

an old witch so tall, her head's above the sun,
the hem of her skirt brushing sparks through the corn.

iii.

Sugar and Turpentine *Texas, 1935*

The black dust blows from Kansas, the red
from Oklahoma. The grey dust comes
from Colorado into my mouth, and I cough
my lungs raw. In bed with my sisters, the wind
knocks through my head, hot and clumsy,
while mom's hands feed me sugar and turpentine
to sooth the phlegm – the only medicine she has.
My brain is packed. All I can see is her crisscrossing sleeves
in the dark, then horses, rogue off a merry-go-round.

iv.

Black Sunday, 1935

Dad grabs the rafters, and the wind whips so hard
his arms move with the roof, up and down.
He puts us by the car and tells us not to move.
We hold onto the doors, which we can't see,
and feel for our dogs, who we can't hear.
Our neighbor stops his car behind us, his whole family
crying, him dipping his handkerchief into the radiator
and holding it over his mouth. His eyes will burst
if they open wider. His hands claw the dirt in his face
as it flows in black rivers through the wrinkles
of his cheeks. We're afraid with and of him.
My dad comes back, shoves us in the car, shoves
our neighbor into his, and tell him, hush,
we'll bumper you home.

GROWN-UP COUSINS AT A FAMILY DINNER

We're all at the "kids" table in the living room,
pushing the food on our plates into sculptures:

"It's world peace!" I say of my coleslaw,
"It's communism!" Lindsay notes of her peas,

and we can't eat because we're hurting laughing,
and we can't breathe because we're delirious,

and we don't talk about being married, or Sam's unemployment,
because the so-hard laughter of our childhood is all we have

in common these days, and it's so thinly spread
over Grandma's silver, we don't know how to talk to each other

in a weighted way, in a way that says the game
of shutting each other in the dark of Grandpa's office

with the dead elk's head on the wall and seeing who
could be not-scared the longest, and not scream, and not come out,

is the game we're playing tonight. Brian's back from Iraq.
We don't talk about the end of the war we never talked about.

But we do talk about pie. Our parents aren't done eating,
but we want dessert, so we hurry them along whispering "pie,"

louder and louder, hoping they'll get the hint, and Sam
comes back from the bathroom with no idea what we're doing

and we tell him on the count of three we'll yell, "Pie!"
and we count one, two -- "PIE!" And we laugh so hard

we're crying. We're crying because once, we laughed so hard.

THE COLOR OF PURITY

Aunt Jack wears white. She has an Irish nose
and a weak jaw, half-shadowed and lovely.
She looks like powder as the lace falls
off her shoulder, and she lowers her eyes
like she knows you're watching.

She's about to laugh. She'll stay somber
if you like. She'll do anything you like,
but she still wants to laugh. Mostly because

you can't have her. Aunt Jack wears white
because she's immune to it. She wears it
like the fur of a dead animal, and after you leave,
when she puts it on again,
it will be a goddamn coronation.

DIRT

Her arms are sun-slapped, busy,
painfully laced with new muscles
and last night's dirt. The strain is dry;
her fingers crack and plunge
with the butter churn. Her grip is as tight
as the frontier's, and as she sweats, she pulls
and stabs. She does the wash. A dark weight
is in the crown of her head, and she thinks
it's the dirt from her husband's clothes.
The washboard creaks as she pushes
and tugs the linens clean. In the cabin,
she watches a spider drown in dishwater.
She flicks it with strange hatred, then wipes
the rim of her daughter's plate, thinking
love, and only love. Her wrists are leather.
They drown each time they dip into the basin,
with each of fall of her husband's ax
outside in the dirt. The weight in her head
is a dishrag wrenched dry, a cold and constant twist.

BEADS ON A WIRE

Let the bright dust of the prairie be anchored
until I've seen enough. Weigh it down so I can think
about it; the way it moves, the place it meets
the clouds, how it steals the blue tones
of the mountains and makes them orange,
blending land and sky into a solitary shape:
a heat-cracked ruffian I can recognize. Let me look at it
the way I look at memories – slowly. *Our house
in the foothills, the sun on your fingernails.*
Give me time to make it mean something,
let it spook me. I'll spin time into a point, and thread it
through the wildflowers, coyote calls, all my days
in the hot grass, like beads on a wire. Hold them still.

FROM THE PLANE WINDOW

The mountains are legs and arms under a blanket,
and I want to smooth them out before I leave –
run my finger over them and push them back
into the ground for safe-keeping.

