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## How Will I Tell You?

Elisa Revello  
DePaul University, [elisarev37@gmail.com](mailto:elisarev37@gmail.com)

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# **HOW WILL I TELL YOU?**

A Thesis  
Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
June 2022

BY  
Elisa Revello  
Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences  
DePaul University  
Chicago, Illinois

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## TIME AND AGAIN

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### Cadence

The trees bend  
to the tune of  
the wind and the leaves  
are coiled in song.

This morning  
I wake  
to the rattle of the sun  
to the drumbeat  
to the rhythm  
of a new day.

## **Sleight of Hand**

Sometimes it's harmless  
stealing a nap in sunlight  
a sister, a sweater  
a husband, a bite  
before its cooked.  
I'm thinking about stealing  
here, at the fountain  
that is unfolding like a  
liquid flower, where  
many travelers have  
relieved weary feet  
where families, with  
their tongues, catch ice cream  
toppling from cones,  
where a reader closes a book  
to let their thoughts  
run with the glittering stream  
and others throw  
their cares, hopes  
in the clear blue.

A little boy with one  
shoe half off is leaning  
over the concrete basin  
scooping his hands into  
the fountain pool and  
stealing coins.  
He holds the coins  
silver, copper in tiny palms—  
all those wishes laid bare.  
He pockets them  
this little thief—  
or is he a magician?  
Will he make all the  
those wishes come true?  
Or will he turn into a human  
trade them for a gumball or  
put them in a piggy bank?  
Will he carry the coins  
for the rest of his life  
and wake with regret  
knowing that he could have  
broken a spell?

## Hello Anty

The sun cooks  
the water  
from the hose,  
and I can smell  
the stone.

There is an ant  
playing with me  
and he does not  
care that I am  
a giant.

Lying on  
my stomach,  
resting on  
my elbows,  
my hands form  
a triangle on  
the sidewalk.  
I catch him,  
block the water.  
Someone says,  
“Your dress!  
Get up. Off  
the ground.”  
But I don’t hear.

He bumps, turns  
scurries, circles  
Until—  
He ascends, scales  
with tickly feet.  
And I must be still—  
    my hand, a planet  
    my knuckles, mountains  
so he can pass safely  
over the stream.

## **Crutches!**

As a child  
I used to  
want to break  
a finger  
or an arm  
and have a sling  
or break a leg  
even better  
because then  
I'd get a bigger cast  
and crutches!  
With a broken leg,  
I could  
leave class early  
have people  
hold open doors  
and carry my books  
write their names  
on the cast in  
bubble letters  
and draw pictures  
with smelly markers  
and leave lavish  
well wishes with  
the earnestness of  
their fourth-grade  
hearts.

## **The Love of Labor**

My first business was  
making friendship bracelets.  
I asked my mom to take me  
to the store where I could run  
my fingers over the threads to  
make sure I got the best  
colors. I tied the thread  
to my bedpost and made  
a bazillion loops and knots  
and it took me hours, days  
that felt like hundreds, no  
thousands of years toiling  
and turning threads to make  
bracelets which I put into my  
backpack and sold to my friends  
for a quarter. But then I decided  
it was a lot of work for little pay.  
I decided—  
I decided it was much better  
to be a writer.

## Dogma

The good Catholic  
girl recites words  
strange old words  
words she does not  
know all of them  
but pictures the words as specks, as stars  
and colors, lights spiraling up to heaven  
and realizes  
they don't teach  
that in Sunday school.  
She tries again. Closes  
her eyes tighter  
so it's really dark.  
She pushes the  
bony part of the  
knee, so it's nailed  
to the ground  
makes her back  
straight like a post  
she binds her hands  
squeezes as hard as  
she can and makes  
an offering to obey  
God's will.

I will  
I will clean my room, she petitions.  
Now, can I please have a puppy?

## A Gift

When I was five,  
I played the air piano,  
making my hands  
into gymnasts and wizards  
used walls, chairs, legs, and  
desks reserved for writing.  
It was nothing to jump, flip  
make something out of nothing.  
I wanted a real instrument,  
a grand one, and back then  
I had the audacity  
to ask for what I wanted.

When I was six,  
my parents brought me  
downstairs. They told me  
to close my eyes. It was  
the biggest present ever,  
one with a giant red bow  
like in a movie or commercial:

A stout console  
reddish brown wood.  
No bench—I had to use  
a folding chair and  
stack books on top  
that the cat knocked over.  
The damper pedal would stick.  
A couple chipped,  
a couple out of tune, but there was  
a promising line of 88 keys.

