

the fever almanac

poems by Kristy Bowen

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**how to tell a story in a dead language**

## estuary

She still promises us an ocean then.  
The lick of salt on our lips.  
Sand settled in the depths of our bodies.  
Anchor. Motion. Tide.

In late July, we travel the road  
to the quarry, the dry skin  
of our heels cracking, rasping.  
Summer drying us out like sea grass.

She survives only on ritual:  
her hands washing stockings  
at the sink, the comb at our scalp.  
Whispers stories of mermaids, loss.  
Treads wistfulness like water.

Fires burn the valley nightly.  
Her body listens, lists  
to boats and destinations  
while smoke settles in the curtains.  
Scorches itself in the weave of her day.

Her daughters become diction.  
The ghost of us, our lost selves,  
scattering across the continent.  
We are roses presses in a book,  
the iron bed pushed against the wall.

We are furrowed, furious,  
prone to strange weather.  
Dream the water will take us  
back one day willingly.  
Our voices dumb as stones.

## nebraska

My grandmother marries at fifteen,  
the whole state flat as the inside of a bowl.  
Clouds thick and suspended over  
lake grass, the bend of barn to sky.

She has only recently found herself  
in this body, this life, restlessness  
rising beneath her ribs like bread.

I imagine she wears white and sighs a lot.  
Brushes her hand lovingly along every  
piece of cloth. Runs her fingertips  
along the rough bones of the fence.

For days, she has been giving things away.  
The doll with the broken leg.  
The chipped plates of the tea set.

She keeps her father's maps,  
their folds worn ragged, whispering  
names. *Alberquerque. Denver. Tuscon.*  
The compass in its leather case.

I'd like to think she came east  
willingly, squalling children in tow.  
The dust of the road collecting  
in her eyelashes, the back of her knees.

Or later, that she didn't mind the stink  
of chickens, the barest bones.  
Washing dishes, Hank Williams on the radio.  
Her best yellow dress hitching at her hip.

## degrees

It begins like this.

My mother reaches to place a cup on the shelf  
and it cracks hopelessly in her hands.

Weeds grow untamed beneath the dahlias  
and paint begins to peel from the house  
in great sheets, separating, pulling away.  
Dividing the real from the unreal.

The pattern begins to unwind. To unravel.  
Dishes cake over in the sink  
while her dress fades, frays at the edges.  
Eggs burn black in the pan  
and the grapefruit halves unevenly  
as if there were no other way.

She is leaving us by increments,  
each time further down the darkened  
narrow roads outside town.  
Abandoning the sullen side streets,  
the men bent like moons over their lawns.  
Women arched over their stoves,  
faces white and blank as the fences  
lined like perfect teeth along the curb.



## **bloody mary**

It tastes of copper.  
Of danger. Skinned knees  
that bleed and burn.

Say it once and you can  
always return safely  
to your bed. Cool sheets,  
summer outside swelling  
with fireflies, dizzy  
and wanting.

But twice and it turns  
taught and bright as barbed wire.  
Your mother walks into sunlight  
and turns back crying. Heat  
squalls beneath her tongue.

Soon your house falls down.  
Violets rising in the field  
of your skin and you forget  
everything. Even tonight.  
The moths beating themselves  
against the porch light.

The whispers of pale girls,  
line by line, their hair,  
their words, tangling in the wind.

## **the language of objects**

By winter, we excel in precision.  
Collect leaky pens, dead leaves.  
Stones smooth and round  
from a hundred rivers.

I pull my mother's hair  
from the tortoise shell comb.  
Pilfer the unraveled lace  
of a dressing gown.

Baby teeth and rose  
sachets litter the bottom drawers  
of dressers in darkening rooms.

I once watched my father pluck  
the pit of a peach from her napkin,  
slip it carefully into his pocket.

Once saw my sister cradle  
a robin's egg in her palm,  
bending toward me in the yard.

The past worn thin as rice paper.

## **divination**

We need not look for water.  
It finds us.  
Settles in the ruts,  
the rims of dishes.  
The hollows of our bodies.

Even on dry nights, we've  
no need for diviners.  
Rains stones and twin forks,  
the useless tools of memory.

We still know loss, as familiar  
as the moan of the porch door.  
The sky before a storm or  
the crash of pots in the kitchen.

My sister's voice bounces  
off the house, echoes still  
across puddles, and even I

remember my mother once  
dived laughing into the river  
fully-clothed. The film of her dress  
floating like orchids around her.

But I forget the timbre  
of my father's voice.  
The cadence of his footfall  
wet on the stairs.

Or that when the river swelled  
filling the yard, we found only  
boots, a busted radio.  
Voiceless and sullen.

## **fugue**

We are losing daylight now.  
Each night lingering later  
by the streetlamps, jump ropes  
curled like adders at our feet.