I'll gather the Sangre de Christos, Colorado,
Kansas, Missouri, and drag them with me
until they form a perfect little ball of land.

I'll tell the pilot, *keep going*, and with my other hand,
I'll lean out the window across the aisle
and grab all of Europe. I'll switch off: left hand, right hand,

until my arms are full of every place
I've ever imagined myself being. I'll juggle them,
or maybe just set them in my lap,
staring at my reflection in the cities --
the cardinal directions rolled up on top of each other,
the Blue Mosque poking through Tucson.

DORMANT IN HUERFANO COUNTY, CO

Arms in a 'D' above her head, she dances with the sunlight looped
between her elbows, thinking it's ballet. Her little feet twist

into the old foundation of Grandpa's house, sliding through the dust
and skeleton walls. All that's left are the homestead's roots:

a square of bricks in the heat. The grind of her shoes send pieces of them
back into the wild, and her arms replace the walls as she reaches

for a ceiling impossibly high. She dances for *Huerfano*, the orphan neck
of a volcano that never erupted, squatting behind her on the plains.

She thinks she's a woman here -- a thought so thorough, she can see
out the adult eyes she's imagined. Her little face molds itself from the inside,

forming features no one else can see. Her legs, in pretend maturity,
raise her further in this moment than she's ever been from the prairie.

It's a private performance. She twists herself into manic adulthood
while the weeds take hold of her family's past, taking it all down,

churning the farm into baked mud. She doesn't know decay. She
will dance for the sun, the wind, the brown grass, until she tires of momentum.

She'll face the butte that nearly burst millennia ago, stop, and bow like a man:
one arm behind her back, the other curved in front, holding herself in place.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

That old tree has an appetite
for children, you tell me. You point
out the window, and I'm distracted
by the white mark on your fingernail.
You get those from lying, Grandpa.

We eat green chili, and even though
my back is to the window, I find the tree
in your glasses. It moves when you do,
taking up both your eyes, giving you leaves
where your lashes should be. Your lip
pulls itself into a fish-hook, and I laugh
because that's the way Grandpas smile.

The tree is black because the sun's
behind it, down in the mountains.
I want to make sure it's not the shadow
of another tree, one that's also bent
and rough, with wild knobs and limbs
like twisted beaks. It's real, and its mouth
is near the bottom, half-closed. My mouth
is stretched sideways, like a dog just turned mean.

VOICES, 1943

This is darkness in Saipan. The sun sets
and takes the earth. I can't see the road.
I can't see Collier behind the wheel,
or my own hands rumbling
on the dash, in the jungle, in the heat.
Behind us, villagers dye silk
with malaria pills. The night coils, tight
and quivering, bug songs burning
every nerve. We stop the jeep. We're back-to-back,
saying *you shoot, I shoot*, ready to fire
through bird calls, frog croaks,
whatever rides the dark. There's a song
in the air, I think. Yes -- it's in the leaves.
It's in my childhood, and it's in Collier,
who twists his neck to find the notes. *Jesus loves me*,
sings the jungle. The song is sweet –
a human chorus, we're sure. We take aim.
Out of the dark that numbs our eyes,
a line of children streams
from the bushes, their sleeves whispering
my arms. *He will wash away my sin*
and let His little child come in.
We're frozen where we sit. Trembled hollow.
Their innocent voices, nearly massacred, slip
and dive through the trees, moving with the wind.
We stay still sunrise sets the island glowing.

UNDERNEATH

We want the kind of fear that puts a stop
to our whole selves; that bright kind,
the kind people go looking for
on their own dare, just to see
what it's like to be completely raw.
That kind. That cold kind under the stairs
where we count the cans of green beans
on Great Grandma's shelves, aged
and dusted with a farm life we were never
a part of. Down here in the cellar,
we imagine dust storms, aproned women
crying on the grass, and animals
we've never touched. What we wouldn't give
for a tornado now – for the skies of Oklahoma
to come roaring through the ceiling
while we hold out our hands to catch them. For now,
my brother tells me stories about a ghost hound
while I jump off the side of the stairs
onto concrete, trying to hurt a little bit more,
because I can, because I'm safe.

THE AFFIRMATION OF CHAOS

We look for life in the Milky Way. The ozone,
someone said, is thin in the mountains,
so we give our faces to the sky, and lean
back from the campfire, in opposite directions.
Beautiful green-eyed Cory and I form
a V -- not like the flight pattern of geese,
but like a Roman numeral V -- a tidy number
for tidy little hand-drawn stars. In real life,
they never have five points. In real life,
someone said, the stars we know and love
don't even exist anymore.

