

Instructions for the Housewife

Emily M. Green

Table of Contents

one:

Opening Shift: Introductions	5
At the Canadian Medical Center in Prague	6
Mother's Fifty-first Birthday	7
How My Brother Learned the Days of the Week	8
All Debts Recalled	9
Turning 19 at Eat'n Park	11
Going Under	12
Lust	13
El Anochecer en Culebra	14
Tonight, I Wish We Had Made Love	15
Maternity	17
Christmas at Our Parents' House	18
Preparing Grandmother's House for Sale	19
The End of Lent	21

two:

Creation Myth	24
Mary Magdalene's Plea to Jesus	25
Mrs. Sprat Speaks on Gluttony	26
Janice; Wife of Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater	27
Thumbelina	29
Mary's Little Lamb	31
Cinderella wakes to cinders again.	32
Freshman Year	33
The Word	34
August	35
Verse is vs. Intent	36
Proof	37
It's like this:	38
8 Synonyms for Broken	39
You Go. I'll Stay. <i>OR</i> Two Poets Live Together	40
Flying Home from New York	41

three:

Instructions for the Housewife	44
Instructions for the Housewife, II	45
Appeal to the Housewife	46
The Housewife Waits	47
Inches	49
With the Help of Your Grace	51
Rolling Over	52
Body as Canvas	53
Sliding	55

Eight Glimpses of My Mother	56
Fad	58
After	59
Politics of Snow	60
Property Rights and Personal Magic	61
Consent	62
Relent	63
Romance Dialectic	65

one

Opening Shift: Introductions
~*Coffee Tree Roasters, Pittsburgh, PA*

My co-worker measures a half-pound
of Decaf Kenya. *Coffees are called
for where they're from*, she says.
We're both from Erie. She shows me
to grind beans, asks if I remember classmates.

I nod to names, empty water
from heavy urns. *Did you know
the boy who killed himself, Blair?*
Into an insulated thermos,
I pour half and half: white

Blair's nervous face when he bungled
our first kiss. I opened my mouth
to taste his tongue, cool against the inside
of my cheeks. *No.*

I give her my back, push the button to brew
this morning's dark flavor: Italian Roast.
Behind me, a wail
stings empty air.

I turn, to hold her, in admission
of my own loss. She raises her eyebrows
at the wax of grief on my face.
*Only the cider warmer. It cries
when you fill it.*

I fill a mug of coffee, swallow
so I taste only heat.

At the Canadian Medical Center in Prague

no one cries. A girl with fox-fur-red pigtails
lifts her dress to show bears on her panties.
Her brother crashes Hot Wheels into the wall,
makes wet explosions. Saliva spots his gray T-shirt.
No sign of emergency
as the receptionist offers the mother
forms. The women's voices peak
and ebb in French.

The doctor's skin is the color
of pumped breast milk—
ghost white with a lick of blue.
He leads me down a dirt path
to the examination room. A bed palled
with sterile, white paper
disrupts the gray body
of the room.

My breasts tuck
around the stethoscope
as the doctor listens for the crush
and uncrush of my heart muscle.
Last night, I found this clinic
in my student handbook:
inexpensive, staff fluent
in English. This morning, from the dorm,
two trams and a metro carried me here.

The doctor holds out the prescription,
explains the risks, tells me to expect
bleeding. He leaves without
holding the door for me.

The receptionist waits
for my credit card
to go through. She plumps her lips,
thickening the painful fuchsia.
The waiting area fills
with dense quiet.
The mother and her small,
breakable children
are gone.

Mother's Fifty-first Birthday

Twenty minutes before work
I call my mother to wish her
happy birthday. She's watching
Maury, "Why Can't I Stop Hitting
and Hurting My Children?"

I feel so bad, Mom says,
hearing the children and parents
talk. What I did to you kids—
I stop her. I called

to find out if she has plans,
if she's happy, exchange a quick
I love you. The breakfast dishes
wait on the table and my bus comes
in five minutes.

But worry eats the walls
of my stomach. She shouldn't
watch these talk shows
or read women's magazines.
If I had time, I'd say,
They're rotting your brain, Mom.

We are close
to disconnection.
I remember being four, shoved
into the kitchen corner.
The stove handle cut
through my favorite T-shirt.

Still, I tell her happy birthday,
I love her, I'll send a card
tomorrow. She says good-bye,
hangs up. I miss the bus

by half a block. The exhaust blows
into the faces of those still waiting.

How My Brother Learned the Days of the Week

His kindergarten teacher sent home
a letter—pink and blue flowers
bloomed beneath careful cursive:
“Toby does not know the days
of the week. We will be testing on Monday.”

A cotton sheet on a clothesline,
my older brother’s body shook
under tears and constant blows.
My father pounded each day into him.

Mother hauled me to bed, whispered
I should’ve taught him myself, as she pressed
my stuffed kitty to my arms.

Late that evening, when Toby could perfectly
recite, my father woke me for ice cream:
my brother’s reward and *Sorry*
for being so tough on you, pal.

In the morning, Toby snuck
into my room. He counted
the days by bruises
on his arms, and I repeated, learned
the length of a week.

All Debts Recalled

You're in the church back home,
waxing pews, prostrate. I sit low
to the ground in a gray cubicle
and answer phones, call debtors
for Creditron.

You take lunch break in the sacristy:
your children baptized under the tint
of a stained-glass replica of the fourth
Station of the Cross: Jesus meets
his holy mother. You don't eat,
but you want to drink the holy water,
to be blessed as the indignant babies
in the cold bath of safety. Every year,

you consecrate the Christmas tree
with a prayer from the Advent book.
Candles burn around the wreath, purple
for Hope, Peace, and Joy. Between Peace
and Joy, pink for Love. On Christmas morning
you replace nubs with tall white bayberries,
set the wreath in the sink, so the candles
won't scorch the dinner table
in their altruistic melt. You save
your ham and cheese for the ride home.

By the coffee pot, my boss hangs a sign:
All Debts Recalled Before Christmas.
Another month of overtime, my voice
shellacked with sweetness, I pray
they won't answer the sharp ring.
Dinner is the best time
to serve the reminder
of financial responsibility.

