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My Body Is a Question Mark Lit from Within

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My Body Is a Question Mark Lit from Within

By

Lisa Marie Schrad

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
to the Department of English
at Butler University

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Introduction: The Best Kind of Poem

In some ways, I'm surprised I picked poetry. Or perhaps, stated more precisely (as poetics would demand), I'm surprised poetry picked me. I am, by nature, a problem solver. I like to analyze a problem from all sides and then come up with the best, clearest solution. I can fall into black and white thinking, in which I am sure there is only one correct answer, and equally sure that that correct answer can virtually always be discovered if we think carefully and long enough about the question. I'm also task-oriented, and a realist who has to consciously refrain from crushing my husband's "what if" ideas and dreams with a logistics question. This means that the open-ended, imaginative nature of poetry sometimes seems at odds with my personality.

But poetry caught me at an early age, when wonder and delight and whimsy did not take nearly as much intention as they do now. The first poem I remember writing was in second grade, when I explicated the sad tale of a rabbit with some mysterious unnamed habit that bothered him greatly. Years later, as a senior in high school doing a creative writing independent study with one of my English teachers, I wrote a poem in response to a prompt on internal rhyme. The content left something to be desired, but I was addicted to the sounds of what I'd written, to the rhythm lingering in the air, the unexpected rhymes smacking their lips with satisfaction on the page. So perhaps it was poetry's music that first wooed me and that has continued to draw me—the way the hard *bs* in "the black bunched in there like a bat" from Sylvia Plath's "Wintering" make you look around a bit warily, as if a bat will be plunging through the darkness at you, for example. And the way the end rhymes in the first stanza of "the mother" by Gwendolyn Brooks, with the sense of completion they give, contrast so achingly with the severe loss she is feeling over the children she aborted.

And the way the soft *s* sounds in “I shook the softening chalk of my bones” from “The Lost Son” by Theodore Roethke make me feel the softness of my own bones in times of deep grief and loss, my legs going weak.

Those sounds, so intentionally crafted to underscore the meaning of the poems, are to me an essential part of poetry, and indeed part of what speaks to our souls and moves us when we listen. There’s a reason the words to songs are much less meaningful without the music. In an interview in *Callaloo* with Charles Rowell, Lucille Clifton highlights the importance of this music:

In the academy . . . one tends to think of poetry as not only an intellectual exercise but one that’s just for the eyes. Does it look like a poem? Must be a poem. But I’m interested in other questions: Does it sound like a poem? Does it feel like a poem? . . . Because the whole truth is that we’re not all just our head and what we think. Logic is very useful; so is feeling.

The music of poetry pulls me out of my need for logic and back into the echoes of wonder that still live in my soul but are so often overshadowed by the demands of the day.

I’ve also been drawn by the precision of poetry—an aspect of poetics that, I’ve realized, actually captures my satisfaction at finding the exact right answer to a problem. I used to think the precision of poetry was just about finding the most accurate word—for example, knowing the difference between *leap* (something done out of joy!) and *jump* (a functional action, so as to avoid a puddle, perhaps) and which one the poem is best served by. But I’ve realized that precision extends to image as well. There is a world of difference between peat in general (inert and seemingly lifeless in our minds) and the peat in Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s poem “Petition,” in which she requests that “the days smolder / like the peat slung /

in plastic sacks by the greenhouse.” Kelly’s peat is alive with scent and movement and condensation in those plastic sacks, and exactly captures the smoldering (another moment of precision!) of a day. Poetry is nothing without precise images that give known words new life, full of color and texture that assault or soothe or tantalize our senses and our understanding of the world. As a fellow classmate commented near the end of the semester regarding Kelly’s poem “Song,” which we read at the beginning of the semester, “I cannot get that goat out of my head.” The precision of Kelly’s images haunted us for months—yes, just like a song, like a “goat’s head [that goes] on singing.”

The precision of poetry must also extend to the poem as a whole, which is to say that a poem must tell the truth as closely as it can. In her interview with Rowell, Clifton explains, “The poet, it seems to me, or the teller, you know, has the obligation not to run away from the stories that he or she knows.” She continues:

Somewhere I said that the purpose of the poet is to tell the truth. When I say truth, I don’t mean fact. Not at all. In a poem, I’m not sure that fact is a biggie. . . . But truth is necessary; it’s big. Tell the truth about things, maybe just to see clearly, as clearly as possible. I tell students that the purpose of a poet is to see what they look at, and hear what they listen to. To go beyond the obvious. To go down deep and to bring up what’s there.

Clifton’s commitment to this is clear in poems like “for deLawd” in which she recounts the grief of black women whose sons have been murdered, as well as “this belief,” in which she tells the truth about the ways white supremacy destroys both black and white people.

Truth in poetry for Clifton also includes the language she uses—language that reflects her

community and the cadences of their speech. Her poetry demonstrates a commitment to be fully herself on the page.

Other poets get at truth via different techniques. Demonstrating incredible fortitude and a commitment to historical truth, Robert Hayden uses actual excerpts from the diaries of white sailors to implicate them for their participation in slave trading in “Middle Passage.” In her poem “During a War,” Naomi Shihab Nye uses enjambment and assonance to indict the “we” of the poem for neglecting to care about those different from them. Writing on a similar topic to Nye, Ilya Kaminsky uses narrative poetry and elements of a drama to tell the truth about violence, community, communication, protest, and love in *Deaf Republic*, even while the events of the book occur in an unnamed country, perhaps a mix of real events and fiction. Indeed, Kaminsky posits that the search for truth is the reason for a poem in the first place; poetry, he explains, is our obsessive attempt to answer an unanswerable question. The best poems, then, are the ones in which the poets themselves discover a truth they did not know along the way, and thus, through their poems, invite readers to see that truth for themselves as well.