I took lessons. Other kids said  
they hated lessons as if  
they were something you  
were supposed to hate. But  
I practiced on that old church piano  
in that tiny damp basement as if it  
were a gilded concert hall.  
It didn't matter if it was  
the same song over and over.  
To play was a gift.

## The Artist

My niece, my godchild,  
we were making pictures  
with your box of crayons and pencils.  
I was drawing that flower I always do  
and coloring it in when you looked over  
and decided that your picture was bad.  
You stabbed the paper, claimed  
you made another mistake and scribbled.

There it was—that voice—that wall closing in  
on you. *But no. No. Not you.* I didn't know what  
to do, but I had to act.

I complimented you and said that your picture  
was not bad—it was good—but you did not relent.  
You crumpled the paper. Groaned. I scrambled,  
told you, there aren't really mistakes in art and  
that's what makes art fun and sometimes  
the mistakes are the best part. But you furrowed  
your brow and mumbled through your tears:  
You didn't want to draw anymore.

I stammered, pleaded to better, higher voices  
of the great universe. I stood, gesticulated  
like I was on a stage and declared,  
In art, there are no rules.  
This, at least, alerted you.  
We don't even have to keep  
what we make, I proclaimed, and  
I ripped up my drawing and threw it  
in the air. You tore your paper too,  
tried not to smile, but I got your attention.

I said: We can always *always* start again.

Then I jumped to the ground to meet you  
and grabbed a handful of colors and revealed,  
I bet you don't know this, but I scribble a lot,  
and I made wild circles with five pencils in my fist.

Look, I pointed, at these rainbow clouds.  
Aren't they beautiful? Do you want to try  
making them too? To my relief, you agreed.

And together, we drove our pencils into paper  
with fury and laughter until we created  
wonderful swirls. Then I asked if you would  
give me your picture to hang on my wall. I made  
a big ceremony of taping it there and told you  
how much I loved it and it was beautiful  
and it was good because you made it  
and making something is always good.  
The truth—because I could never fool you.

Oh how I wanted your freedom  
to find its way back to you—  
because if you love art, my dear,  
you can have it all of your life.

## **An Author**

The author  
keeps the pen  
in a box  
in a locked drawer  
the pen, passed  
down from his  
grandfather to his father  
to him. In his hand, the  
weight of generations.  
He likes to think that when  
he holds it, his ancestors  
whisper, root for him  
from beyond because he  
cannot do this for himself.  
He is, with this pen,  
reminded that he is  
always a child  
always looking to be carried.

The pen, a 737, a slick  
powerful machine  
orbiting the earth. Together  
they escape the villain of ennui.  
The pen, a wand  
gold tipped, commanding.  
With it, he is master of his subjects  
the god of his world.  
The pen, a compass,  
that doesn't just point him  
to the treasure  
but redraws the map.  
The pen, a baton, which  
pulls a chord from the brain  
through the heart to the hand.

He reminds himself each time.  
It is a pen, a mere instrument that he'll use  
to mark this paper.  
No, he can't think  
about it, about how it works: writing.  
If he thinks too much, he can  
no longer be a child.  
No longer be carried.

## A Note for My Sister

I found an old photograph of us and our cousins,  
took a magnet and stuck it on the side of the fridge  
that is next to the trash can. Because I like time travel and  
because of braces and big hair. Then I found myself,  
another day standing, looking into the photograph  
with a full garbage bag,  
heavy in my hand.

My sister is wearing a skirt-pant red black  
polka dot, striped, hey-look-at-me loud coordinated outfit. Bangs.  
She is six or seven. One arm raised with the palm stretched out, and  
the other hand on her chest, eyes alight, mouth open. Devilish joy.  
I can almost hear her in this picture—laaaaah—serenading the room.  
She's the youngest of the bunch, but  
She's taking command.  
Front and center.  
Showing off.

I think I want to ask her, my sister, but I know that maybe  
I shouldn't, but I thought, perhaps I could ask her  
at a moment when it might seem innocent like  
in the car on the way to the store, or I could even  
write a note and slip it in her purse, but  
I know I must not push because  
some things are so delicate  
(and you know how you feel when  
people ask you about these things)  
but I think I might just do it  
even though I am not certain  
I want the answer, but  
one day, when the  
time is right,  
I might just  
ask her:

Do you still sing?