Sometimes I dial the number wrong,
say the name wrong. I hang up
before they can. Or a child answers
and I feel her grip the receiver
as if I held her body
in my sweaty palm. Sometimes
I am close to dialing your number,
but you work, too, and never answer
the phone during supper.

You clean the altar
like you washed my vagina
when I was your child: scrub the marble
till the shine bleeds. Somewhere inside
hides the relic of a saint.

Turning 19 at Eat'n Park

Beside the dumpster, Michele lights
a birthday blunt in my honor.
We're still in our uniforms, aprons heavy
with wet rags and quarters.

Weed passes
around slow, tired waitress to tired waitress.
In between hits, I smoke Newports.
Menthol buzzes on my tongue
and in my throat.

The air spits soft
droplets of rain on us.
Gemma hands off to me, I drag
at the blunt.

How sweet
to feel another year
in the distance between
my limbs, in the curl
of wet hair to my scalp,
in the whisper between huddled
female bodies.

D'vina suggests
Murray Avenue Grill,
where the bartenders won't card us.
Already, I can taste the bottom
of a pitcher of Yuengling: a little
bitter and the suds
something like melting.

Going Under

Mykal and I dash naked over dew cold grass.
We jump far into her pond. Splashes explode

like lamplight bursts on the water.
We float on merlot drunkenness, push

past each other and let out secrets,
each a firefly burnt out by morning.

She tells me her father ran with a woman
to the other side of the Mississippi.

In high school, she throbbed
for comfort, so she lay on the bottom

of the bathtub, feet on either side of the faucet,
concentrating on the lick of water. She imagined

the shower massager as some boy's tongue
strumming inside her thighs. The water ran her raw,

wanting someone to touch her.
I don't tell her that on those same nights

I was in the woods, my back on soft
pine needles and jeans down

for the throb of my boyfriend.
My ribs felt hollow with his heart

beating against them, and my legs ached
from keeping them spread. I spent tonight waiting

to tell Mykal that as my lover's face tightened,
and he ejaculated, I conjured her, weightless

on the surface of the pond. But now,
as the cicadas and crickets compete

for attention in the darkness, how small
a trinket my desire seems.

I swim to Mykal's wet body. The frogs' deep throats
cup her sobs and carry them under.

Lust

The last peach
at the bottom of the plastic bag
has grown ribs tight
against its skin, like a prepubescent
girl. But I desire its flesh,
and the bones splinter in a bite.
Shards stick in the cracks between teeth.
The marrow—richer than juice—
I lap from my hand down to my elbow.

Cross-shaped spikes of the pit martyr
my fingers. Shreds of tongue linger
with fruit in the warps of the seed.

The pause in the back of my throat,
where speech stops for anger, appeals
for the stone. Rings in my spine
separate, in order to suffer
it. Even my veins push
at the pockmarks on my skin to let it in.

If only my navel were the mouth
of a tube, made to guide
the harmful, then I could protect the softer
parts of me, the lips all too eager to bleed.

El Anochecer en Culebra
~for Kevin

Stars poke through sky
like needles
through construction paper.

Church bells clang cacophony—
each offers a sermon
seconds off from the next.

Bars punctuate crossed buildings.
We drink frozen beliefs,
glasses smoke against heat.

Each cold swallow
burns us heady with hope.

You peel my clothes
like sunburned skin. Love
waves between our bodies.

We soak each other,
unable to dry
on an island so small.

Tonight, I Wish We Had Made Love

I smoke a cigarette
out the window. You sleep,
grind your teeth
against the pillow.
The violence of the noise
shakes me.

We fought tonight.
We might fight tomorrow
and uncover a pawed-at secret,
with the careless rain
of who can hurt the most.
Maybe it will be the last
whimper of us.

You clench your jaw.
I want to go to you,
smooth the lines
from your tightened face;
but the open window
lets winter into my hands
and feet. That, or the aftertaste
of cigarette on my skin
would wake you.
Another argument—

who takes more.
Need has such great teeth
and such empty hands.
With your short, black curls
and your lips forming kisses
with every word you say,
you have surpassed
all my expectations.

Two years with you, and I think
I understand the word beloved.
The desire to give the best wine,
the best meal, the best sex.
Or maybe it's more like the ache
of being awake without you.

Sometimes I feel panicked,
unable to move closer

to your body, resolute
layers of skin stop me. I wish
that tonight, we had made love.
Even if I showered away
the latex smell, I'd remember
one specific kiss or your sweat
in my mouth or a hair caught
on my tongue. Something
I could take.

Maternity

If I could recreate my mother,
send her back
to the ambivalent womb,
I would choose, instead, my own
thin uterus for her precious
gestation:

to grow her hair heavy and dark,
thousands of bold-faced question marks
exclaiming her countenance.

Her eyes turn greener,
some of the brown speckles
picked out. Her skin gives
up her careless freckles. She
tans and swells her breasts

in time to satisfy the bodice
of her Confirmation
gown. She does not forgive
the Psalms their adoration, nor
the nuns their precise hemming
of her self-approval. *Oh no, mother,*
I say, *you must not*
let them expose the whites
of your ankles. I collect
refrigerator magnets to hang
her love letters, used maxi pads,
and outgrown blouses.

I name her whatever
she wants, no matter how antiquated
or foreign. She's allowed two sips
of bitters a night and one shot
of absinthe a month. I buy
her expensive records and replace the needle
on the player weekly, feed her corn dogs
and bowls of dark chocolate frosting,
bring her to the monkey house
and the arcade, anything

I would do anything
to bear her newly born
body in my crooked arms.

Christmas at Our Parents' House
~to my brother

Once, I knew all of your belongings
by heart: every baseball card,
Matchbox car, and button-down shirt.
Today, in front of the tree
weighed down by decades of ornaments,
you have whole facial expressions
I don't recognize.

Your wife separates the wrappings
from presents, puts pants
back in their boxes
when you hold them up
for size. She does not wait
for smile or surprise as we tear paper.

Tonight, you will sleep
at her parents' house. When we
lived here, you woke me,
moaning in your sleep, the sound
of a widowed animal.

Now, when you cry out,
does she roll you over or shake you?
Or does she move closer, press
her quiet skin to the pulse
of your dreaming body?
Or maybe you sleep quietly
in your house of unnamed color.