At home, the rooms are windswept,  
reckless. Tables overturned.  
The kitchen floor lined with glass.  
My mother searches the yard  
for night crawlers, wildflowers.  
Puts another stone in her pocket.

Here, it's always raining--  
or beginning to rain--  
as we climb the jagged  
cemetery fence. Play  
bloody murder among the graves.

We are counting even now.  
The boy I once kissed,  
his lips, his fingers  
sticky, tasting of caramel.  
The red haired girl and  
the letters she never wrote.

We turn around in darkness.  
Once. Twice. Three times  
and are lost forever. Still  
listening for the silence of shut  
windows and early frost  
to call us home.

## palimpsest

So say these rooms are darker than  
you remember. The windows narrow,  
shadows lengthening beneath shabby desks.

Rows of alphabets line the walls  
like glyphs: perennially  
A is apple, B is ball.

In sixth grade, early fall,  
your wrist snaps beneath  
the jungle gym. Chrysanthemums

burst against the fence while  
your best friend wears a bra.  
Kisses white sleeved boys behind the cafeteria.

At night in the tub, you slough  
the day from your limbs. Meanwhile,  
something has been mislaid

or taken. The chalkboard dialectic  
of knee socks and cartwheels.  
These schoolyard casualties.

How do we remember except  
by gauging what we forget?  
Indian burns and snakebites.

The word *cunt* scrawled across a bathroom wall.

## **thaw**

It's the sun slant of February  
that you remember. First thaw.  
The boys in brown trucks.  
How they smelled of juniper  
and beer. Something  
sweating fever. Hard.

On some road that skirts  
the river, ice cracking brittle  
as fingernails, your breath  
labors somewhere tight.  
Smudges the windows.  
Branches tangle the surface like limbs.  
You take the bottle, smile.

Still, haven't you walked into that  
frozen river a thousand times?  
Felt the cold call you, take you in?  
Even doing something as simple  
as pulling a sweater over  
your head, or brushing your hair,  
don't you still?

Everyday, this pale light filtering.

## how to tell a story in a dead language

Perhaps it begins with cell memory.  
The ability of the body  
to recall azaleas, or bruises.  
To remember the verb *forget*  
long after the night has leaned  
a bit closer and whispered  
something like your name.

Still year by year, there is less of you,  
but harder, bones empty as a sparrow.  
This penchant for stolen cigarettes  
and driving without headlights.  
The scars beneath your temple  
and a wrist that aches when it rains.

Now, you tell me your husband  
is kind, in his way. Smells of gasoline  
when he spreads you beneath the eaves  
on a quiet street. I can only think  
of how at twelve, we watched  
the Egyptians. The museum's cool  
fiberglass labyrinth. How they  
carefully rinsed the organs of the dead,  
placed them in their dark jars.

## **drought**

Somewhere the trees are burning  
along the road. Kindling sizzles  
and cracks, the night closing  
around her like a fist.

She is writing, slips of paper,  
in the dark of her room.  
The word *alone* aches in her  
teeth, knocks on her door.

She places *father* beneath the  
pillow, listens to its beat  
like a moth's wings.  
Her dreams are dangerous.  
In them, she carries a knife.

Somewhere, *love* forms  
a hole so endless it echoes.  
Her mother's cries travel its edge,  
drop like a stone in a well.

In this summer of fires,  
*drought* rests beneath the house  
settles in its bones,  
rattles the windows.

Has taken up residence  
in the hollow of her chest.  
Violence in every breath,  
every kiss like a blister.

Years from now, every hand  
will leave a bruise,  
every tongue a scar.  
Even the word *safe*  
will harbor *harm*.

Even new growth will burn.



## **allegory**

In this place, the dark is winning.  
Each night slipping over us like a damp

sheet while puddles in the yard fill  
with mosquitoes. The tomatoes strangle

everything, line the window ledge  
like satisfied hens. She can't stop

longing for storms or burying  
the season's dead beneath the porch.

A bird's skeleton. The smooth bones  
of a black cat. Tomorrow, she'll

rise in the morning, plump and useless  
as the moon. Fecund as her mother's

nesting dolls. Hope is a triangle  
of sun on the wall, a thousand bottles

glittering in the trees. She'll place  
each knife in the drawer with care.

Dare them to harm her.  
Brush her hair until it hurts.

## the last of the summer poems

It seems she dreamed this house  
into being. Transparent  
as a beeswing. Perishable  
as the roses guarding the door.

My sister and I collect rocks,  
quartz and flint. The fine  
scattered feathers of a large bird.  
We wish to be dangerous.