## Grandma's Gravy

I remember as a kid traveling to foreign lands of other people's houses and staying for dinner, and the family cooking what they called spaghetti and a glass jar with a mustachioed cartoon man. I remember eating something unfamiliar and saying thank you, but I did not tell them that it's not called sauce.

I did not tell them of cramped hot kitchens in summer  
of a master curled over the stove stirring with a crooked hand  
of olive oil in a can hidden under the sink and cast iron and  
mounds of garlic and garlic turning gold and permeating the house  
of thick paste and handling raw meat and tying meat with strings  
of rolling and kneading and tossing flour  
of Romano that is pulled from the depths of the freezer  
of handfuls of salt and pepper and leaves and dashes  
of ingredients that can never be measured or revealed  
of wooden spoons and sizzling and snaps of oil  
of parsley that you cut with your teeth  
of hauling jugs of wine from the basement  
of a massive pot and a long slow simmer  
of waiting for a deeper richer red  
a color that is only known to few  
of armies of tasters lifting the lid  
and releasing the scent of promise  
and dipping bread in the pot  
when no one is looking and  
storytelling that seems like yelling  
of grating the cheese because  
you're the kid and the kid gets the worst job  
of the grater that hurts your hand  
and a slippery paper plate  
holding a mountain of cheese  
of boiling water and steam  
of huddling around a flame  
and working a whole day  
cooking. But you—  
you are not just cooking  
in your family. Your family—  
are makers of  
magic.

**THIS, OR SOMETHING BETTER.**

---

**Lottery**

Spending hours  
until the sun cashes out  
the great golden coin  
fades  
into the slot of the horizon—  
payment for the stars.

## **Voluntary Confinement**

The worker, employee number 614, swipes a badge and punches a code to enter Suite 400. Then, a minute before start, plods to the to the third cube, a clone of hundreds of other cubes. The worker droops down into the chair, stuck to it crumbs from lunches of yore, and powers on the computer which blinks a few times before it drones. Bound to the desk, the worker opens a spreadsheet, types, clicks, but mostly stares, feigning concentration lest the supervisor passes, while surreptitiously looking at animal memes, reading true crime conspiracies, and obsessively checking the clock. The minutes stick like burnt grounds in the coffee pot. Today, on the second day of yet another five-day stay serving time for a paycheck, the worker is distracted by the flickering overhead light, which, the worker believes, is not powered by electricity but human souls. The light flashes above the motivational poster with a platitude about “Purpose” and a photo of a bald eagle soaring above white-capped mountains. The eagle is frozen in flight, trapped in the frame.

“Flights,” the worker mutters, turns back to the computer, and starts looking for an escape—to Hawaii, Prague, London, Lima, Kyoto, New York, Omaha, Milwaukee—anywhere but here.

## **A Lot of Nothing**

Couch caving  
among an empty bag  
of twisted pretzels,  
cloudy glasses, a single  
sock, a half-eaten pizza  
now half-embalmed,  
the recently unemployed  
former manager, now  
ex-husband, is prostrate  
in front of the TV. He  
stops episode 56 and  
changes the channel. When  
he sees the talking heads  
excited about a new  
catastrophe, he  
powers off,  
ignores the bills piled  
on the self-help book  
which holds the key  
to success and  
leaves the free weights  
free to collect dust.  
His phone silenced,  
he curls up with a towel  
that he should have folded,  
settles in for a nap.  
Is laziness an act of defiance?  
He does not worry.  
Ahead, an open calendar—  
the loveliness of nothing.

## A Whole Menu

I'm getting pancakes. With strawberries and whip cream.

What about eating healthy?

You mean, healthily. I think I'll have the eggs benedict.

What about your cholesterol?

Eggs and bacon.

Cholesterol.

Fruit instead of bacon.

The melon is tough, tasteless. You can't stick a fork in a grape.

I should eat light. A yogurt parfait? Oatmeal?

Oatmeal! May as well go home.

The French toast looks good. So does the quiche.

Don't kid yourself. It won't be *pain perdu* or the quiche in Paris?

Not sure if I want sweet or savory...how about chicken and waffles?

There you have it.

Oh, but biscuits and gravy!

You'll be bloated and tired.

I will start the diet today: a scramble with veggies.

You'll be sorry when you see pancakes.

Two eggs over easy, sausage, and a side of pancakes.

