ABSTRACT

IN THE CRICKET HOURS: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

by

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Master of Arts in English

California State University, Chico

Spring 2010

_In the Cricket Hours_ represents my journey as a writer. The “cricket hours” defines the time when my reductive reasoning narrows and my inclusive observation expands. In these hours, metaphors make music and meaning. My early poems developed from a desire to understand my experience with loss—to use the poem as a lens to focus the complex and conflicting emotions of accepting the death of loved ones. At the time I wrote them, they were an entry to understanding and acceptance. The mournful narrative poem became a way to contextualize my grief in order to move beyond it.

The poems contained _In The Cricket Hours_ explore themes of loss, death, and separation through various lenses, and many of these poems move beyond these themes to provide the reader space to learn something about herself. Some poems are equally mournful and hopeful. Others question the inequity in social systems and ask the reader to consider the oxymoron of economic disparity and the connections a speaker draws between herself and the marginalized people she observes living
outside her socio-economic group. All ask the reader to consider the speaker’s experience as one note of the human experience. As the speaker’s losses open up her compassion for others, so too, the poems hope to open up a reader’s perspective. They create a space *In the Cricket Hours* where a reader might see the infinite connections between herself, humankind and the natural world.
IN THE CRICKET HOURS: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

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Spring 2010

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This project came to fruition from a series of fortunate finds. I dropped a chemical biology course to enroll in an American literature course, and that class changed the trajectory of my education. Dr. Jim Karman introduced me to the poetry of Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath, which prompted me to get out of the fine-tuned focus of a Biology degree and broaden my perspective as I completed degrees in English and Humanities. Dr. Karman remains a touchstone teacher: a muse and a mentor who brings out the best in students by asking us to, “Live the life of the mind.”

After a 20 year banking career, I was fortunate enough to find two more touchstone teachers: Rob Davidson and Jeanne Clark. Dr. Davidson took a chance by allowing me to join his graduate level writer’s workshop so I could get back into writing poetry. He accepted me although it was painfully obvious I hadn’t written academically for years. I was under the impression that “creative” wasn’t inclusive of “incisive.” I sincerely thank Rob for showing me that the best writers are both: masters of metaphor and adepts at argument.

Jeanne Clark is the musical muse in my poetry. Over the years, Jeanne encouraged me to play with language, to play with sound, to play with images and words, even to play with scissors and paste. *In the Cricket Hours* owes a great debt to Dr. Clark as many of the poems developed from studying poetic forms under her
guidance. My best work happened in the hours between our weekly meetings. My debts to Rob and Jeanne will be repaid (with interest) in single malt scotch over the years to come.

The poems in this collection benefitted from the careful critiques by my fellow graduate students. Sharon DeMeyer, Jennifer White, Sarah Knowlton, and Erik Armstrong were invaluable resources during my studies, providing pointed, thoughtful insight into how to make my poems sing. Many of the revisions in the final collection grew from their feedback during our workshop discussions.

And finally, to my husband Dave. I can’t find words. Being tongue-tied after all these years says everything. Pour us a gin and tonic and let’s listen to the music of ice clinking crystal.
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In the Cricket Hours represents my journey as a writer. The “cricket hours” defines the time when my reductive reasoning narrows and my inclusive observation expands. In these hours, metaphors make music and meaning. My early poems developed from a desire to understand my experience with loss—to use the poem as a lens to focus the complex and conflicting emotions of accepting the death of loved ones. At the time I wrote them, they were an entry to understanding and acceptance. The mournful narrative poem became a way to contextualize my grief in order to move beyond it.

The poems contained In The Cricket Hours explore themes of loss, death, and separation through various lenses, and many of these poems move beyond these themes to provide the reader space to learn something about herself. Some poems are equally mournful and hopeful. Others question the inequity in social systems and ask the reader to consider the oxymoron of economic disparity and the connections a
speaker draws between herself and the marginalized people she observes living outside her socio-economic group. All ask the reader to consider the speaker’s experience as one note of the human experience. As the speaker’s losses open up her compassion for others, so too, the poems hope to open up a reader’s perspective. They create a space *In the Cricket Hours* where a reader might see the infinite connections between herself, humankind and the natural world.
PART I
Shikibu’s poem captures my experience with writing poetry. Like the speaker in the poem, I try to maintain a single focus when I’m writing; yet, I can’t help but become distracted by the many cricket sounds around me—the banter from my two teenaged sons, the clink of ice against crystal as my husband pours a gin and tonic, the chirp from my email inbox. What I love about Shikibu’s poem is its simplicity and its reluctance to judge. The speaker acknowledges the crickets’ voices, but doesn’t comment on whether they are an intrusion or a component of her meditation. She leaves that up to the reader. She is pulled between her desire to maintain her focus and her growing awareness that she “cannot help but hear” those cricket voices. Likewise, when I’m focused on writing I am also pulled away by the sounds around me. Whether this tension is productive or not is up to me.

I have a Thoreau-esque image of poetry-writing that is entirely at odds with my life. I picture myself secluded in a dimly lit room overlooking a lush meadow. Shadows stretch the walls as I contemplate the curves of night. Poetic questions follow: What is a metaphor for silence? Can silence be captured by a word?
Is silence the space between words? Do poets need silence to write? The only sound is my pen scratching paper. And then I hear those crickets. Sometimes the noise around me seems like a barrier to writing. Other times, I embrace my sons’ banter, the clink of ice and the email chirps as the music in my life. These songs enhance my experience as a poet: an observer of and a participant in the world.

In the Cricket Hours represents my journey as a writer. The cricket hours defines the time when my reductive reasoning narrows and my inclusive observation expands. In these hours, metaphors make music and meaning. Jane Hirschfield, in her book Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry, describes this state of poetry-making: “It is felt as a grace state: time slows and extends, a person’s every movement and decision seem to partake of perfection” (9). My early poems were far from perfect. They developed from a desire to understand my experience with loss—to use the poem as a lens to focus the complex and conflicting emotions of accepting the death of loved ones.

When I thought about organizing this collection, I placed these poems at the beginning because they signify the beginning of my poetic journey. “Mom’s Gooseberry Pie,” “Estate Sale,” and “Epigraph for Dad” work through the deaths of my mother-in-law, my grandmother, and my father. These poems are consistent in tone, displaying my tendencies for layering metaphors with lyrical language—what I consider my “natural” poetic voice. I can’t help but feel a bit self-conscious when I look back at these poems because they are both heartbreaking and personal. At the
time I wrote them, they were an entry to understanding and acceptance. The mournful narrative poem became a way to contextualize my grief in order to move beyond it.

Moving beyond grief becomes evident as the poems progress throughout In the Cricket Hours. The poetic voice changes in the middle section of the collection as I began working with poetic forms. Writing in Anglo-Saxon prosody, Sapphics, and other forms opened up new voices and vocabularies that weren't necessarily in my "natural" register. "Mommy," "Sloughhouse Grill and Bar," and "Red-Fisted Man" are character narratives, and I found that writing in a constructed character's voice distanced me from my grief. These narratives created a wide-angle lens that revealed my losses as one note of a broader human experience.

The final poems in the collection represent both a closure and an expansion: a closure on my grief that expanded my compassion for others. The speaker in these poems uses her personal experience as a lens to view separation and loss as part of the human experience. These cycles are repeated in the natural world. Like the early poems in the collection, some of these poems are about loss; but loss that creates a connection between the poet and the subjects she considers. The final poem in the collection titled "Autumn Leaves" demonstrates this connection as the speaker identifies with a homeless drunk and her own sense of displacement, naming him "Our crumpled prayer."

