

Degrees of Oblivion

A creative thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

By

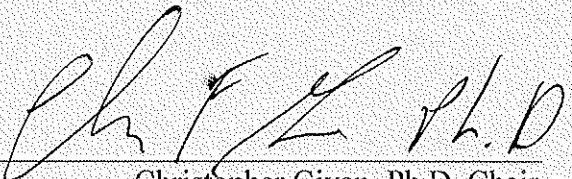
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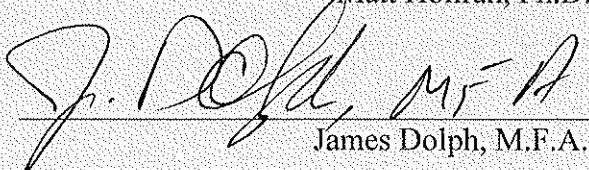
Degrees of Oblivion

A CREATIVE THESIS
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT:

These poems are chiefly concerned with self-awareness and the degree to which each poem's individual speaker is, either voluntarily or involuntarily, oblivious to his or her particular circumstance within the poem. This idea of self-awareness is explored by creating situations within the poems which force speakers to react to such themes as infidelity, mortality, loss, isolation, identity, obsession, suicide, and insanity.

The poems in this collection are situated within the scope of poetry from the latter half of the 20th century to today, as a few of the poet's primary influences are Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds, Steven Dunn, and Tony Hoagland.

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Introduction

Making Room for the Reader

Degrees of Oblivion is a creative thesis consisting of 43 poems (60 pages) and a critical introduction. The title refers to the obliviousness which functions as the central theme, connecting the poems in this collection. This idea of self-awareness is explored by creating situations within the poems which force speakers to react to such themes as infidelity, mortality, loss, isolation, identity, obsession, suicide, and insanity.

The element of obliviousness is represented in various forms throughout the poems; for instance, the theme manifests itself through the speakers' lack of: self-awareness, understanding for the situation, education, life-experience, coping skills, motivation, or faith. Nevertheless, the speakers within these poems are neither unintelligent nor entirely ignorant; in fact, they present, at times, a broad range of understanding, in regards to their condition within the context of the poem.

To some extent, there is a fine line between oblivion and denial, as the speaker seems voluntarily to assume a more oblivious role than what the reader might perceive him or her to actually be. For instance, in "Shawna's Legs," the narrator's lack of commentary, regarding the situation in which she is recalling, works to create a somewhat ambiguous attitude. This ambiguity surrounding the narrator may well portray her as having no insight into the subject matter or the people mentioned in her story. However, the narrator's omission of judgment—which a reader might expect to see aimed towards Mr. Matlock whom they likely view as a sexual predator and adulterer—

signifies a certain degree of sympathy on the narrator's part. In addition, she has a lack of sympathy for her schoolmate, Shawna—who most readers would consider the victim of this older man. Considering these things, the reader can conclude the possibility that the narrator has more insight than she is willing to share within the poem, even if she does not appear to command an acceptable level of understanding over the subject matter.

In "Rotting Pumpkin," the speaker has no problem commanding a level of understanding over her situation; however, she refuses to utilize it. The speaker claims, regarding her romantic relationships, that she is not good at "picking up on things." She alleges an inability to recognize warning signs that reveal her male counterpart is not as invested as she; on the other hand, further into the poem it becomes apparent that she is quite cognizant of the imbalance in her relationships. Not only does she realize that she is in a bad situation, she confesses to a purposeful pattern of involvement with men who have the potential to cause her severe emotional pain, possibly emotional death—expressing the desire for her lover to "carve out" her "center and seeds" and leave her to "rot." The speaker asserts that she engages in this destructive behavior because she prefers agony over boredom.

While this would seem a breakthrough—assuming her role within the poem was to imply a new level of consciousness—in actuality she is simply stating the nature of her predicament, with no motivation to understand or alter it. It is to this extent which the speaker is oblivious, as a reader could understand her to be either unaware of her need to bring about change or uncertain as to the manner in which she might do so.

The narrator in "We Cleaned the Garage that Day" looks back to a moment when she was struggling with the task of acknowledging her own level of understanding of her

marriage, as she is trapped within a reality forced onto her by her husband—a man who finds it impossible to throw away such useless junk as a broken picture frame and a single skate. In one sense, the skate is symbolic of the husband's solo journey and his obliviousness to that fact. Nevertheless, whether the husband sees it or not, he is without a mate; the information helps the reader understand the improbability of him continuing on his journey for much longer.

“Two Girls” along with “Cigarettes in Heaven” both share a common theme, in regards to an often innocent nature of obliviousness. These poems show two sets of friends who have no ability to anticipate what the future will hold, due to their lack of life-experiences; therefore their ideas of the future remain familiar to their present state of existence.

To a certain extent, “I Didn't Go See Nanny,” a poem about mortality and loss, also depicts a speaker whose obliviousness is bound in a lack of experience. Unlike “Two Girls” and “Cigarettes in Heaven,” we see the speaker in this poem undergo a transition, as she gains an awareness of the world with which she had not previously been equipped. The speaker, whose self-centeredness renders her incapable of seeing past her own condition, is forced to confront her misconception of mortality. In this poem, the speaker recalls passing up a birthday gathering for her 95-year-old great-grandmother because she is dealing with an increase in her workload, having just begun teaching and attending graduate school. She does not anticipate losing her grandmother and so she decides not to join her family at the gathering, but by the end of the poem it is clear to the reader that the speaker is suffering from regret.