You always get that.

Then a muffin—no, a gluten-free muffin. They look yummy.

Yummy? They look like cardboard.

But it's something sweet with no carbs, healthy-ish.

That's all?

An omelette. I haven't had an omelette in a while...

## The Cleaning Lady

The first floor is barely ruffled, but they leave dust bunnies so she can make them vanish; upstairs in the office, she runs the feather duster over the mahogany desk, around the picture frames, and under the keyboard, and swiftly, she returns the collection notice to its hiding place; in the master bath, she closes the vanity that holds the oxycodone, sprays the mirror, wipes, squirts blue bleach in the toilet, scrubs; in the boy's room, she pulls the soiled sheets, sets down fresh linens, puts his shoes in the closet next to the box with the knife and tiny bones; she runs the vacuum, mops and oils the floors. Back from kiddo's game, they inhale the lemony air, admire their home, and ask: "How *does* she do it?!" They hand her crisp, new bills and she thanks them—without looking.

## The Danger of Mirrors

This grown woman smears  
cream into the lines of her  
face, stretches her skin to  
make them disappear. She  
cringes at her reflection, but  
knows she shouldn't berate  
herself. All that wasted time,  
pointing at the gap in her teeth,  
staring back at lopsided eyes...  
legs too stumpy  
shoulders like a bull  
hips like in hippo. Once  
someone called her pretty.  
Loved her smooth skin.  
Now, she agonizes about  
her skin too. She tells herself it is  
a pleasing face when she smiles  
even though there are  
two lines, hooks on the  
side of her mouth, spider webs  
around her eyes, her lopsided eyes.  
One day, the lines won't matter.  
One day, she'll be glad for her  
lungs and for her heart and her knees—  
then soon after, when she finally  
sees herself as life,  
she will be reduced to a name  
on a stone, somebody's mother  
somebody's wife, daughter, sister—  
a name and dates.

## Divorce

The wife finds herself  
in the kitchen in the  
afternoon with a bottle  
of gin and an empty  
glass, a glass which she  
knocks off the butcher  
block, one of her cherished  
antique glasses, one part of  
a set she could never  
replace. All ruined.  
She lowers herself to  
pick up the shards  
kneels on the glass  
feels a welcome pinch.  
She puts all her weight on  
one leg so the shards  
dig in until she bleeds.  
It doesn't hurt—  
why doesn't it hurt?  
She laughs and the  
dog nods its head  
like he's asking why.  
She stands up, leaving  
the floor in shambles,  
and pours another drink.  
The clock dings, echoes—  
the imminent silence stings.  
She wonders  
where he might be  
this time of day:  
finalizing a contract,  
at the gym, a boozy lunch?  
No, it's Thursday:  
the weekly meeting—  
But did she ever really  
know where he was?

## **Misophonia**

In the library, a woman, twig-like, with a dainty, bedazzled pair of glasses resting on her nose, is absorbed in a book, and breathing. You're supposed to be reading, too, but you're distracted. You have read the same sentence 20 times, but it perplexes you. Because her breath is not breath—it is the roar and squeal of heavy machinery, of pistons expanding and contracting, of exhaust hissing and chugging without end. You wonder if breathing through such a tiny nose is labor. Perhaps she should see a doctor. You could advise her, but she must be aware of the machinations of her own body. You've been raised to know that it is impolite to say stop breathing, so how about quiet down? It is a library. But you really want to say: stop breathing. STOP. (Or do you want to make her stop? No, you're not a murderer, but you see now that you could be.) She has the audacity to read and still breathe, tormenting you, while on your page, the words are spiraling and melting into word soup. She turns a page, but in slow motion, and it echoes like a tree falling in a forest. No one hears it but you. And she breathes, launching rocket after rocket of air, a blinding, deafening fire.

## Collector of Disappointments

The shopper buys and buys  
lodging it all into her home:  
clothes for grandkids to come  
two air fryers (buy one get one free)  
twenty boxes of low-sodium crackers  
thirty bottles of shampoo  
a year supply of kitty litter  
a case of balsamic vinegar  
paper plates, aluminum foil  
bottled water and canned goods  
she creates towers of newspapers  
and fences of magazines and  
orders jewelry which she  
arranges in treasure piles  
from the soap star  
turned entrepreneur  
and she buys dolls and  
keeps them in boxes  
secures them under plastic  
in case one day they are  
worth something and  
she buys wonderful creams  
and weight-loss remedies  
kitchen cleaners and gadgets  
that they don't sell in stores  
late, late at night. She  
collects in case loses it all.  
She is surrounded,  
filled, satiated somehow—  
even if there isn't enough,  
even if it doesn't last.