And perhaps, in the end, it’s really this need for precise truth that catches me in poetry’s web. For telling the truth—about myself, about history, about places and people full of beauty and grief—is one of the most important opportunities we have as writers and thus as observers. Poetry calls me back to what is most human—qualities like honesty, attentiveness, awe, and wonder, as well as an ability to feel deeply the aches of the world and be moved to lament by them. That’s the privilege of poetry too—being able to move others in similar ways, and help them see connections between seemingly unlike circumstances or objects. Before reading “Petition,” had I ever considered how a day is like

peat in a plastic bag? No. But once we read those lovely lines with all of their sensory details, we think, *Of course! That's just what a day is like!* And we instantaneously remember our own smoldering days—for me, those sticky-hot Michigan summer days of my youth. In the details and connections made in poetry—even details rooted in a life very different from ours—we find our own life and situations reflected, our own unanswerable questions asked, our own search for the truth reflected.

In an interview with Nikki Finney, Clifton says in her oh-so-succinct way, “The job of the art, it seems to me, is to not leave you where it found you.” I expected my MFA years and particularly my thesis year to lead me to new places, but I had no idea how surprising the path would be. In August, just before I started work on my thesis, I found out that I was unexpectedly pregnant. Near the end of March, about a month-and-a-half before turning in my thesis, I gave birth to my first biological child, a little girl. And she, perhaps, is the most accurate metaphor for a poem that I can come up with: Here she is, full of music and a wide range of sounds that delight me. Here she is, precision in each tiny fingernail and eyebrow. Here she is, still being written, one great unanswerable question. And here I am, quicker to laugh and cry, quicker to marvel at the tiny coos coming from my living room and from outside my door as the birds return for spring. I see the truth about myself—my strength and my fragility—spelled out starkly, as well as that of the world with all its joy and sadness. And I am irrevocably changed—unable to ever return to the perspective I had before I was a mother. She, like the best kind of poem, has brought me to a much different place, one where every day, my heart is, yes—there is no other word for it—*leaping* with love.

Modeling

Look at you, womb blooming
like a lily at forty-one, brave enough
to open without my knowing.

All those years I scrutinized, chastised,
tried to starve you into submission
like the worst kind of mother.

I would have denied you were mine if I could,
even when you were only arms sticking out like spindles,
a collar bone jutting out of its skin.

How did you know in those first few weeks what it takes
to nurture new life? Where did you learn that kind of welcome,
that eager anticipation of what a baby requires?

I'm paying attention now
to every signal you send
communicating what you need.

Body of flesh and blood. Body of text
unfurling now, a whole new book inside my frame.
Body of water, teeming with life.

Is this a sign you've forgiven me?

Eve's Lament

"Then God blessed them and said, '... Fill the earth and govern it.'"

Adam and I took turns
naming each new delicate flower. Together,
we gathered seeds and planted them
deep in the velvety dirt. At harvest time our fingers flashed
among the thick green leaves of trees laden with fruit,
each ripe fig placed tenderly into heaping baskets.
After a rain, we walked beside the cold streams,
ensuring they stayed within their banks,
laughing at the fish playing hide and seek in the water's shadows.
Dreams and waking mingled, both worlds flush
with vibrant oranges and blues, purple wings flashing by.
Our eyes scanned each other's brown bodies with pleasure.

What would I give
for those days now?
No shame coiled around my
neck, squeezing. No broken
wings, no thorny soil, no bloodied grass at the edge
of every day. No darkness
that seeks to devour.
Now, we hide our bodies behind
fig tree leaves. Pain pounds
inside my rounded belly, the seed
of Adam's cold stare, his iron
fist.

From Dust to Dust

You loom like a single solid cliff
keeping watch at the edge of the Gulf.

I cannot climb you or conquer you.

When I question you, you remain
silent as grass in the small sand mounds.

I can be quiet too. Let me watch the world with you.

Overshadow me until I know
my smallness but am not afraid of it.

By the time I wake, your beauty will be forgotten.

Help me accept
my fleeting life.

Flute Player

“Messengers arrived from the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. They told him, ‘Your daughter is dead. There’s no use troubling the Teacher now.’ But Jesus overheard them and said to Jairus, ‘Don’t be afraid. Just have faith.’”

I am used to the dead by now. The end of a life is what allows me to make a living. At the synagogue leader’s house that day, the other musicians and I played our dirges steadily among the stooped forms of neighbors and family gathered in the bedroom of the small dead daughter.

Her pale stone-stillness clashed with the chaos of notes, wails, stomping, tears splashing to the floor. My mind wandered to another girl I’d glimpsed that day, alive as a storm, her hair black and shiny as the night sky . . .

When Jairus arrived, his eyes were red, rubbed raw. The plain-looking man with him seemed as if he was about to break out into a grin. Peering at the child he loudly said, “She isn’t dead! She’s only sleeping.”

Our notes stopped, mid-song— even the birds outside stopped singing. Then mirth swelled toward the ceiling, reckless with disbelief. Who was this man to tell us we didn’t know a dead girl from a dreaming one?

I am used to the deceased by now. But I will never recall that day without a shiver. Soon after we were all sent out of the room, Jairus’s daughter walked through the doorway and stood before us, face like a poppy at the height of its bloom.