The sky is caught above the pines, framed
by their tips in the shape of a hand. While I wait
for it to fall, I watch two stars switch places;
their move is sly and final, and Cory doesn't see it.
I've dared myself to witness this wilderness,
this proof that I am as unknowable as the universe.
Cory ties his gaze to mine, holding me still.
"You only think you saw it" he says,
"because it's what you wanted to see."

THE RIGHTING MOMENT

A rogue wave, a massive swell
of two colliding water walls
doubled in height, broke
the *Italian Gold*'s steel hull
in half. Today, the storm
sends waves in all directions --
a delirious ocean.

It's a Blue Northern. A sky
fluorescent, concrete wind
knocking the tops off waves
in the middle of the sea -- waves
that block the sun. They land
on themselves like bombs.

Crests as high as boats are long
can flip vessels upside-down. This
is the kind of storm where wind
is water. People drown in the air,
their pitch-pulled lungs flipped
end over end, trying to breathe salt.

In a storm like this, everything depends
on the righting moment: when gravity
sets leaning ships upright again.
It's the torque that keeps each vessel
balanced on the sea. We all have one.

I wait for mine at night. Rising water
is the worst part of my ugliest dreams --
the waves before they break, swelling
strong and landing somewhere, someday.
All I see is the approach.

CALLING

Seals have their favorite places -- certain rocks
in the sea. I call them with music.

One stretches to my violin, tail pointing east,
nose reaching west until his body flattens. It's not enough --

I want them all. My last note sinks through my legs, my feet,
through the diving fissures in the cliff, until my song lies

on the waves. Here's another one: his head looks like a man's
in profile as it leads his shoulders out of the water.

He's heard me play before. Each time, he lifts himself
further from the Atlantic. I call three more:

One drifts to the left, another to the right. One stays put;
he lifts the sun's light off the water

and onto his own skin, the same color as the sky.
I stitch air and tide together, dragging my bow

down, then up; raising the seals, pulling the clouds.
I'm the tune. The only sound for miles

is my four strings, setting the sun. Alone
on the cliffs, I cast vibrations through the dark.

GHOSTS IN THE ORCHARD

She tasted ghosts in her sunburned little mouth.
When she passed the shed, all rained on,
she saw the quiet of their dance;

they were in the water.
Some of them slid in drops
down the window, eating dust.
They turned white, stretching
into messy rivers that leapt the sill

and broke. She called them with her fingernail.
She touched the glass, a little bit,
and they seeped into her skin. They ran

with rapid elegance. She caught the still ones
like this: her finger waited just below them,
so close, and they came to her
because she asked.

FIRE FISHING

We're fishing -- that's what we call it. My brother and I face each other across the campfire, and our cousins, Sarah and Tommy, are at our sides: Dunnington, Romero, Dunnington, Romero. We work like magnetic beads, holding each other in place as the wind throws frigid air, skimmed from Lake O'Haver, into our faces. Tommy's hood, puckered tight around his head, glows red and mean as he leans over the flames. When he twists the stick he's been roasting, I twist mine too, because fishing for fire is a competitive sport. We all want to rip a piece of light from the logs, popping hot, so we can hold it above our heads and wave our names into the air. It's self preservation; it's taking fire from fire, me from us. When I catch one, it's a shark, and for one beautiful minute, it's not communal, and I've branded the stars with my own name.

GOOGLE EARTH

My old house is in a bubble, arriving
like the Good Witch of the North.
There's Charlie, the car I've driven
1,442 miles away from you, still parked
as though I were home. I zoom out,

and watch like a prairie hawk who's feet
have left my roof, as the house becomes
a neighborhood, the neighborhood
a whole blue-collar town.

It takes three seconds.
I follow Highway 50, the little vein
that shoves me past the Safeway
you were so impressed with, the retail job I hated,
and the school where we shared an iPod,
mourned Dan Fogelberg.

I take a right, and land on your porch.
The trees are brand new saplings,
and your brother's car is in the driveway.
If I were really there, Bear would be barking.
This is as close as I can get,
so I zoom out, and out, until

the distance between you and me
is the length of my hand.