The poems contained In The Cricket Hours explore themes of loss, death, and separation through various lenses, and many of these poems move beyond those themes to provide the reader space to learn something about herself. "Spare
Change,” “Playa del Carmen,” and “Autumn Leaves” are equally mournful and hopeful; all ask the reader to consider the human condition. “Spare Change” and “Autumn Leaves” question the inequity in social systems and ask the reader to consider the oxymoron of economic disparity and the sense of connection the speaker draws between herself and the homeless man she watches. “Playa del Carmen” sees beauty in human mortality and asks the reader to consider her experience with death and arrive at her own conclusions. The cohesion between all the poems in the collection is the impulse that brought them into being. They were born in a wound.

Wounds

And You? Remember how the crickets came
Out of their mother grass, like little kin,
In the pale nights, when your first imagery
Found inklings of your bond to all that dust.
—Wallace Stevens (10).

My impulse to write developed from a childhood wound—my father’s suicide. Some poems in this collection explore that loss among others; however, they also seek to transcend the impulse that created them. Like Stevens’ crickets creeping out of their “mother grass,” these poems creep out of their mother wounds to consider death and our human “bond to all that dust.” The poems in this collection, then, have a purpose: they transcend the wounds that created them to forge connections with a broader human experience. They use the poet’s individual experience as a lens for the reader to view her own experience, so that by reading the poems, the reader may learn something about herself. Jane Hirschfield explores this idea: “Both the reading and the writing of poems explore one thing by means of
another; each draws on a fundamentally metaphorical mind in order to reach toward the new. We turn to Shakespeare's sonnets to learn not about Shakespeare's life but about our own" (35).

Poetry leads us beyond the poet to illuminate our own lives through metaphor. Some poems explore personal wounds, and these wounds become a gate the poet steps through in order to move beyond her individual experience. When she understands her wounds in a broader context as part of the human experience, she steps through that first gate. Writing about loss with an inclusive awareness leads the poet back to an understanding of herself, which is another way of saying turning inward can become the first gesture of turning outward.

Turning inward has its beauties, but also its devils. I can think of no better example in poetry than Sylvia Plath. I loved Plath as an undergrad when I first read "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" in an American literature class. Plath was smart. She was mad. She was cool to just about every English student who loved poetry. At the time, I identified with Plath's obsessions, especially with "Daddy" since I was working through my father's death. The opening stanzas of the poem grip me still:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time--
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal . . . (984)
Plath’s incantatory opening line reveal the speaker’s obsession. The repetition and rhyme in “You do not do, you do not do” plucks those sensitive hairs that run along the back of my neck. “You do not do” contains more passion than those small words can bear. Passion spills over into Plath’s images: the foot stuffed into the black shoe, the “ghastly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal.” Although I am gripped by Plath’s imagery and the lyrical music she creates with alliteration, my relationship with her work is complicated because Plath, like my father, committed suicide. Early on in my writing, Plath’s poetry became an obsession: a window to understand my father’s suicidal psyche and mirror for my own obsessions with his death.

Tony Hoagland celebrates obsession in Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft. In one chapter subtitled “Are you still writing about your father?” Hoagland states, “A real diehard, indestructible, irresolvable obsession in a poet is nothing less than a blessing. The poet with an obsession never has to search for subject matter” (81). Hoagland goes on to acknowledge obsession’s dangers, which include “redundancy, immobility, stagnation, narrowness of aperture, confinement” (81). Plath’s obsessions give her poetry the power of image and immediacy, which continue to draw me to them; yet, at this point in my life, I find her work problematic. I think Hoagland’s “narrowness of aperture” captures my criticism of Plath. The voice in many of Plath’s poems is domineering, and at times the metaphors feel overwrought into self-aggrandizement, which leaves little room for a reader to discover something about herself. My primary issue with “Daddy” and
"Lady Lazarus" is how the speaker uses the Holocaust as a governing metaphor. This is not to say I don’t empathize with the speaker’s wounds in both poems; rather, I think Plath excavates these wounds using the broadest shovel in contemporary history, and I’m not sure whether it is an apt comparison. Jane Hirschfield has a response for my criticism: “Passion does not make careful arguments: it declares itself and that is enough” (23). Except in the case of Plath, these declarations can be dangerous.

John Gardner recognizes the dangers in Plath’s poetry. In his book-length essay titled *On Moral Fiction*, he describes the power of art: “The business of civilization is to pay attention, remembering what is central, remembering that we live or die by the artist’s vision, sane or cracked” (39). Gardner’s aesthetic is highly controversial in the literary community and he makes several judgments in his essay I don’t support, but I do agree that art can be a powerful teacher. The lesson we glean has as much to do with the artist’s vision as it does with how we as readers synthesize that vision. I think it’s difficult to read a poem without connecting the poem in some way to our own experience. This connection is the power and the magic of metaphor. So, I can’t deny that my reading of Plath’s work is both influenced and informed by my father’s suicide.

“Lady Lazarus” employs an extended metaphor comparing the speaker’s suicide attempts to Holocaust images. The poem opens in the middle of a wound—which is the impulse for many of my poems—but what is the metaphor’s trajectory? The speaker compares her skin to a “Nazi lampshade,” her face to a “fine Jew
linen," and her skull, "eye pits, the full set of teeth" to an unidentified victim in a concentration camp. When I think through the images connecting one speaker’s suicide attempts to the victimization of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis, I am confronted with a problem in “Lady Lazarus.” Is a suicide attempt comparable to the acts of extermination enacted by Nazis against the Jews? Has Plath, by elevating the speaker’s victimization as a woman with the victimization of an entire race, belittled the Holocaust? In my mind, this metaphor magnifies the speaker’s anguish in a way that undermines the power of the poem’s images. Referring back to Jane Hirschfield’s assessment of poems and our reasons for reading them—that we read poems not to learn about the poet’s life but to learn about our own—“Lady Lazarus” becomes problematic. It is difficult for a reader to learn about herself because the speaker’s larger-than-life persona haunts every line. I wondered what might happen if I applied a paradigm shift to Plath’s work, one that might change the poem’s trajectory.

I revised “Daddy” into “Mommy,” a narrative written from the speaker’s daughter’s perspective. This paradigm shift allowed me to explore a child’s experience living with a suicidal mother. As I worked through the poem, I thought it might be interesting to consider how Plath’s poetic brilliance might intimidate a young daughter who also aspired to write. Plath’s “Ich, Ich, Ich” in “Daddy” becomes her daughter’s criticism of her own work: “Ick, Ick, Ick.” Irregular rhyme schemes and imagery embedded within the lines in “Mommy” reveals a young poet developing her craft:
It’s snowing now, I’m
cold, feeling gobbledygoo hungry
for your waffles shaped melted
like clouds drowning
in pale butter pools.

I have always been scared of
you. Not god,
but your squeak seeping through
walls at night. You thought I didn’t hear—
bite my pretty heart red in two.

My revision explores another perspective on suicide by applying a new lens and a new voice in “Mommy.” Plath’s victimization at the hands of “Daddy” transforms into Plath’s daughter’s victimization at the hands of a suicidal “Mommy.” The psychological dynamic in the revision creates tension between daughter and mother, rather than daughter and father. The revision also provided an opportunity to address suicide from the perspective of a survivor.

Revising “Daddy” also gave me a greater appreciation for the intricacy of Plath’s poetic craft. As I began writing in poetic forms, I recognized the incantatory rhythm in “Daddy” is constructed using an Anglo-Saxon line. Many of Plath’s poems also layer images by using lists. These techniques create an obsessive intensity—their rhythm and imagery make poetic music.

Cricket Songs: Meaning and Music

The Crickets sang
And Set the Sun
And Workmen finished one by one
Their Seam the Day Upon.
— Emily Dickinson (962).
Dickinson's poem captivates me because not only do her crickets make music—they "Set the Sun." Dickinson pairs cricket songs with the image of men filing home from work. Both crickets and men have jobs to do, as they "Seam the day." I love this poem as a follow up to Shikibu's tanka because Dickinson's crickets not only make music; they do something. Cricket music coupled with the image of workmen filing home creates a measurement for time. Dickinson's cricket songs have a purpose. Likewise, the poems in this collection have a purpose.

Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" takes exception with my desire for poems to have a purpose: "A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit" and "wordless / As the flight of birds." He concludes, "A poem should not mean / But be" (331). Like Hirschfield's paradox of poetry leading both toward and away from the self, MacLeish's poem includes a paradox: "A poem should be equal to: / Not true" (331). Perhaps a poem's truth is relative, or inaccessible through the logic of mathematics, so poem can't be solved. I find that as much as I'm enchanted by the shape and texture of globed fruit and stilled by the silent flight of birds, despite the being of both, I also look for meaning in poetry. When I review my less successful poems, they're not lacking being, they're lacking meaning. I'm working toward poems containing meaning within their being. Rather than asserting an either/or aesthetic, I propose a meeting of the two. Poems should mean / And be.

The poems that resonate with me months and years after the images of being have flown deposit an element of meaning within me. I can think of no better example of this synthesis than Tony Hoagland's poetry. Hoagland's collection of
poems titled *What Narcissism Means to Me* is rooted in moral meaning while exploring serious subjects with the lightest language and humor.

Italo Calvino’s essay on the virtues of lightness explored in his book *Six Memos for the New Millennium* describes Tony Hoagland’s approach to serious subjects. Calvino defines two types of lightness in literature: a lightness of language that fights against “the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world” and the light of illumination, where the writer points a beam of light on a serious topic which allows the “sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world” (12). Calvino’s aesthetic corresponds to Hoagland’s treatment of racism in his poem “Rap Music.”

The beauty of “Rap Music” is the contrast between the weight of the topic (racism) and the light humor Hoagland uses to describe the speaker’s experience as he’s stuck in traffic next to what sounds like “Twenty-six men trapped in a submarine / pounding on the walls with a metal pipe” (49). The speaker in the poem makes connections which are both farce and true, stating the “sound [was] turned up / so loud it puts everything in italics: enough to make the asphalt thump.” The car becomes “that portable torture chamber” that might contain “a lot of dead white people.” This statement takes on another level of irony because Hoagland is a white poet writing about racism from what initially appears to be a racist perspective on rap music. One could criticize Hoagland for a seeming irreverence in his approach to racism; however, the final line of the poem turns back on the speaker as he states, “this tangled roar / that has to be shut up or blown away or sealed off / or actually
mentioned and entered.” Hoagland’s final line re-contextualizes the images and brash humor in the previous stanzas, beckoning us to consider the seriousness of the poem’s theme. The speaker implicates himself in his judgment of rap by recognizing that his perspective is from outside the car—metaphorically outside the socio-economic world that is often the source of rap’s lyrics. Hoagland’s final line infers that the way to understand rap, and by association the black people in the car listening to rap, is to “mention” and “enter” the “tangled roar” of the music. Hoagland’s verbiage is stripped of euphemism. It’s light in its frankness and irreverence about a topic we are quick to dull down with “safe” language. The final line not only applies to the speaker. Although it is declarative, it also asks the reader a moral question: is she willing to “mention” and “enter” into the paradigm of rap music?

I take a similar stance in my poem, “Spare Change.” On the surface, the speaker in the poem judges a homeless man as she’s on her way to work from the coffee shop:

I pass this homeless man
camped on the edge
of First and Main.
Mid-November, cool
and clear.
Vanilla latte warms
my unpocketed hand.

He’s bucklehunched
outside Blue Room Theater,
slack-packed against a chain
link fence.

Like the speaker in Hoagland’s “Rap Music,” the speaker in “Spare Change” is from a different socio-economic group than the subject she considers.
She judges the homeless man, stating he is "camped on the edge" while he's "buckle-hunched" and "slack-packed against a chain / link fence." The speaker in this poem is both repelled by and drawn to the homeless man. She can't help making connections with his image and a character from a Beatle's song—the "old flattop" man with "juju eyeballs." As she makes these connections, the images in the poem pull from the images in the song, "Come Together." The final line in my poem asks the reader to consider whether the gap between the speaker and the homeless man can be bridged with "spare change," which corresponds to how the speaker in Hoagland's poem asks the reader to consider mentioning and entering "Rap Music." In both cases, the final line implicates the speaker in the judgments made earlier on in the poem while prompting the reader to consider broader social issues.

The final poems in this collection address serious topics using light language as a means to illuminate a slant version of the truth. They use metaphor as a lens on gravity of the human condition while avoiding heavy-handedness. Lyrical language provides a means to approach the truth circuitously. "Playa Del Carmen," "Spare Change," and "Autumn Leaves" address death, poverty and homelessness; yet, these topics are explored with light, lyrical language and a carefully crafted narrative stance, one which doesn't judge but attempts to understand the connections between the speaker and the subjects she considers. I'm peeling away layered metaphors to find a few clear images—images that tell a story. But with my lyrical tendencies, I can't help but listen for music.
Wings and Rasps: Making Music

Crickets actually produce different calls for different purposes. The calling song, which may be heard for distances up to a mile, helps the female find the male. Once she is near, the male switches to a courtship song to convince her to mate with him. And, in some cases, the male also sings a post-copulation celebratory song.

— Norton Anthology

Cricket songs are rooted in anatomy and I think this makes an interesting connection with our human experience, how our relationships are often rooted in the physical connection between two bodies. Crickets make music by rubbing the base of their wings against a ridged vein, like rubbing paper against a rasp. The paper-thin wings vibrate, and this vibration beckons the female crickets to mate. The image of a wing meeting a rasp reminds me of my experience with marriage: wing-light bliss and rasp-rubbed work. My poems “Rings” and “Lips” explore courtship, marriage, and intimacy. Like cricket songs, these lyrical poems are rooted in the physical body including images of “neck, knuckle, a bridge of hips.” The images and sounds in these poems are designed to make the reader work. Reading the poem aloud requires some linguistic gymnastics, and a commitment to push through to the end. This idea came from Denise Levertov in her poem titled “The Ache of Marriage.”

The ache of marriage:

thigh and tongue, beloved,
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved,
each and each
It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy
not to be known outside it
two by two in the ark of
the ache of it. (807)

Levertov’s poem is grounded in anatomy as she references “thigh,”
“tongue,” “teeth,” and “belly.” The poem also uses sound as a metaphor for its
tHEME encouraging our minds to reconcile what appear to be incongruous
comparisons. Our ears pick up and recognize sound patterns, even when the images
don’t seem to have a concrete correlation. Sounds make music, like a wing vibrating
on a rasp, and this music makes sense to our ears. We hear the pattern of repeating
“t” and “th” in the words “thigh and tongue, beloved” and “throbs in the teeth.”
Because we accept the comparison based on the sounds, our brains go to work
interpreting the images. Thighs are involved in love-making, and tongues too.
Tongues can become thick when lovers quarrel, and thighs become heavy bearing the
weight of marriage. Levertov’s sounds help us interpret these images.

My poem “Rings” borrows heavily from Levertov because it is rooted in
the physical body and uses sound to reinforce its theme. “Rings” creates connections
between bodies with “neck,” “knuckle,” and “a bridge of hips.” The words forming
these images are embedded with staccato repetition of the “ck” sounds in “stuck,”
“neck,” and “knuckle.” The poem also soothes with lyrical “s” sounds in “hips,”
“slip,” and its anagram “lips”: 
We sigh, slip words between lips,
love stuck to our tongues.
We make promises,
swallow ourselves like wine.

Love stuck to our tongues,
fingers trace curves. We
swallow ourselves like wine.
Neck, knuckle, a bridge of hips,

My poem pairs staccato and lyrical sounds as an aural metaphor for my
time in marriage; it is both effort and bliss. Understanding the image and
sound relationships in both poems allows us to experience marriage on multiple
levels. We interpret images related to the poems themes through alliteration.
Repetitive sounds encourage us to reconcile seemingly oblique images of “thigh,”
“tongue,” “lips,” and “knuckles” with marriage. We physically experience effort as
we speak these poems, working through linguistic gymnastics to form carefully
crafted word sounds. Our effort parallels the effort involved in maintaining a
marriage.

