

# **Blood and Mirrors**

Poems by Candice Amich

April, 2000

Thesis Advisor: James Daniels

## **Contents**

### **I.**

Waves  
June 1988: A Father's Leave-Taking  
Spinning Outwards  
Eroded  
A Bald Promise  
New Year's Eve: Three Girls in a Bathroom  
Before Her Father's Funeral  
After the Divorce  
The Drowning  
Dilations  
House on the Outskirts of Havana

### **II.**

Thirteen Flaming Stars  
Residue  
Misattribution  
Brother's Keeper  
The Segregation of Self  
A Snow Queen's Farewell  
Our Affair  
Sunday in the Park  
Eve's Disturbance  
"On the Fortieth Anniversary of the Revolution, the Year of my Birth"  
Warhol Does Venus

### **III.**

Outside Leaves Keep Falling  
Fiercely Blooming  
Night Light  
Breaking the Cycle  
Christina's World  
Sweet Poison  
Moment of Clarity  
Dreaming of Marilyn, Monroe Street  
Sex After Graceland

### **IV.**

Collision  
Reunion  
In the Year of the Dead  
The Birth Performance  
Woman's Best Friend

The Holiday Gloom  
I Offer My Doctor Blood Money for a Prescription  
Buy Nothing Day  
Getting Out  
The Pact

**V.**  
Enduring Current: A Possible Dream Sequence

**I.**

## Waves

I was seven when my father told me he came  
to this country from Cuba on a wave—  
no shoes, no papers, no parents.  
I imagined a breaker whisked  
him away from his family,  
dropped him off naked and new  
on sunny Miami Beach.

\*

My brother liked to sit on the toilet  
and watch my father shave.  
One night I peeked in the crack  
and saw my father pointing to the scar  
from his appendectomy, heard him tell  
my brother it was a gunshot wound  
from Vietnam. Later, my father boozed  
while my brother wrapped Band Aids  
around the stomachs of his GI Joes.

\*

I was eight when my father told  
us about the orphanage—  
four years he slept with rats  
before his parents arrived  
in Chicago. Age seventeen  
he joined the Unknowns.  
Street gangs, rats, and a war scar.

\*

I read about fishing boats and big waves  
in Japan. Fathers burning candles  
with their families at night.  
I wanted a monsoon  
to take me out of my skin,  
let me start over  
ninety miles away.

\*

I believed my real father

was still tumbling in the Gulf—  
that the man pounding  
his fist on the kitchen table  
was a Cuban alien  
who had stolen  
my real father's identity.

\*

I dream of Havana  
in the rainy season.  
Travel east  
to Santiago de Cuba.  
Back west  
to the tobacco province  
of Pinar del Rio.  
These routes  
are open to students.

\*

Somersaulting across a plantation  
I bump into my real father.  
He is thirteen and rolling  
cigars. He is careful  
to spill no tobacco.  
There is nothing  
to start over.

June 1988: A Father's Leave-Taking

We watch the white curtains  
yellow; the slow effacement  
of afternoon into evening.

I recognize birdsongs:  
brother's warbling  
against mother's wheezing.

My feet are cold, resisting  
the transition  
from carpeted staircase  
to hardwood landing.

I want to pluck a crystal from the chandelier,  
see it burst into a billion bits of ice:  
*I am done with all things brilliant  
and blinding.*

Instead I vacuum,  
suggest to mother we strip the ivy.

But she is busy yanking brother  
from the window.  
I concentrate  
on wiping away his smudges.

I surrender—  
we are out of Windex.

## Spinning Outwards

We pick clover on the side lawn of the church;  
split every third leaf in half. Your shoulders sag  
and your lower spine collides with rough bark.  
It reminds you of the weeping willows  
that rasped against the windows  
of your mother's stone estate.  
You would pray for a sharp rain  
to soften the cold grey exterior.  
You want to say the long corridors  
were maintained, like in a museum,  
but your speech slips *mausoleum*.

Watching cars meet and diverge  
at the intersection, I am aware  
of my fingers trembling  
above the skinny thread  
of a web. It connects me to the bark  
at your back. In Catholic school  
I thought myself a spider  
and spinning outwards dangerous.  
The passageways solemn  
with so much weaving gone unnoticed.  
Back then I was grateful  
for the small disappointments;  
an excuse to disentangle  
from my lace work.

Our mound of four-leaf mutations growing larger,  
we wonder if we can be more than just mirrors  
to each other. If anyone can ever recant  
us from our centers. We imagine  
a world of webs; wonder  
if we would want this.



## Eroded

Two nights I have waited in bus stations, stared  
at the same faces. Seven hours until departure,  
I roam Denver's puddled downtown half-asleep.

I would like to stop and watch the sun rise  
from its muddy cradle, but my clothes  
are soaked and I don't have a room.

I seek shelter under the twitching neon of a diner—  
try to rid myself of the eroded feeling  
that overtook me during an Omaha downpour.

I tuck my legs under a small checkered table.  
If I stare long enough I can catch  
the black and white squares floating.

A queen saunters through the door wiping  
his streaked mascara with one hand, pulling  
his stockings up with the other as he spreads

a tear further up his leg. The click  
of his heels startles me as he crosses  
the room trailing a thin stream of mud.