The male speaker in “It’s Snowing in Oklahoma City” seems unaware of his isolation, as he is under the impression that he is merely alone because of the weather. However, it is apparent that he is a lonely person. In the poem, he is stuck in an adolescent state, longing to join his mother and father for the holiday while rejecting the desire to share intimacy with a romantic partner, fearing that their time alone might arouse in him a feeling of claustrophobia. The speaker references his neighbor’s isolation with a level of sympathy that renders him completely oblivious to the fact that there doesn’t seem to be much difference between the two men’s situation than their age.

In “The Ant Colony,” the speaker juxtaposes the monotony of the couple’s day-to-day routines with that of an ant colony which resides in the couple’s back yard. In this poem it is the third-person narrator, neither the couple nor the ants, who seems to be in search of a level of spiritual understanding. The narrator suggests that the ants might possibly be aware of their giant counterparts, and—due to the ant’s lack of understanding for the role of humans, along with a reverence to the human’s colossal size—without any way of knowing different, seek spiritual comfort in humans. The narrator seems to be dealing with a lack of faith, as the poem is ultimately questioning if humans too are seeking trust in something that isn’t real, simply to make it through another tedious and backbreaking day.

Throughout the collection, the theme of obliviousness continues, whether it is regarding the speaker’s state of self-awareness or the speaker’s ability to yield change.

Ironically, I did not set out with the goal of portraying this theme within the poems; in fact, my goal was simply to avoid rendering the reader oblivious to what was taking place within the poems. In order, to fulfill my desire of preventing the poems from

being obscure or vague, I knew I needed to provide enough detail within the poem to relay my insight as to a particular human condition. The challenge with that became figuring out how to allow the poem to retain a level of spaciousness which would permit the reader to experience the poem in a way that relates also to them. This urgency to make room for my reader, though, did not arise in the initial stages of writing this collection. Actually, it was not until midway through that I took on this notion.

In my initial stages of developing a practice as a poet, my level of gall was astounding. The goal was to put everything down on the page, sparing no detail. In addition to my natural inclination toward a more confessional style of poem, the discovery and influence of such poets as Sharon Olds, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton was simply affirmation that I was on the right path.

Although I look back now and realize that wasn't exactly the case, I understand that my work at that time was necessary to help further my development in this craft that is ever in need of more pruning.

Fundamentally, it was my practice as a reader which initiated the evolution of my practice as a writer. I am not talking about a reader, in regards to undertaking a text due to an assignment. I began reading the poems voluntarily—as poems, and most importantly as a writer of poems; because I embraced the idea of lineage and the fact that each writer builds on what they learn from their predecessors. Instead of focusing my attention simply on the work of my contemporaries, I began reaching back to read such poets as John Donne, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and Emily Dickinson. Even though I did not plan to adapt my style to the style of these particular writers, I accepted the necessity of understanding poetry unlike mine—its

language, its structure, the context in which it was written, the audience for which it was written, and the ways in which each generation sought to be innovative or different from the last. What I realized for myself, although I had always been told so, was that these poets built the foundation for my generation of poets.

Once a novice poet begins to understand his or her insignificance in the grand scheme of poets and poetry, it can be intimidating. However, it is that knowledge which forced me out of my comfort zone when studying poetry. This single element set in motion, my understanding of the need to sharpen and trim my poetry. It was not long before I shifted my goal from being purely confessional in my writing to attempting to engage in a conversation with poets and poems which inspired me.

Eventually, after a good dose of reaching back to the past, I was ready to embrace my contemporaries again. I began reading such books as, Stephen Dunn's *Walking Light*, Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, and Tony Hoagland's *Real Sofistikashun*. From those books, I realized my own degree of oblivion. There was an element which I had failed to incorporate into my writing, one that I hadn't considered, or at least had taken entirely for granted: the poem's reader, and the ways in which those overly confessional poems worked to embarrass the reader as well as me; even worse than embarrassment, I caused the reader to become isolated from the poem all together. I had never really thought of it in this way.

Restraint and structure were no longer outdated ideas, but they were elements within a poem to be appreciated. The strange thing is, instead of proceeding to throw out all my confessional poems, I gathered them up to prepare for the real work. They were

suddenly more valuable to me than they had ever been, because I was embarking on a stage where I would actually find myself ready for the revision process.

Although I knew that those poems needed some major surgery, I also knew that they were not impossible to work with; the subject matter had been important to me for one reason or another, I just had not known how to approach it at the time. In addition, I understood that, even if the work turned out to be simply another exercise, it was valuable. However, my revision of these works over the last year and a half was not merely an exercise, as the work resulted in some of my first publications. As miniscule as I understand my poems to be in the world of poetry, being published is a rewarding experience, and it gave me a much needed sense of revival after so many rejections. As simplistic as it may sound, once I made room for readers, readers made room for me.

Ever Ready

My closest friend
set fire to herself with
gasoline.

Self-immolation,
they call this.
For this, there is
actually a term.

If I had to guess which
lighter she used—
red and yellow, a faded out
7-11 logo and finicky flick—

the one I had to lean down
out of the wind to make light
that morning I pulled over on
Broadway Extension
so she could throw up
champagne
while I smoked;

the one she used
to burn
the end of her
blue
eyeliner.