## Aisle Five

The retired librarian stood between the cans of shoepeg corn and pickled okra, the jar of pimientos escaping her. She scanned the shelves, pointing her finger, until she found what had eluded her. She grabbed four and placed the jars in her cart one by one, and when she went forward, she knocked into Mrs. Greene who said, as if she were reporting the weather, that Mrs. Hall called, and he had died in his sleep. He—Mr. Hall—who kept the books for the lumber company for 30 years, coached little league, and painted model ships, lived under the tyranny of his wife's voice. Mr. Hall who dug out her car in a blizzard—Christmas 1962—when she yanked the frozen door and they tumbled into a foot of powder, when he took her face into his careful hands and kissed her, a dry and warm kiss, in the silky breath of winter.

Overhead, the fluorescent light hummed, cracked, ripped through her veins. The squealing cash register, tormenting. In the 30 years that passed, she never summoned the courage to ask him—did he...had he wanted to? Because she swore that a thousand thoughts passed between them. It would have been enough if he thought he could love her, wanted to, even if he couldn't. He could have felt anything: wistfulness, the pinch of regret, or nothing at all. She told Mrs. Greene she had to go, pushed the cart aside, knowing that she must get home, she must wrap herself in the safety and comfort of a book.

## Morning at the Park

From the vantage  
of the park bench,  
his park bench, his spot  
south of the willow trees,  
the lone man observes:

Two boys,  
the gangly one hikes  
his knee up to his chin and  
throws the ball which smacks  
the mitt of his chunky, red-cheeked  
friend who waves a limp  
hand because of the sting.

The old man  
with the hat  
who uses an umbrella as a cane  
flashes a showman's smile, a smile  
that predicts he's going to tap dance  
down the path while the bluebirds sing  
and the squirrels step in time.

And the waitress, chewing gum  
instead of sucking venom out of a cigarette,  
speed-walks in her vintage yellow dress  
nylons and tennis shoes,  
her hair, meringue  
whipped into frozen peaks,  
eyebrows drawn in angry disbelief.

Alone, he witnesses from  
the safety of the park bench:

A couple he hasn't seen before,  
older than him, gray and carrying middle age,  
holding hands, fingers braided like high schoolers.  
In a trance, the couple watches the saxophone player  
who never looks up—

He can't stop it. The song travels to him,  
the melody slides across the mid-morning sky—  
the music seeps into him, softening his bones.

## OVERCOME

---

### A Cold Kind of Magic

People who escape  
the seasons  
say they don't miss  
the cold, or maybe  
don't remember  
what it's like to witness  
the first cover of snow  
standing outside, alone  
on a tranquil winter night  
when your breath is full and visible  
and you can feel your blood running  
feel the warmth of being alive  
it's the closest  
you get to silence,  
the closest you get to erasing darkness  
the closest you get to a blank canvas,  
the first snow—  
and the windows...  
how the windows  
of all the houses  
burn gold.

## Another Birthday

Wrestling the balloons  
into the backseat of the  
sedan, each bobbing,  
squeaking  
attempting to escape.

Balloons,  
cheerful annoyances  
to mark a year.

I drive

    think, yes,  
so many happy  
years like this one.

Years of joy  
innocence  
wonderful surprises  
gifts, celebration  
music and

balloons: red, blue, yellow  
boxing each other in the backseat,  
fighting to free themselves,  
blocking the rear view...

I drive

    ask  
How will I tell you?  
You cannot go back to  
a year like this one. And  
how will I tell you?

There will be others too.  
Years when you can't hold on,  
Years when you must let go—  
years that will fly

    drift  
disappear.

## **An Honest Love**

Their love was  
not saccharine  
nor was it quiet.  
It was the scrape  
of the shovel on the drive  
the thunder of garbage cans  
the roar of the vacuum  
the shriek of the morning alarm  
clomping down the stairs,  
grunts and snorts and  
exasperated sighs—  
It was a single pot  
tarnished and durable  
yet a holder of mysteries  
and a soother of miseries.  
It was medicine  
after a long day of  
work, the taste of  
homemade gravy  
from a wooden spoon.