Family Recipes

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought silence, from the stove there shrills
The Cricket’s song, in warmth increasing ever
—John Keats (54)

I’ve spent the last few years looking for a structure with sturdy sides and
a stable base to contain my conflicting emotions of grief and of acceptance. I wrote
the opening poem in this collection as an ode to my mother-in-law who recently
passed away due to a rare form of cancer. Historically, the ode is a lyrical poetic form hearkening back to ancient Greece. An ode generally elevates and celebrates a heroic individual’s life. In modern poetry, the ode has been reinvented by Pablo Neruda and Kevin Young. Neruda’s *Elemental Odes* and Young’s *Dear Darkness* celebrate the simple, tangible stuff of life: Neruda wrote odes to socks and wine, and Young wrote odes to sausage and pepper vinegar. Neruda and Young’s odes become a metaphor for human experience. The simple is transformed into the sublime. My poem “Mom’s Gooseberry Pie” is an ode written in this style, where a recipe becomes a container for something larger. The poem celebrates my mother-in-law’s pie crust, but the crust also becomes my approach to accepting her death. “Mom’s Gooseberry Pie” begins with Mom’s recipe and these simple directions create a container for her death. The recipe as an ode provides a psychological crust with a defined top, bottom and sides. The recipe as a form allows me to plumb my experience of Mom’s life and death without my grief spilling over into precious sentimentality or self-indulgence. The form does the work for me:

Sprinkle in ice water, a teaspoon at a time, stirring lightly after each addition until mixture just holds its shape. Knead gently, pressing your hands’ heels to relax the gluten. Be careful not to overwork. Gather loosely into a mound, then let it rest awhile.

The recipe is embedded with death images, yet using the recipe as a form shies away from heavy-handedness. The speaker in my poem kneads dough gently, and also needs to accept her loss gently. As she gathers the dough “loosely into a mound” the image creates a connection to a grave mound. Letting the dough rest becomes a metaphor for letting her mother rest. The recipe as an ode honors the
legacy the speaker's mother gave her and becomes a directive for acknowledging her loss. Kevin Young's odes in *Dear Darkness* take a similar tactic. Pork, wine, and sausage open a door to explore the loss of Young's family members. "Ode to Boudin" creates distance from the speaker's subject and approaches loss with clarity, humor and grace:

You are the chewing gum
of God. You are the reason
I know that skin
is only that, holds
more than it meets.
The heart of you is something
I don't quite get
but don't want to. Even
a fool like me can see
your broken
beauty, the way
out in this world where most
things disappear, driven
into ground, you are ground
already, & like rice
you rise— (195).

Like the crust in "Mom's Gooseberry Pie," Young's "Ode to Boudin" becomes a container for his grief. Within the skin of Cajun sausage, Young finds a space to explore the loss of his father. Pork and rice are "ground" and Young's father is "driven into ground" yet boudin rises "like rice." Young resurrects his father by creating a metaphor about food; the skin of the sausage becomes the skin of his father's body like the mound of Mom's pie dough in my poem becomes her death mound. Writing an ode about food as a "light" approach to death led me to explore other forms and other voices.
Poetic Forms and Finding New Voices

Like most writers, I run into periods when I get stuck and when I get stuck writing in free verse, I turn to tanka. Writing a tanka is like following a recipe, but using your own ingredients. I know exactly where and how to start: five lines, alternating syllables in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern (Turco 273). Tanka tells me what to do: Focus on image. Be clear. Be concise. Listen to the music of the words and the silence between the words. Hear their rhythm. I submitted this tanka to a writer's workshop along with several free verse poems.

Sharon's Sunday Drive

Power poles lift lines
like skirt-hems. Mustard blossom
tufts between girded
thighs. Under the overpass
spring shade nudges cool concrete

This poem made the biggest impression on the group, and according to the class sounded more like me than the clever enigmatic voices in my free verse poems. I was surprised by their feedback because I invested exponentially more time and effort into the free verse poems. In my mind, they were richer, denser and provided more opportunities for interpretation than my simple tanka. What the class was trying to tell me is that my poems are better when they are clear and not worried about impressing their reader. I began to approach my free verse poems like I approached this form: focus on image and simplicity, listen to the music of the words. This early work in tanka led me to experiment with other forms.
Haibun was a natural progression for me as it contains haiku, a Japanese form similar to tanka (Turco 192). Basho’s “Narrow Road to the Interior” is a classic example of haibun recording the poet’s journey across Japan for over 150 days. Along the way he journaled his travel—both literal and metaphoric—in prose punctuated by haiku. The resulting linked narrative allows the prose to inform the haiku and vice-versa.

After reading a few of Basho’s haibun, I wrote “Sagrada Familia,” a poem about my son growing up. Like Basho’s inspiration for haibun, this poem came from our family’s recent travels to Barcelona. We were overwhelmed by the sounds, sights, and smells from the vendors and sidewalk cafes after spending two days roaming the streets of La Rambla, the Gothic quarter, and visiting Sagrada Familia. Our dinner at a local waterfront café put Barcelona into context for me. I watched my oldest son stack shells in a column that resembled the towers of Gaudi’s unfinished cathedral, and couldn’t help but think how he used to make sand castles the same way. As much as I enjoyed watching him play, I also became aware of the heft of time, how quickly he had grown up. The prose section of my haibun details the rich sights and sounds of Spain. The haiku moves to explore parallels between my relationship with my son and the relationship between Mary and Jesus—how at one point Mary’s son, like my son, was on the cusp of becoming an adult. According to the Bible, Mary knew Jesus was born to a purpose beyond her. Likewise, I know my son will move on to his own purpose. This realization is both rewarding and frightening:
Trent pries open the mussels and passes the baby clams to me. He teases his little brother with an oyster, opaque and wiggling on his fork. He sucks winesoaked shrimp heads and looks to the line where blue meets blue.

Thick night, Maria, my son stacks sea husks in spires tears like baby teeth.

The voice in the haiku is similar to others throughout this collection; however, the preceding prose adds a new resonance, with differing sound patterns and a progression of images I don’t usually find in my free-verse poems. The lyrical “s” repetition in “mussels,” “passes,” and “teases” is offset by the hard consonant sounds in “opaque,” “fork,” and “sucks.” This interplay between lyrical and consonant sounds is repeated in the haiku with “stacks,” “husks,” and “spires.” Haibun gave me a place to explore prose, which provided a new resonance to my writing. But Anglo-Saxon prosody shook loose some interesting voices living in my larynx.

I should have guessed Anglo-Saxon prosody would take me back to Plath. Plath’s “Daddy” opens with an Anglo-Saxon line: “You do not do. You do not do.” Lewis Turco defines Anglo-Saxon prosody as an accentual metrical line, “each line (called a stich) of verse contains four stresses, two or three of these syllables are overstressed by means of alliteration. . . . Besides the four strong stresses in the stich and the alliterations, each stich is broken in half by a pause called a caesura” (22). Anglo-Saxon prosody looks deceptively simple on the surface, but when I tried to knit lines together to make some sort of cohesive image or idea, I kept bumping up against the caesura, the accents and the alliteration. Writing an Anglo-Saxon poem taught me about my poetic habits—what line lengths, pacing and images I tend to gravitate
toward. My early poems were highly lyrical, layered with metaphor, and sonically soft "s," "l," and "f" sounds, as seen in my poem "Tawny."

Amber coats curves
flows as fingers flow
over first felt flesh,
pools at the base
waits.