Preparing Grandmother's House for Sale

Every room engorged
with black garbage bags.
And now the basement,
stinking of mildew. I open
a trunk. Pieces of leather
stick to my palm.

Inside, dead hats. Her family Bible.
The last dates listed: her birth
and marriage. Someone's careful cursive
faded and smeared. Beneath
the Bible, her wedding dress.

In the photographs, her train engulfs
her and grandfather, limiting
the whole world to the moment
of her smile and matching pearl necklace.
They are the only pictures

in which she is beautiful.
But the silk deteriorated
for fifty years, now brittle
and jaundiced. Beads loosened
from a string hesitate
to fall, like drops of water
on the lip of a spigot.

I wanted to wear her dress,
give her the marriage
she'd hoped for. More things
I can't keep. At the bottom
of the trunk, I find a tangle of afghan,
crochet hook still mixed-up
in a raveling row. Just big enough
to cover my hand.

She might have begun
it before she married,
and brought it to this house,
meaning to finish.
The coarse yarn scratches
my hand.

I put everything back

into the trunk.
She is somewhere else.
None of this
will tell me where.

The End of Lent
~hymn by Sydney Carter

1. Good Friday

*I danced on a Friday when the sky went black;
it's hard to dance with the devil on your back.*

Someone watched Blair's body dance
from the rope, the disconnection of his neck.
Someone pumped the fluid out of him, filled
the cavern with chemicals. Someone fitted
prom tux to him, pried his eyelids.

At noon, I cross the funeral home
to the casket. It overflows with blue ruffles
like a bassinet. No one absorbs
the shake of my tears. I touch

Blair's lips—dried since our last
kiss. Five years since I clung
to him like seaweed to driftwood,
since I pirouetted from him
to another boy.

2. Holy Saturday

*I danced on the Sabbath and I cured
the lame; the holy people said it was a shame.*

John doesn't kiss me until I ask,
I don't fuck him until he offers.
The funeral fresh on my skin, I slide
under him as easily as unwrapping a condom.

His eyes blue, broken veins. His limbs
hang over me—I am his childhood bed.
He thrusts to a rhythm I can only brace against.

My body folds as he bends
to kiss me. His tongue stings
my chapped lips. I need to feel—
the scrape of hair on my face, sweat
lathered to my breasts.

3. Easter Sunday

*I danced in the morning when the world begun;
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun.*

I wake to the pipes frozen with water
expanded to ice. Out my window
the sun sparks on snow like glass shards.
If I stepped out in my bare feet
I would cut myself.

There is still time for me. Time before
Mass to fry eggs and potatoes, eat them
thick with ketchup. Time to scrape
my toothbrush in my mouth, to spread
warm vanilla chapstick over my lips.
Still time to remember my first

kiss—Blair, in a corner of the church rec room,
his mouth tight to braces, his loose embrace left
my back private from his touch. Even under mittens
and hat, I know the way to church will shudder me.

4. Easter Monday

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;
and I'll lead you all in the dance, said He.*

Yesterday's snow melted, gray
slush splatters under my running
shoes. My forehead pricks warm
with sweat as I pound down

the sidewalk. Silver bracelet glints
from my wrist, rotates
around my arm to the rhythm
of my stride. I pass

Blair's stone house,
his unlit bedroom; his cat waits
in the window, ears down.
Its head follows my form.

two

Creation Myth

In the end, the animals caught
a disease from sun-
light, something that made the mammals' fur
brittle and their minds sticky
as two-sided tape. They wrecked
cities in rabid fights. The scales
of a single pet alligator razed
eight copies of the same house
on a suburban street
in a ripple of moments.
Women could not hide
their children. Little ones
escaped from basements
and out cellar doors.
They tried to push
drowning birds
back into the sky.
A couple of looting porpoises flipped
into a bank vault and oiled
hundred dollar bills with their skin.
The men called the apes Jesus, or whatever
the appropriate translation. The sun exiled
earth, as it had done to the dead lover, Mars.
The moon, disturbed by the sun's callousness, pulled
on mourning clothes.

Then everyone died, even the rocks.

Mary Magdalene's Plea to Jesus

I do not get the test of three crows of the cock—
rocks and accusations are always plentiful, always in hand.
You are no golden calf, poured to the shape
of a freely cast mold. You carry your mother

in the stuffed folds of your wallet. You paint
her name in scriptures, on billboards. Remember
the virgin as you short sheet the bed of the adulteress,
as your slap her breast and bite her cheek. But pleasure

pays for itself, and you listen. I speak
for my bloody stone clitoris. Let me grind
upon you, let me make bread of your erection.
My yowl, a beast in a cave, let it echo

to all those who carry stones. You teach
men to watch and not want, to love
the dehydrated camel, unable to spit or moan.
You teach women to fold their bodies, to dent and creak

under the vow of marriage. Let me take their skin
and make it cream. Pleasure pays for itself, and lovers take
turns on their knees. Let them stand in their flame retardant robes,
but do not let them know what it is to burn a martyr—

let them stone each other, let them take
the body in handfuls of loose sand,
let them lose their teeth in bingeing, and wake
to empty cupboards—pleasure pays for itself.

Let me weave the thorns from your body.
I will suck the poison from your sacred
heart. I will rend your tunic to allow me in.
My swollen lips will be your covenant.

Mrs. Sprat Speaks on Gluttony
*~Jack Sprat could eat no fat,
And his wife could eat no lean*

Weight is grace: the swell
of buttocks, tide of stomach
ebbs and rises with breath,
the heft of buttery breasts
as a woman stands. My arms
outsize some women's thighs.

Fat on the lips
makes them glisten. Gold
should taste so rich.

The tines of a fork sound
hideous against plate. Better
to eat with fingers,
lick them clean.

My husband can't get enough
of me. He's thin as the stem
of a wine glass, but gluttony
buds in his throat.

I've butchered many cows and pigs.
I know under those skins:
first fat, then meat—trim
the riches for the feast.

My husband glistens
with sweat for my body.
The thin on the fat,
sparse on the thick. Feed
and eat. Feed and eat.
Skin is only the beginning.