Pollen glistens on our lips  
while cats go mad in the garden  
thick with mint. We pick nightshade  
along the fence, wait for owls

to nest patient and wide-eyed  
beneath the eaves. Our bed smells  
of dead things. It spills into our  
dreams where a woman with red hair

trails a finger along the filthy lip  
of a bird bath. *Know*, she says.

*See.*

## sleep

In this dream, I don't know you.

A woman in a white dress steps  
from beneath a tree. She is  
and is not you. A trick of light  
and desperation. In another,

you stack plates in the cupboard,  
your arms reaching beyond my plane  
of sight. Doubt turning like a screw  
between your ribs. Later, lightning

cracks the air, blackens it. The line  
of your back rises in some interior room.  
At dawn, we'll travel the tangle  
of grass to the car, our hems

damp, unraveling. You'll whisper  
soon, the word careless as a curse.  
Our memories will mingle.  
Yours become mine. The long road

to town. The drip of endless faucets.  
Even still I dream you have  
forgotten us. Pots of milk burn,  
boil over on the stove. We grow

thin from neglect, bones rubbing  
beneath our dresses. Cutting through  
days like a worn knife.

## **unsound**

The wrist holds impossible cruelties.  
Dead pets nest in the curve of an ear,  
while every heartbreak has a spot just  
below the throat. Even at eleven,  
car wrecks twisted the cage of my ribs.  
Milk skinned and amber tongued,  
I dreamt of my mother's rubied ovaries,  
their accurateness: me and my sister,  
our mouths pink and flawless as a ballerina  
in a box. Surely, we rested like a dragonfly  
at the tip of her spine, or a knot in the rope  
of her dreams. Even now, a grandmother  
summers in my sternum, while another swims  
the blood stream, the heart's gates and locks.  
My ankles still turn at the slightest imbalance.

## **after the flood**

After the flood, we can't get  
the scent of river from our hands.  
The rock of water from our bones.  
Even in dreams we float  
like drowned girls pulled  
too late from the river.  
Our dresses molded like gauze  
around us, eyes pale  
and sightless as opals.

Once you swam the span,  
bank to bank in minutes,  
slicing the river behind you.  
Even then it was growing  
inside you, this need for distance.  
The loss of land, of going back.

Now it rains for days, swelling  
beneath the eaves, and already  
we have forgotten when you  
slipped out the door. The boys,  
their tongues moving against  
your throat, white in darkness.

We grow used to absence,  
the body's space, its cavity.  
Already our mother hangs sheets  
bright and wrinkled in the sun.  
Already she is admiring summer,  
how it spreads like dandelions  
across the floodplain. Calm and  
persistent as water.

We are losing you piece by piece  
like the clothes in the wardrobe  
fallen loose from their hangers.  
The yellow blouse, the pink nightgown.  
Drifting out the windows and down  
to New Orleans, where the dead ones rise  
up through the ground, wandering the streets.  
Sadness and jazz in red dresses,  
the Mississippi lapping at their knees.

**glossalalia**

## **circumference**

Forget the blackened clatter.  
Distilled. Diluted.  
The water in the blue glass.

Here it's all about periphery.

Take the white wall in darkness,  
the listing eyelet curtain.  
The woman outside in the garden,  
up to her wrists in soil.  
How the sweat gathers at her hairline.

Inside, getting off, you are violent, volatile.  
That desperate tenor of blood, of breath.  
Knees tangling the cool sheets.

Somewhere there's a word  
for this, a small catch  
to be unfastened.

## **beneath**

We've grown used to this danger.  
The dark valley of our mind pulls  
and aches. Sweats and waits, wild  
and divine as lilacs in the sun.

Boys in cars drive by. The heat  
of them, the dust kicked up, sticks  
to our thighs, grits in our mouths.  
Tastes like honey. Or the way their

fingers move across the collarbone.  
We live inside myth, it sings in us.  
Mad as the mothers crying in gardens.  
The swell of hips. The way the wrist

bends, snaps. Fate as tight and tangled  
as a web that lies every time. The maiden  
with her thread. The laurel tree. Death  
in every doorway. Peril beneath every bush.

Spiders spin outside the window,  
fat as cherries in the humid air.  
We'll notice our ankles, how fine  
and useless they've become.

Only the earth pressing up against us.



**cassandra**

She says the future is visible  
at the edge of things.  
The spaces between.  
Doorways and twilight,  
launch and destination.

In his truck, hot to distraction,  
she dreams of storms dragging  
themselves sopping across the prairie.  
A baby born in a field like an ear of corn.  
The ache of a woman's wrists.  
She looks where his hand meets  
the wheel and blushes.

History is no more than a syllable  
in a bottle, blue glass. A poem  
written on the underside of a cup.