"Tawny" is an extended metaphor for intimacy, and like sweet viscous wine, this poem coats the speaker's tongue with lush sounds. What my early poems were missing was the contrast from staccato syllables, the burn that comes after a stiff belt of gin. Anglo-Saxon prosody, with its stubby words and syllabic stresses gave me a new voice and new themes to explore in my poems. "I Hide Behind the Couch" captures one of my clearest childhood memories—my mom washing wine glasses from a dinner party long after I'd been sent to bed. She always played Creedence Clearwater while she did the dishes, glass of wine in one hand, a dishrag in the other. Sometimes I'd sneak out in the hallway to watch her hips sway as she stacked the glasses along the length of the counter. "I Hide Behind the Couch" works to coordinate the lyrics from the song with the complex relationship the speaker has with her mother. Like Plath's "Daddy," the poem has an obsessive forcefulness that is underscored by the rhythmic pattern Anglo-Saxon prosody prescribes. The poem also layers details:

Creedence Clearwater—Midnight Special.
Mom does dishes after the party:
Gilby's gin jar. Crushed Camel butts,
five card stud. Brillo-pad, poker chips
rubber gloves, Palmolive. Plates head-high
she scrubs, she sloughs
doubled-down, skirt slit,  
London broil. Blood. Musk-melon man  
fingers fumble. Thick thigh,  
dropped dish, hurry him home.

Anglo-Saxon prosody added a different sonic dimension to my poems, a staccato texture like the cricket’s rasp to contrast against my lyrical tendencies. I also learned new approaches to sound and rhythm by translating Gabriela Mistral’s poems into English. “Playa del Carmen” grew from my experience translating a collection of her work titled Madwomen: The Locas Mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral. I was drawn to Mistral because I spent several years studying Spanish in high school and loved the music in the language. I was also curious to see if I could decipher poetic meaning with my rudimentary knowledge of Spanish. I decided to work through the process without the aid of an existing English translation because I didn’t want to be influenced by another writer’s interpretation of which English word best mapped to the Spanish context in the poem. In a way, I was translating in a self-induced ignorant fog. I had a feeling that wrapped within interpretations of the Spanish language many possible poems could arise.

I started with a Mistral poem titled “Cobre” and began by reading the poem several times in Spanish and scribbling down the vocabulary and verbs I recognized. I looked up the words I didn’t know, writing down every shade of meaning. From this laundry list, I began to piece together a literal translation of the poem. The first run of a translation is called a trot, and my pieced-together trot included images of men melding copper, rocks grinding and weeping and a copper-man image rising from the fire. All these images drip with religious overtones
evoked by the words “righteousness,” “redeeming,” “prayers,” “chants,” and “Father Copper.”

As I continued to work line by line and stanza by stanza, I saw tension between two religions. Father Copper became a symbol of men’s religion—Catholicism—and the weeping stones emerged as an ancient, organic feminine religion. The second stanza conjures the man-god, “Copper,” and the “mother stones” quietly comment on the nature of this god’s heart. Stanzas three and four continue the stone’s criticism of man’s religion:

Rise, Father Copper, rise.
The fire conjures you,
you are a man,
molten heat in your breast.
Be still, be still;
do not confess your secrets,
your love and desires—
flints grinding.
No, you cannot speak beautiful words.
You do not know your heart.

Day after day you emerge.
Poor spinster stones;
poor sleeping stones.
Yet, you endure. We
hate what you are called,
you and all of your dead
kneeling before your grave.

In the final two lines of my translation, Mother Stone closes with the epitaph, “Now it is the same, now it is equal / the silence of your word.” I’m unsure whether Mistral intended an interplay between male and female religions in “Copper.” I experienced the collaboration between her words in the source poem and my response in the translation as a tangible metaphor for the poetic conversation.
Mistral’s visceral imagery and her lyrical language circled back to me in Mexico a few months after losing my mother-in-law to cancer. Acknowledging her loss provided the foundation for “Playa del Carmen.”

Transcendence

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings.
— WB Yeats (39)

Yeats’ poem beautifully captures a transcendent place for the speaker, as “peace comes dropping slow” to “where the cricket sings.” I had a similar experience strolling the beaches in Mexico a few months after my mother-in-law’s death. My son Trevor found a white fist of coral, absolutely lovely and scalloped with delicate veins. He placed it in my hand and said, “Funny, how shells are like sea-bones.” The metaphor of that line tumbled in my mind the rest of our walk. I began to hear it in Spanish, and as I gathered shells, I said their colors to myself in Spanish: tamarindo, tamarind; rosa, rose; negro, black; blanco, white. Each shell became an oseo, a bone resembling our human bones: skulls, knuckles, arm and leg bones. The repetition of the sounds echoed the repetition of the waves, and as I walked, I found myself discovering the poem. I wrote it in Spanish, paying close attention to the sound and rhythm patterns in that language, then translated the poem back into English to see how it changed. I love them both for their music, their image, and their ability to recreate that moment when I could find a way to acknowledge Mom’s death:
Playa del Carmen

Que linda caminar
En los oseos del mar
Oseos rosas, oseos tamarindos
Oseos rojos y negros.Brazos del mar
Manos del mar
Cabeza granulo y nudillo.

Lovely, to walk on the bones of the sea: 
rose bones, tamarind bones, 
red and black bones. Arms of the sea
hands of the sea, 
grains of skull and knuckle.

The poem connects images and sounds through alliteration of soft “s”
sounds in “skull” and “sea” with “b” sounds in “bones” and “black.” The “s”
repetition undulates between the beginning and ending of words as seen in “bones”
and “sea” to “bones” and “arms” then “hands” and “sea” and “sea” and “grains.”
Although I didn’t realize it as I was writing the poem, the movement of the “s”
repetition from the beginning and ending of words emulates the ebb and flow of
waves on a beach, and these sound waves evoke the sound the ocean makes while the
speaker is gathering shells.

“Playa del Carmen” relies heavily on anaphora in all three stanzas. The
first stanza alternates anaphora in line one, repeating “of the sea,”and in line two
repeating “bones.” The second stanza repeats “of our dead mothers” and “of our
dead brothers.” Both stanzas use anaphora at the end of the lines; however, the final
stanza calls attention to repetition at the beginning of the line with “And nobody.” I
see my obsession with certain words popping up in “Playa del Carmen”: knuckles,
hands, and pockets all appear in an earlier poem I wrote called “Spare Change.”

These poems metaphorically ask us to consider what we choose to put in or pull out of our pockets and why. The speaker collects bones “Playa del Carmen” while the speaker gives away loose coins in “Spare Change.” Both poems contain vibrant color as a means of interpreting a speaker’s mood. The sounds and images the colors provide when paired with bones creates an interesting contrast. They become a lens into the speaker’s mind as she’s creating a connection between colorful seashells and our white human bones.

What I love most about “Playa del Carmen” is that its toes are rooted in a wound; yet, it reaches to understand grief as something outside itself. The poem transcends the dangers of sentimentality and self-pity arising from an individual loss to acknowledge loss as endemic to humans and nature. It strives for an objective stance, where the “poet is an intermediary, a voice for objects and nature, a perception” (Hirschfield 131). It balances human bones with seashells and the speaker’s knowledge that she too must die with the graveyard of sea bones she walks upon. The image is equally beautiful and mournful.

The closing poem in this collection is terza rima in the tradition of Dante. When I think about The Divine Comedy, I think about Dante’s journey to Purgatory, the Inferno and Paradiso. I found a modern example of terza rima in Robert Frost’s poem titled “Acquainted With the Night.” As with Dante’s journey, the speaker in Frost’s poem is also travelling a road:
I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain - and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (54)

The lines on the page create a visual metaphor for a journey; they look like a progression of footsteps. This progression is reinforced as the form weaves end rhyme between alternating lines as seen in “night,” “light,” “rain,” and “lane.” Every time Frost’s poem refers to “I have,” I get a sense that the speaker has seen much, but that he also lacks something, a "cry to call him back or say good-by."