LOOKING TOO FAR INTO A WATER DROP

The distortion doesn't bother me –
the way the world twists and shrivels
in a tiny liquid dome. Everything inside it fits,
squeezed and doubled into a fraction
of an inch. I watch miles of land
stretch off a leaf's tip and slam
into a puddle, and count halved drops that survive
and multiply like earthworms. What bothers me,
sends a frozen mass through my spine,
is the way these drops sink
into my skin, entirely. They're pulled
to me, hurtled toward my still hands,
sliding off their downward course
to shove my reflection back into me.
I feel them spread, and think about
the way they absorb each other like cannibals.

BOAT STABILIZER

I'm perfectly hinged,
raising my wings in the water
to sink easy, without resistance
when the boat tips forward.
I'll keep you steady
when the waves lift the hull
up again, and the weight
of the ocean pushes my bones
down. I'll make it very hard
for the storm to send you rolling.

Don't cut me loose again --
I'm doing well on this new chain
that keeps me hanging from the outrigger.
I promise to stay put, heavy against
the lunatic wind that once took me
dancing through a squall, sweeping me
into the wheelhouse windows,
where I sliced you good.
You torched the swinging links
of the chain I made wild. You threw me down
into the cabin, where I stayed for a long time.

THIS IS HOW I GET PLACES

My right foot is a conquistador, always
telling my left foot, "Vigilance is the bane
of momentum! Keep up!" and my left foot
beats a parallel path next to it, pulling me along,
following my right foot, because my left foot
can't make decisions. Turns and stairs are taken

only when the conquistador feels like it, so
my left foot gives up, pays no attention, no
attention at all, to where we're going or how
we'll get back. This arrangement worked until
yesterday. Yesterday my left foot stopped.

It pinned a leaf on the border of two sidewalk squares,
toes on one side, heel on the other, and it took a while
for the right foot to stop too; the right foot moved
only to vanquish, to beat and powder every mile
and say, "look how far I've gone!" So for a moment
it slammed on the ground over and over, not realizing
we weren't moving forward. Then it got mad.

It pointed west, and my left foot copied, but
it didn't leave the ground. The right foot pointed
south. The left foot pointed south. I pointed
south, and we kept turning in circles, faster
and faster until the leaf under my left foot
became liquid and dyed the sidewalk green.

The conquistador, glutton for destination, wrenched
my entire right leg forward, until the left foot was *en pointe*,
ready to summersault and bring the rest of me
crashing down. But it stayed put. The right foot was drawn
back like a relaxed rubber band, returning heel-first
and making quite a noise as it scraped along the concrete.

My feet were planted. I was like the U.N., useless
without cooperation. My left foot said,
"Stay here and wait for more beautiful leaves."
My right foot twitched and I kind of wanted
to let it take me forward and stretch the street behind me
until it grew so long I could safely say I had the biggest
collection of progresses in the world.

But I sat down, cross-legged, so that both feet

were facing up, and my brain couldn't distinguish one from the other. For the first time, I took note of where I was.

WALKING IN A DEPTHLESS SNOW

Every time I stop, I sink a little lower
in the snow, the sudden inches marking
the ease with which the land has swollen
under winter, and my awkwardness
on this unknowable ground. I may as well be standing
a thousand miles above my home, the familiar
garden paths. By frozen increments, I become
unnatural to the world. The pine I knew
when it was green has lost its needles.
Suddenly, in white, there are no edges, no points
on its limbs – it's only a bloated cast
of what it used to be. I am outside
this cold and sparkling arrangement
in which every plant and being has agreed
to be stilled. So, I pull a branch down hard,
stretch it as far as it will go, then release it,
and send a flock of magpies screaming.

FILM NOIR

She sees her own head reflect
in the TV screen, its shape encircling
three characters at once. She watches a man
with *hate* and *love* tattooed on his knuckles
hunt for a child, and she worries about the glisten
passed from his knife to her eyes -- she can feel
the blade in her pupils.

But it's a story. The child's arms are silver
and shadow-striped by the moon,
which shines so hard it pushes the shape
of the window across his bedroom, onto
the wall he faces. It's this he looks through
instead of the glass; in these panes, he can see
the fairytale he tells out loud, placing himself
in a castle across the world.

The window takes up the entire screen.
She leans closer to watch the boy's tiny body
disappear in the shadow of the killer's hat,
thinking it's exactly what adulthood looks like.
In the dark, she sits alone, quoting:
It's a hard world for little things.