Her lipstick grows soft in the cave  
of her pocket and she knows it's coming.  
This great desire, her body broken in  
like the spine of a book. She's convinced

she'll die in water. Learns to fear  
rivers and dishpans, empty bathtubs  
and bottomless wells. Bides her time  
staring beneath the quarry's black shimmer.

This fold in the map of her body  
meant for nothing if not rending.

**sweet**

A girl holds a pear in her hands  
and all is choreography.  
The coil and knot, the heart's  
negative, turning.

Maybe it's witches, maybe rain.  
How the bones glow  
like an x-ray. The gestures  
of hunger, thirst.  
Hands cupped to mouth.

Her blue dress speaks  
of siestas, the skulls of sparrows.  
Their histories folded in drawers.  
Flowers taking root in  
the belly and blooming.

All month she tastes blood  
on her tongue, her thoughts  
like a house ruined by water.

Like Gretel she learns where  
the sugar lies in the dark,  
dark center of the myth.  
Knows that only some return  
home safely. The others  
lost to kitchens and wind.

## **volition**

At seventeen,  
I listen for disturbances.  
The click of old locks.  
The sigh of fence posts  
straight in the ground.

The bones of the house  
crack and list, this longing  
like rain, always too  
much or too little.

Even still, I've seen the china  
crack, spoons bend, the laundry  
lift off the line and take flight  
over the wheat fields.

Living here is forever  
like testing a well, throwing  
a stone and waiting  
for the ground to turn.  
The bread to rise.  
The sky to shatter and burn.

My mother washes the blood  
from her hands at the sink  
while my grandmother spins  
stories--weddings, birth, loss.  
One life into the next, her tales  
fastening like noose.

Lately, at night, I've been  
traveling from my bed,  
the earth smell wide as an ocean.  
Desire like a sieve,  
urging volition from the body  
like water from a bucket.

**slice**

So say this woman is a storm door,  
a hurricane, is three days late.  
And yes, you can call her *honey*,

but only after the plastic  
mermaid has swam  
to the bottom of her glass.

Nothing here is upright.  
Soon her alphabet dwindles  
to vowels, the guttural wants

of backseats. There are ghosts  
in the parking lot she swears.  
One in the burned out garage.

Her dresses rot on the hangers,  
linger with Shalimar, truck stops.  
The day narrow and darkest at the roots.

## **idling**

Her skin wears thin  
from all the touching.  
This movement of fingers  
over her spine.  
The pale pinked danger  
of her thighs.

Here, night sharpens itself  
on rain, the tattered  
arabesque of bodies  
against windows.

In their houses,  
beneath kitchen lights  
and desk lamps,  
they're catching,  
those slender wings.  
Tendon.  
Filament.

In the car, she draws  
a scarab, a spade,  
a tiny scythe on his back.  
Imagines lines forming  
on lonely roads,  
the world  
reassembling itself in  
violins and matchbooks.

**starve**

She must have been a strange  
thing in that light. Folded  
backbone, the fitful  
spawning. How the trees  
dreamed they were girls  
without feet, without eyes.

And her such a pale thing.  
Consonants fail in the dim  
hours. A euphoria of horizon  
or objects or drowning.  
We are kitchen matches

in winter; our throats ache  
with want. Paint chips  
from the railing  
and the widowed cells  
remember the quiet of

windowpanes, ribcages.  
The moons of our nails  
taste salty and bloodish.

*the only good girl is a dead girl.*  
*the only good girl is*  
*lemons, windchimes, slice of thigh.*

My bones are looking for something  
to lick. Car crashes fill our mouths,  
sugared and thrashing.

Beneath the pinks of our dresses,  
in our collarbones,  
there is famine.

**dark**

Still, there's a gentle  
tedium to my hair between  
your fingers, my throat

beneath your thumb.  
The octaves tremor  
like cicadas, all that time

in the ground, the damp  
wrinkle of their wings.  
Years and I've been hiding

the bones in the words,  
the teeth beneath the pillow,  
while women swim, white limbed,

in my body. Pale amnesiacs.  
My hips ache in the place  
where my mother still lives—

is still alive—digging  
in the peonied earth.  
Together we pull her apart

like the sections of an orange.  
Still I have a taste for it.  
For honey. For blood.

Dark collects in my mouth.  
Even my dresses are dangerous.

## **the fires**

Forget how words signify  
color: how cup is blue.  
Curtains, white. Her mother,  
wrought iron and canary.  
And her, red as a burning  
dress. A hem blackening  
as the trees explode.

Still, she has drawn maps.  
Spelled out her name  
against the windows.  
Ten years later and she  
won't know which is worse.  
The sheets smoldering  
on the line, or the ones  
wrinkling her bed.

Miles above the fire line,  
you'd think it was the beginning.  
But it started before:  
deep ruts in the road,  
semis on the interstate.  
How she followed them sleeping.  
Always barefoot, always west.