Frost’s poem successfully developed a theme I had struggled with through several revisions of one of my early poems. He captured the tension I was trying to create between an isolated speaker walking through a community and finding herself both a part of and apart from the people she passes as she walks. Among other images, my early draft included an image of a homeless man, “buckle-hunched over blueberry muffin crumbs.” The closing poem in this collection titled “Autumn Leaves” is the result of revising that poem into terza rima:

Autumn wind rustles leaves, and I walk past
a bucklehunched drunk. Knobby haunches bend
over concrete comfort—papers tucked fast

as army sheets. How much time did he spend
scouting this doorway, scavenging old news
from the curb?

This poem takes a leap toward combining the elements I’m striving for in my work: being, meaning, weight, and lightness; the poet turning inward in order to turn outward to find connections between herself and the world around her. The
poem seeks to transcend my experience as a poet to provide a place where the reader may learn something about herself. Yes, it too was born in the cricket hours, those hours when I watch; I listen; I write.
PART II
In the Cricket Hours

I listen. Time breathes.
Rising ribs, falling ribs
moon crescent ribs.
Tick clock in the cricket hours,
shadows seam the days.

Nights fold and unfold
like crickets hold
hope—
a gleam thin
as two wings making music.

And I tuck this music
as I tuck these hours
gently,
in my threadbare
pocket.
Prepare the Crust:

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. In a small bowl, sift dry ingredients. Cut shortening scissor fashion using two knives until mixture resembles small pearls. Sprinkle in ice water, a teaspoon at a time, stirring lightly after each addition until crust just holds its shape. Knead gently, pressing your hands' heels to relax the gluten. Be careful not to overwork. Gather loosely into a mound, then let it rest awhile.

Generously dust the board. Generously dust the pin. Recover lost scraps, meld them in, and turn out onto prepared surface. Working your way out from center, roll a uniform thinness, a little larger all around than your tin. If the edges crack, dip your fingers in lukewarm water and mend. Roll half onto the pin, transfer gently, easing the bottom and sides. Tuck excess between forefingers and thumb, pinch an edge to keep filling from spilling over. Prick the bottom with fork tines to prevent puffing. For a golden glaze, beat an egg with sugar, bathe the edges with a soft brush.

Fill as desired:

Sun slips sky like a yolk down a bowl.
Eastern brook trout shed shadows under
the big rock while my sons race
elbows, rods and lures.
Damsel flies pop creek's skin like lemon
winged bubbles twizzling rum and soda.
In the darkening meadow, tiger
lilies fall all over themselves.

Dad smolders, stick in hand by the campfire.
He stokes last summer's ashes, turning
alderbrush knuckles, checking for
char, an unspent ember.
I release the stick from his fingers,
replace it with his highball.
He rewinds.
Bucket in hand, I cross the creek, climb
dusty switch-backs up the hill, on a wild
gooseberry hunt.
August ripe, they dangle red
like overblown pufferfish
under Ponderosa pines—
their spikes matched only
by their sweetness.

Sunset, and a bucketful.

My sons clamber up from the creek,
empty creels cured by a bowl
of gooseberries. We pour them into scalding
water, watch the prickly skins burst,
gold-green. We cool
them in a colander, separate spine
from sweet, tumble them with sugar,
cornstarch, a pinch of salt.

We empty them into your crust, watch
them swim for the high scalloped edges
golden, glistening
with egg wash.
Estate Sale

Behind the box of chipped china cups,
piles of pilled wool sweaters—
Grandma’s sewing machine.

Its brand was etched in bronze once
circled round by two elegant lines.
Not so elegant as her hands
as they turned the wheel,
surging prayers into cloth.

It had to be magic, I thought as a little girl
kneading Grandma’s knee.
And the thread knew exactly where to go,
silver needle poking perfect lines
between pin fences.

Yards, scraps, thrift store fabric
massaged, caressed.
Cotton orphans transformed
into pirate pantaloons, gowns for a princess,
gypsy headdress.
Grandma knew how to stitch little dreams.

“How much?” an elderly woman asks
as she runs her index finger
along the spine of Grandma’s sewing machine.
Her eyes absorb my pause,
my accounting.

Her fingers open, clasp my hand,
fingers that know thimble
fingers that know prayers
whispered at the wheel.

“Not for sale,” she says,
then smiles a grandma smile,
turns into the white morning sun.
Dear Brother,

Mom craves sweets, so
Dad bakes cookies —
the first time in forty-five
years. Mom is propped
up by pillows and
pills. Still, she
pats my lips. I
can’t help seeing
her and thinking: Twinkies.
Tooth-torn plastic
wrappers falling on
grass. Remember sticking
our fingers in gooey,
sweet fluff when we
were summer kids?
Barefoot, pumping endless
blue on our backyard swing.
Elegy for Dad

I was barely five, but I still remember this—

I trapped a bluebelly lizard
in a thicket of saw-grass.
His tail curled cool, a blade
along the crease of my palm.
I like to think you were proud, then,
although the lizard clawed
free leaving his raw
half-tail wiggling
in my little
white fist.
The bride was a red girl,  
twenty-eight years of womanly life  
and all so lonesome.  
Daughter of the lands,  
do you wait for your poet?  
Something ecstatic and undemonstrable?  
What do you seek so pensive  
and silent?

The butcher-boy puts off his killing clothes.  
She hides aft the blinds of the window.  
She sees the black of his perfect neck.  
His glance is calm and commanding.

Long pent, now loose  
clenching interlocking claws  
fierce gyrating wheel  
incessantly moaning,  
tumultously bursting,  
a scented gift.  
At last.

They rise together:  
she with her half-spread wings  
glides in the mystical moist night-air.  
She, hers.  
He, his.  
Pursuing.
Rings

We sigh, slip words between lips,  
love stuck to our tongues.  
We make promises,  
swallow ourselves like wine.

Love stuck to our tongues,  
fingers trace curves. We  
swallow ourselves like wine.  
Neck, knuckle, a bridge of hips,

fingers trace curves. We  
seek soft wounds, opening  
neck, knuckle, a bridge of hips  
shedding skin’s difference.

Seek soft wounds, opening  
lovers’ grind. We move, move away  
shedding skin’s difference.  
We remember to forget—

Lover’s grind. We move, move away  
circle back again.  
We remember to forget.  
We sigh, slip words between our lips.
Lips

Remember the time I traced your lips
with mine? I could sketch an ellipse
along the pale pink crease between
our breaths. Luminous lids, soft seams
eclipse your eyes. Your gaze slips
down now, lands on my shoes. Thighs, hips
the pearls of your spine—memory grips
your phantom shadow, slick as gleam.
Remember the time

when time wasn't troubled? We slipped
hollows, dew pooled in pockets, lips.
You turn away, now. And I dream.
Dissipate this empty I seem
wordless to name. (Ah, your pursed lips!) Remember the time.
Sagrada Familia

My sons are hungry. They haven’t learned siestas, tapas, and dinner by moonlight. Strolling along Barcelona’s seven crescent beaches, we read café menus: jamon Iberico, caldo gallego, tortilla Española, patatas ali oli. Street vendors call “Mira, mira, senora!” and “Vien aqui.” Flaminco from Las Ramblas echoes down alleyways. Laundry dries on iron balconies.

We choose Salamanca for its oceanfront tables. A local woman nods approval as my oldest son Trent orders in Spanish, “Paella para las tres, y calamare al la plancha para mi hermano.” Our waiter delivers a plate of pimientos—tiny green peppers deep-fried and lightly salted. We lift them by their stems to keep from burning our fingers, wave them in the air to cool them. The peppers spark every zone: salty, sweet, bitter-hot. My husband butters bread. I pour sangria into deep cups while the sunbathers fold their umbrellas.