SONG OF THE CIMARRON RIVER

It's the crash of water on granite: the tattered river song
you heard a lifetime ago, when it was constant as air.
That sound might have been an echo, then – your thoughts
and breath handed back to you through the frozen trees;
That was when the river sang one long note, exactly
how you wanted, and it was the water itself whose voice
wrapped around your heart – every single pump
of your pulse – and tied it to the forest. This is the Cimarron:
its cold and silver banks. This is what you knew. In winter,
the mountain air is cold enough to shatter, and fill your lungs
with frost, wind, snow -- all in the staccato beat
of cracking tree limbs, heavy with ice. You hear the song in pieces
now: a melody of memory. The river is voiced by rocks
and drowned branches, which catch the tune of Earth
and steer it through the water. You'll never hear the song
of your past – that steady chorus of rapids, because now
all you hear is the uneven rush of snowmelt
against a stone here, a log there. Never the water on its own,
in that deep and constant lullaby. Now, you wonder
what would happen if the river fell and never landed,
never touched anything. What would that sound like?

BY AND BY

*Farther along we'll know all about it.
Farther along we'll understand why.
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine.
We'll understand it all by and by.*

--Anonymous

i. The Ant

An ant jerked across the porch,
pulling a seed. Its legs rose and fell
thousands of times without sound,
or maybe with so much sound
that it became unnoticed over time --
all the legs of all the ants hitting
the ground created the tone of Earth.

ii. The House

In the grass, the old house lives backwards,
death to birth, slipping out of itself -- from nails
and glass back into lumber. It happens slowly.
Decay goes unnoticed until it's complete; no one
sees it while it moves. The house becomes land,
keeping to itself the small complexities of rot.

THE MAN

The man plants his feet
in a wide stance, turning himself
into an arrow aimed for Heaven.
He shoves his eyes into the sun,
lets them glow, then takes the light
down to the dirt, out to the fields.
He can place the sun anywhere,

even on the roof of the missing
farmhouse on the grass. He stitches
together the hard-landing years,
knowing the house had yellow curtains,
a constant vase of sunflowers, and a room
that inhaled his grandmother's first breath.

He sees it all behind his eyes
and feeds it to the open land. He's stared
at the past so long, it's imprinted on the backs
of his lids, and it leans out of the blackness
there, like the ghost of a flame
after it's looked at too long
and soaked into the retinas.

BONANZA

The rats are in the silver mines,
keeping the rot moving, pinning
the night under their claws.

On the road, they pass each other
in moonlight, braiding their footprints
and pulling darkness from the mines

into rows of sunken cabins --
slabs of mismatched wood,
nailed with haste in the glory days,
bowing under roofs of tin.

This is where the miners lived.
Here in the aspens, the soldier pines,
they dreamed between two cupped hands
of hills, and behind them were the mountains,
and in front of them, long, empty pages
of dry, flat land.

TRASH

A small plastic bag is stirred and spiraled with dead leaves
through the snow and into the sky -- not flung, but pulled

as though it were draining upward. It moves over iced apple trees
in c-shaped twists, east, then straight up, west, then up. The whole time,

it balloons with light. Then the earth inhales, calling it back slowly
to the very tip of the land, and branches hook the plastic so the wood

is sleeved in white. When it blows open, the bag holds a swath of the world
curled in its hollow body. The air, the snow, winter itself is scooped up,

and the wind is finally seen (can only be seen) in the swollen man-made wrinkles
of the bag, as it folds down toward the grass, blocking the moon for a split second.

MABLE DUNNINGTON, IN THE CANYON
(1917)

When they reach a patch of sun, they sit in the creek
without words. Mabel leans on her elbows,
and lets the light close her eyes. Her hands sink into mud
until she can't tell where she stops and the land begins;
Lena thinks they're one in the same. She wants this place
to know her like it knows Mabel, like it seems to know
everything that ever was. Her head swivels toward sleeping bats.
There are ghosts here, she thinks -- not of living things,
but of the earth itself. The canyon walls drip in red layers,
warming cattail clusters and vines that dangle like rags.
Mabel glides her fingers through the water so comfortably,
not even the minnows stir at her touch.

A TOURIST TRAP IN HANNIBAL

The underground gift shop had a back door
that opened into caves.

I carried *Huckleberry Finn* into the dark,
walking with Twain while you wondered
whose feet were on our roof.

Drips of rock
glistened in the tour guide's light.
We looked to our sides; the flashlight beam
couldn't catch anything in front of us --
there was nothing there to hold its circle.

Toms and Beckys
littered the red-brown walls,
carved sweetly with little hearts.
I spent a long time looking

for Mark Twain's initials,
before I remembered he'd changed his name.
I ran my fingers
where his had been.