Janice; Wife of Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater

Peter's hollow erection stands stiff,
a melting candle, the pink wax
coming to nothing and the twisted, black wick

easily blown out. Janice wanted the heat.
She had grown breasts with wide aureoles
and strong brown nipples for it. She had married

to the depths of a hungry farmer for the burn
against her tonsils. Peter makes her dig in manure
to plant pumpkin seeds, the tough orange husks

he craves. He does not curl his fingers
under the silk and lace panties Janice saved
for her trousseau, he does not cool her flush

with the cave of his mouth. Instead, he muddies himself
in the fields, petting the new calf and fondling
the velvet undersides of young pumpkin leaves.

Janice wears silk gloves and a hat with a bent
peacock feather when she drags her slippers over street corners.
She lets men open the doors of their pick-up

trucks for her, she lets them press
the back of her red head as she sucks
at them. She lets them split

her open in alleys and carve
at her insides in by-the-hour pseudonym motels.
At dinner, she tastes them in the sides

of her mouth, as she feeds Peter roast
pumpkin seeds with her rouge noir
painted fingernails. But one night,

Peter does not smell squash in his bed, but man
and woman. He hollows out his County Fair prize pumpkin
and pushes Janice over the moist lip. She falls,

with a squish, to its floor. He places the lid, with its shriveled
phallus, high above her head. All night, Janice scratches eyes
in the side of the shell. She loses the bones of her fingers

to its not so willing flesh. At daybreak, she pounds
her fists through the two shallow spots. Through them,
Janice watches the cocky ring of the sun rise.

She smells the pulp on her fingers. This is how Peter
sees the sticky, stringy world everyday.

Thumbelina

A woman so small, she could get lost
in the lush flesh forest of another woman's vagina.
A woman so fragile, a handshake could break
her spinal cord, make it helpless as the veins
in a fallen leaf. Her brain no bigger
than a worm's gullet, it mulled the sand
of her thoughts to tiny bits.

Her family lost her in the folds
of a picnic blanket, forgotten by the lake.
She followed an ant home, wanted to make love
to his black thorax, but she couldn't fit
in the hole in his hill. Maybe

she could have thought something of how
we are too big for our smallest desires,
but she twisted her Tinker Bell foot
trying to shimmy down; and there wasn't anyone
to carry her away. She got lost

in the teeth of the crab grass, her ankle
swollen to the size of a pumpkin seed.
She fell asleep, tucked into a dandelion head,
and dreamed of the butter dish at home, her palms
full of greasy yellow, her lips thick with cream.

She woke strapped to a frog's back
by a woman's hair, maybe her mother's.
It was red enough and dark enough, strong
as manure in a freshly fertilized field.
I am a prince, he told her, but when he pushed
his long frog tongue into her dainty mouth,
her cheeks bled.

He fed her moth wings
and gave her the eyes of bees to fracture
the sun. He brought fish scales to decorate
his muddy hovel. One day he ate
a brown spider, and his eyes turned
blue with pain. The frog writhed and spasmed.

Thumbelina, fat on married life, shuffled
away with the slow speed of a first kiss.
She would have said a prayer, but she

had always been too small for such books.
To the cross-eyed frog husband dying, Thumbelina
seemed to only be a ripe acorn, ready to sprout
into the deep earth.

Mary's Little Lamb

*~Mary had a little lamb, whose fleece was white
as snow. And everywhere that Mary went,
the lamb was sure to go.*

At first, I loved him because of his white skin.
It looked so clean.

As a child, other children called me yellow.
Grandmother said, we Chinese value pale skin.
My little lamb, he was valuable also
in his love odes to my breasts and thighs.

Companions walk beside.
The sinister follows.

He loved me because he found the angle
of my eyelids to be exotic. He wanted
me to be sideways.

How many nights did he and I ride
on the vapor of novelty?
How many cold cereal breakfasts
we kept each other warm, burning
fascination of the other's skin?

How does one say *we broke up*?
I told him quieter than sheets
settle after sex.

Some men want loud
no's, they must hear the break
and crack.

Now, he leaves daisies on my doorstep
his breath on my answering machine
half-eaten chocolate bars on my computer at work.
With colored chalk, he writes Mandarin on my sidewalk.

On the street, he will get close enough to whisper:
but it doesn't matter that I'm white.
But I see his lips form: *yellow, yellow, yellow.*

Cinderella wakes to cinders again.
*~A dream is a wish your heart makes
when you're fast asleep.
~from Disney's Cinderella*

What does the heart wish for?
Not this slow, awkward sleep.
As a child, I loved the dark,
the quiet that came with the last

embers and left soot
on my face. When I woke,
I had nothing but grief
for a pillow. But then

tragedy struck, arbitrary,
like a drunk driver.
A man can take a girl
dressed in ashes, her beauty

a rainbow smiling through.
He can bruise her pelvis,
like the kiss the hook gives
a fish. Then the nights taste

like burning. I keep on believing
in the raw dream of that man
chafing against my thighs.
During the day, I have faith

in my Prince. The sun
has no heartache. But the effort
to wake from the bruise
of sleep stings like broken blisters

after dancing all night
in hot glass slippers.
I would trade a whole year
of balls and gowns

just to bundle my heart
in a white-cotton sheet
for one night
and fall fast asleep.

Freshman Year

~1994-1995 General McLane High School

I begin the year with Doug, who I meet at the mall—he wins me a stuffed Fred Flintstone at the arcade. I dump him when he says he loves me. Then I have a crush on Sean Hammer—I nearly swoon when he shows me the top of his boxers—I swear, I saw that plaid waistband, and the whole world went white and blank with desire. But Sean

dates Kristi Wilkins, and I date Brian Crew. I let him French kiss me on the band bus. His tongue floundered big and wet in my mouth. I think, if this is kissing, count me out—like the first time I have sex, and I'm just lying under the guy as he pump-pump-pumps—but that's not until four years later. I dump Brian after we kiss

and he asks Kristi to homecoming. Kristi Wilkins again, who was my best friend in first grade. She peed herself and refused to go to the nurse's office because she didn't want to change out of her Girl Scout uniform. For homecoming, I wear a strapless purple velvet dress.