Our paella arrives steaming. Shrimp surround the perimeter arranged so their heads, spines and tails face in the same direction. Their legs touch baby clams the size of a fingernail. Dark mussels huddle inside the clams, followed by a ring of oysters, wide-mouthed and sprinkled with smoked paprika. Beneath them, saffron rice. Trent pries open the mussels and passes the baby clams to me. He teases his little brother with an oyster, opaque and wiggling on his fork. He sucks wine-soaked shrimp heads and looks to the line where blue meets blue.

Thick night, Maria,
my son stacks sea husks in spires
tears like baby teeth.

He turns 16 tomorrow.
Fog

“No regrets, my friend?”
you ask as you smile your sideways smile.
You say you’re moving to Portland.
“No regrets,” I reply, then recognize the lie:
to regret having nothing to regret is still regret—
Why now? Why Portland? Why fog?

What is it about fog
that entices you? You say, “Goodbye, friend.”
“Don’t you regret
what’s undone?” You smile.
I wish you well, lie measuring the distance to Portland.

I wonder about Portland
about people living fog
twisting threadbare lies.
They fantasize. Friend,
they smile like we smile,
which looks the same as regret.

I have nothing to regret.
I have nothing in Portland
but you, your smile,
a familiar weight. Fog
dampens thighs, friend,
knots like lies.

Where do you lie?
What do you regret,
I wonder, friend?
I measure the distance to Portland.
Two fingers breadth to fog
no more than the breadth of a smile.
My smile:

a lie
a fog
a regret
a Portland
between us friends.

Time passes, regret lines my smile.
It measures the distance to Portland
the fog, my friend.
Mommy
        after S.P.

One, two, where are you, Mommy?
Where are you? Your shoe
lies under the bed.
I hid it there (I'm sorry). You told
me not to touch your things.

Mommy, I have to tell you—
don't cry, don't hide,
please? The shiny-black skin shone so-so
pretty on my little white foot like a
poem serpent.

You sleep like a bent finger,
your head in the oven stoking
coals to cook children, knocking bones,
bent twig extended. You don't
grasp, Ach du.

You sang me hate in German by
nightlight, by my bed stories
of breadcrumbs, cottage butcher's
thick neck-trunks, wood to feed
your oven.

You said there are dozens of ovens, so
I could never tell just when
you made things your things.
I could never talk.
You were too busy talking.

I wrote a poem once thinking,
Ick ick ick.
I could hardly write. I thought every poet was
you and words listened only to
you.
It's snowing now, I'm cold, feeling gobbledygoo hungry for your waffles shaped melted like clouds drowning in pale butter pools.

I have always been scared of you. Not god, but your squeak seeping through walls at night. You thought I didn’t hear—bit my pretty heart red in two.

I wanted to keep you, Mommy. I stole your other shoe, your scarf, word-scrapes from your trash. When your squeaking hushed I pulled hairs from your brush.

And then I knew what to do. I made a model of you: taped, tucked in my secret place. I go back, go back to you. I could make Mommy you.

Why do you hide behind the door? Why woozy-giggle-ferriswheel sick head? Peek a boo, Mommy. I'm not hiding. Why are you?
I Hide Behind the Couch

Creedence Clearwater—*Midnight Special*
Mom does dishes after the party:
Gilby's gin jar. Crushed Camel butts,
five card stud. Brillo-pad, poker chips
rubber gloves, Palmolive. Plates head-high
she scrubs, she sloughs
doubled-down, skirt slit,
London Broil. Blood. Musk-melon man,
fingers fumble. Thick thigh,
dropped dish. *Hurry him home.*
Wet rag wrung dry,
she tidies, tucks tight
turns back, turns out the light.
Mona Lisa’s Howl

What broils beneath this smile?
A mother’s smile?
A daughter’s smile?
A wife’s, a lover’s smile?
A respectable lady’s smile?
An artist’s smile?

Oh, to press my fingers into a palate
pull ochre into ebony
blend burnt umber with indigo.
swirl sienna into moss
a touch of vermilion.

Oh, to color the curve of my neck
shadow my cheek hollows
glisten my chin,
stain my breasts crimson.

Then to run wild, curled claws
shred. Canvas shifts.
naked, in humid woods
my finger-painted face
a restless indigo
Lips curl.
a howl.
Trussing Gamehens

Granny's stub knuckles
pop drumsticks from hip sockets
an elegant X.
Slender bones, twine like shoe straps.
Granny binds wingtips. Stone birds.
La Bohème

“Martini, dry. Two olives. Tanquerey.”
Stiletto lady flicks Madeira ash, 
exhales smoke slivers. Chiseled fingers flash 
a fifty. Worn Wurlitzer juke box plays
Sinatra' *As Time Goes By*. She nods, sways—
remembers low-lit halls, swinging hips, crash 
of crinoline and wool. Cigarettes smash 
red lipstick moons, a heavy cracked-glass tray.

Stiletto lady sips her gin, side-long 
glances. She listens for the flick of fire, 
sweet gestures from a calloused thumb. A flame 
with square shoulders, blue eyes, a smolder song.
She orders another, sighs a smoke spire, 
twirls olive toothpicks. An old lover’s name.
Pour me into that mouth-blown glass,
the one with enough lead to moan
as dipped fingers swirl circles,
wet-wide. Melt
mid-November frost.

Breathe me.
Slow,
slower.
Vanilla-musk memory
sleeps in charred oak,
blossoms in response
to the turn of your wrist.
Amber coats curves,
flows as fingers flow
over first-felt flesh,
pools at the
base
waits.

Pull me through your lips.
Honey liquefies, lingers
slicks tongues velvet.
Enter and entered
lover,
soft,
blessed
speechless.
Slough House Grill and Bar

She says, "Don't you go baby," grinds molasses knuckles. He says, "Chicken shit! Git your honey ass gone." He don't mean it, though. She pours moonshine, silver ice over.

He says, "Fix me collard greens, woman." She sighs lemon river, hominy railroad. Southern Comfort flatbed, sassafras love. And bourbon. Highways ice over.

She says, "Bloodhound, do me right." He moans, crushes beer cans. Big rig, hauler box, buckler, wrangler, possum trapper. She boils blood sausage, squeezes. Tire-iron lovers.
Father Copper: A Translation

Men redeem copper
with the truth of fire.
What a beautiful birth,
yet no one sees
the stone, its mother, mourning.
Men taunt her for her barrenness.

Rise, Father Copper, rise.
The fire conjures you,
you are a man,
molten heat in your breast.
Be still, be still;
do not confess your secrets,
your love and desires—
flints grinding.
No, you cannot speak beautiful words.
You do not know your heart.

Day after day you emerge.
Poor spinster stones;
poor sleeping stones.
Yet, you endure. We
hate what you are called,
you and all of your dead
kneeling before your grave.

Cold, chants, and death-smiles,
the prayer and the word,
sunrise, sleep,
and the prayers no one gathers.
Now it is the same.
Now it is equal—
the silence
of your word.
Ice Cream Jesus

He skitters cul de sacs
in a crunched carapace,
egrabs wheels in
driveways, screeches
summer camp
songs half-flat, tinny.

He doesn’t hear the songs,
not because he can’t,
but because he won’t.
The buzz draws August
children. They
swarm alongside
clanging quarters.

He slows the truck, opens
doors, doles out Drumsticks
Missile Pops, Itsits,
Chocotacos. He forgives
children for being
children, their impatience
their sweaty change.

He forgives
them for holding pleasure
with grubby hands,
for licking cold
sweet summers.

He forgives
because he too
as a boy
chased the truck,
sucked sticky rivers
melting down his knuckles.
Red-Fisted Man

In the cricket hours, I listen for his voice.
Mom's done dishes, tucks me in, waits up all night
for Red-Fisted man. She has no choice.

Mom cleans chickens, chops chard. I rejoice
for lumpy dumplings, gooey thighs. Mom drinks. Light
in the cricket hours. I listen for her voice.

In Sunday choir, preacher man says, "Lift your voice
to Jesus!" But I whisper. Jesus knows my fright—
Red-Fisted man. He had no choice.