## Dementia

He trudges down the highway  
against oncoming traffic  
toward the vigorous wind and rain  
with his hat and overcoat and  
his Sunday best, not minding  
the cars because he's hurrying  
to church, until the officer with  
bowed eyebrows and a shy smile  
stops to chat, and because she has  
nice teeth, he tells her about his  
practice, stresses the importance  
of flossing and explains that he  
slept unusually late and his wife  
left without him; they go every  
week like good people do, lived  
here all their lives except for the  
years stationed on the island  
which was beautiful,  
perfect weather, but  
you always miss the place  
you call home; he insists  
on showing her where he lives—  
because after nearly a century of living,  
his body knows:  
the only way to get there is  
to keep going.

## **Grief in Summer**

Underneath the umbrella  
of her hat, she  
seizes the weeds  
lifts the spindly roots  
a piece of earth  
or peace for her,  
if only temporary.  
It is the snore of  
the lawnmower that  
revives her, makes her  
look again  
she hasn't moved them—  
the boots that are not  
large enough  
for the man  
who left them  
by the door.

## New Tricks

I walk, and my dog sits in a wagon. Now, I am the one that pulls him. His right leg is lame. The neurons are not connecting—his brain is not speaking to his leg—maybe a disc issue. He is a beagle terrier mix, shaped like a bullet, long and low to the ground. Before, he could outrun most other dogs. Even though he sits in the wagon, I watch him because he'll still try to jump out. He still has the will. I imagine him reminiscing at the park while sitting with the other white-bearded dogs, like an old man chewing on a cigar with a glimmer in his eye, saying, "I used to chase all the rabbits." When my dog was younger, a rabbit on the other side of the fence tortured him. Motionless, glaring at him with one dead eye, the rabbit—arrogant rodent—stayed planted in the next yard while my dog ran back and forth along the fence, barking. He barked and barked and woofed and yelped and growled. Relentlessly. It was a regular occurrence. But one day, my dog who is less than a foot tall, grabs hold of the chain link with his paws and with fierce determination, scurries up the fence, leaps at the rabbit, and chases it away. I pretended to be mad and half-scolded him because I didn't want him to get hurt. (I suppressed a smile, thought, "That's my boy!") Once he got the courage to jump the fence though, he did it all the time. He has scars, lines with no fur, down his back legs to his paws from catching the top of the chain link. Chasing rabbits, all that jumping, that must have done it. He can't move like he used to, but he still tells me he wants he treat, still tells me to let him out, still alerts me when someone's there. He barks, a low throaty bark, sounds bigger than he is. He barks all the time. I used to tell him to be quiet. I used to scold him for barking so much, but now—now, I listen.

## **Disquiet**

Postcard city  
frozen with dis-ease.

A pulse-line skyline.  
Cold concrete.

Empty streets and vacancies.  
Burdens of community.

Dark windows. Ghosts  
and the memories they keep.

But the water is not silent, no.  
The Earth, She is rapt, heaving.

“Tell me, now,” a truer voice utters,  
“What is the purpose of all this striving?”

Inside four walls, somewhere  
someone is wishing she could weep.

## **Once Was Home**

Under the weight of  
three coats, he extends  
a grimy hand and lifts  
his inflamed eyes that  
juggle madness. Filth  
upon filth has stained  
his face. Dare you imagine  
that he did not have a ratty  
beard, or reek of excrement  
of stewing in his own stench  
...Dare you imagine  
what he was like when  
he was a little boy?

## Battle of Today

It took an hour to get up but  
today I showered, dressed,  
put gel in my hair, brushed my teeth  
counted the minutes, used the lint brush  
to remove the pet hair, made  
coffee, ate a granola bar, took  
a vitamin, did all these things,  
got in the car like everyone else,  
even though there was nothing in me.  
I drove, turned on the radio,  
but I couldn't tell you the news,  
and I played a song, but I couldn't sing it  
so I turned it off. A friend called  
and I said that I was good and I  
asked questions so I didn't  
have to tell her there's nothing,  
or maybe it's something, in me. Or  
is it on me? It was no use:  
I couldn't explain it.  
I must have smiled twenty times  
at the office, at the store  
and when I got home  
I made a joke even though there was  
still something—but it hurt after a while  
because there was nothing, nothing.  
I sat down for an hour, and it took  
another hour to get up.  
I went for a walk and  
I walked quickly so I could outrun,  
rid myself of it, but even after I was done  
walking, there was still something.  
And I wrote, too, trying  
to get something out, and no  
matter, nothing interesting  
came out at all. And when I went  
to bed, I was thankful because  
I didn't have to pretend. But  
I couldn't rest, I couldn't sleep—  
I was already going to war  
with tomorrow.