My skin grew pale. We should have started in on some triumphant tune, but our flutes clattered to the floor. Without asking for our pay, we slipped away into the street still strewn with ashes scattered by mourners.

I stopped and stared at those tiny flakes. Would they wake too, bursting back into flame?

No's Protest

After Naomi Shihab Nye's "Dictionary in the Dark"

Hours after an unarmed black man
is murdered by a police officer in public
because his tasered body shuddered
in a way that made the cop "perceive
a threat," the police department says,
"No additional information is available."

No never agreed to start that sentence.

No never wanted to imply
that there were not witnesses at the Kwik Check station
who saw Jonathan Price fly to the middle
of a domestic dispute to save lives, who heard
the police siren whining its way to the scene,
the taser pop, the gun shots.

Then watched his body fall.

No is now limiting its appearance to specific places and occasions:
No will knock on the door of the Price family home
and humbly offer itself to his mother, Marcella,
who sits on the floor pounding her fists against
the couch, head buried in a cushion. Wherever a picture
of Price's face appears, **no** will sit beside **threat**.

Next to Price's grave, **no** will link arms with **more**.

And then **no** will prowl the highways and sidewalks,
ready to rise up spine-straight
between every unarmed black person
and the gun pointed at their head,
and catch the bullet instead.

Mother

After watching the world
drift apart like ash
in a breeze, I need to lean
my cheek into your palm,
kindest of them all.

Assisi, Italy

I.

Even the German general sensed
something sacred stirring among the bricks and stones.

Before weekly Mass, he gave his gun to the priest at the door
and didn't take it back until the *Deo Gratias* was said.

In southern Italy, bombs were dropping as easily
as ripened olives falling from the branch when the enemies agreed

about this place: Allied planes held their fire,
uninjured Axis soldiers left, the rest remained

to heal. Jews were smuggled through like silent birds,
wings clipped and dyed, while the General turned a blind eye.

II.

Don't you turn a blind eye to me while I'm here. Say something about suffering. Not the self-inflicted penance of Francis and Clare, who made this city famous, or even the suffering of the Jews hidden behind monastery walls. Say something about *my* suffering.

Finally, in San Damiano you give me a word: you are Jesus Who Sees My Pain.

I do not mean to be rude, but I need Jesus Who Comes Near Enough to Catch My Tears,
Jesus Who Holds Me While I Weep, Jesus Who Keeps Me Close, not Jesus Who Looks On
from a Distance.

Please. I am no saint. Say something
else.

III.

These hills abundant with orchards and arbors
are kind. The grass is not afraid of tears;
these tender shoots welcome the sorrowful
and every kind of water. When I am still,
I hear that ancient blessing given to the Israelites,
which surely the trees here whispered
continuously into warworn nights:
The LORD bless you and keep you, like he has us.
The LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you. The LORD
turn his face toward you and give you
his peace. I breathe deeply. I write. I weep.

Meanwhile, miraculous grapes
keep growing on their vines,
fat and juicy with the secret griefs
they carry.

Crossing a Line

Give us your green and red and yellow
peppers. All your beautiful bells
are welcome here

if they were freshly plucked
from the plant
by a clean hand

if they crossed our border by highway, properly grateful
for a ride in a cold truck driven by a man
whose name does not make our tongue stumble

if no grubs from their fields
remain snuggled up inside
amidst the seeds

if they arrive untraumatized,
unencumbered by the soil of your land, dirt
easily shaken off with a flick of the wrist

if they are perfectly sweet

if they reveal nothing
of the places
that shaped them
besides the one small oval
we stuck to their skin:
4688 Grown in Mexico

Then we will display them
in a bowl on our table,
all the colors shining and silent.

Once Again Becoming

During the time of perpetual shadow,
when every theater cut its lights
and splintered houses scabbed the streets,
one night we heard the first rattle and boom
of bowling ball spins and pin-falls again.
That wasn't the music we'd missed, but it was
its own kind of song, the notes we needed
to creep out of bed for more than a beat.
One artist, then two, transfigured
pictures from the pockets of their dreams
to a faded brick wall. Swirls of yellows and greens
and blues bloomed, even in the dark. We dragged out
dusty chairs and spread blankets over the street
to study the colors, our eyes adjusting to the shocking sight
of beauty on our block. The clocks, stopped
for years, started ticking again, a steady heartbeat
in the square. We welcomed and we welcomed and we
welcomed. Stray cats, vinyl shops, martini bars,
busted pick-ups. We iced the blue-black bruises
of boarded-up buildings and didn't condemn them
for the beatings they'd withstood. Instead, we thanked them
for refusing to leave.

Teach Me More: Lessons That Have Shaped My Passion for Racial Equity

I.

In Philadelphia during a stinging January, I fumble with chopsticks, try kimchi and squid at restaurants and potlucks, eat my first Philly cheesesteak, prepared by Jenny So in her wok. For six days, I am a guest in her home, afraid of making a faux pas. She tells me, kindly, to *loosen up*.

II.

When I'm stopped at a light, I think of Montikka and her mother and the driving game they played in inner-city Harrisburg when she was just eleven. Every time her mother was forced to bring the car to a full stop, Montikka got a point.

I wonder now if it was just for fun, or if keeping a car in motion is the only way to stay alive in a city insistent on sinking its teeth into your skin, then sucking you dry like the bones on a rack of ribs.

III.

As a proofreader for a publishing company,
I read what I can about justice.
How. Why. Where. Who.
The world becomes an exclamation point, flush
with need. My body is a question mark
at the end of every sentence.