Some boy says I have my mama's way. Big noise.
He says, "Shimmy on over here. C'mon, girl. It's alright."
In the cricket hours, I listen for his voice.

Some nights, I'm alone with my breath, moist
wounds whisper in a webbed starlight.
Crickets fold their wings. Silently. I have a choice?

Press tongue to lips, sounds scratch chords. I have a choice.
An unspoken word takes flight
in the cricket hours. I listen for my voice.
That red-fisted man. He has no choice.
Bighouse Buffet

Stacked trays are starving,
ribs lift hollows.
Nobody sighs hmmmmmmmmm,
or gurgles hmmmmmmm somethings,
or hmmmms burble somethings
or burbles gut nothings.
Nobody prays
for rock shrimp po boys
slathered in file' souce.
Boys are not going
to suck chicory or sorghum syrup
only, there and there, somebody's son
stirs patience with a slotted spoon,
grinds dry biscuits
like gravy days.
Old News

Bottles burst bricks.
Shards flock
over upturned
faces. They blaze,
red tire irons.

They dump cans
scoop cartons,
greasy fingers,
rib bones,
plastic peels
half eggshell moons.

Feed it what will burn.
Feed it what will not.

Police circle
the circle.
The fire
throws shadows.
Dark.

Noise
like silence.

A singed newspaper
flutters
one page grafted
to the sidewalk
the others unfolding
skyward
like
untested wings.
Lush Jungles

I.

Milked dart frog sweat
indigos Amazon spears. Lush
jungles, words
like arrows fly—
lovely,
deadly.

II.

The beast: tiny heart—toothless
gnaws desire's trough.
Love: smooth polishes
the sharp soul's edges.
Board Room

I sit. Mouths move: 
words, words, meaningless words. Bankrupt. 
Silent words 
spew out 
suck in. 
Breathless words.

Numbers, numbers 
numbing numbers, 
numbers filtered 
between lines. 
Sideways numbers 
measure like music without sound.

Outside the boardroom, 
raindrops tumble like 
numbers, spreadsheet. Glass 
towers, they crash 
on slick sidewalks.
Sonnet for Rain

I miss the smell of rain—how water weighs
young limbs like drooping petals. Dove-gray morn
unwinds tonight. Bright moon, stars strumpet, blaze
behind cloud curtains. Brooding hush. Forlorn.

Red desert sun, horizons iris gold.
Thoughts lost collect like ingots. Blue-black flies
beat wings against bleached bones. Overhead, bold
tongues, gnawing buzzards. Somber quiet lies

in dusty rivers. Come rain. Torrent come.
Arroyo slipped her shore, forgot her rift,
her current. Swell her belly. Beat her drum,
unleash her blue. Remind her. Bear her gift.

And lover, leave me drowning in her wake
no more to wander wanting. Waiting. Ache.
Dance of the Six Veils

Winter slumps down windows. Ease under a veil of amber whiskey. Blades freeze under a veil.

Cardamom, coriander, turmeric. Kaffir lime leaves shimmy in oil. Tagine tease under a veil.

Bent zealot crawls roads, rheumy-eyed and faithful. Desert God, war decrees under a veil.

Hospital halls sound like spring: whirr, buzz! Morphine almond blossoms. Bees please under a veil.

I can’t answer your questions of why, why, why? Swallow words. Lovers seethe under a veil.

Slide your knife along my sternum, lift skin from bone. Lisa’s fossil soul breathes under a veil.
Sharon’s Sunday Drive

Power poles lift lines
like skirt-hems. Mustard blossom
tufts between girded
thighs. Under the overpass
spring shade nudges cool concrete.
Parking Lot #10

Lone sycamore,
green above
silver pebbled tar. Iron
ripples a skinned
trunk. Lupine, dandelion,
vinca-tinted
Lexus, Dodges, Volkswagens—
a meadow asphalt
turns parking meters
into morning glories. Lush
red faces trace
sun across sky.
Nickels pour like seeds
into slotted mouths.
Early Harvest

On the cusp of spring, a roadside plot
of almond trees hacked
mid-trunk. Orphan
stumps stretch phantom
branches calling bees,
stellar jays.
They don't know what else to do.

Fallen twigs grip pink
petals, like little boys
buried in their mother's
skirt.

   And I think it might be less shameful,
   if had they chopped
   those almond trees in
   winter.
Shadow

Why
didn’t she dodge or swerve
before my bumper clipped her? Shadow
slumps curbside like a pile of leaves
raked in the shape of a dog. I have reasons
to drive on: blinking gas light,

knotted thoughts, bourbon. A slight
twitch, a tail. I can’t say why
I stop the car. No reason,
just instinct. I swerve
between piles of leaves.
She is quiet, a dark
curve of bones and fur, dark
paws, ears tucked flat. Her eyes light
yellow as Autumn leaves.
“Why didn’t you hear the car? Why?
I tried to swerve.
I tried . . .” Hopeless reasons.

I slump over her for other reasons
I can’t explain, stroke Shadow
from muzzle to the swerve
of her hips. In the moonlight
I wonder why:
no collar, no tags? Leaves

stick to her coat. She whines, leaves
her head in my lap, reasons
muzzle and fur are why
I bend to her breath. Her shadow
tail thumps concrete. Light.
I say nothing as I swerve:
holding on, letting go, but she doesn’t swerve
from my touch or ask why bourbon leaves
me reckless or why her light
breath catches mine. She doesn’t need reasons,
curls her tail around my leg. Shadow
Dog. I can’t say why

I wrap her in my jacket, or why
I carry her to my car, or why Shadow
swerves my mind light as yellow leaves.
Spare Change

I pass this homeless man
camped on the edge
of First and Main.
Mid-November, cool
and clear.
Vanilla latte warms
my un-pocketed hand.

He’s buckle-hunched
outside Blue Room Theater,
slack-packed against a chain
link fence.

I watch tobacco fingers
roll a question.
Tobacco fingernails,
yellow moons
wax fantastic mojo
Rolling,
rolling.

Yellow eyes,
gumboot eyes
hovering beneath
walrus eyebrows
wandering,
wondering.

My thumb traces orbits
in latte leftovers.
Nickel, quarters, dimes~
Come Together
in my hand.
Beatles’ flattop groove,
spinning
spinning.

Then, that question: And I wonder, does this spare change exchange change anything?
Playa del Carmen

Que linda caminar
en los oseos del mar
oseos rosas, oseos tamarindos
oseos rojos y negros. Brazos del mar
manos del mar
cabeza granulo y nudillo.

Si como nos oseos: nos madres muertos
nos hermanos muertos
y una dia, yo tambien. Pero, pobre oseos
sin color, solo blanco.

Y nadie recoger.
Nadie acariciar, o
pone en el bosillo.
Playa del Carmen

Lovely, to walk on the bones of the sea:  
rose bones, tamarind bones,  
red and black bones. Arms of the sea  
hands of the sea,  
grains of skull and knuckle.

Like our bones: our dead mothers,  
our dead brothers  
and someday, mine too. But, poor bones,  
they have no colors— bleached white.

And nobody picks them up.  
Nobody polishes them or  
places them in her pocket.
Autumn Leaves

Autumn wind rustles leaves, and I walk past
a buckle-hunched drunk. Knobby haunches bend
over concrete comfort—papers tucked fast

as army sheets. How much time did he spend
scouting this doorway, scavenging old news
from the curb? How did this skinny frame lend

the idea of walls, of home? Bagged booze
bedfellow. He sleeps. And dreams. Autumn leaves
me restless. Heels click corners, avenues.

I round blocks, wear my soles thin as thieves.
I round blocks, cross white lines going nowhere.
Autumn wind rustles, but nobody grieves

for hours badly spent, for days, years we bear
like drunk hope in doorways. Our crumpled prayer.
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http://insects.about.com/od/grasshoppersandcrickets/f/howcricketssing.htm