A cloudburst from the West warns  
me I will never make it past Salt Lake  
City. I am wishing I had never left

Chicago when something wet hits my face.  
But it is only a leak. A small sadness  
dripping from the ceiling.

## A Bald Promise

Twenty-two years old, Julie ran  
from Asheville to Laredo, changed  
her name to Lola. She pressed

her swollen cheekbone  
to the Amtrak window and gazed  
into the bald eye of her reflection.  
For twenty hours she rode the waves  
of her marriage in a Percocet barrel,  
rose from the anesthetized trip  
in Texas. Stepping down

from the platform, she dug her heels  
into the dusty ground, crouched  
to watch a swarm of flies  
attack the brown core  
of an apple.

Thirteen years later, the thud  
of her husband's fist on her cheek  
rouses the dormant swarm. She lifts  
his shotgun from their paneled wall,  
shoots him in the leg. Riding

an opiate wave, she returns  
to the discarded core—  
the buzzing muffled.

New Year's Eve: Three Girls in a Bathroom

I straddle the toilet.  
Angela and Lucy work  
my hair into a nest  
of fixed coils.

Angela swipes  
a streak of purple  
through her spiky hair.

Lucy is opposed  
to costumes.

Cold air snakes  
around my neck,  
I press my palm  
against the duct-taped crack  
in the window.

Angela lights two cigarettes,  
hands me one.  
We ash in the sink.

\*

Angela shoves Lucy and me  
back into the bathroom.

All coked up, she bursts  
into tears. A helium  
balloon snags  
on the hinged door,  
explodes.

I turn on the busted radio,  
tune into static  
as Lucy locks the door.

Angela wipes her eyes  
with her wine-stained tank top.

I wrap my scarf  
around her neck,

Lucy lights her smoke.

*I have this dream  
Josh and me are fishing.  
He hands me a minnow—  
I hook it.*

*Our baby screams.*

A knock at the door—  
Angela unhooks  
the latch,  
allows Josh to enter.

We tell him we are tired  
of our costumes.

He watches Angela wash  
her hair in the sink.

I pull pins  
out of my coils.

Lucy wipes  
a trace of powder  
off the edge  
of the tub.

### Before Her Father's Funeral

The woman paces in the reflection  
of the living room mirror,  
tying up her hair. The child fears  
the ice sheet has swallowed  
his mother, left him  
with this projected woman  
in the long black dress.

She goes to the window and pulls  
it open, mumbles something glacial.  
They are waiting for her in cars.  
She sighs one last fog, turns away.

The sun radiates heat on the hardwood floor  
under the open window.  
The child stretches out on his stomach,  
imagines God is a light that can warm  
the shivers away. He worries  
that if the snow outside melts  
his mother won't make  
the swim back home.

### After the Divorce

Damp wind nudges him towards shore.  
Fog lifts a few inches above water;  
he recalls the way a woman raised  
her skirt above her ankles  
before stepping over a puddle.

The musky smell of washed-up fish seeps  
into his lungs. He listens for the crunch  
as he steps on their skeletons; imagines  
their souls swimming up his legs,  
lodging themselves between his vertebrae.

He walks down the pier,  
concrete cold beneath his feet.  
A faint figure sits on a boulder  
at the end of the long runway.  
He allows himself to recognize her.

When he reaches the boulder,  
he fingers a crevice, the fractured sternum  
of mammoth rock. He heaves  
himself up and observes  
the horizon. She is gone.

He savors the salt's sting.

### The Drowning

My sister says a bolt of lightning  
split her trunk in half  
when her husband's lungs  
filled with water  
during a July downpour.

She sold the house and furniture,  
bought a cabin in Montana.

I visit her in October. She has taught  
her daughter to paint in thick oils,  
to notice the way sunlight streams  
through the gauzy drapes.

At dinner, my sister traces her finger  
along the rim of her glass; denies  
three times that she misses the East.

It is only after she has put her daughter to sleep  
that she speaks openly about the cold:  
how the wind seeps through the insulation,  
fills her lungs with its howls.

## Dilations

The sick man lies in bed, opening  
and shutting his window-blind eyes.  
A silver sea surrounds him; its sterling waves  
carry him back to the soft-skinned memory  
of a woman:

*In the woods, their fingers wander  
under each other's shirts,  
over each other's hot stomachs.  
Sunlight filters through the dense canopy  
above their heads; slender rays  
illumining their wordless speech.  
The moment dilates  
and all their gradual touches  
blend into one.*

His wife nears his bed-side  
with a glass of water and a handful  
of pills. He refuses her, hurls  
the pills across the room.

Her pinched face softens  
the moment he lets go, dissolves  
in the glinting of the waters.

His last words swallowed  
in a shower of pink capsules.



House on the Outskirts of Havana  
*-for my father*

Sand rushes into an abandoned house  
through half-boarded windows  
in the gusty month of April.

Dunes gather like hooded monks  
at the foot of the stairs. Small squares  
of colored glass glint above the door

of this house I have imagined for us.  
A three-legged table  
and two paint-chipped chairs.

This is the house I cannot leave,  
the table where I sit and wait.  
The light caught in the stained glass;

the words we have not shared.  
I invite you to listen: two blocks away  
leaves whirling down a sewer grate.