IV.

When I move to Madison for a writing job, no one gives my face a second glance. Every landlord I meet is eager to offer me a unit. One year later, the city is named a top-ten place to live.

Just off the Beltway, African American third-graders
who live in apartments I was told not to rent
do not yet know enough words

to read the report claiming Madison is
the worst city in the state for them.

V.

I learn I am white.

VI.

Amy Hu explains that she leaves half
of herself at home when she comes to the office.
She longs to take up more space

than the five letters of her name.

In the privacy of a conference room, LaKendra Adesuyi lets her tears flow fast over the ways her tone of voice is scrutinized at work.

In her boss's office, she refuses to cry. The tears of easily offended white women win every time.

VII.

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, an African American gentleman dressed in his best suit gets pressed to the back of the bus and cannot use the restroom. For years I see him everywhere I go, pressing up against windows, glass ceilings, invisible lines on city blocks.

VIII.

On the night that no indictment comes,
I sit on my sofa alone, 362 miles from the courtroom
where another white officer will walk away
without having to pay for the death he caused.

What will I say
to the uncle
who gives generously
to friends in need,
who knows
no black people,
who claims
this is just?

IX.

Adrian shares his story
of being smuggled
into the US from Mexico
at the age of eight.

Now he works and tucks his babies into bed
with the heat of deportation
always on his back. Day after day,
he waits for word

that his appeal
to stay
has been
granted.

I pray for *un milagro*.

X.

On a cold Chicago evening, a family struggling
with grocery bags waits to cross a busy street.
I guess that they are from Somalia,
that the sacks they carry are full
of the terrors of war. "Would you like a ride?" I ask,
inviting them into the heat of my car.

It is such a small act
compared to their courage,
their kind smiles.

Lily-Bloom

Lily of the valley
of the shadow of death.
Lily of death in the forest.
Shadow Lily at the funeral.

Lily weeping alone, shriveling
in her soil. Lily-stem shaking
with pain from the weight of a sky
about to burst. Lily losing a petal.

Water Lily thirsting
for a calm pond. Fire Lily
spurning pity. Lily enduring
long after her stem is cut.

Lily learns to flap her petals
like wings. She lands
on the moon, roots herself
into the rocks.

Tiger Lily sizes up the stars.

What We Remember

My son, like a forest tree, does not understand *social distancing*. He could pass for a tall sapling as he jogs to kiss his grandparents goodnight just after we've explained the situation. His brain, similar to his bloodstream and bones, resists the absorption of anything suspicious, like the fact that his nonna and nonno could die. Wrestling with the dog, he cannot fathom tiny particles invading his cells like characters in a video game, their dark force bent on finding a host they can exploit and destroy. He would find that drama thrilling. If he remembers these days at all, it will be as the stretch when his soccer skills suffered without weekly practices and pickup games. He'll see the gap in our lineup of yearly family photos from the top of the Ferris wheel in Nice, all of us sending silly sounds over the lights lining the water's edge. He'll recall his long limbs knocking into walls, his disappointed fists pounding pillows after every request to meet up with his cousins was answered with *no*. He will not remember the easy breaths he took as he lay in bed, or the rhythmic way a command center in his head went on regulating his temperature. The perfection of his lungs. The miracle of his white blood cells pulsing inside his body, his body pulsing inside our home.

Windows

Small bird, gray as the sea.
Wings hushed on concrete. Tail feathers point
to the clouds, a clue to an urgent message.

I want to believe she's fine, fine, but she never
moves. I imagine the moment of crash, the thud on glass,
the quiet crack of a small neck.

How long before someone sweeps her
into a dustbin? Will the sky be dismayed
at her absence?

I rub my rounding belly, picture
the tiny bones growing inside, the downy hair,
all the hazards ahead.

Some Beautiful Body

1

Remember that you must
win their respect with the thinness
of your body. Your mind,
your kindness, your ability
to find the missing *i* on a page of words
a dozen sets of eyes
have pored over already
will never be enough.

If you become a pencil, a line
on notebook paper, a staple
holding together the scattered parts
of a life that feels out of control,
who will not applaud your discipline?
Everyone wants to be

the tine of a fork ferreting spinach
into a mouth, not the spoon
in a bowl full of pasta.
This way you are free
to move around in small spaces, slipping
about without attracting
attention. Like a favorite nail file
that keeps getting lost.

If I have a body, it is for
punishing. Pushing. Seeing how far
it can go before the miraculous sinews
start to unravel. Can't I build a bed here
in my head, under the safe shelter of my skull,
which never gains weight?

Or, if I have to have a form, can't I be
a smooth lake, some beautiful body
of transparent water, full of life
yet weightless
when you cup it
in your hand?

2

Assume that your body—your cells,
your bones that have never broken,

the length of your neck—has
to meet the expectations of others.

Associate hunger with weakness. Then try

Tacitly rage against the character
of your thighs, eyes, skin—pick

Blame yourself when someone responds
angrily to the words you rehearsed
in your head for hours.
Resolve to be better

Ignore every warning of danger
so that you can more spectacularly
like porcelain shattering on concrete.

Take a mistake you've made
and set it on a stone floor. Beat it until
it is too spent to justify itself, too tired
to hold together. Let the fine particles drift
and settle around the room. Do not

failed

to eat.

anything.

next time.

fall,

dust.

How little
space can
I
occupy
to say
I
am sorry
for some-
thing
terrible
I
must
have
done?
Can I
hide underneath
this overturned bowl?
I'll shed it
like dog hair
when I've
done enough
to make amends.