But that's a guess
I'll never know
the answer to.

“Are you ready for this?”
my husband asks me,
from the passenger seat.
“Yes. I have no choice.”

I speed ahead—brave,
ignorant imagination—
to the ICU burn unit.
Where people are
burned! Pink and black
like Ball Park Franks.
Where your own best
friend, the one you called
sister, can only recognize you,
rather what's left—swollen,
bald head protruding from a
bandaged mound, singed stench,
machines for lungs—by your
purple toenails, same color as mine,
from our last week's pedicure.

You think that you are
ever ready *for this?*

Mexican Pizza

Not everything broken needs fixed.
It's okay to give up sometimes,
to say that kids are resilient,
that for one reason or another they'll
hate us so why not let it be our divorce.
They'll understand someday when the
sound of their spouse's voice makes them
want to shoot a smoking bullet into something.

It's normal to fear starting over,
or to worry that one income won't do.
A single income might not buy a summer
backpacking across Europe, but neither did
two. Really one should have no problem
keeping the lights and water running.

More than anything, lots of excuses have
kept us together for so long and I'm sick now.
Still you refuse to let go, the way I can't let
go of our past—nights alone, hang up calls,
blond strands on your sweater, sleep talking
women's names.

I'm not perfect either. One time took nine
hundred bucks from your pants.
Another dented your Jeep and refused blame.
Even called your mom a bitch on Easter.
But no reason to check and balance
our mistakes when what we should do is give up.

Our honeymoon in Vegas, I spat on you.
Don't remember why, only that you
lit a joint there in the Bellagio and
walked away. Next day we agreed to
divorce. But that was eight years ago.

It's three a.m. now and my stomach's growling.
Taco Bell is open, you tell me, and offer to get
me a Mexican Pizza if it will make me love you.

Neighbors Come and Go

My neighbor's having an affair.
She leaves, most mornings,
half hour or so after her husband.
I see her dart out to the car,
pulling on a heel, fastening a button.

In the car, left arm straddles the wheel,
right anchoring the rearview for a
solid look at mascara, lip gloss.

She sometimes doubles back,
engine running, car door open,
a sweep through the house—something

remembered. I imagine her in there
plucking a rogue eyebrow, shaving an armpit,
brushing her tongue, or rubbing oil onto the
cracks of her heels—routines ignored

for her husband. But the lover, she wouldn't force
him to endure these secret flaws, understands
that he probably wouldn't. With him she's fresh.
Though she'll eventually slip up on that comfort

she hadn't noticed, or that she mistook him to
believe was fine. Might start with no perfume, little
less make up. And before long, she'll wear a ponytail
and sweatpants. This will be the end of both his

allusion and it. But her husband will welcome her—
the unkempt eyebrows, armpits, stale breath,
rough feet—all things that ensure him of a safe
return. At least until something better to do than

watch her neighbors come and go.

Shawna's Legs

In seventh grade, forty is pretty much middle age so Mr. Matlock must have really been something for us girls to notice the blonde hair that fell just above his blue eyes, calves like a basketball player, and the Polo shirt that fit snug around his chest and biceps—likely the reason Mrs. Matlock married him. Seventy pounds heavier than him, I once heard some of the female teachers trying to figure it out. They split before the end of the year and everyone had a different reason. I found Shawna in the bathroom crying the day he was fired. She told me it was her fault.

My Cheesy Love Poem with a "But" Included

My heart speaks its own language,
created for you. I wish I had the
courage to translate it, tell the words
it whispers to me when you finger
back the strand of hair from my eyes,
breath onto my collar bone, run the
tip of your toe along my leg, and sleep
as though you are safe in my presence.
But I can't tell you these things
because I know my translation is off.

Actually, let's keep it real,
you're an asshole. But you're
great in bed and extremely
gorgeous so I make excuses.
Truth is, hair in my eyes
annoys you. Your breath, well,
people have to breathe.
You'd rub your toe on any
other leg, even the mattress
because it soothes you. And
you don't need me to feel safe.

None of this sounds as pretty though.
So when my heart speaks to me,
I choose only the words I want to hear.

Sure, one day I'll have to actually listen,
but for now I'm fine with the bullshit.

To Take Responsibility

On the front porch of my grandparent's house,
my dad tells me of the government-implanted
microchip in his tooth. He hears voices
corresponding about his day-to-day, static
radio transmissions that rouse him from the
blurred gaze of insomnia, a constant swell
and throb around his gum line.

I ask if they know where Bin Laden is, who killed
Kennedy, and what happened to those Area 51 aliens.
He says he'll have proof of it soon, the microchip.
He knows some of us are in on it too. A lady at work
knows his story and offered to help him gather evidence.

In the factory where he builds electric motors,
the machines block transmissions on a good day,
he tells me. He doesn't tell me of bad days at home,
pacing, laughing, mumbling then answering,
"nothing," when my grandparents ask what he's saying.

He's lived with them, off and on, all his life.
They once told me they'd rather him there than
caged like a vicious animal in some jail or hospital.

Mom won't tell me of when he forced her to
take a horse tranquilizer, beat her for catching VD
from him. Or of the time he walked out
masturbating in front of her friends. But she
confirms what I've heard over the years with,
"We married at 15. Besides, that's history."