**II.**

## Thirteen Flaming Stars

Forty years ago my father arrived  
In Miami, ninety miles north of Cuba  
In a sea-blistered boat with thirteen  
Other exiles. His parents were not rich—  
Did not flaunt jewel-ringed toes on white  
Sands. I dream the opulent hotel

His mother scrubbed floors at is now a hostel  
Where I meet my father. *I arrive  
In a banana boat; its sides white-  
Washed by waves. This Cuba  
Does not belong to Batista's rich  
Friends. Here there are no thirteen*

*Colonies, no painted stars. My thirteen-  
Year-old father leads me to flashy hotel  
Windows, and we flick matches at the rich  
Customers inside. Castro has not yet arrived—  
Has not yet appointed himself the Cuban  
Messiah. We stage our own Siberian white*

*Night: my father burns his father's white  
Suits, and we holler Revolution in thirteen  
Tongues. In pre-Castro Cuba  
I meet my real father in a flaming hostel.  
In the US, my real father has not yet arrived—  
He is not the one hiding out among the nouveau riche.*

My brother is resolute on becoming rich—  
Studies investment banking, his white  
Male birthright. He has longed for the arrival  
Of unrestrained free trade since age thirteen  
When he fell in love with the market; lavish hotel  
Rooms available in all developing countries but Cuba.

My father promises me we will fly to Cuba;  
Promises my brother we will visit his rich  
Clients in Mexico City, stay in their plush hotels.  
Though this trip is just another of his white  
Lies, I cannot help but wonder how the thirteen-  
Year-old boy in rags would suffer our arrival.

*Smoking a Cuban cigar, wearing his father's white*

*Suit, my rich father burns holes in the thirteen-  
Year-old arms of his rival in the lobby of our hotel.*

Residue

In the next room, mother is weeping.  
She caught me under the living room table  
mashing the contents of grandfather's pill box  
into paste, licking the chalk  
from between my index finger and thumb.

I wake up in the back seat  
of grandfather's yellow car:  
mother kisses my flushed cheek  
smoothes my sweaty bangs  
tells me I am a good girl.

After they pump my stomach  
she imitates the sucking sound  
of hoses, assures me my belly  
is poison-free-- nothing but roses  
left, dozens. We hit a bump  
and the chalky feeling rises  
but I hold it down  
afraid of thorns.

## Misattribution

I.

The summer of my fifth year  
I decided romantic love  
was my mother receiving  
my father's tongue  
into her mouth  
in St. Elizabeth's parking lot.

II.

Later, my father picked a dandelion.  
The pollen my mother blew  
was a purer form of snow.

III.

An hour earlier, he had slammed her face  
against the passenger window.  
Saint Teresa in Ecstasy,  
her eyes rolled slow  
to the back of her head.

IV.

They both skipped Communion—  
my father's hand shook  
as he smoothed a strand  
of my mother's loose hair.

Brother's Keeper  
*- for my brother, the ninth*

*"God, it may be assumed, took murder into account; He did not take surgery into account."*  
-Milan Kundera *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

I.  
Cain desires to know  
what in his brother's head  
pleases God—

does not run  
after he splits  
Abel's skull.

He does not discover the thorns  
pricking his own grey matter,  
but dove wings, doused  
in the reddest of wines.

He pulls a thread from his loin cloth,  
hunts for a pine needle,  
stitches his brother's skull.

Holding his head in his lap,  
Cain blesses Abel  
with a kiss on the forehead.

II.  
If I have been institutionalized  
it has been for the wrong reasons.

At three I was a murderer.  
Ten years later, a traitor  
to homeland and blood.

Brother, at three I pushed  
you off your high chair  
when no one was looking—  
fourteen hours you wailed  
before mother took you to the hospital—  
they set your legs in fat casts.

By age thirteen, I detested  
your love of dollars—  
the blind pursuit of green.

I stole all your hoarded \$1's  
and fed them to the dogs  
that roamed the neighborhood.  
A sixteen-year-old poodle  
died of ink poisoning.

God was not pleased.

III.  
Abel's eyes open  
like a vulture spreading his wings  
or a dove betrayed—  
his whites webbed in red.

Abel is weak, the dove.  
Cain is marked, the thorn.

Abel lifts a trembling finger  
at the moment of recognition—

forgive me, brother.  
I was born to crack  
your mind open;  
drink the wine.



## The Segregation of Self

1.

I explore the cellar of the abandoned stadium.  
Tiptoeing through the blackness, a door  
slams shut behind me. I call out your name,  
you reach for my hand through bars.  
We listen for the boot-steps of guards.  
I whisper *I want*  
you finish *to be free*.

2.

Eighteen-years-old, I hated getting drunk  
in front of you, who always abstained,  
navigating us through the segregated squares  
of Baltimore, like an unbalanced checkerboard  
of black and white, until someone sold  
me something, your sad muffler  
thumping us all the way home.

3.

I liked walking pre-dawn streets  
with you— crunching cockroaches.  
Amazed this small violence could hurt  
you— a man. The men in your neighborhood  
called you “lady” three times that night.  
I whispered *I want*  
you finished *to be cruel*.

4.

Four years later, I am leaving school  
with a suitcase of sledgehammers  
to help you knock down  
Greenmount Avenue Wall.  
We will lay out new streets  
that from a distance  
where the light is pure  
will look like winding strands  
of your long lady’s hair.