Believe you do not deserve any good thing. Beg your blood to produce something better as it pumps. Politely decline the forgiveness offered after you burned the broccoli. Panic when a host offers you a piece of pie.

3

An-or-ex-i-a. Which woman
does the word belong to?
This one in the mirror?
Try as you might
you cannot
generate
compassion
for her.

her laughter never reaches her eyes

You are at the bottom of a bowl with steep, smooth sides.
No footholds to facilitate an escape. Stuck
as if there is honey on the soles
of your feet (honey which you
must not eat).

her laughter never reaches her eyes

You are swirling in water, sputtering for breath. How long
will you whirl in this porcelain sink, draining? When will the last gurgle
suck you down, down into the dark,
wet earth?

her laughter never reaches her eyes

When will you receive your reward
for your absolute obedience to the ruler in your mind? You're a dog desperate
for a pat on the head. Shake. Sit. Lie down. Come. Run
faster! Don't eat that!

You are imprisoned in a mortar by a dictator
who vowed to give you power.
You see the shadow
of his pestle starting
at sunrise, promising
a pounding. Bent
on grinding
you smaller,

like basil
being
punished
for its
strength.

she can't remember her name

You are
the mortar,
an empty
stone.

4

*Does fear itself have a shape, a texture?
Is it something you can scoop into a bowl
and feast on, one small spoonful at a time?*

*Something you can feel with each swallow,
sense it sliding down your throat
like a pebble or a large fish, flicking its tail
against the soft tissue of your esophagus?*

*What I am really talking about
is deprivation—the realization
that you've oriented your life around emptiness*

*for years, like a stray dog circling a bowl
devoid of food, keeping itself distracted
from the cold for hours, until it can sleep, and dream
of full bowls, and wake to circle again.*

*Do you know then that one scrap of meat,
one small honeyed patch of light
and warmth, will make you weep,
cause you to fall bare-kneed onto the floor*

*out of gratitude? But you will also be afraid
of how much you needed it, afraid
of how wildly everything inside you leans
toward more.*

5

This shame. That shame. This loss,
and that one. Life tossed away
for existence in prison. This rule

that I must follow. *This one
that I will break.* That bad dog.
This good one. This body, a ruler.
That body of water teeming
with grief. That grave. And that one.
All this life that wasn't saved.
That hollowness that will kill
me. *This hunger that will keep
me alive. This bead of honey
on my tongue (honey that is sweet).*
A bitter fight. This lonely
bite. This snack. This meal.

*And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one.
And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one.
And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one. And this one.*

*And this one, right here, in this beautiful bowl.
With this startling view.*

You don't
deserve

But maybe I do

Encountering Mary

Up-close, she is raw-knuckled,
red-cheeked, scrubbing the day's dirt
from the floor. Stray wisps of hair
curl toward her face.

Before her I'd surprised Zechariah in the temple.
With his shoulders back, chin and incense lifted to heaven,
his priestly robes and pristine lineage fairly glowed
like the cherubim of gold on the altar behind him.

It's true I had to mute him for his lack of faith.
But this Mary of Nazareth is still a child. Raised
to run a household for her husband. What
does she know of God's cosmic plan?

As I stand in her mother's kitchen, a man lit up
like a star, she lifts wide eyes to my face. Will she faint
or scream or run for help when I explain
God's justice is coming into and through her womb?

No. I lean in closer to hear her reply.
How will this be? I've never slept with a man.
Her nod confirms she knows the cost she'll pay
for carrying a baby before she is wed.

Eagerly, water dripping from her hands,
she offers her whole body for his work.

Once I disappear I recognize the truth:
this teenage girl is a warrior too.

Every Small Way

After Ada Limón's "The Conditional"

What if the goal you worked toward for over five years
dissolves like sugar in coffee? You might never
look out at a classroom of students, never hear them
recite an original spoken word piece. Never teach.
What if you don't develop a taste for English Breakfast tea again,
even after you give birth, and on afternoons with your mom and sister
you choke down cold water while their mugs puff with steam?
And every sunset starts to look the same? What if your name
doesn't appear in print, your own words never reach beyond
a few good friends? And your city is no more just than when you came?

What then should you say
about your life? Was it a small breeze,
nothing of substance? Or did you love
the best you could, in every small way?
Washing the wooden spoons by hand,
making cookies for a friend
who feels unseen, smoothing clean sheets
across the mattress, wiping spit-up off
your baby's face. Sending a note
to a quiet corner of the world,
the envelope full of grace.

October

Is the small exhale of bees,
 bedding down.
Grows older
without shame.

Letting go, I soften
as the days color and cool.
 Curl in
like smoke swirling,

 waiting for the losing
to end. I swallow fire, set off
sparks of red against
the blue of my eyes.

Nothing is dead.

The bare brown bark,
the leaves already
 nourishing the soil,
the chill in the air meandering

along the lane,
 speak
without saying
a word.

The Measure of Me

I am numbers and letters that matter
but don't, a weight on a scale,
pencil marks scratched
on paint for years until my height
reached its peak. I am a shoe size that ranges
from nine to ten depending on the make.

I am a GPA, a GRE score, neat and tidy
on a line. I am a dollar amount in my not-yet-
replete retirement fund. I'm a speed limit,
a gust of wind brushing past you at the grocery store.
I'm a galaxy of unnamed planets just discovered,

a channel you can flip to, a radio frequency
playing the song you need to hear. I am three
square meals when you don't have time
to eat. I am the word you need to complete
your rhyme. But what I want to know is,

when the hummingbird retracts her neck and fluffs
her countless feathers on her way to sleep, how
is she sure—cheeky bird—that she's done enough?