She uses the word history with a casualness that
causes me to wonder how she doesn't know
history and present are parallel lines that flex and
join to make a circle. I understand why she wouldn't
want to talk about it, and maybe she doesn't want
me to judge him based on these things.

But if she knew my stories, the one's I
won't tell her, then she'd know well that
I've already made my own judgment.

My grandparents inform me I'll need to
take responsibility for him after they die.
And it reminds me of the Christmas I
let my new puppy off his leash. Dad had
warned me not to, but I didn't listen.
New Years Day he finally turned up. Rabid.
Holding Midnight to the ground, my dad yelled,
"Do it. You have to take responsibility."
The trigger was cold against my finger.

It's Snowing in Oklahoma City

A white inundation, I'm confined here.
Christmas alone, instead of home in Beloit
with mom and dad, my brother's three boys
running past me to packages under the tree.
They find their names, point them out.

The dying Elm on my front lawn glistens
now, fully clothed in it. Almost makes me
feel guilty that I've hired someone to chop it,
but I'd rather cut it while there's still some life
in it than to wait until it's standing dead.

It could almost pass for Wisconsin here,
the way it falls so solid that the interstates
are closed and nothing leaves the runway.
No one in. No one out.
All together. But then again, not.

If I had a girlfriend maybe it would
be nice, stuck inside a day or so.
But maybe it would be worse than
being here alone—both of us
crammed into one space for too long.
It's probably better this way.

The old man next door is home.
I see the images from his television
flicker against his window, out into
the darkness of the day, watch lights
turn on and off as he moves, from
room to room. And I wonder if
he's accustomed to such isolation.

Summer Boy

Something I never told you about, happened
at least a decade ago. I was sixteen,
bangle bracelets, pink lip gloss, and cut-offs.
Days raced across like clouds, the face
of a boy disappears into memories of sun,
tanning lotion, bikinis, and all things summer.

I could tell you of teenage life: how that summer
was the only summer that ever existed, nothing happened
before or after as far as I knew, and the sun
was my measure of time, always going to be sixteen,
never realizing that soon enough I'd be face
to face with the maturity I'd been chasing—cut off

from childhood. And I slid out of my cut-offs
after a couple of cinnamon-breath kisses with that summer
boy I barely knew, didn't care to ever see his face
shifted, and inside me a daughter or son
would interrupt my dreams, cut off
trips and college plans that at sixteen
seem to define a person. That summer
marked the end of freedom. But it happened
that my mother offered an option. Though her face

revealed it more a consequence I was facing.
On a dark September morning we left before the sun
came up. She drove, no mention of what would happen,
or if it was the right decision. When I tried, she cut off
my voice, cranked Don Henley. But the boys of summer
were already gone. And in less than sixteen

minutes of being in that clinic, so was my sixteen-
year-old naivety—gone. Like the one who never got a face,
or a name, not a day at the circus, no vanilla cone in the summer,
and no numb fingertips from snow in January, when it seems the sun
might never return, but hide back into some other orbit, cutting off
the world from existence. As if the whole of the thing had never happened.

Since that sixteenth year, I've had a daughter and son,
and from theirs I imagine a face—a guilt I can't cut off.
And each summer that passes is a reminder of what happened.

Checking Out at Food 4-Less

the lady in front of me
wears a man's plaid shirt,
foot propped onto the
bottom rack of a cart
that's filled with room
temperature juices,
frozen pizza, and kids

she can't much afford
to feed—she tells me,
complains about gas too,
and her husband doesn't
get enough overtime at
the tea and coffee factory
on 63rd and Maybranch

she smoothes the oily
ponytail, apologizes for her
appearance, grey mascara
smeared into the folds beneath,
her eyes scan me then
back down at herself,
but I never move mine
from her face, smile like
she's the prettiest woman
I've seen all day, nod
at everything, convince
myself we've connected

and before heading out,
she turns back to gesture
so long with her chin

I forget sugar, hold the line
and cashier, run to aisle six,
linger until I know she's loaded
them and gone away.

My Every Man

In seventh grade, I drew a naked sketch
of Shawna Rhoades and showed the class.
I wanted her to cry, hated her since third
grade—can't remember why now, but I did.

Maybe it was that her parents owned
Midway Skate land and friends told me
stories of parties with pink cotton candy,
root beer in bottles like the real stuff,
strobe-lit skating to Debbie Gibson, and
dark corners for smokers and French kissers.

But I don't think that was the reason.
Thing is, she didn't like me and I didn't like that.
Weird how it works sometimes—decided enemies.

In the principal's office, Mom walked in,
purse clutched to rib cage, rosy lipstick
on her teeth. She stood next to the file cabinet
where Mr. White kept the green notebook for
Indians who'd sign their name for free pencils.

He was waving the picture around at her,
other times pointing over to me. She was,
both hands on his desk, leaned in with the
neck of a goose fighting for her goslings.
But I didn't hear a word they were saying.

I had wanted them all to laugh at her.
They laughed when the teacher sent me away.
And at that age, when it's so important everyone like you,
middle school is a combat zone unlike any.

When there are lines drawn, a division
like Shawna's and mine, it's kill or get
done in. You need every man
on your team, walking those halls with you.

Telling Mr. White where to go, and the
many ways he could get there, a tear pooled
in the corner of Mom's eyelet,
but it didn't roll down until after mine did.