A Snow Queen's Farewell  
*-for Sean, in New York*

I was your Pittsburgh snow queen, faraway  
and cruel, in a glacial palace all my own.

I discovered the elixir for the *polar numbness*  
you promised— bottles of toppled red wine

flooded the cellar floor. I even wore your cool words  
like an elegant cloak, dismissing one boy after another.

But now I am living with a man more like a dragon  
than a boy, whose enormous swishing tail whirlpools

heat, melts my ice sculptures— and the glassy rivers  
rushing down your shrinking bust

look nothing like tears.

Our Affair  
*- After Guernica*

Your tongue— a woman  
hanging from a flaming window.

My knees buckle— a horse pierced  
by a stake, twisting its head back.

A bird tears a vowel from its gut—  
your hand clamps down on my mouth.

A light bulb explodes—  
our limbs elongate and swell.

Mine is the severed arm gripping  
the handle of your broken spear.

### Sunday in the Park

Across the park, maroon maids and men in black  
surround the white bride, the fat queen bee,  
guard her from flying frisbees, a football.  
I overhear the groom ask two kids,  
chocolate smeared across their lips,  
to move their branch-burning game.  
While the photographer, ruffles  
spilling down his shirt, struggles  
with his polished tripod, two slim maids  
grab either corner of the train, pull it taut:  
spin the bride.

The groom tosses  
fist-sized jewels— rubies, emeralds  
sapphires— into the center  
of the train. They bounce  
before landing in the open mouths  
of two voluptuous maids.  
The men whistle,  
the women swallow.

Using a branch, I sketch  
these wedding-day hallucinations in mud  
as the messy-mouthed boys ignite  
the weeping tree at my back—  
its roots bonding my feet  
to soggy ground.

### Eve's Disturbance

I was born  
of a wound.  
I ate the apple  
to become my own creation.  
For ages I have failed  
at transcending my body.

I have locked myself in a cabin  
to annihilate my sex  
with a pearl-handled razor.

Adam sharpens his sledgehammer  
while I prepare the bath.

I want to tear out a rib,  
lay it as his bloody feet,  
return to dust.

The window shatters—  
I nurse the shards,  
clutch them to my breast  
as he enters me.

“On the Fortieth Anniversary of the Revolution, the Year of my Birth”  
-after *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*

Diego, I am burning  
in an evergreen bush, my wings  
broken so I cannot fly  
to New York or save myself.

I fall asleep with pins in my leg,  
awake coiled in an umbilical cord.

Out the window I see  
my father diving off a balcony.

I imagine you strung high in the air,  
painting your mural. Then imagine  
you falling as my spine shatters.

Thirty-three years after her death  
I dreamt of reuniting with my sister.  
She was laughing, waiting for me.

I could not cross the threshold.

### Warhol Does Venus

He chops her off at the shoulders  
parts her scandalized lips.  
She transcends the pale dawn  
of the Renaissance, rising  
into an electric blue landscape.

Neon green swirls  
through her hair; snakes  
yanking sideways,  
from the roots. Pink ribbons  
adorn her headache.  
Through reproduction  
he deflowers her—  
a Medusa for the masses.

Under a seething twist of hair,  
her shoulder, queer and naked,  
seems bashful. But her eyes,  
lined in blue, are Virgins  
fucking the sky.

### **III.**



### Outside Leaves Keep Falling

I squint away the clumsy heart-like shapes  
of the brick-colored splotches  
staining mother's hardwood floor.

Father wrenched  
his full burgundy glass  
from mother's grip  
& split his own cheek  
wide open, spilled blood-  
wine everywhere.

I was raking leaves  
when he ran out screaming  
*Nuthouse, fucking nut-house*  
mother yelling  
*Quiet you crazy drunk.*

Soon, I was raking  
past mud, past stone.  
Outside leaves keep falling  
& my shoulders are sore  
from gathering armfuls of branches.  
Mother has hidden the rake.

## Fiercely Blooming

In his daughter's mind, the alcoholic father  
is an endangered member of the species.  
She likens his life span to the fierce twelve-hour bloom  
of certain wild hybrids. At the time of her birth,  
he is through with the flamboyant show  
her mother went knobby-kneed for. She consults  
scientific texts for an explanation of the slumped shape  
he has assumed. He has planted himself in dangerous soil,  
full of toxins that accelerated his brilliant burgeoning,  
depleted his serotonin supply. She lives in perpetual fear  
of his extinction.

His flaccid body refuses to die—  
he stalks through the garden, contaminates  
the healthy soil. She desires to cut  
her own flimsy stalk at the base— suffers  
diagnosis and treatment.

By age eighteen she is familiar  
with the mysterious workings of neurotransmitters,  
poisons. She no longer fears extinction—  
hers or her father's.

So why is this big girl stomping  
around his house, ripping the pages  
out of her diagnostic manual,  
igniting her scientific texts?

She is warning her father  
her heart is ready to explode,  
to spill its spoiled fruit  
all over his walls.

## Night Light

My father flings one arm back to switch  
off the hallway bulb and misses;  
stumbles into his bedroom.

The television on mute, his son lies  
curled in his wife's arms; their cloudless  
faces glowing deeply in the blue light.

He kicks his shoes off, clanks his heavy watch  
on the night stand. Steals a pillow from the closet,  
sleeps on the throw rug by the foot of the bed.