The bodice curves sequins into my cleavage, little wings that cover my breasts that won't grow past an A-cup. At homecoming, I meet Doug's older brother, Greg and his face is so beautiful, I dream about him and every time I see him I can't move because he's sexier than I remember and I wonder what it would be like to let him touch my breasts. We break up because my parents won't let me get phone calls from boys and he's tired of waiting for me to call.

Cross country season ends, and the boys take the District X championship, but the girls don't win anything. Then I get a lead in the school play and all the upperclassmen hate me and suddenly I'm in love with Matt Lovett, who plays Puck and looks like Jim Carey, but he's dating Jessica Gardener, who's bitchy to him in the halls, and all the freshmen girls hate her.

My friend Sarah Zboyovski has sex, Brian moves away, and my friend Amy is diagnosed as bipolar, but she doesn't believe it and never goes on medication. I get my hip-length hair cut in a short bob and my mom cries. She keeps some hair and saves it in a plastic bag. I run on the varsity track team for long distance. I miss going to the state meet by one place. It breaks my heart.

The Word

Today, I learned to read poems slow,
just as one learns to slow the disparate
humping of bodies toward climax.

Today I also learned to be humble. I must never
defend a poem that has torn from clarity,
that floats on an orange and white bobber
and loses the transparent fishing line in the rocks.

The slow poem finally produces a core
and bitter, brown seeds. The stem
might fall off. Or I might twist it off.

There are as many todays
as there are defenseless poems.
I am not so humble. I want

lust for me to be inconsolable.
I want the after taste of coming
to be unforgivable. Today I learned

poetry and lust are irreconcilable. Immiscible.
They separate like skin and blood
from a child's wounded knee. Don't
forgive this poem. Don't slow down.

Every word. Coitus.

August

This is the month of the five-finger discount.
If it is green, the plants' roots were stolen
from the Civil Rights campaign
of a small town in New Jersey. If it is draught,

the brown of the grass
is stolen from candy bars melting
in the president's fist.
Even the sun steals sweat from a counterfeit

dealer in shade. Long past tax returns,
the wealthy steal the drip of hours
from the poor. Lakes steal sand from the shore.
The pale pilfer tan from bottles.

Only the pricker bushes go uninvolved,
as they push forth blackberries
and raspberries, the sweet and protected.

Verse is vs. Intent

Maybe every poem is inevitably about Sex.
Gender. Death. The parent. Maybe not
asparagus. But that's a nice green
word to chew on. A nice cud
to rediscover.

Let's talk about theme: the moral
of the story which post-modernism
turned to central idea. We've moved so far
down the street from right and wrong,
sometimes stealing from the corner store
involves no conscience.

And the poem can con anyone
who hasn't tried on the latest verse.
How well woven and clean from the designers
to factory this new season appears. The texture
rubs the inner thighs nothing like the old tweed.

The language we now digest: rhyme *diphthong*
with *Kool-Aid* or pass the *cream* and the *zeugma*.
Whatever you mean by that. What could be meaner
on a child's tongue? In an old dog's mouth?

Here we've come to process, revision, rev
the engine, tune it and listen. You hear anything?
Half the gears are missing. Looks pretty
in reverse, but these empty taillights
suggest rear-end collision.

But you can't hit anything if someone stapled
the word to the page. Beautiful stasis,
the fists of the typewriter kissing white
and kissing white. How the computer
spits its hum in the air. Please, don't bend
to this poem, then tell it no.
Don't end this poem with nowhere to go.

Proof

Think of a word

Example: rooftop

Now double it

rooftop $\times 2 =$ cityscape

Square it

(cityscape)² = horizon

Subtract 4

horizon $- 4 =$ vanishing point

Divide by -1

vanishing point $\div -1 =$ foreground

I forget the rest, but it's a wonderful trick—in the end, Kafka is always at the other side of the equation, with a footnote about the unerring humor of *The Trial*.

If you don't believe me, consider meta-fiction and language poetry—both equally as painful. Or the flatness of a baseball diamond as a pop fly reaches its apex. Or even the theories that untangle the DNA that codes sexual preference.

More proof? The angles of a square are all 90° (Uniform couples kissing at a high school party. Two L's in a 69). Or, a circle is made up of all points equidistant to the radius from the center (An underwater fault and the resulting tsunami. The hot girl at the prom). Regardless, it starts with a definition, like the stump of a lizard blooming to a tail.

But this is one of those things that moves forward, like the action of a good short story ("A Good Man is Hard to Find"). It's driven by desire. Shaped by creative bent. Fixed together with pipe cleaners and copied by Plaster of Paris. (The model the art teacher holds up for your eight-year-old to emulate).

This must be conceptual (Duchamp's fountain). Procedure is as important as product. The method is inherently complicated, or I wouldn't have forgotten it. It's got vectors and a good metaphor: literal and symbolic (Whitman's noiseless, patient spider). I know it needed a color wheel.

It is reverse-Kafka, based on a subjective process with an objective solution.

QED

P.S. You won't end up on the roof.

It's like this:

There's nothing under a tombstone
but a body. There's nothing on top
but the world.

You can't decide, so you become a switch
hitter in a death mask, handing out jewelry
made from locks of your hair. Wherever you go,

the cat won't come with you. She's sensible
enough to fear sky, fire, and water.
That's why you named her Titania

and set her out to watch for the Reaper—
he's the kind of guy who wears
a hat with two beer cans and only one straw,

who watches the game and argues
the score. *Who's on top*,
he asks you, but you weren't paying attention

or don't know what passes for winning.
You're used to small apartments with stiff beds;
teenagers sneaking around trying to get a piece

when all you want to do is rest.
Your immaculate cat gets along better
with the Landlord than you do,

because you've always liked dirt
and hated cleaning under your nails.
You could stay clean

if you sat still while the grass grew,
but the plot only gets shorter
every year, and it won't be long

before the anti-climax:
an eviction notice
in messy doctor-scrrawl.