You touched my arm, I flinched,
and you knew why it hurt.
We squinted in the warmish caverns,
just for a minute, then I led you
back into the day.

THE CLEMENS HOUSE, ON TUESDAY

I walk past every evening,
thinking how cleverly
the arches frame the windows.
If I had an excuse, or muffins,
I'd trot up the steps and knock.

We were neighbors.
I used to sit shoeless,
right there on the lawn,
with Livy and her Sam.

I made a pie when she died.
For the kids, mostly,
and for Sam I made jokes.
He laughed for my sake.
He never sounded so old
as when he laughed.

I gave up on baked goods
when he lost his little girl.
I didn't like to see him
looking the way he walked:
without purpose.

He's in there now,
alone, and there's no light
so I guess he's drunk.
He closed the curtains

days ago, but his shadow
burns through them, slumped
over his desk, and silent.

THIS IS NOT AN EXHIBIT

Everything's dead now: the plants, the trees, the bears too, I guess, because their old zoo pit has been a ghost collection for twenty-three years. This isn't on the map, and why would it be? This is not an exhibit. It's a section of the zoo my mother used to walk through on her way home from Catholic school. A dugout coliseum of sorts, cupped in Grandpa's part of town. *This is where they kept the bears.* I never saw them, but boy, did I see their claws in the safety rails -- iron spokes curled upward, keeping out, keeping in. This was a soup bowl of bears driven mad, and I don't know how many were here, or what species, but the caves in these walls are deep enough to hold all of us.

BISHOP'S CASTLE

The scaffolding is thin. Jim Bishop builds soaring trails
of wood and meshed steel so he can leap along the walls
of his castle. This web of his is built for strangers
to stand on -- to look down at spruces, up at turrets.

Inside, the stairs are fanned like a deck of cards,
circling through a tube of stone and icicles, up
to the throne room, which is color and light.
It's a room made for dancing -- more air than walls,
warmed with stained glass. Jim doesn't live here.

He sits on a gable, hammering a dragon's head,
whose neck stretches down to a fireplace inside,
coughing smoke. He hums. He curses.

He's wearing thin. While tourists roam the halls,
the castle stretches in his mind. He's released it
for forty years, stone by stone, and it's growing
every day; a thousand tons of rock become his skin.
His thoughts are glass, wood, and steel.

MADELINE ASTOR: LIFEBOAT MEMORIES
(April 16, 1912)

The air is caught in my nightdress, sending fresh pains
curling through my calves, telling me again that I'm frozen.
If I could be still, train my eyes on the stitched vines
trimming my sleeves, I could let myself be numb.

I could become smooth starlight stretching
from the sky to the sea, my reflection passed
back and forth, eternally, from Heaven to the Atlantic.
This is what I want: to dissolve into the elements
until I can't feel their teeth against my skin.
I inhale, holding the screams

from the ship inside my lungs, trying my best
to hide myself from the lives being ended,
from my own life, squeezed between the shoulders
of strangers. I can't tell if the calls from *Titanic*
are to me, or from me, because here,
my view dotted by bowing heads of curls,
I don't know whose life this is: "ours" or "mine."

I cover my ears, trying block any cry
that could be my husband's, or worse,
no cry of his at all. On the ship's half-sunken deck,
the dogs are circling; someone's let them loose,
and one of them, an airedale, is pacing,
a few steps left, a few steps right,
not like she's afraid, but like she's deciding.

IN A BEDROOM BY THE DOCKS

The wood creaks with the ocean,
and the sound moves along the walls
like a tongue. She steps in grooves
made by fishermen's wives,
who'd paced the splinters
from the floorboards. She waits
for him, for Sunday, when she'll sit
in a church with old captains
who know better. They'll sing
to his picture on the altar, while she watches
the horizon. All night she's awake, sliding
her feet through the dents, not feeling the cold
until sunrise bloodies the waves.

OUTBACK

Mulga trees look like tattered hands,
webbed in bed sheets and dust.
I saw one from the train
and thought of ants.

At White Cliffs,
I stayed in a room that roofed
botched song lyrics and drunken
Aussie toasts.

It was a hundred-and-six degrees,
but I never drank.

Kangaroos bobbed along the porch
in clunky silhouettes.
I wanted them to see me.
I would have smiled.

In the morning,
the desert turned orange.
Faded bushes smudged the horizon,
and nothing moved

but the proprietor.
He saw me and waved.