\*

Earlier, my father slapped my half-brother across  
his grinning face for eating with his *fucking mouth*  
*open*— for getting *goddamn sauce* on his chin.

He left the table, drove to a bar off the interstate  
and drank alone among strangers in a rubber booth;  
cracked his fat knuckles under the splintered table.

My father cannot stand to watch his own children eat—  
we use our index finger as a wall to fork rice  
up against, we don't finish chewing before swallowing.

\*

I wake up to go to the bathroom, the light from the hallway  
yellowing the crack under my door. I peek into my father's  
open doorway, spy his lumped shape darkening the floor.

Sleeping in my brother's room in my second family's house,  
I do not know whose dreams I am having; why I wake up fearful  
for the shoeless boy forced to sleep on the floor for playing in mud.

In the next room, a woman enters my father's dreams. Her back  
pressed against tree bark, she laces his tiny shoes. He wipes  
a tear from her sun-burnt cheeks as his father cracks a whip.

## Breaking the Cycle

Fetching a pail of wine for her sick mother,  
my grandmother heard a voice boom  
that she would marry a beastly man  
*con un lloro de un oso*  
with a cry like a bear.

They left Puerto Rico for America with two girls  
prettier than the violet's leaning  
against my great-grandmother's headstone.

My aunt acquired meningitis  
soon after they arrived,  
her fever swelled for months.  
They were sure she would die.

Forty-five years later, my grandparents  
still tolerate her mood swings  
like a silent prayer of thanks  
to a wild-eyed God.

Their eldest daughter, my mother,  
went to church every morning  
before high school to snuff  
out the night's terrors.  
She later married a brute.

My grandmother wept  
through Mass one morning  
when I was five, warned  
me hours later I would bear  
two beautiful girls to a man  
equally passionate for drink.

I pray my girls will pour  
libations on our graves,  
learn to giggle with the gods.

“Christina’s World”  
*-After Andrew Wyeth’s painting*

Christina leans into the square  
    wooden church wearing her long  
        pink dress. Her slim  
    hands form a vase  
beneath the solitary statue:  
    all night in the dark waiting  
        for the lips to bleed or eyes  
    to trickle or loins to fall.  
Christina sees pink pale hot  
    incense lazily drifting  
        up the noses of the women  
    at the well who casually  
disrobe and steal their men to  
    to the woods— but Christina’s home  
        is vast and brown and dry  
    without the sweaty rich green  
safety of the woods. Surrounded  
    by wooden blocks of inescapable  
        mortality Christina reclines  
    on the parched ground for hours  
1, 2, 3— of counting— 4, 5, 6  
    and finds herself drinking  
        from the damp sweet sick  
    green waste of a swamp.  
Cupping her flowered  
    hands to her mouth she vomits  
        small black marbles.  
As Christina awakes  
sudden from her swamp  
    she recognizes a small pearl  
        hidden in the moss of the hair  
    damp, sick on her face and reaches  
one pale arm back in terror.  
    Her elbow breaking in remembrance  
        of nauseous moisture caught  
    in the angled swirl of trance  
she bows to the horror  
    of brown continuous  
        1940s Indiana afternoon.

## Sweet Poison

Nicky Cruz, the born-again gangster,  
gets down on his knees  
and bellows the Lord's name  
in five rasping tongues.  
My stepmother dips  
my baby brother's pacifier  
into a zip-locked bag of sugar,  
stuffs it in his mouth  
to silence his wailing.  
Nicky tells the story  
of his father, a man possessed  
by demons, who named  
his four sons after himself.

Both my brothers share  
my father's name.  
I want to steal the baby  
from the dangerous red-haired woman  
digging a frosty pink nail  
into my hunched spine—  
let her save my father  
instead. I squeal  
from the pinched pain  
as Nicky summons the sinners  
to accept the Lord  
back into their lives.

Taking my tears for a sign,  
she beckons Nicky over.  
The congregation turns  
its communal head as he places  
a sweaty hand on my forehead  
and shouts *Sweet Jesus,*  
*this young girl is opening*  
*her heart to you today.*  
My brother spits out  
his sugary pacifier.  
I kick it down the aisle.  
We are openly sobbing now.

### Moment of Clarity

Waiting for the drugs to kick in, we climb  
up the wobbly fire escape. Drop newspapers  
on the blistering tar before sitting down.  
Read Pablo Neruda poems aloud:

three old women bathing on the seashore.  
The speaker anticipates the descent  
of seagulls, a moment of clarity  
before the fall. He has been drinking  
red wine all afternoon, left the cafe broke.

Across the street, an old woman drops  
her groceries on her porch steps. She curses  
in Italian, shoos away the cat circling  
her thick ankles. I imagine her on the beach,  
her umbrella collapsing in the wind.

The bathing old women remind the speaker  
of his mother's swollen ankles, the water  
trapped inside. A gull swoops down,  
delirious. We begin our unsteady descent.

### Dreaming of Marilyn, Monroe Street

Marilyn is hanging out the window  
of her thirteenth floor suite, a rose  
clenched between her teeth, beckoning  
my husband with a long, manicured finger.

He passes through the lobby, ascends  
the spiral staircase that I have littered  
with plastic dolls in my image.

Door number three is slick with steam.  
He turns the wet knob. Jumping on the bed,  
Marilyn shrugs off her towel; he reaches  
for the heart-shaped balloon she is clutching  
to her breasts. From the doorway I click  
my red heels together— the signal.