8 Synonyms for Broken

1. A mermaid's hair is half fluid in the cold dawn air. She picks crabgrass from the brittle scales on her tail.
2. Ants tear apart an orange vinyl booth. They heave away pieces larger than their backs.
3. A skeleton chips enamel from its anklebone into a laundry basket of folded whites. At the bottom, the linens shudder.
4. The trumpet full of gin uses its spit valve for lyrical criticism.
5. A dog marionette picks its nose, wipes the booger on a puppeteer when he's not looking. The puppeteer cuts his strings, tries to teach him sign language.
6. Light switch without a cover strips wires with the joy of on and off. The cover was off-white. It did not like the manner it was screwed, or all the stripping behind its back.
7. June bugs in red wet paint magic leave waltz trails on the concrete. To their left, Bumblebees carry off June bugs' antenna, abdomens, and thoraxes. June bugs make dandy bricks for pompous Bee condos.
8. You will never have an-all-the-seeds-blown-off-the-dandelion-heads-up-penny-lady-bug-on-the-shoulder-oven-hot-cherry-pie-station-wagon-kind of life. *See: fixed OR impervious*

You Go. I'll Stay. *OR* Two Poets Live Together

You sweep. I write. Tomorrow
we'll trade. On our desktop,
we have HIS and HERS Microsoft Word
folders. I double click on mine.
I sweep. You write. The dustpan
becomes too loose to fix
to the broom handle.
Tomorrow is Friday. We'll lose
the weekend to a case of Heineken.
I write. You revise. My middle-aged
mother had more fun,
locked in her bedroom with Agatha
Christie and a bag of Doritos.
You wash. I dry. We cook
everything with leftovers. *Have
you seen my Neruda?
Check in the solitude.
And my Dickinson?
Not in a fortnight.*
I sleep. You write. You wake
me at 3 A.M. In my dream,
I have just begun
the process of tonguing a girl.
*Listen, you say,
I changed one word
in the third stanza. Now
it's perfect.*
You watch baseball. I write. The TV
speaks louder than vodka. A blank
computer screen is the same
to a blank mind as a blank piece
of paper. But the screen buzzes.
You write. I revise.
This is not a poem about my mother.
This is not a paperback mystery.
You go, send out another stack
of poems. I'll stay. Maybe finish
this. Maybe finish a bag of Doritos.

Flying Home from New York

Leaving the city, everything
seems small—water
beside La Guardia curls
onto the runway, gray icing
on gray cake. A stray tree
molds white with snow.
At take off, the streets diminish
to a sooty grid.

My stomach slides into place,
but nothing feels level.
It's the same vertigo
as first grade, teacher pulled
the U.S. map down the blackboard.
She pointed to Pennsylvania,
fingered our jagged peninsula
intruding into Lake Erie.
My desk slid off the map.
Bowing lines of longitude
and latitude drew
nothing I knew of home.

The woman in the seat
next to me asks where I'm from.
She carries Minnie Mouse
as Lady Liberty for her daughter.

In Europe, I said home
was New York City.
Anywhere outside
the United States
of America, the whole country
could be NYC.
To my neighbor unfolding
her lunch tray for pretzels
and pop, all of France
might bear the name of Paris.

But home—that's more
specific than the uterus,
more confined
than that old amniotic sac.
I've never found
it on my flight itinerary.

I want to ask
every cloud
out this plastic,
double-paned window
if it's ever covered my home.
From the sink
in my gut, I know I'm close
to landing.

three

Instructions for the Housewife

Don't answer your empty house.
Let it cry its heat. Let it spill
black paint into the night.

Drive to Pennsylvania,
where leaves gasp
fierce yellows and reds

from trees' strangulation.
Don't wait: the pressure
will force your hands and feet

to sleep. Shake out your extremities,
welcome back blood.
In your navy handbag,

the one without logos,
Put all breakable thing inside.
Your husband last. He must be loud

with emptiness. Follow
the streetlamps back
to their tributaries. I live

on a boulevard next
to brotherly love. My house
has blue shutters and a Virgin

in the yard. Ring twice.
Knock once. Throw
your purse to the bushes.

I'll answer at any hour.

Instructions for the Housewife, II

Buy yourself underwear,
every print and pattern
you reach out to fondle.

Look at your thighs,
those scoops of melting
ice cream.

Put on fishnets.
Covet
your crotch.

Fold and unfold
your legs. Memorize
the strain and relax
of every muscle.

Grow impatient
to touch yourself.

Abandon your clothes,
your rings.

Sink your fingers
into your tight,
expecting vagina.

Sing the sweet dream,
the wet dream, the shake
of orgasm in hand.

Appeal to the Housewife

Girl, I never loved a man
as I love the inch
between your breasts.

Kills me how your scent
falls in your cleavage. List
the extracts in your perfume
so I can drink me a cup of you.

To touch your arm
would be to discover piety.
I'd scream like the child Jesus
being born.

I imagine you sleep
on your side. I bet
you drool on the pillowcase.
Let me in your bed, I'll stay

up all night wiping the corner
of your lip. I'd make you
a bed of endless purple,
darker than any man
can bleed.

But every night
is another turn
in the man/woman
man/woman two-seat ride.

Girl, you got a house full
of Ferris wheel nights
and baby days. Gimme
an inch, gimme a cup,
saliva, a taste of your lip.

I got nothing
but a grave full
of purple nights.

The Housewife Waits

Across the hall, your daughter offers
her body to sleep. She turns her back
to the curtains and the wind.

At the bottom of the stairs, her house
of Legos waits. Without a door,
the house resembles a bomb shelter. No one

leaves. Your screen door hangs
off its hinges, broken by your husband.
He exploded from your life just last week,

as his blonde bombshell sparked in the car.
He liked to make love
to REM, "Everybody Hurts."

You turned the music down
afraid it would wake
your daughter, sweating

in her blue sheets.
This afternoon, you weeded,
and she sang to you, *Rabbits*

love the garden. The bunnies left
with their bellies full
You wondered why

all songs celebrate loss.
You planted mostly squash
and cucumbers. Your husband

wouldn't go near them. The rabbits
work noiselessly to take them away.
Your husband left loud

as a raccoon tipping a garbage can.
You remember his greedy paws cupping
your buttocks, your breast.