Always the dead pets.  
Dogs lost to flames.  
Kittens drowned in pillowcases.  
In dreams, her mother  
combs knots from her hair,  
wades into a boiling river.

There's danger in the quick  
of her nails, the matches  
beneath the mattress.

Ten years later,  
and you won't even be able to tell.



## **distance**

By the time they reach Ohio  
she has forgotten her name.  
The roundness of it lodged  
like a stone beneath her tongue.

Her lips form new habits,  
the geography of his mouth,  
the slim round of a cigarette.  
She uses words like *kiss*  
and *fuck* casually, without blinking.  
Learns to look away  
when he touches her face.

Already, she is convinced  
she sees ghosts. A girl barefoot  
and crying along the interstate.  
A man dangling from a  
sycamore outside Chicago.

She puts an ear to the tracks.  
Listens for the rumble of things  
moving closer, then further away.  
His hand roaming her back.

In Iowa, he teaches her to rub  
spoons until they bend.  
Twist the neck of a deer dying  
beside the road. Sleep with  
a knife beneath her pillow.

Across Kansas, the wind blows  
her mind clean, straitens her hair,  
hollows her voice. Pulls it from her,  
a dark ribbon winding the rows  
of wheat chaff. Each town  
a candle along the toll way.

**glossalalia**

June still aches in my fillings.  
Sieves through my skin like the scent

of bruised fruit. I'm a broken  
spell, a fever. A fear of red.

In bars, I lean too close  
to men with poor intentions,

fall prey to whiskey's sinuous hymn.  
Sometimes the moths, their given

names, *actias luna*, *automeris io*,  
are too much, too many. Evoke

barbed wire, plums flush as the lining  
of a heart. The terrible flowers on my dress,

tea roses culled in a field of pale blue,  
set off a war, a famine beneath your

tongue. You are trying to locate my body  
amid the sheets by taste, by guessing.

The mattress swollen with rain.

## **hazards**

It's a vocabulary of old country  
songs. Unfaithful women  
and open roads. A scratchy  
vinyl itching in her thighs.  
This fear of swimming pools  
and gas station bathrooms.

Who can sleep in a red room?  
Walls, curtains, sheets.  
Scarlet and loud as a hundred  
whores in a bar. Crimson  
as the inside of her mouth.  
All night she whispers into the  
the crook of his arm,  
runs her fingers along  
the rigging of his spine.

Here, evening sticks  
in your throat, makes its way  
into your vowels. The men in  
parking lots smell of sorghum  
and slow gin. A pretty girl  
needs a ditch to lie down in.  
A witch to brush the milkweed  
from her hair. It's a danger

how her knees gleam in the  
medicine cabinet's stale  
phosphor. Her legs spread  
pale against the dingy tub.  
Her body like a lake at the bottom.  
Rocky, and not meant for swimming.

**room, 118, arizona**

Even now her edges are blackening  
under his tongue, the words livid  
in the mouth, impossible.  
The skies tonight deceive.  
Promise rain, deliver nothing.

Yesterday, she dropped like a dime  
into a crack. Fell asleep  
mid-afternoon hurtling toward  
Tuscon. Dreamt of burned out  
houses. Intricate arsons.  
He tells her she is never

quite as beautiful as she is  
on her knees. The space,  
the abstraction of her body, opaque.  
She writes villanelles  
on the skin of his back. Records  
the time she dragged a fingernail

across a fairytale and out fell  
a dozen girls, wide-eyed,  
april in their blood. A palm  
reader in Texas warns her  
of conduits and spells.  
She grows incautious, notes  
the scorpions scurrying

beneath the bed. Strands  
of hair, stained sheets.  
Vacancy glows, a thousand  
cigarettes, through the shears.  
She forgets how early  
the night falls here.  
How early it fails.

## scarlet fever

There are ghosts in the body.  
More precisely, manifest themselves  
as a flutter beneath the ribs.  
This desire to string your body  
like electric lines along darkening  
roads. To etch the stars across  
the slope of my shoulders.

I know these fevers.  
You bring apples. Novels.  
But still the night tastes like coins,  
wrecks us. Not the twist of metal  
but the memory of red. The gas station,  
Tuscon, where you bent me  
over the sink. Later told me  
your mom never touched  
you unless it was a beating.

See, there's an error in the story.  
A failure in the thread. I was  
seven once, and sick, and my  
mother, all-night, danced  
in the corners of my room.  
Gorged herself on gelatin  
and the tv's static hum.

I'm rattled with the spirits  
of dead women, damp  
sheets twisting into rope.  
All night, I dream of eggs  
shaking in their little cups.  
Blood in the yolk.  
Morning.