She pulls a pin from out of her hair  
and pops the balloon, showering  
him in red ants. He howls himself awake.



## Sex After Graceland

In a motel 50 miles north  
of Memphis, legs dangling over  
the side of a kidney-shaped pool,  
a couple watches the sun set.

They have been drinking straight whiskey  
all day, christening their 'Fat Elvis' shot glasses  
in their underwear. He walks over to the parking lot,  
digs through the trunk of their Buick.

Last night making love she pretended  
they were in the Pink Cadillac. Later, dreamt  
of the King disrobing her in the Jungle Room,  
taking her in the Monkey Chair, the Indoor Waterfall  
running.

She has not shared these pictures  
with her husband, nor does she plan to.

His shadow  
meets hers. Carrying a rolled-up newspaper, he sits

next to her, unfolds the paper and hands her a flower.  
Magenta, it blooms from a plastic stick. *I stole  
it for you yesterday, from the Memorial Garden.*  
She presses up against him, *Oh, baby*, asks him to help  
her stand up.

Back in their room, he pulls her dress  
over her head, unbuckles his belt. She takes a swig  
before lying down— imagines magenta sky.  
Her husband's eyes: two plastic stars.

#### IV.

## Collision

My father's cheek pulses  
as he jerks the rear bumper  
into the scabby knees  
of a toothless punk.

He kicked the hubcap  
as my father rolled  
our shiny Chrysler Lebaron  
through a third stop sign.

Last week, Bobby showed  
me his eraser burns  
while Sister Mary Agnes  
lectured about the Trinity.

Mother, with her shapely hips,  
is Eve. She packs apples  
in my lunch. I steal a knife  
from the art teacher's desk  
and share mine with Jimmy  
behind a tree shaking  
the chestnuts off its limbs.

At the moment of impact  
I focus on father's bared gums—  
I want to sink my teeth  
into Bobby's burns.

Reunion

*-my father's visit, Denver, 1998*

When the mountain goats approach  
your rented car in their sickly white coats,  
we do not feed them.

We understand this halted landscape  
where human touch  
is hazardous.

Perhaps we feel justified  
by their bald patches and splintered horns,  
their suicidal stumbles onto the road.

You want to quit drinking—  
buy an avocado farm  
in the Everglades.

I want a faraway place  
to keep me from stumbling sick  
onto the road.

I would plant you trees  
with roots tougher  
than alligator scales.

You would hang the fruit so high  
I would forget it is tender  
under its rind.

## In the Year of the Dead

I am five years into this life.  
Grandmother's apartment oozes

a yellow light. She is burning  
candles for the dead. She brings

a photograph to her lips:  
the policeman's eyes are green

and cat-like, his wife lovely.  
Hours ago, she received

a call from San Juan—  
Jorge was shot at his desk.

Grandmother will lose  
another brother that year.

\*

They find a suicide note  
in his wife's handwriting.

Icons and flowers overtake  
grandmother. She serves

me orange tree's leaves in tea,  
prays the rosary three times a day.

I finger the framed faces  
of the dead while she sleeps;

learn to brew leaves  
for the morning tea.

### The Birth Performance

The night before her second miscarriage, my aunt dreams she is sitting on her porch steps when a little girl hands her a violet. Weeks later, reading outside, she encounters an ad in a woman's magazine— a special offer on a limited-edition doll. The doll's blue velvet stirs something unnamed in her, raises the hair on her arms. She becomes aware of her wrists' pulsation, recognizes the face of the little girl.

The day the package arrives my aunt places the box in front of the football game my uncle watches, leaves the room. She returns with scissors and a knife, works at the box like a surgeon— cutting the tape precisely, taking care not to pierce the cardboard. My uncle turns off his game. She asks him to draw open the curtains as she pulls apart the flaps, splitting the box's rib cage in half. Unburying the doll from tissue and holding her to the light for my uncle to see— a bead of sweat trickles from my aunt's lip, glistens.

## Woman's Best Friend

1.

Seven-years-old, I was sick of people.  
A limping alley cat was my best friend

until one morning I found her dead  
on my doorstep. I poked her with a stick.

2.

My grandparents housed a stray  
in their boiler room. I was not allowed

to touch it. I slammed the door shut  
on its tail to hear it screech.

3.

My brother and I tortured  
my stepbrother's cat with pellet guns.

Within weeks it was suicidal. We heard  
the thud when it jumped off the refrigerator.

4.

After the backyard funeral  
I developed an allergy to cats.

Ten years later I adopt a hairless.  
I am teaching it to shave my legs.

## The Holiday Gloom

"I know when love goes// it slips through all insulation,/ forgets your name,/ becomes sky."  
-Stephen Dunn "In the House"

Three hours before you arrive  
I lie on my ash-covered floor  
while a friend rolls a joint  
at my desk. My body glowing  
in fluorescent light, I imagine  
I am the razor grazing your cheek  
as I stray, one last time,  
over the sunken lines of your face.

She plugs in the blue Christmas lights;  
we talk about the holiday gloom.  
Following the slow revolution  
of the record player you bought  
me one year ago, my head nods  
like the clown with the broken neck  
I am about to give you.