Ritual

"... While you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony." —Anne Lamott

Pick a mug. Wait
for the kettle's whistle.

Attune to the slosh
of steaming water,

steeping
like moonlight.

Splash cold milk
into the dark pool.

Sugar crystals dissolve
like seeds in the ground

that will grow
something good.

Cup the warmth
in your hands,

offer your prayer.
Let that first sip

silence you.

The tea shimmies
down my throat,

that hint of sweetness a balm
for the bitter cup

the world
will drink from today.

I wrap my fingers
around my mug until

it is a cold stone
and I am warm,

wholly human,
hard edges softened

into something
I can swallow.

On the Pier

Fisherwomen and men stand against the rail,
rods bobbing like buoys.
When a line goes taut, every head turns
while the rods' tips keep weaving through the air.

Two fish win, extracting their slick cheeks
from the barbed hooks.
The third fish is defeated,
doubly trapped by hook and net.

He flops against the pier's worn wood
in protest. Salmon.
Pale against the metal sink
built for cleaning each catch.

The clouds gather and gather, coolly eyeing us all.
Below, two tiny birds race a speedboat,
wings flapping furiously. They know what's at stake
if they lose to a motored beast.

The single salmon is now still.
He is the only fish we see
sucked from the bay's soft throat.
As we walk away, the rods keep bobbing behind us.

Forgiveness

Before you can allow forgiveness
to set foot on your front stoop,
you must feel the sharp edge of scissors
against your skin as someone you love snips
the string that tethered the two of you together.

You must watch him walk away,
leaves whisking at his heels,
feel your spine go stiff and cold
as a shovel while your heart's skin thickens
like a ripening pineapple, spiny, protected.

Before you can entertain forgiveness,
and offer it cupcakes and tea on a small tray,
you must see the farm you carefully saved for,
plowed, planted by hand, wither slowly
from a hidden parasite caused by your neighbor.

And then, months later,
in one moment of quiet
while sliding your body into bed,
you must recall the times you too tried
and failed to care for others well. Remember

how you withdrew from your world,
how your own body shriveled
like a small fish lying on land?

Before you can draw forgiveness to your heart
like a small child burrowing their face into your chest,
you must witness the twisted, pale trunk
of a whole tree rotting from one bitter root,
brown leaves hanging listlessly from each papery branch.

Then reach, reach for forgiveness,
fragrant and tender. Tuck it
into your muscles and bones.
Nurture it, the most important guest
you'll ever welcome.

in your hand, each one
a ripe plum: please remember
the problem, how fragile

our forgiveness over who you choose
to spare, how others' miracles
can be impossible to bear.

Dosage Forms

I wake with a stone in my belly,
picturing the machine on your computer screen
that you've been married to for days.

She is a cold spouse, all sharp edges and heartbreak.
Every time your fellow pharmacists set her spitting
white powder from tubes into tiny capsules,

red error cells bleed from a spreadsheet.
Late at night, when you finally pry your hands
from the edge of your desk to head toward bed,

you move like a man already fired. For weeks
the machine fills the whole house. I watch her
rend you limb by limb without touching your skin

while I stand by like a second wife, unsure of my place,
aware of my need. The tidy squares of Excel are an affront
to our own ragged edges.

Six months into our married life,
I don't yet know an equation
that will calm you. All I can do

is peel you an orange, fragrant and juicy. Beg God
to heal this body of steel from the error of her ways.
Trace each of your ears with my finger again and again,
a record of the most crucial data.

Home Is Where

1

You can't help but think of home. The neatness
of the quilt on the queen bed, pillows tucked in. No dust.
Rooms that draw the full length of the sun's rays.
Your mother on the other side of the table, peering into your heart
through her reading glasses, tea steeping between you. It's hard—

looking for a place everywhere you go.
Why can't you take up residence here
as easily as the ladybugs, who claimed
two windowpanes and a corner of the ceiling
while you were washing dishes?

2

Did you think all those hours
rearranging dollhouse furniture,
setting tiny spoons
beside dime-sized plates,
prepared you to move
into someone else's space?

One night, at the house alone,
you realize you have no idea
where the spare light bulbs
are stored.

3

It takes time. I know this. To learn to let dirty dishes sit for a bit
while talk turns to trebuchets and trailers. To stay present in a room
when a memory might take shape,

maybe late at night during the office renovation,
all of us laughing so hard at Meghan's imitation of a movie villain
we can no longer hold up our paintbrushes.

4

You are still the only one
who wants the cars locked
while they're sitting in the driveway.

5

When we return at eleven one winter night,
I lead the way in, remembering to step over
the downspout on the sidewalk,

careful not to slip. My fingers know
where to find the light switch
for the outside sconce,
even in the dark.

White Growing Up

I looked at picture books of blonde-haired girls eating the same sandwiches I found in my Rainbow Brite lunchbox. I walked one block to my elementary school without knowing sidewalks in other places were dividing lines for rival gangs. No one in my family died until I was a high-school freshman and my great-uncle got cancer.

I played with the kokeshi dolls collected during my mother's childhood in Japan but seemingly skipped over those internment camps in my history classes, and didn't know any Asians until Ai arrived as a foreign exchange student at my school.

If my neighbors
and teachers
and librarians
and dentist
and friends
had skin, it was the same
as mine.