## **On Mania**

On the edge of invention  
standing on your hair  
ideas are fleeing  
before you can catch them

then you do  
catch one  
a conspiracy  
live out of your skin  
disappear from yourself  
from everyone else and  
go flying  
    higher and higher and higher and higher  
without wings

## Still

I walk in the woods  
in the winter when  
no one is around.

A fat tree stands at  
the bend  
a sentinel guarding  
the unfettered world.

The naked trees reach  
like hands grasping at  
the sky, delightful,  
a cool milky blue.  
The snow is sweet too,  
frosting on branches.

My wish is simple:  
mind clean, thoughts melted.  
I do not ask for  
suggestions, insights.  
I have to believe  
what I alone see:

Ten cardinals perched  
magnificent red  
hot specks of blood on  
the hooks of an oak.  
The color shocking,  
I blink. Generous,  
they hesitate—

ruby wings rustling—  
then flying eternal.

## LETTERS FROM THE FUTURE

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### Oceanic

I stand before the ocean  
    ancient yet restless  
steeped in mystery  
    vital and present  
giving, taking  
    inexhaustible power  
I take a breath—  
    in  
    out  
it's a relief  
    realizing how small  
I am...  
    human.

## The True Warrior

The true warrior is not a soldier  
a commander, moralist, or preacher  
she is a flower in a field of flowers  
who births her seed, trusts the  
wind. She gathers the kindling  
of her grief, disappointment, anger  
the tatters of life  
the strings of uncertainty  
and waits for it  
to catch fire. She  
builds a path of  
the stones that have  
rained upon her,  
ebbs, flows  
lets the current  
of her spirit pull her.  
She does not take or hoard  
she receives with grace  
and glory.  
But she can  
withstand explosion  
exploitation,  
brutality, violation  
and though cruelty may  
try to contain her  
she has the  
courage, the might  
to push the door open.  
She does not  
wield a gun  
or a baton  
or carry a spear,  
she does not  
attack, maul, belittle, or plunder—  
she does not begrudge or hate:

The true warrior does not destroy—  
she creates.

## 1-800 Call

Down the mountain  
gravity carries us  
into the valley  
the car winds  
round the countryside  
the grass springing  
from the dwindling  
hills, fresh green  
brilliant green  
and blue  
everywhere and  
it's the kind of spring  
day that you must drink the air.

But among the lush earth  
is a billboard. A monstrosity,  
an ugly splat dwarfing the trees.  
There's an image of Jesus  
on the billboard, not a  
painting, not a work of art,  
but an image of a man in  
a bad wig and below the image  
a 1-800 number. Isn't  
prayer toll-free?  
Enraged by the billboard,  
I think of calling to complain  
about this abominable blemish  
on nature. No, I'd go  
straight to the manager—  
God would surely agree.

If I called, if afforded an hour or two—  
No, I'd need an eternity.  
I drove on...  
wondering if I should have called  
and what I might have said,  
damning all the billboards  
along the way.

## **Beloved for Sale**

Turn the key gently and at a precise angle,  
otherwise, the starter locks.  
The heat takes a minute to fire up.  
The driver's side window doesn't roll down,  
unless you press and pull at the same time.  
There's a burn hole in the passenger seat,  
a big stain the shape of a kidney bean in the back,  
and a seatbelt stuck loose.  
A little water gets in through the trunk,  
so put some plastic down.  
There's a bit of rust on the bottom—  
cloudy patches on the paint.  
It's got a lot of miles, but  
the oil was changed regularly.  
The clutch might need  
to be replaced down the line.  
The antenna's bent, but  
you still get a few stations—  
the speakers are good.  
And if you take this baby out on the highway,  
you should see her go.

## Dress Rehearsal

In the theatre of  
my mind, I imagine  
(forgive me)  
your death.  
At your funeral,  
I stand above your grave  
with a single rose  
eulogizing  
recasting, reciting  
the timeline of your life  
playing only the best parts  
trying to capture your  
character, your spirit.  
I cannot settle on  
which stories to tell,  
so I tell them all,  
rehearsing my monologue  
gathering an ensemble  
of memories until  
I whimper, cry  
cry and cry harder—

until I am awoken  
by the resounding grief,  
the sniffing, choking, wailing

startled by my own blubbering,  
I open my eyes,  
fearing I have lost time  
acting out this tragedy.  
I am grateful to return  
because now, finally—  
I can see you.