She leaves the room, my eyes fix  
on the wobbly blue ceiling.  
Outside it's snowing.

We don't kiss when we meet  
but hold hands, barely touching.

What I am thinking:  
I would like to roll myself into the cigarette  
we burned each other's wrists with  
the night before I left. Live  
in the white saran-wrapped layer of skin  
the hour before it blisters.  
Extinguish myself in the snow.  
White paper to white flesh to white flakes.

But we speak casually  
about the cold.

I do not tell you what is happening  
to the tattoo you designed;  
afraid you will notice the black ink  
my ankle is leaking  
on the flurried sidewalk.



I Offer my Doctor Blood Money for a Prescription

I snatch my pink pearl purse from the mirror table. Mother is mopping the bathroom floor, a busted radio plays the *Psycho* soundtrack.

I glimpse a woman with waist-length black hair choking a pigeon below the subway platform. She is the woman bleeding on the bearskin rug

in the dream where mother and I stage the suicide of Consuela and her lover. I get off at Seventh St. and jog the three blocks

to Dr. Cielo's office. Again, I am late. He is passed out on the couch for patients. Shut-eyed, he inquires what I am hiding

in my pretty pearl purse. I tell him I am sick. He wants to know why the handwriting on Consuela's suicide note matches mine.

I sink into his leather chair. I see mother bent over the cellar faucet, wringing sheets. It is useless to speak. He will never believe

it was ourselves we were trying to blot out.

### Buy Nothing Day

I am bored with the living and my excesses.  
I have lined my walls with blue recyclable bags  
full of clothes, flushed my watch, shredded  
all the receipts, cards, stubs, overdue bills.

A squirrel fell down my chimney.  
I fed it antidepressants. Built it a bed  
of torn love letters and bra padding.

I am unlocking doors, cracking windows  
praying for an ice-eyed kidnapper to steal  
me away from my little literary life.  
We will mate and make a home in the woods.

Our children will live and die their own lives.

## Getting Out

The summer I worked in Denver  
I spent my nights in the kitchen laboring  
over Sylvia Plath's surviving journals,  
looking for evidence. A single entry  
stood out: *Ted employs a rubber hose  
to gas an injured bird. Saint man.  
But, oh, the squawk of the stove jets.*  
After her suicide, Hughes burned  
the last notebook: *ash face, cast-iron poker,  
big Daddy.* For six sulfur months,  
she worked to mythologize him as vampire—  
*drainer of blood, squasher of nests.*

*Our lady of the eggshell nerves,*  
sealing herself in a London kitchen.

\*

The night before I left, I found him crouched  
in the closet reading my old journals.  
He held his left wrist up to my face,  
pulled a plastic comb from his pocket,  
and drew a slash straight across.  
I hurled a lamp at his head—  
dug my heels  
into bits of shattered bulb.

## The Pact

The lovers have shoved their bed  
into the sloped-ceiling walk-in closet.  
They have been planning this joint exodus  
for years— have wallpapered  
the closet with pictures of trees  
greener than the pine scraping  
outside the small square window.

Her spine curls into the cavity  
of his sunken chest. She feels worms  
slithering into the open slits of her wrists,  
gliding past her shoulders and up through her skull,  
nestling in the grey matter. His chin rests  
on the knob at the base of her neck.  
His arms reach around her concave belly—  
his blood trickles down her thighs,  
past her knees, puddling the mattress.

*She gently pulls drained veins  
out of his arms one-by-one;  
stripped cords hung to dry  
from the sagging clothesline  
in their backyard. He scoops  
dirt from her mouth, builds  
a small mound of earth  
for the worms exiting  
her slashed wrists  
to burrow in.*

A pine cone falls,  
scattering needles.

**V.**

## Enduring Current: A Possible Dream Sequence

### 1. The Descent

The instructions for dream  
are written in Sanskrit  
on the insides of your eyelids:

Look deep into the well,  
its mossy walls disturbed  
by shadows,  
all of them yours.  
Cast a bucket down.

### 2. Guardian Angel

You enter the flea-market reproduction  
hanging on the flowery wall  
behind your canopied bed.

The floating lady guards  
the boy and girl crossing  
the wobbly bridge;  
her long blue gown  
fluttering. You trail  
behind her. Blinded  
by a sudden spray of cold  
you clutch for rope—  
one bare foot slips  
between the boards.  
A tap on your shoulder—  
you turn and reach.  
No one there—  
but up ahead, a single crow  
lands on twine.

### 3. Christmas Encounter

Fearful of the dark wings circling  
your canopied ceiling, you sneak  
out of the room and peek  
at your mother half-tangled under covers  
in a black velvet dress as you shuffle  
past her open doorway. You tiptoe  
down creaking stairs; spot

the round back of your father's head  
reclined on the battered arm rest  
of the family-room couch.  
His left hand hangs limp  
above a bottle of Absolut;  
his right clutches the remote.  
A woman in red underwear pours  
a grey business suit a drink.  
He changes the channel  
upon your padded approach:  
*The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.*  
He stumbles to the kitchen  
for more ice; returns with a bucketful  
and a glass of milk. Sitting next to him  
on the coffee-stained couch, you try  
to watch the grinch's antics without blinking—  
he pours himself another drink—  
you whimper. He wraps  
you in his pinstriped pajama arms—  
you gulp for oxygen; your eyeballs  
glassy and wet as the sweaty bottle  
that has toppled over.  
The runoff puddles  
your mother's dark red carpet.