**past september**

She thinks in threes:  
the father, the spirit,  
the unknown ghost.  
Three steps to the window.  
Three days until she bleeds.

Her tongue is fragile now,  
slipping along words.  
When she speaks,  
even the azaleas are anxious.  
Morning becomes a wound,  
jagged and dangerous.

She abandons her shoes  
along the road to Galveston.  
Drags her heels along  
thin tread of summer.

This is the point of entry.  
Of balance, diffusion.  
The breathy signature.

She places her hand against  
her stomach, dreams  
of daughters named  
after hurricanes.

*Isabel. Lily. Camille.*

Soon they will ask her  
where it hurts—

*Here. Here. Here.*

## **sangria**

Not red, not exactly. More like dawn,  
or the illusion of it. Hummingbirds, humidity.  
Azaleas splitting in your palm. In Texas,

the nights sueded, starlit.  
There is no language for the soft  
of your hands, their thunderous Braille.  
Bruises ripen on my wrists like plums.

Nevertheless, I am sly, scarlet-lipped.  
Gathering light in the folds  
of my dress. Crossing my sevens  
polite and girlish. I still dream

of the desert, the woman you once kept  
sleeping in the curve of your body.  
She slices peaches, pulls the hair from her face.

She sweetened and full of rain.  
Even the coyotes have lost the scent of her.

**a dialogue in blue**



## **afterwards**

November is brittle,  
breaks off in her fingers.  
Is grey as the slope  
of a page, rumped and damp,  
left in the rain.

Her tongue becomes a rockslide,  
an eclipse, the keeper  
of broken things. There  
among the skeleton of trees,  
a bent stick pulled  
from the river.  
Evasive. Dreamed up.

Ask her what she knows  
of winter. Leaves  
drifting through doorways.  
Impermanence and flux.  
The crack her voice makes  
over certain words. How  
his hands moved over her  
as if tapping the body for water.

She still sleeps badly  
as the leaves rot on  
the ledge. Still yearns,  
her breath inside her  
moving, moving—

## **december**

You are always surprised by want,  
soft as the inside of your arm.  
How it bruises, speaks of  
twilight, whispered litanies.

In another place, a woman  
reaches for a comb, comes back  
with a rainstorm. She is halving  
grapefruit in Key West,  
missing snow.

Later, you'll dream of sheets  
settling across a white bed.  
Catch your reflection strange  
in a window pane. The measure  
of your breath in the subway.

In a season of winds, we hold what we can.

## precision

In the end, it is the language  
we forget. This hastening  
of tongues, the unfastening  
of buttons. Dawn, and how

do we know the name—  
the real name—of it, now,  
when the minutes are marked  
by sticks, and the lanterns

hang like moons over  
the lawn? A wreckage  
of dactyls gather in my  
throat, my dizzy limbs.

The resin of the bed.  
The very first word  
was surely *need*, or  
a sound as if underwater.

Our open mouths listening.

**three a.m.**

There is still this terrible blueness.  
This undressing. Straps slipping  
against her arm, pale sky opening.

Always the residue of sleep.  
Darkened eyes, the tattered breath.  
She's a postcard from Arizona  
tucked beneath a novel.  
Snow thickening beneath streetlamps.

These wants are thin. Impulses,  
synapses. Her diary scrawled  
on her forearm, a refrain catching  
as ditches fill with women  
warned by mothers, lips  
caking with mud.

And what to make of these  
arrangements. The thrust.  
The afternoon's calamity  
grown exponentially.  
On corners, in bar rooms,  
the glasses are empty.  
We are missing incandescence.  
Water. Something.

He once told her our souls  
are as permeable as cells.  
They divide. Infinitive.

## **navigation**

It begins with fluctuation.  
Fingertips. The tiny bones  
of the ear. Something  
rushing beneath the clavicle,  
vermillion and fierce.

She's terrible with maps.  
In summer, this shaded labyrinth,  
she can sense the water,  
the black cliff opening to the east.  
Can find her way solely  
by sense of smell.

Here, the worn grey scent of money.  
Women sweating beneath cashmere.  
Children, their hands smelling of mangoes.

Winter, and the wind sweeps the landscape  
clean, dries her out like paper.  
She carries a charge, sets fire  
to doorjambs, the blanket on her bed.  
Her neighbors rattle the walls  
at night, pushing against their bones.  
Everyone prone to night sweats,  
fever dreams.

All the roads have lost their signs.

## the blue dress poems

1.

Lucy has forgotten how to count.  
Dance steps, teacups. How the light  
smells of rain. Her dress is so blue

it aches in his mouth. Makes him  
long to lick the inside of her wrist  
where the cotton of her hips falls

away to shadow. Later, she swallow  
enough gin to drown, and he'll fish her  
from the pond, hauling her over the side

of the boat just in time. We are all a little  
in love with her. The woman poring over  
grapes in the market. The child crying

in the aisle. We are ruined by hammocks.  
By sweetness. Her turned cheek.  
Who doesn't want a girl who

is a sea chantey, an open window?  
A pale beyond the fingers?  
Something beautiful. Yet sad.