## **A Long Hike in the Desert**

I am thirsty in the desert  
lumbering up this mountain.  
Walking is a drag. Such heavy feet.  
Why even move without wings?  
But I trudge on—I have a  
winding key on my back, a  
clockwork motor that won't stop.  
I move forward, though slowly  
clumsily, I head toward the top.  
And if I do arrive, and when  
When I arrive, I will be sated.  
Because there is just a piece of  
glass between me and the sky,  
and I will break it. I will break it—  
and it will rain.

## Searching in the 21st Century

The seeker with the cell in hand,  
a phone that is not just smart  
but a power center of knowledge,  
in contemplation, scours the internet  
for truth, asks critical questions such as:

How do birds have sex?  
Aches, pains, fatigue, disease, life expectancy...?  
What is my zip code?  
How do you know if someone's a sociopath?  
Are Virgos and Leos compatible?  
How do you lose weight in your face?  
Is it okay to eat snow?

The seeker, fingers aching and frantic,  
neck craned, head burdened  
with knowledge—  
so little  
so much.

## Future Barbarians

In the future (when we're the past)  
they'll snark, laugh at us, telepathically  
take rides in cars like it's quaint  
(not the clip clop of horse and carriages  
but vroom vroom). They'll laugh until they faint:  
as if paper were power and profit were prophet!  
(Like the sun revolves around the earth.)  
They'll ask as they transfer in their hover crafts,  
how could the ancient humans eviscerate  
forest, sea, city,  
draw invisible lines of country  
condemn, abuse bodies, beasts...  
let them go hungry?  
War: outer war, familial war  
inner war with the self  
Such cruelty! (tie each limb to a horse,  
burn you at the stake, stone you)  
How could the pre-evolved  
inject their minds with dribble,  
rely on electricity, worship celebrity  
work on flat screens? How archaic!  
(As if a hammer and chisel.)  
In the hospitals, they'll gasp,  
how the primitives used to cut  
drug you as if it were healing  
(whiskey, strap you down,  
chop off your leg with an axe).  
They'll toast to eternal health  
and centuries-long lives...  
and joke about what we wore,  
having a good old snort in  
the trans-atmosphere when  
they dress up like us for  
the holiday, inter-galaxy-ween.  
Glad we're here, they'll say,  
in this space-time continuum,  
knowing all about  
knowing nothing  
of this world, this universe,  
and its infinite worlds.

## Two Skies

The last sip of  
claret on the patio,  
watching two skies  
battling. On one side,  
the sun, wild and ranting  
burning through  
a tangle of trees.  
And the other,  
clouds climbing, stirring  
spelling a storm, poised  
to extinguish the summer day.  
The sun bows  
and the clouds throw  
a sheet of shade,  
devouring the warmth.  
Goosebumps. You  
command the sun,  
try, even knowing that you  
cannot hold onto a season  
cannot hold onto a day  
cannot pray away change.  
The air's chilly voice,  
a boom  
whip of lightning  
warns you of the  
coming downpour.  
Despite the warning,  
you do not move,  
but you remember—  
You, too, are a  
precious and powerful  
thing. Though the  
neighbors are slamming  
their doors and shutting  
their windows, though  
the insects have quieted  
and your family is calling,  
you do not run inside.  
Instead, you hold up your cup  
and wait—  
wait for a glass of rain.

## **A Little Insight from the Moon**

Last night I woke wild on a dream,  
thoughts aflutter.

I sauntered worn streets half asleep  
to the thrum of the night train,  
and I watched myself, noticing  
with new eyes, seeing  
the black sky pulsing and  
a glossy white film  
'round the moon.

I rose to meet her  
peeled the veneer back  
peeked into the other side  
and whispered into the void:

“What good is an engine  
if the tracks lead to nowhere?”

There was no answer—

No angel anticipating—

I lamented, returning to ground,  
but then the moon herself  
winked and granted me  
a secret feeling.

I slid back to a time  
when I wrote with  
a stone on the sidewalk,  
never thinking about  
purpose and meaning,  
about place,  
about losing or winning,  
about getting  
from here to there.