I shut the blinds.
I left the pub with one bag,
and sank into the sun that I hated.

SUNBLIND

(After Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*)

Squinting, the men in the boat
put down their oars.

They wished the sun would sink into the river,
and take the light from its surface
so at least something was dark.

Whiteness seeped into the bridges,
into the boat, out of their eyes
while they waited for the banks to shadow.

But the clouds blazed. The Maidenhead's arches
dipped, one, after the other, across the Thames
to both shores, stretching like a millipede

and rumbling. As the train crossed, the sky
yellowed, smearing steam over newly-revealed shapes,
clotted in the engine's shadow, shriveled from its height.

Lines, curves, edges, and ripples
came together in its massive silhouette,
and the men were spellbound in their boat,

shrinking in the sounds and the blackness
and the thunder of the train.

JANJAWEEED

I swallow years off women.
My teeth shave their feet away,
and the popping of skin and prayers
sounds like "refugee" in English.

They dream of burned houses.
When they awake, their sweat and mine
is rubbed with dirt into each other's clothes.
Every bone is loud, and sore, and camouflaged
as finally as their names.

I see a young girl draining
on her uncle's lap, and she feeds me
her memory: gun emplacements
circling her yard; a dried clump
of someone's skull, and a pair of sickly twigs
that are the same color as everything,
everything.

She'll parch herself until we share
the desert, then we'll kill each other
forever. I'm in her uncle's broken teeth.
I'm in the creases of her knuckles,
and the snap they make
as she unclenches.

HOSPICE

I wish I would have lied to you,
and told you I had a dream about Jesus.
I should have said that Jesus said, "Don't be afraid,"
or "Everything's okay," but the truth is,
God and clichés are two things I don't believe in.

I didn't let you lie enough.
You watched too much TV,
so your stories became someone else's
repeated plotlines -- you tried too hard to make them ironic.
I never helped you exaggerate.

One day you waved your hand like water,
and told me about a painting on the wall.
That ugly boat, you said, thrilled you.
You told me Grandma picked it out,
(or maybe you did), and you kept moving your hand
until it was at the same angle as the sails.

When I sat down, you grabbed me
and said, "I wanted to tell you I was nervous,
the first time I saw a tank."
I think you told me
about guns, trucks, Germany, Lucy,
all at the same time.
"I wanted you to know that," you said.
I didn't ask you why.

You said you were afraid,
and I thought it served you right
for being Catholic. Then you said,
"I'm not ready," and I turned colder still,
because it looked like you might cry.

I couldn't tell if you were pleading
or warning, but I understood,
and wanted to say "I love you"
or something, to reassure you
that I'd keep your stories forever.
But I didn't take your hand, or hug you,
or tell you the lies I wanted
to tell about Heaven.

I have stories too.

ELEPHANT GRIEVING BEHAVIOR

Lions take a passing interest
in their dead before they eat them.
It doesn't take long; even chimps
get bored with corpses, leaving
their limp offspring in tree's knuckles.
But elephants spend all their lives
recalling each other. They always notice
the bones of their own kind, cradling skulls
in the gentle hooks of their trunks,
pawing the tusks of their dead
relatives and mates. Again and again,
they reach for sloping foreheads,
sun-stained teeth, and crevices
that shaped the faces they keep trying
to find, to feel, to bring back. Here
on their sacred graveyard grass,
they once circled their matriarch
for days, passing warm baritones
back and forth until their words
were in the earth. They'll come back
to cold bones, always, with the same instinct
that keeps them from tripping over calves
who dart among their mothers' feet.

DAD'S TURN TO SPEAK

Me and my cousin took a motorcycle trip
when we were nineteen, to California. I wore
a bandana, and when I came home,
I was quiet again.

I live my life in bursts: a hippie who howls
out the window of his truck, then shuts
its orange door with the ease of an older man.

I live, then I love
living. This is how my world doubles.
I sit back

and think myself into whichever life
I want to feel: the one I had, the one
I'll make, and others, like the baby's
I couldn't save. That's the one I keep
quiet.

I live each day three or four times,
until it's real enough to matter. I think
slowly. I want what I have, so badly
that I back up and watch myself
having what I want.

I'm a firefighter, I guess. Please
don't make me talk about it.

FOUND

(After Will Eisner's comic, "The Treasure")

Two boys with no questions
stared into the grates
of a subway airshaft, eyeing
what lay dropped and darkened
beneath Manhattan.