I thought white was the color of the milk on my Cheerios, the soles on my turquoise Converse hi-top sneakers, the keys that were easier for my fingers to find on our upright piano. I thought it was the color of my napkin, not the way it was folded tidily beside my plate; I thought it was the color of my grandma's hair, not the way she took her tea; I

thought it was the color I saw
around my blue iris when
I looked in a mirror.
I didn't know that it's
the way I see.

Father-in-Law

What he wants for his eightieth birthday is his kids and grandkids and great-grandkids gathered to clip clay pigeons out of the air. He wants us to hook a fish for each year of his life and race canoes across the small pond. He wants roasted pig and apple pie, a card tournament that's bound to cement him as king. Some of the grandkids will wear socks pulled high like his, and shorts held up with suspenders, just to get that grin to appear below his white mustache. So for him we drive from Nebraska, Illinois, Indiana with cinnamony pies steaming our car windows, fishing poles in tow.

After his week in the hospital not long ago,
all we want is his appetite back, his small belly
sticking out again above his belt
when we pull him close.
All we want is to gather again and again,
hear him calling out instructions behind us
while we bait our hooks, cast,
search for signs of life below the water.

Let his days be longer. Every week, let his hemoglobin count be as predictable as zucchini poking through his soil each summer. Let him linger late into the night of his life, reluctant to leave the laughter and good wine. Let him outwit time.

And before he goes will you whirl us away
like Elijah with his chariot of fire disappearing into the sky, protected from goodbye?

Mass Ave.

You used to be an extra branch
off the city's main line, six blocks
of afterthought. Small smudge
on a bus route.

Ink stroke by ink stroke, you became
 an autograph everyone wants. You are
 the soft pink pockets of Mari Evans
 two stories high, the flashing

 orange outline of *Ann Dancing*. You are
 the buttoned blazer at the business lunch
 and the cosmic earrings of the jazz-club crowd.
You are bird song and siren wails and cocktails.

Bright star in the constellation
 of streets.

*I was grafted in
extra scant stick
awkward angle
on a tree*

*but I'm becoming
thick and strong and smooth
bursting with leafy perches
that the birds rest in*

*Let me be the branch
they never knew
they needed.*

Leaf, Spider, Thread

One small yellowing leaf, suspended
by a barely visible silky strand
outside the window, twirls
in the puff of breeze. Little leaf,
how do you hold on
to such a thin cord?

A dime-sized spider scurries across
a jungle-gym of web, twenty feet
above the ground. Bristly spider,
how do you know
the gossamer floss
will not let you fall?

Can I be the thread, spun
from skill, holding up
a world? So skinny
as to almost disappear?

Or is it best to be
the spider, the leaf,
buoyed by something
that will not break?

Hunger

I.

Sunsets are not for eating. Too much
sugar before bed! Not to mention
what the rays will do to your waist.

We only watch, watch and do not
touch. Breathe the lit air through our noses,
mouths closed. Listen to the cries

of a few birds lamenting the sinking light, but never
stretch out our tongues for a hint of that honey.
We watch until the sun slips away

II.

After many years of emptiness, trying to fill
our stomachs with small puffs
of clouds, those of us left
let our bodies talk again.

They are hungry for the sight and touch
and taste of one beam spotlighting
a small bloom in the grass
just for existing.

For months we practice licking,
flicking our tongues into the dark
so that we'll be brave enough
to give our bodies what they crave once we find the sun.

III.

Now, each evening,

we eat the sunset

drop by drop until

we too are glowing orbs,

lit from within.

The Blessed Ache

When dinner
was done, you all
worked together

restoring order
in the kitchen.
How sweet

the saucepans looked,
gleaming again
in their place on the shelf.

How soft and kind
the air inside as you took
to the homework and bills,

to your books
lying quietly
beside the couch.

Oh—the ache
for that safety again,
for living room windows

like giant eyes
that always see out
and let nothing in

but light.

What Remains

When I was eleven, a house in the center of my hometown
burned almost to the ground.

The charred remains
were a child's drawing of black,
jagged mountains on a white sheet of paper,
the lines stark, thick, from a crayon pressed hard.

How could a community
comprehend the loss?
For days, the burnt boards stood
like telegraph boys on a front stoop
bringing bad news
to mothers during war.

*Don't get too close, baby girl.
Don't throw anything into the bonfire.
Don't run around over here. You might trip
and fall. Don't ever put your face or hands
or feet in the flames. Stay close to mama.*

On the evening I turned forty-one, gray billows of smoke
filled the sky outside the ice cream shop, dark linens
hanging on a line, flapping and twisting with rage.

From fifty yards away, the heat pricked my skin,
its orange tongues frenzied in the semi-dark.
It was hunger like I'd never seen it—

determined to consume every 2x4 and speck of dust.
Glass cracked, then burst, as if
the panes had been holding their breath

in the hope of hiding from the heat.
I wanted to run from the watching crowd without looking back,
curl into a ball on my van floor.

Why did anyone want to witness this destruction?

*You see dancers in the fire? Yes, let's wiggle our bodies
like the flames. Oh—you see a scary face, with big teeth?
That's just the fire puffing his cheeks, blowing his heat
toward us. Yes, darling, I see those sparks. So pretty,
glittering like fireflies or stars.*

In our first house, a single staircase stretched
from the kitchen to one bedroom
where my sister and I slept.
At two years old, I remember my mother's fear
of fire on those stairs, cutting us off
from my parents' protection.