#### 4. A Warning

You are warning  
the man of your dreams  
seated in the large velvet chair  
by your bedside  
about the inevitability  
of disaster. He offers  
his usual scoff,  
ashes his cigarette  
on the carpet, sips  
his usual scotch.  
Whirling wings  
outside the window—  
you beg him to notice  
the slow downward spiral  
of the wasp  
beneath the lampshade,  
the plane crashing outside.  
He roughly grabs

your hands, weeps  
for the passengers  
on that slow-motion plane,  
its scissor wings  
heading towards the glass.  
He wrenches you  
from stiff sheets,  
teaches you how to run  
blindly from disaster.  
The familiar staircase sags  
beneath your weight.

On the street you watch  
the delicate ghost of the plane,  
a white moth, ascend  
into a midnight sun.  
The rising of your sleeping soul—  
the flapping, angelic snore.

#### 5. Christmas Confession

You lover shakes you awake;  
his icy fingers trail down your exposed back.  
You reach for your dress, notice  
the empty bottle blazing on the night stand.  
You slowly poke your head out of the black,  
feel the velvet graze down your cheeks.

You run out the door, slipping on the ice patches  
down the driveway to your mother's old, beat-up car.  
You turn the radio up full blast— the steering wheel  
vibrates— you cannot drown out the choking  
of your lover's sobs. You roll down the windows—  
flurries slapping against your cheeks from all sides—  
cannot undo what he has done. You fly  
past billboards of women in red lace,  
men smoking cigars.

#### 6. A Familiar Song

The scenes of Calvary run  
like a pornographic film.  
You are running up and down aisles  
chased by drugstore effigies;  
saints step down from their niches,



form a long procession line  
to the Emergency Exit.  
A blazing afternoon sun  
on the screen— Jesus is pool side  
sipping a martini, humming  
*My god, my god*  
*why have you forsaken me?*

#### 7. A Visitation

You wake up in a room crowded with actors  
swinging from trapezes, scarves loosely wrapped  
around their necks, defining delicate jaw lines.  
You try to tell yourself that all this glamour,  
all these private late-night parties, cocaine deserts,  
won't save anyone. The room swells  
with silence. The Star of the show floats  
into the center of the room in her long blue gown.  
Behind her the boy and girl from the bridge  
are dressed in drag.

They lift her satin train  
above the ash-covered carpet. She approaches  
you in the large burgundy chair you dozed  
off in, and you close your eyes—  
await her platinum forgiveness.

#### 8. A Reawakening

You return to the icy bridge  
and fall to your knees. Bracing  
yourself between two splintered boards,  
you carefully lower your body  
onto the frozen river. You know  
the gleaming silver object in the distance  
is an ice pick and what you must do with it.

A child faceless as a stone  
smoothed by years of enduring current  
looks at you from under the ice.

Your fever swelling, the river  
beneath your bare knees begins to thaw.  
The pick's fierce face glaring,  
you realize you must lie flat and naked  
on the ice to melt through.

\*

After your guardian angel lifts  
you out of cold water:  
notice the sexless, porcelain child  
at your side. Remove the icicles  
from her eyes, hold her tightly  
to your chest. Rub her forehead;  
weep because you cannot erase  
the faint claw marks.

## Poetry Reading List

- Anna Akhmatova *Selected Poems*
- Raphael Alberti *Concerning Angels*
- W. H. Auden *Selected Poems*
- Elizabeth Bishop *Geography III*
- Joseph Brodsky *Part of Speech*
- Joseph Brodsky *To Urania*
- Raymond Carver *Ultramarine*
- James Cummins *The Whole Truth*
- Mark Doty *Sweet Machine*
- Lynn Emanuel *Hotel Fiesta*
- Lynn Emanuel *The Dig*
- Lynn Emanuel *Then, Suddenly*
- Carolyn Forché *Gathering the Tribes*
- Carolyn Forché *The Country Between Us*
- Carolyn Forché *Angel of History*
- Louise Glück *Firstborn*
- Louise Glück *The House on Marshland*
- Louise Glück *Descending Figure*
- Louise Glück *The Triumph of Achilles*
- Louise Glück *The Wild Iris*
- Louise Glück *Ararat*
- Robert Hass *Sun Under Wood*
- Denis Johnson *Collected Poems*
- Julia Kasdorf *Eve's Striptease*
- Galway Kinnell *Imperfect Thirst*
- Yusef Komunyakaa *Magic City*
- Li-Young Lee *Rose*
- Li-Young Lee *The City in Which I Love You*
- Philip Levine *New and Selected Poems*
- Larry Levis *The Afterlife*
- Larry Levis *The Dollmaker's Ghost*
- Federico Garcia Lorca *Selected Verse*
- Audrey Lorde *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*
- Sharon Olds *Blood, Tin, Straw*
- Mary Oliver *House of Light*
- Fernando Pessoa *Selected Poems*
- Robert Pinsky *An Explanation of America*
- Sylvia Plath *Ariel*
- Anne Sexton *Selected Poems*

- Charles Simic *Walking the Black Cat*
- Gerald Stern *New and Selected Poems*
- Marina Tsvetaeva *Selected Poems*
- Alpay Ulka *Meteorology*