They stretched themselves
over the pavement, and one by one,
they pulled mistakes into the daylight.
They dropped them into categories:

Shiny things, broken things,
moistened clumps of things
that barely even existed.

The boys found discards
from everyone, and as they pulled them
to the surface, the city
saw again the swallowed trinkets
of stretched-thin lives, and answers decades old.

A dirty diamond ring.
T.G.L.'s watch, with love from Jan, stinking
with old rain. Together with a mound
of pennies and loosed pamphlets,
they touched the street again,
filthy, but recalled.

One by one, used objects slipped
and blurred themselves onto the pavement,
as the boys pawed
through trashed values.

They left behind a wake
of tiny mementos, thought about
at least twice now. The ring
was kicked between the boys' shoes
as they walked away
with a dollar-sixty in coins.

RIDDANCE

Every now and then, a bird falls down the chimney,
and lands in the stove's cold soot. I hear them
scraping in the dark.

Once, I opened the grate to rescue a sparrow,
but it hopped back into the chimney --
they do that, sometimes -- afraid of the light
they so desperately miss.

I left it bowls of seeds and water, every day, listening.

The thing in the stove grew shapeless
in my mind, as it thumped among the ashes,
blinding itself by hiding from the sun I offered.

When I finally caught it in a net, it dusted the room
with filth, leaving a trail flapped from its blackened wings.
It fought so hard to stay.

I watched it fly into the prairie, a changed thing,
and I never thought of it again. Later, I found
a mouse caught in a sticky trap, and I tried

for hours to set it free, but its nose was stuck
in the gel, at such an odd angle – close
to its hind legs. I tried, and it tried so hard.

I wish it hadn't struggled, because I couldn't
pry it out, then. It glued itself so deeply in – all
of its legs, its head, bent and broken.

But I couldn't kill it any more than I could free it,
so outside, I set it down, walked away, wanting
it gone, or maybe free – I still don't know the difference.

PACKING

I'm in the garage again, but this time, instead of pulling the hidden stairway down from the ceiling (you used pulleys and ropes to keep your house moving in such fantastic ways), I'll grab handfuls of steel washers, weights, and bullet shells from World War II that I'll tuck into a purse I found with leaves stamped in the leather. It's not like before. I'm not here to open the door on the back wall and step into the spidered tunnel filled with firewood and boxes and boxes of telephone chords and light switch plates. I know that toward the end of the tunnel will be a bathroom that doesn't work, and beyond that, under a ceiling dripping with buckets and Radio Flyers, will be a too-thin door that opens into a cage filled with cages for small animals. Their droppings still powder the ground of the old coop, where none of Mom's rabbits lived for more than a week as the ruthless rooster pecked his authority hard among the birds feeding below the rabbits' mesh walls -- your uncles loved to hunt when they were boys. Your aunts pasted hearts with nicknames in them to the walls. "Forever," they said, but now they say "ever," just barely, in the dark. I brush sawdust from the drill into my bag, sweeping the remnants of the last gift you made me with your own hands in with the wire, the screws, the brass keys, everything you held dear at one time or another.

HIS FRANCE, 1945

Captions in white ink, pristine, under
photos that don't sit still -- France
has been sliding off these pages
for sixty-five years: my grandfather unglued.

Our first night on Napoleon's Tomb.
Except the tomb is in the distance, behind
a line of jeeps, so far away that the tires
look taller than its dome. Bundles of barbed wire
are black in the foreground.

Paris. *An ever-present gang of kids.*
They're staring at a tank, and my grandpa
stands with his hands on their heads,
like all of this is his. Everyone rolls
their shirt sleeves the same way.
I would have called it *Us Kids*.

A lie: I've reached the top of the Eiffel Tower.
He stands on the tank, "Honeydipper,"
left arm stretched and curved above
his head, appearing to meet the tower's tip
miles away. But he isn't touching anything.

This picture, *Destruction Near Marseilles*, is gone.
The photo beneath it says:

Oui! Oui! Mademoiselle! And she's riding a bike.
Her dress is inching up her thighs, which look small
from the jeep window. Many years ago,
I might have seen her face, but as she rides
she fades into the pure white street.

THEY NEVER FALL

Shadows cut the trail into piano keys,
dragging darkness between two walls
of aspens -- white, slender, antler-slashed.
In a steady hum of leaves, dead trees lean
against live ones, curling their branches
into the soft limbs of saplings. They rest
among joined roots, keeping the same shape
as those they touch, the same shade and silence,
like they don't know they're dead.