Now, we eat oranges and talk  
about poetry, mathematics.  
How they are inadequate to

the breadth of our bodies,  
the tightened span of our ribs.

She is naming seas and spinning.

2.

The dressmaker wants  
to call this pattern *catastrophe*,  
or *wreckage*. How the indigo  
roses spread like bruises  
in their field of sky.

The pins between her teeth  
vibrate and she imagines  
suicides, bodies falling  
from bridges. Each petal  
a stain, an innuendo. Something  
spreading itself to evening.

This fear of flowers  
sets vases rattling in shops.  
Sends her screaming from rooms  
filled with chintz. She pricks  
her thumb with the smallest  
needle. Waits for the  
bloom and the sting.

3.

Somewhere a dress slips  
from a woman's shoulder  
and sets off a war. A hem

gathers water, darkening  
at the bottom, and a hundred  
children go missing. I wear it home

from the thrift shop, still bearing  
the scent of lilies, and you dream  
of a woman holding her breath.

When we sleep, night scavenges  
our cellars. The bottoms of closets.  
Weaves history in the lace

of a collar, the seam of a scarf.  
There is a hurricane in your button hole.  
A thousand dead men in your shoe.

I am something scrawled in the margins,  
undressing by the light of stars.

Truth is, we're all a little in love with it.



## **breaking the spell**

Syntax gives over to a dry sound.  
Knocks like the bottom of a boat.  
There's a grey, with birds,  
maybe moths, a thousand frenulums  
humming. Perhaps a premonition

in the tidal pool. The net of stars  
fixed above the yard. Sometimes  
it goes like this. Easy, smooth  
as lips unfolding the syllables  
against our bodies. Tomorrow,  
teacups on the ledge will fill

with rain. The aftertaste of olives  
inhabiting my ribs. The lay of bones,  
their blue diagram. A dizzy gust,  
and something gone missing.

This the evening's parable:  
black, calendula,  
the mouths of insects.

## night drive

On route seven, crosses line  
the highway like arms  
and this, a seduction.

The towns with names  
like *Elizabeth* and *Lena*.  
how a thing happens

or it doesn't. Count  
the variations of red  
in my hair and you'd know

I was a liar, my tongue  
humming like a tuning fork.  
My trick of concentration

is a word that begins  
in the diaphragm  
and spreads to the limbs

as the headlights flatten  
the asphalt, skim  
the open throats of bullfrogs.

Still, I fear clearings.  
The verb scribbled and unwritten.  
The place we come to

where the night is shaped  
like a spine. Where my thighs  
bathe in the radio's thin heat.

## **tornado weather**

We soon tire of broken things.  
The lawn furniture bent skeletal  
in the yard. The grass patchy  
and pale. The way day  
divides into a thousand nights,  
each warmer than the last.

Soon, we are sleeping  
on the porch, hauling  
the mattress outside  
in a cloud of dust.  
Moths fluttering against  
our eyelashes while  
rainwater gathers in our mouths.

Expectation hangs from a nail  
by the door, each breath at my ear  
contingent on the last.  
Words drowning in the sway of trees,  
the beginning of a motion.

In the afternoon, we drive.  
Your childhood no more  
than a tipped cup, an impossibility.  
Mine, flush with the loveliest darks.  
We are cautious of stories.  
How they are always waiting to happen.

There is no way back from here,  
you tell me in a dream, your hand  
brushing my stomach, delving  
between my thighs. Each night,  
we wait quiet as stones for sunrise.  
For the world to right  
itself in a flush of sparrows.

## **under the pleiades**

September is a trick, a thickening  
in the blood. By now, the summer  
girls have placed their hands  
between their knees, letters  
from other lovers tucked  
beneath their skirts.

I've been dreaming of a basement  
in a house I've never seen.  
The night is disarranged  
and full of bones. The only  
way out is a blue bottle  
on a low ledge.

Tonight, after the clean slaughter  
of sex, how we slur into  
each other without thought,  
you'll name the constellations  
in my hair. Seven casualties  
in my web of stars.

**anna burns the dictionary**

Harder than you'd think,  
this letting go of language.  
How to understand the body  
without *wrist* or *ribcage*.  
The pale equation of *throat*  
divided by *eyelash*.

And now, forgotten the word  
for *heart*, as if we needed it,  
while the vernacular surrenders  
to something like circumference.

How do we describe the movement  
through metaphor. How water  
is taking the house floor by floor?  
How we mistake our limbs  
for armoires and wicker chests  
while vagueness rattles the architecture.