I can't say why, normally she'd have ripped
my ass, but that day she was my every man.

The Air in Macau

In freshman composition, my student,
a Chinese kid, accent like Bok Choy,
never misses a day of class. He is pale
with black strands hanging, nearly
covering the red, metal edges of
what seem to be outdated women's
frames. He grins, whenever I look
above the other raised hands to ask him,
"Ai, what's your input on the discussion?"

In his essay, he tells of his life:
"I was someone I will never be again,
young boy in Macau where hot air is
moisturized. I love so much to run,
even though it is breathless. One
day I learn how to run track, and
I am good. Coach tell me I go
anywhere, pay for nothing.
My family is sad and happy when
I find it is here where I want to
do the breathless sport."

And I do not reach for my red pen, or the
highlighter that, like a patrolman and his
nightstick, I rely so heavily upon at times like
this. Not because I intend never to show him
what is correct. But because, before I mark it up,
discolor the characters, I want to read it again.
And when you think about it, he isn't wrong

because if you can imagine a set of paper-covered
bones pushing their way through the thickness
of the Macaun air, forming muscular circles
around the asphalt, running until the very track
no longer sustains, not the whole country
or continent, not any other land atop any other ocean,
nothing else existing, no other place in the world

he chose to be but Oklahoma—
you would agree it is a breathless sport.

Tell me, how do you mark against that?

Night View of Taipei

The capital city allures him with a sort of toxin
that some search a lifetime to never find. People
piled into crevices, buildings atop buildings, steel
and gleam, slabbed concrete stacked above and
around. And all of it untainted by familiarity.

In the Shilin Night Market, under the buzzing
fluorescents, he gestures with vendors who
push spices, bubble tea, fish with heads,
fried scorpions, and Brittany Spears posters.
A mean-faced woman cooks oyster omelets,
a boy steals peanut candy for his sick grandmother,
men curse one another at a card game,
a girl crouches in an alley to cry about blood
between her legs that she doesn't understand—
recycled oxygen mingles among exhaust and
the perspiration of the city starts, lightly, to fall.

It is in the hallway of his hotel that he happens on
her—an American like himself. Dark hair and eyes,
she is pretty, not beautiful. The sight of her, not her,
makes him smile. She laughs to him, mouth open
wide like the Keelung River, and poses her body.

Robed in their damp sheet, she asks his name and
gets no answer. Out the window he notices the
night view of Taipei is unobstructed from
her room. The orange, green, and white flicker
against the blackness that he hadn't remembered.

Rotting Pumpkin

You once used a butter knife
to carve a pumpkin with such
precision that I knew I'd let you
slice me, if you ever asked but you

didn't ask, and when I begged
for it, you told me you had already
done it, I just hadn't noticed my blood
spilling onto the floor, making puddles

around your feet, though I should
have smelled metallic, but I'm not good
at picking up on things, like the way you
usually don't look at me when we make love.

The sort of men who would look
at me, even kiss the fine hairs around
my temple, fold their fingers into mine and
squeeze, are never the ones I'd trust with a knife,

because they'd put it away in a junk
drawer to rust. Until their tender calm
of approval jarred me after it, iron oxides
and all, to do the job myself, a main line-severing

that would deliver me from gray,
mind-numbness. Besides, I don't like to
inflict my own wounds, not when you can carve
out my center and seeds to let the whole of me rot.

I Wish My Mom Were a Crack Head

For Ptolemy

I'd be happier
to excuse her
absence if
she hung out
on 9th street behind
White Diamond Inn, a
brown sack of warm beer
passed between the other
girls and a man—always a man.
And one of them has a shitty ass
kid who sits alone crying, nobody
to heat the hot dog that he toddles
to the refrigerator for, pulls from the
meaty juice and eats cold because,
fuck, not all of us are so lucky as
to get a warm dog and a mother
who's around to serve it up.

My Five-Year-Old Daughter's Bunny
(The one I begged my husband not to buy)

I hold him,
dying—
not dead.

His black fur shines—
velvet waves
Apache hair.

A warrior body,
half-alive,
shudders
then
calms
between
convulsions.

The splintered,
tiny neck
beneath fluff.

His face is wet
from my tears.

I nuzzle,
sob, heave and
he struggles more
to lift,
hold breath,
live.

He will only go
by force
so I place my first
and middle finger
against his nose.
Cigarettes in Heaven

In high school, I'd sit with Chicago
on the concrete bench out front, where
she'd watch the three kids from special ed.
Everyone but her called them *retards*.

After lunch we'd buy a Dr. Pepper
near the front office where they sat,
newborn ducklings without a mother--
her excuse to eavesdrop just one more time.

In winter we'd huddle there, on the bench,
hands cupped breath, heads leaned to their
conversation—questions that drifted from their
bench to ours: *Do people smoke cigarettes in heaven?*

We never talked about them, but
sometimes made their questions ours:
Will we be friends in heaven?

Answered with the same honest ignorance
as the special ed. kids. Promised to grow up
and be next door neighbors, raise our kids
and husbands to be best friends too.

Somehow it stopped at *grow up*.

On her ninety-fifth birthday,
the entire family gathered
at her white house on the hill.

I had just begun graduate school
and was teaching for the first time.
It would have only put me behind.

Mom sent pictures of the day—
Nanny smiling in a yellow dress,
red and purple pansy print.