Your daughter slept through
the noise. She wants to give him
the house. She built the roof

with several layers, yellow and red
blocks come to a point. You wait
for the gentle cacophony of her snore

to build the walls of sleep. In your bed
you ache, as one hung upside down.
All that blood rushing

pulls hard from the feet. Somewhere
in the neighborhood, a woman yells.
The current of her voice

lilts almost like song. Somewhere,
the rabbits gorge on summer's end.
Somewhere, your husband—

Inches

1

Long after snow
hushes the city,
I leave my lover's bed
to hide in the bathroom
with my vibrator
and imagine your fingers.

2

Your boyfriend reaches
into your pocket,
pulls out a stick of gum.
The hand in your flared pants
flushes me wet.
The sun glitters snow.

3

Are you
close enough
to smell smoke
on my breath?

4

Your elbows
have no creases.
I would bend them for you,
lick chocolate pudding
off the sleek hills.

5

In a vermilion dress,
you descend the perfect curve
of a staircase. The velour
whispers compliments
to your thighs. Your hips
weep to be held.

6

reverse of knees
 dimple between back and ass
bow in top lip
 bottom eyelashes
moist hairs inside labia
 inch between breasts

arches of feet

7

How can there be
so many miles between
two women
in the same city?

8

I wake, inches
before the clock radio sounds.
No sound I can make
could reach you
to pierce your sleep,
open your eyes.

With the Help of Your Grace

The penitent wakes early for confession, her sundress bares shoulders, still lined from press of bed sheets.

In the diner, a waiter wipes ring of coffee from Formica tabletop: stain of last night on his clean rag.

Flower sellers on Craig Street expose buckets of dyed carnations, plagued with desire to wilt.

Museum fountain reflects file of children, hands clutch lunch bags, drawn thin by pull of water.

To lie with a woman, the priest tells her, is to deny your sexual nature. He petitions her for a good Act of Contrition.

The penitent trails the priest's gray hand as he splits air; neither sign of the cross nor absolution touch her.

From the window of a grinning blue Neon, the butt of a Marlboro Red vaults into the bus shelter.

Hi-Level Bridge crosses waterfront under yawn of sun, its hot breath blinks out street lamps like unspoken thoughts (I love her).

Behind protection of a dumpster, the waiter burns a blunt between his lips. Smoke curls tears from his eyes.

The priest spreads his arms—kneelers hit pew with the click of wood on wood.

The penitent rises, mouth still soft with the host and memory of a woman's tongue.

Rolling Over

Sea returns to sea

and sky to sky.

~Patti Smith

Wind rolls snow

from the top of drifts.

Coming at the face

broken flakes sting

sharp as sand.

Tomorrow, rock salt

and cars will turn

the white to slush.

The wind will have only

itself to throw

in my eyes.

Body as Canvas

In Spanish class, I gave
a presentation on Frida Kahlo—
multitudes of canvas
with her single eyebrow,
forced mustache.

My professor suggested
the artist only had herself
as model for feminist.

Without a fecund uterus,
Frida must have wondered
what was a woman. She tended
her pets, painted umbilical cords,
wore the most elaborate dress.
Diego had it easy—he believed
in man and phallus, fucked his way
to masculinity.

I tried to make my body
a canvas, had a moon and star
tattooed to my left breast,
a paw print on my right thigh.
Each one hidden, a transgression

to show off by lifting my skirt,
lowering the cup of my bra.
I got high off the needle,
then the colors and scars.

But I couldn't forget
the terms of my body.
In the infrared light
of memory handprints,
skin cells, and semen
of the rapist glow.

Maybe Frida knew
aesthetics can work around
meaning. She twisted up her hair,
pinned in flowers, surrounded
herself with vivid colors—
even after Diego left.

If she could paint herself
into beauty, that might give her
the power to be a woman.

Even on the mornings I prepare myself
most carefully, as I rub on
melon scented lotion to smooth my skin, pull
lace underclothing over my tattoos,
zip up my lush dress, then powder, line,
and glitter my face; even then I must
look into the compact for validation.

I want to tell Frida
that maybe it's about authority:
to stretch, paint, mount
your countenance and force
the canvas into the world.

Sliding

You and I ride the city bus, the start and stop
pulls and throws us, a row of sausages
tied to the ceiling. There is a crazy lady,
the swelling of her thighs and upper arms
floods the seat. *The Monkeys*, she says

to the girl with a pony tail and cell phone,
are a reincarnation of the holy family.
No one asks her how 3 came back as 4.
There is a smell on the bus of air conditioning
and wet sidewalk. Outside,

raindrops slip on the pavement. I lean forward
to bite your navy blue T-shirt. This close
to you, my hands catch desire as seeds of a wet
dandelion. I reach for your cock with my right,
clutch the metal with my left, my knees sear

with resolve to stay up, to not fall into you.
Mickey, the old lady heckles, *had the biggest*
wank of them all. The bus skids, a child
in worn sneakers. The girl croons
over the lady. I double over you,

all my joints bend over your stiffness.
The bus starts, and we are all in our places,
not quite. I wait for you to reach for me, to right
what has unsteadied.
You are unmoved.

Eight Glimpses of My Mother

1.

I don't remember if she kisses
dryly. She backs away
quick and her lips smack
after she's left my face.

2.

As a baby,
I bit my father
when he tried to take me
from her.

3.

She sewed me into dresses
and baked sugar cookies,
coloring the frosting to match
my eyes. She dusted the house
with the smell of her rose-scented
body powder. She never learned
to drive. She copied casseroles
from magazines. She became pregnant
with my little brother and played
sitar records to her aching stomach.

4.

My parents met
at Gannon University.
Their first date
was the 8 Ball Dance.
She wore
a black and white shift dress
made on her Singer.
He picked her up an hour late.

5.

After each shower,
she dusted her body.
Sometimes the powder
fell on clean towels,
and I smelled her all day.

6.

When my father
pushed me into the door,

she stood still. Blood
moved faster than her kiss.

7.

Keep on keepin' on,
she writes in a letter.
She guesses at my size,
sends homemade fleece skirts
with slits in the back.
Envelopes lumpy with news clippings,
baby pictures of me,
and the tangle of her black cursive
clog my mailbox.
I want to give her
my phone number,
but handwriting is safer.

8.