Here at the fulcrum of summer,  
a scant atlas speaks of Philomela's  
tongue cut like a tightrope. Her inability  
to conjugate the word *frighten*.

I can still conjure the sighs  
of dark skirts and stockings,  
but, sadly, cannot say the words.

**that thing you said about destiny**

Thursday and there are sonnets  
in my hair while the subway's  
dark mouth yawns its litany  
of radios, bathtubs, the wrists  
of women in grey sweaters.

These hours are rare.  
These hours are prettier sisters  
from out of state.

Tell me a story, I'd say.  
But you hate my dexterity  
in finding the swell,  
the heart's ventricular reds.  
The sheets begin to ache  
with November. The bones  
of a mouse appear beneath the sink.

## **in spain**

These points are fixed  
against terrain.  
Fragment. Ornament.

Write evolution on a sheet  
of paper. Thin, pale  
as a robin's egg. Say  
it's all inevitable:

The laundered dresses fluttering  
on lines. The window shedding  
its paint. Sugar dissolving

in a glass of water. Place three fingers  
against my collarbone. Breathe.  
Tell me again how you lost

the red notebook twice  
in other countries. The passage  
about the girl in the alley.

How she tasted like a rainstorm,  
all dampness and electricity.  
I forget the oranges  
and the blue tattoo.

Always the tattoo.

**an explanation for wednesday**

Perhaps it's the havoc,  
summer gone and the world  
tipped like a cup. Or  
how I've been reading Rilke,  
fingering your postcard from Paris.  
Playing sonatas and dreaming

of girls in bright scarves  
and black skirts waving from  
buses to hotels with  
white, clean sheets  
and claw foot tubs.

After all, it's hard to tell  
the speed of bodies falling.  
Or the sound of indigo.  
*Unless* plagues the staircase.  
Unsteadies the ladder.

Meanwhile, I have learned  
to breathe underwater.  
The slightest intake.  
Then the lull.



### **the sleepwalker's love song**

You begin with fire. Or the story of fire.  
The house that refuses to burn. Summer  
turns and suddenly even the interruption  
becomes the point. Something crushed  
and kept between the pages of a book.

I'll tell you a secret, but we must be quiet.  
Like bent spoons rusting in the grass.  
These devotions, the curve of palm  
against cheek, against the small  
of my back. I can tell what you're like  
by the span of your hands. Can gauge  
danger a hundred feet away.

How do we explain what we do?  
How the hunger increases  
by intervals till morning.  
When all I can remember  
is the constellation above my  
bedroom window at fourteen.  
Iodine soaking the veins of leaves.

## **blood moon**

Spring, and we hum to  
the grammar of currents,  
the dilation of minutes.  
My mouth, the argument.  
This flare.

Last summer. Firecrackers.  
You burn a circle in the grass,  
a circle in my hand,  
and I remember  
grade school pigs curled  
tight in jars.  
The drama of rooms  
with wide open windows.

You see, this breathing,  
ragged, persistent.  
is like the beginnings of  
dark water seeping  
over floors. The starved  
contours of us.

All through winter,  
I sit in the empty  
bathtub for hours.  
Not crying.  
The curtain unravels,  
slips along its rusted rod.

You say I am hardened.  
But last night, late,  
I watched the moon slide  
over itself like the eye of a cat.  
The scrim of the city  
pulled back

I must have told you a hundred times.

## **a dialogue in blue**

The boats have failed us.  
Now, as we sleep, the world surrenders  
its sundresses and immaculate floors.  
Gives over to the dialect of storms.  
Of shoelaces tied in tidy bows.  
I am elliptical, losing myself

to the bottoms of strange rivers  
at the slightest nudge. You are  
astonished at how the water  
sounds in my throat and reinvents  
itself as deep snow. The answer  
to your question is at the end

of a hallway in a dim apartment  
where the plates still ache  
for hands. Where the shipwreck  
of my ribcage still calls out  
to the beautiful swimmers.

*Come in. Come in. It's getting dark.*

## **predictions**

Though somewhat useless when it comes  
to earthquakes, plane crashes,  
your father's accident on Route 5,

she can still foretell entire  
towns underwater. Can find a quarter  
at the bottom of a well simply by

the sound of its falling. After all,  
who can guess what the body  
is capable of? What dark swimming

lies within? The ache in her calves  
indicates snow, while in her dreams,  
the tunnels beneath the city fill

with river. Deliver businessmen  
and housekeepers, still clutching  
their morning coffee as the pipes

beneath her floor sweat and moan.  
And who can say the water doesn't sing  
to our bodies like something lost,

salt and membranes thickening.  
Or that, in French, the word for *rain*  
isn't terribly far from *to cry*.