She's in her rocker, afghan over
her knees, hands folded. Anyone
would've said she had another year.

the man who cleans
my carpet is a phony,
the brown spots still
visible after three treatments

was white when
all brand-new
unmarked from blemish

one stain in particular
made by my husband's son
from an affair
is chocolate ice-cream vomit

i have since learned he,
the child,
is lactose intolerant

in two and a half years
his mother never picked up
on that but then again
who could expect her to

take time out of her busy day
of begging my husband for spare
cash to buy a pack of diapers and
cigarettes or a gamble at the slots

and he always rushes to her,
says i'm greedy when i complain
because after all i am
the one who has him and the
nice home we share with all our
stains, and she's a single mom
alone in the world with her
shitty, pukey baby

We Cleaned the Garage that Day

Or did something like loaf, aloof, we were alone
bumping into one another's elbows and knees
silently battling through the hand-piled plateaus,
junked treasures that never should've lasted as long
as they had, but you always refuse to get rid of things—

Blank VHS tapes, heat-warped against the concrete,
mingled next to the yellowing files that straggled
loose outside their rusted cabinet. The broken
exercise machine you planned to fix, but that neither
of us used when it worked. And the single roller-skate.

I hate it about you that your changes are always brought on
by my force. Even then, that day, I was sickened at how you
thought it was progress we were making, rearranging when
we should have been removing . But you were adamant about

holding onto that cracked, empty picture frame that said *family*.
That's when I realized I'd have my work cut out,
when the time came to convince you to remove me—
piles and piles away from any real intention of letting go

She spends days, sometimes nights, in the garden,
planting new words for disappointment, weeding
any remnants of the anointed. Seedlings wither
under cracked earth, chimes ring only when struck.

Neighbors speak of politics, city planning,
higher prices on deli-sliced bologna at CV's,
tip-toeing the dark subject, sensing that the days
when she relied on faith are gone, as never existed.

Has she forgotten God, ask the churchmen.
Regarding herself, she questions God the same.

gingham butterflies, iron-patched hot cotton
they tug the ribboned flow of summer's rupture

rays bends every direction, same distance as squint,
to pink and potato their skinny surface, but then

clouds smell of blue minnows, dandelions, and
turned soil, with winds cooling the thickened plains,

nostrils turned sudden, skyward, catch plump droplets,
do drop down and grow the earth, they chant and prance

swaying low, down into the thick of it, unaware that
summers from now the same world will be all different

Their alarm sounds,
like sirens from a
fire engine,
into his ear. He
turns to her and says,
“I feel like death.”

But one does not
wake feeling like death,
as death does not feel
like anything—at all.

The kitchen tiles,
make scraping noises
as warm skin, cooling,
drags across.

And he can do
nothing but
complain about
the price of
gas and cigarettes,

While she scrapes
the damp grounds
out of the pot
from the previous
morning.

Behind their house,
beyond the
concrete patio, a
mound of
red ants
move about,

Among the grass

and dew,
possibly aware, but
equally
oblivious to
human activity.

Maybe the ants think
there is more,
believe in us,
something bigger,
in order to cope,

Seeing that
there is nobody
to tell them
we are not
gods.

Is it wrong of me
to withhold minor
things from you?

sometimes I may
spit in your coffee
place a straight pin in your shoe
deliberately wash your whites
with denims, but

I hide these things
for your protection

telling you-
it would start an argument
cause you stress
so, then is it not my duty
to hide these things?

not directly a reaction,
call it indirectly,
maybe I've remembered
something you did in the past

such as that time you cheated on me
for three years
with the same woman
and she bore your son

I don't think about it everyday
—not as a whole—but
minor events enter my brain,
casually and randomly,
at least every other day

for example, I'm scrubbing the shower tiles
suddenly it feels as if I am being stabbed
by a flicker, a memory

perhaps I recall that time
the kids and I were ill—
a parasite from unclean lettuce
at a fast-food restaurant

we, a heaving trio
repair and mend
with no assistance
you—absent and
unable to be reached,
you revel in your cleverness
and the freedom of not having to
stay in a classy hotel

your mother is disgusting
when she philosophizes
“Men will be men, but as women we
have to stay focused on our priorities”
I almost went through with the divorce
to spite her,
she was in a panic when I moved
into that house on Memphis Street
neither of us cared, you nor I

you moved off with your salvation
I had one less person to clean-up after
a high time for both of us
but ephemeral at best

when that summer ended,
your passion for her went with it
you showed up on my doorstep

solitude had been gracious to me

allowed me to remember myself,
maybe it was merely losing a few pounds

I could have shut the door,
it probably wouldn't have bothered me
much

but a little part of me
had missed you
I was in a sentimental mood

is it wrong of me?
because I said I would forgive you
but there are still times
when my small intestines burn with
desire to absorb revenge
desperate to see you unhinged,

unhinged like I had been
when I found out she
named the baby Ptolemy,

the name I had chosen
three years earlier for our son,
but backed out at the last
minute, for Alexzander

not exactly bitter
possibly somewhat sour

maybe I've brought it all
upon myself in
agreeing to reconcile
accepting your apology
but not completely
sure if I want to
hate or love you

so I consider us

—not as a whole
but each moment
as it occurs

sometimes forgetting it
altogether, like when you
and the kids are playing
in the snow at midnight

those are the moments I will feel you
and say that you are real
swallow asteroids to
protect our universe
grab you deeper inside me

but other times remembering,
a former pain that refuses to expire

and those are the moments
I will resent you
and wish we weren't real

is it wrong of me?