I dream her sitting
at a red picnic table.
She wears her countenance
from twenty years ago,
round with the fineness of youth.
She has on brown corduroys
and a green T-shirt. She angles
her crochet hook into a skein
of multicolored yarn,
finding its way in and out
of the rainbow. An afghan
flows from the other end of the hook.
She leans into her work,
and an oak leaf falls
into her chestnut hair.
She doesn't notice.

Fad

We stole bits of yarn
from our mothers' skeins
to braid into friendship bracelets.
We lined our arms
with these covenants
walked around school
in haphazard sleeves
knowing which stripe
on each arm was ours.
We traded strolls
around the blacktop at recess
fruit roll-ups from lunch
and the first turn in the middle
of the jump rope.
Even the girls with glasses
hand-me-down gym clothes
or a stutter, even they
had a few woven gauntlets.
We hid in the coatroom
before school and played
dirty Barbies, flat crotch
to flat crotch. We dared
each other to touch tongues
flip up our skirts
steal our sisters' tampons.
We wore pointy shoes
to kick boys
that pestered us.
At night, we wore bracelets
to bed, unwilling to expose
our naked arms.

After

Upon parting,
you don't leave saliva
in a kiss and say,
forget me.

Every afternoon
without you
pulls
one string
of yarn from the pom-pom
on my winter
hat.

If you rip
a hair from
your scalp,
you can see
how color
dulls at the roots.

Now, I take baths
because the shower
startles my skin.

On the subway
I find a child's
mitten. It reminds
me
of you.

Politics of Snow

The temperature creeps—
yesterday it was six degrees—
today three. Breathe outside,
and the nose, throat, and lungs
ache; the same ache
as when tears start.

The news fractures cold
into statistics: coldest winter
in 5 years, 3 elderly die
of exposure, tomorrow
the temperature
will remain steady.

The empty palm
of the sky stretches, waits
to be filled. We are all
so expectant to be given
something.

This morning, several schools
closed, superintendents
afraid for the children
loitering for the bus.
How do parents stay home?
Even the weather

depends on a woman
to be more willing to miss
work. You hear wind
before you see individual flakes
cast to sting exposed skin.

These harsh conditions
dictate rock salt hardened
pant cuffs, slush under feet
and tires, a bit of snot
in the nostrils.

Snow grits
between my teeth.

Property Rights and Personal Magic

Inside my vagina
is a pouch, where I hide things,
such as the memory of you.
The vagina feels
so much warmer,
cleaner, than the heart.

The heart, involuntary muscle,
works hard enough, without
your greedy memory to keep.
While you might find the fold
of my lips subjective, inside
my vagina, no secrets repeat.

In my pouch, I keep a rag doll
my mother sewed before my birth,
a plastic bird my father sent
for my eighth birthday, a photo
of my best-friend and I
gripping our soccer trophies,
and *Behind the Attic Wall*
my favorite book from childhood.

I won't say what else. You
may consider the vagina
a storage room, as I zipper away
this memento, that lover.
It's not that old wives' tale,
the vagina begging
to be filled with a dowry.
You couldn't find any of this,
even with stirrups and a flashlight.

Consent

Can I say I'm done with men? I want to accept
that I'm finished with the intrusive penis
and ready for the solicitous vagina. Yes, I have dreams
that I lay naked with my best friend,
her buttocks slack against my thighs
and my patient arms drowse on her stomach.

Can I hate men? I want to say
that every man that fucked me, fucked me
over. All men become stray dogs
tearing meat when offered the body
of a woman. They all burn
matches under the nails of ambitious women.

Men thump and pound.
What could lilt me to orgasm? I love
the whisper of a female mouth. The inside
of a woman's cheeks are softer, more giving
than a man's. It's not sentiment
when I say I love the bends of a naked woman.
She's pudding in my mouth, not
like the rough skin of a rough man.

Am I sorry
that I like to make myself up, dark eyes
and swollen lips? I only wear skirts. I dye
my hair. I shave my legs, tweeze my eyebrows,
and paint my toenails. The worst part?

I want to love a woman as beautiful
as myself. Even though I have bruised
my body and slid my fingers
deep down my throat, I consider myself sexy:
every dimple in my thighs and pucker
in my stomach.

Men live lifetimes
without a baby inside the pod
of their bellies. Will I permit
myself never to give birth?
If it means I am not
the female house cat
who cries at the windowsill,
desperate in heat.

my female cat cry out a dark window,
desperate in heat, and did not allow her out.

Relent

I tell time by the fade
of her lipstick. Her fingernails
are broken apple peels. Her chest is a change
in pitch mid-dial tone. Her feet, almonds
I sucked clean of chocolate. Her hips
trigger the fire alarm

of her legs. Her eyebrows haunt
her, two branches that question
the face of the moon.
But what does the moon know

of loss? It only echoes
the sun across
clouds. Patience
brings its glance

from wane to wax. My lover's tears
make power lines taut. Her sneeze
folds buds into napping. Night without her
forces the moon to quiet. The furious
sheets flush too hot
to sleep. Then morning slaps

night, burns
stars to submission. Without her,
bicycle chains slip
off gears. Desks spit
out all contents. Squid swallow

ink. Without her lips, I lose time
between my mattress
and comforter. But tonight, we coil

in our bed. And after, I press
half my satiated body out
our window, to thank

the arch of sky. How much loss
has filtered as prayer
into the heavens? How many
lovers have called to the Virgin
on behalf of the moon? Three words

into my prayer, my lover calls to me. Her make-up
has worn away, save for the red tint
of her lips. *It's late*, she says. She arches
her back, a tired sky. The click
of the light switch
finishes my prayer.

Romance Dialectic

You are particles of wind
the door separates when it closes.
I am the door that pushes you
in both directions as I fit
into the wall.

You have counted the pores
of a chicken egg and calculated
breaths sucked through the shell.
Impatience caused me to devour
every seed of a green apple
and then, to feed you the stem.

I curl seductively,
a fallen hair
on a tight black shirt.
You crease
gently, the soft lines
of a lush upper lip.

You shouldn't trust
my prints on a doorjamb.
One smudge, and the whirls
lose their oily grip. But still,
you hold the brush
and spread dust.

I never counted
anything past ten. You should
count backwards. Start now.
You might approximate me.