We never had to call the firetrucks
that lived across the street in our small-town fire hall.
But the sound of sirens in the middle of the night
hung above our heads like dreams, filling every crack
inside our house the way that water fills a firefighter's hose,
explosive, dousing everything in its wake.

*Hold my hand, honey. Now hold
your other hand up from here, toward
the fire. Doesn't that feel good? Fire can be
so nice, like when it keeps us warm.*

The ranch house we moved to when I was three
had bedrooms clustered together. Two quick steps
from parents to daughters. Six blocks away
from the fire hall now, the siren call still carried,
a mournful wail on the night air, as if nothing
could be saved at the site the trucks were heading to.

I lay in bed summer nights, sweating under a sheet,
imagining a doorknob hot to the touch,
rehearsing my route of escape.
After the hallway light went out
only the burnt-black darkness
of my worry pulsated through the room.

*No, sweet pea, marshmallows can't feel pain
when we roast them. They don't work
like our bodies do. If our skin touches the fire,
it will hurt a lot. But marshmallows are made
for toasting and melting and eating.*

I didn't have nightmares about that hungry fire
after the birthday ice cream last July,
so creamy and cool in my mouth.

But snapshots appeared unbidden in my mind.
Ash falling around us, floating upward. The sizzle
of water on flames. Flashing red and white lights

warring with the orange blazes. The softness
of my husband's shirt as I leaned my cheek
against his warm arm.

Tiny Galaxy

This is still my nondescript nose,
my knock-kneed legs, my forty-one-year-old skin.

But now, a tiny galaxy
is slowly forming inside me.

Femurs—delicate as bird bones—lengthen,
a mini-rosebud heart beats in the shelter of my pelvic bones.

Before this, I could draw the map of my body on a page,
the faint veins leading to squat pinkie toes,

to a small constellation of moles on my back.
This week, joints loosen like shoestrings.

When I bend to shave in the shower, wet skin sticks
to my abdomen's growing curve.

Today, if I saw a snapshot of my belly button, stretched,
waxy, white, I wouldn't believe it was mine.

My stomach used to be as flat as Indiana farmland.
The same favorite jeans zipped up for years.

Now I never know what clothes will fit me in the morning.
Am I allowed to feel angry at my body's miraculous growth?

After birth, will my core be a gently rolling hill?
Will hills look beautiful on me?

At my ultrasound, the doctor says the baby's size
is just right. How is it my body is enough

to meet her needs? Look at the brightness of her spine on the screen,
each vertebra like a pea in a long pod, ripening.

The flaps between the chambers of her heart flow in mesmerizing rhythm
like a swimmer's limbs, open, closed, open, closed.

While I am mixing batter for muffins, humming as I check the recipe again,
her lungs are forming in my rounded abdomen. It shines, a rising moon.

Waiting for a Verb

How much should be said?
We are waiting for a verb,
for wind to wade through water,
for a spider's spiny legs
to scuttle across the kitchen floor.
Even the river that slows to a trickle

understands the importance of action.
I must do my part: meander
among the yellows, split
the fragments of days into songs,
share the sun's rays with others.
Listen before I speak.

Each small word flung into the air
matters more when the sky is a verb,
when the leaves on trees
are verbs, when the pattern
on the butterfly's delicate skin
is a verb.

Today as I leave the orchard, the bloom
of apples is an action, rising from red skin
into my nose and lungs. I brake and wave
to a fellow driver: you go first.
The apples nudge each other. *See
what we've sparked*

Sharpening on the Edge of Stress

Give me
a neon arrow
flaming to the next
urgent task, and don't ask me
to change course once I'm on my way.
I don't have time for zigzagging or lolly-
gagging. I am not the morning
song of a bird, wafting
through the air in curves
and spirals, unconcerned
about the clock. I am the force
pulling cloud to earth
that births a lightning bolt.
I am shears that snip
a straight line through
the cloth, collar to hem.

My mother-in-law says I'm
a gem. But what if I'm the blade
that cuts the beauty
from the rough dull stone?

All That We Have

One tiny tick clinging to your neck,
right where the soft skin is perfect
for kissing, rattles my ribcage
like an aftershock. For one long second
our future slips off the shelf and cracks
into joint pain and fatigue, me helping you up
from the mattress each morning.

My fingertips should have detected the tick sooner
in their slow stroking of skin above your T-shirt collar
while we lounged in our chairs after lunch.
Now I am fumbling to spark a flame
on a match's bulb, holding the hot black tip
to the tick's hind end. Singeing the baby
fine hairs from your skin.

Later, as we unload the dishwasher,
I study your neck, willing any rash away.
I want a contract with the future,
fifty years of dinners like tonight,
us seated side by side at the table
you ate at as a child, dining on our favorite
smoke-soaked salmon from the grill.

What I have is the solid weight
of your warm fingers on my arm.
Your neck safe for now. And on it,
a hand that has never been this alive.

On a Spring Evening Just Before Twilight

Three boys on bikes
whoop by my car,
their shouts like a breeze
that sweeps an alley clean.

They swell like Corvettes
with their coolness,
as alive as fireflies, this capacity
to dazzle. I smile wistfully.

The air they holler into is theirs, the concrete gripped
by bike tire treads is theirs, the white lines
of the crosswalk and the streetlights
not-yet-giving-off-glow—theirs.

All of that they can have, but not these words.
This poem, flung into the atmosphere
as soon as they shout past my open car windows,
is for those of us whose wonder has turned to worry,

who have lost our ability to be present
on a bike seat. These words, set down
on a white page, are my tire treads,
my own small whoop back into the world.