Annoyed at Death and Sylvia Plath

My mind turns to you, Sylvia Plath, whenever the children are screaming, squirming, begging to be hugged and held, in need of peanut butter on bread or tissue for the toilet, but all I want to do is finish one more stanza. And it's still not enough for me to understand your reasoning.

I read somewhere that your suicide should have been predicted by the use of "I" and "me" in your poetry. I laugh to think, no matter how many times I refer to myself, selfish thoughts and pitiful rants, I could never go as far as to stick my head in an oven. What kind of person plans death?

Today four soldiers were killed in Iraq in a suicide bombing, while the president shared a pat and chuckle with the Australian Prime Minister. Very chummy, I assume. Maybe the chef will make them some sort of endangered species for dinner. Now that's a pair of heads for the oven.

I remember playing with you, or someone like you, in some sandbox somewhere, when I was a child, Sylvia Plath. You were disgusted that your dad had died. I recall thinking that it could have been worse. He could have chosen to leave, walked away, like mine had. Maybe you went looking for him? Was he there—
in the oven?

You really did use "I" and "me" quite often. Now, after having time to think about it, would you change things? The poetry, I mean. Surely, you wouldn't change having placed your head in a stream of gas because some silly man had broken your heart. Guess what? His second wife did the same thing, but she took the child with her. Do the two of you ever bump into each other?

I might let you go with me to the library tonight, Sylvia Plath. Let you see what women write about today, decide if much has changed. Unless you have something more exciting in mind. (I think of how difficult it will be to get you to go somewhere without Ted.)

I suppose he could go. I'd like to get to know this man you so frequently speak of. Maybe there are misconceptions about him. The three of us could get some sushi, share our opinions about marriage and what doesn't work. You and I already agree that there are times it makes you want to stick your head in an oven. Someone should have warned you about the consequences of doing so. That's right, someone had warned you. Several times I understand.

We're so very different, Sylvia Plath. I can take the pain any day. The blank numbness will have to come for me because I won't be the one to chase it. I chase kids who act crazy, a husband who actually is crazy, and words to describe all of the insanity. And I never get tired of doing so. In fact, I love it.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I run barefoot in the street

because I like the way it feels to pretend like I have control. I may step on sharp objects or stump my toe so hard that the skin peels back like an opened envelope. But at least I can feel. It scares me to think that one day I won't. Almost makes me hate you for choosing it.

But I do not hate you. Something drove you to madness, made you believe your head was a glazed chicken, rhubarb pie, fresh-water salmon, or artichoke and swiss casserole. Who am I to hold you accountable? Nothing special about me but warm blood.

Farewell, lonely sister, dead, silent voice of womanhood, your words stronger than your spirit. All your threats false alarms, except the ones against yourself. Now they echo endlessly, but mostly inaudible, against the sounds of a world that continues its rotations. Did you not know it would be that way?

When My Husband Asks Can He Trust Me, I Answer Yes

I am landscaping our backyard—circular, limestone and mortar beds—
weeds pulled, soil loosened, rocks removed, rotted autumn leaves
and fine grit worked in—hours, days of sweat, ache—agonized
placement of flower and foliage—full sun, partial shade, full
shade—with spade and fork I situate the perennials—
Black-eyed Susan, False Spirea, Bleeding Hearts,
Goldenrod, Maiden Pink, Lady's Mantle,
Spring Beauty, Helen's Flower,
Bloodrot, Wormwood.

But it is all for pride of ceremony.
I watched the mud sliding down
the mountain, heading
towards us, even as I
planted—aware my
labor was to be
blanketed
away.

Go Right Ahead, Please

Saw my sternum in half.
Crank open rib cage—
thick double-layer membrane.

Knife at my arteries.
Unfasten blue veins.
Anything—take it away.

You clot-busted it alive—
revived the tissue.
Only fair—belongs to you.

Maybe There Is No Cure for This

Last night she watched a special on
Aids in Nigeria—women raped by the
infected, impregnated with the disease.
Babies they or no other could care for—
cough, mucus, fevered starvation in a
damp, clay-floored hut that does not
accommodate life, even the last dangling
strands of it. She wondered if it was real,
if he ever loved her, or was it imagination.

In the cold, mirrored cabinet she searches for
relief, thumbs the bottles. Her face stone and flesh.

Emergency Sex Education

Freshman year, Stephanie Mader got pregnant by Merle Thompson, an orange-headed senior about three inches shorter than her and more like a forty-year old man than one of us. Something about him—snap-button shirts and moley chest, the way he scuffed his pointed boots along the halls—seemed the kind of guy who'd smoke a G.P.C. and use words like gasket, valve, shaft.

Stephanie wasn't a cheerleader, but she wasn't someone the mean girls would call a skank either. But Merle—even his name was hideous. I didn't need to understand though because love is strange. I can handle that. What I'll never get is why the female teachers gathered all the girls into the gym for emergency sex education then simply told us never to mention the pregnancy, not even after she delivered.

Dinner at Mammaw's

Growing up, I remember how Mammaw wiped her hands on the kitchen towel draped across her shoulder as she looked down into her Betty Crocker Cookbook. Her meatloaf scented the house with green pepper and onion. And Pappaw paced, kitchen to living room to kitchen. He'd flip a few channels then back he was, in the kitchen. Everyone was hungry, from his anticipation alone.

Today the slightest scent moves in waves as food sits covered in the kitchen. My sister and I do not eat, feel bad she went through the trouble. Mammaw sits beside him on the couch, plate in her lap, scoots food around with a fork, tells us she's hired someone to help—to bathe and move him from bed to couch to bed again. She runs her hands over his scalp, fingers purple against thin white curls. My sister suggests a home instead. Mammaw says he will get better, refuses to send him anywhere.

I picture her, brunette again, between two walls pushing out with both hands. She thinks she is fighting for him, unaware of the walls closing on her as well. And I don't have the courage to tell it.

Thursday at the Zoo

We Throw Pistachios to the Meerkats
while each second the zoo moves
further away from the sun.
The people pass, eyeing our
misbehavior but enjoy the fuss
among the kats. And we enjoy us,
mother and daughter, differences
of eighteen years dissolving
like sugar and water into simple syrup.

The Thing That Bothers Me Is

You were
fucking her,
feeding her
with your *Come*
away with me.

Digging,
rotating,
mixing,
into her

soil. You
poke, prod,
fill up
the whore,

one more
bastard,

another bastard,
floating fatherless,
husbandless pollen,
earth's belly
bulging,

growing bastards

all over.

Spring up,
chutes and chutes.

Sprout, you bastards,

strength like weeds.

Mazda for a Lexus

We were eighteen with a newborn,
one-bedroom at Apple Lane—
the subsidized complex for Indians
and low-income families.

Not married but together, a couple
of kids trying to figure out how to pay for
a real place, Enfamil, Pampers, State Farm.

He kept his job stocking sweet peas
and Spam at Price Cutter. And took another
at Whirlpool—where refrigerators travel
continuously down the assembly line.

I worked commission at Warren's shoes
where women always decided that
they'd buy next time. Except for once
when I waited on a forty-something—
mini-skirt, orange tan, chunky ankles.

Newly divorced and broke, she'd taken a job at
The Cheyenne Gentleman's Club.
Her teenage son at home, refused to help
pick shoes for her first night, but his friends
said she was the coolest mom ever.

Thinking back, I shouldn't have judged her:
a creep who didn't deserve that poor son,
and his friends only thought she was cool
because they wanted to be those hump-drunk
men at the bar, her hollow pelvis grinding their faces
as they squirm, squeeze themselves soft again.

A year later we moved out of Apple Lane
into a four-bedroom, two-car, brick.
Gallon-size Ziplocs of marijuana were piled
like a slaughtered cow in our deep freeze.
He said it was triple—maybe more—than

what he made at Whirlpool. I told him
it was wrong, to stop while he was ahead,
before he got caught. Then I quit Warrens
and traded my Mazda for a Lexus.

Fathers

My dad's father died in '81.
Forty.
Lung cancer.
Camel.
Filterless.
Two packs a day.

It's there,
in my mind
when I buy my
Newport
100s
in a box.

That piece of info
regarding
my genetics, a
reminder of what
awaits.

My own father, alive.
Fifty.
Fucked up.
Meth.
Pipe.
Fifteen times a day.

It's there,
in my mind
when I line it up—
cocaine
credit card
straw.

That piece of info
makes me hate
that I love the hot tinge
up my nostril

and in my drainage.
I'm no one's father.
Thirty.
Static.
Everything
Any which way.
All day. Every day.
Nobody to fuck up
but myself.

It's there,
in my mind,
that piece of info.

Fata Morgana

calla lillies, cobble fountains,
orange, white, yellow
sandstone chapel
by the shore,
thumbing
sinkholes
where,

opossum shaped bishops hide
their matte faces,
while lit women
light their
matches
for

holy candles,
long
since
snuffed
to

usher in the bride
for her branding,
and after brandy
the groom
unlaces
her,

unaware that
although
he now
knows
her
he
does
not
own
her
and never will

I've a Taste for Something Sweet, He Told Me

I prepared a pan with slathers of
Crisco and sprinklings of flour,
for the battered guest it
would harbor in the near future,

unified flour and soda to linger impatiently
in a neighboring container while
butter, sugar, milk, eggs, and vanilla
copulated within the privacy of their own bowl

desegregated the flour mixture from
the latter mixture then punished them, collectively

poured them into their new shelter,
where they could repent and be reborn,
sponge buttery birth, born again,
into a soft, warm crumbley
that now lives inside him

where I want to live
and be his soft and warm,
moist, golden crumbley
filling him rich with goodness

and I would linger and copulate,
integrate and be punished,
finally to be reborn
to live inside him but he
keeps me outside

speaks words like "uncertain"
when asked how he feels about
the future of our co-existence

so I made him cake
and had a piece myself,
aware that it would all be gone soon

Hep to the Jive

Dark-lit surge, Vicoso, Vite, Vormo,
Wild Flower sparkles in the room—
a fantasy for nightcrawlers and
restless egos who pretend there
are secrets to be revealed
about life, within the music.

Citrus, berries, and florals splash
and wade, then drown in neurotoxins that
stream slowly down pharynx, larynx, and
blood veins—like perspiration on a
drinking glass—then culminate into a
salivary pool of warm, acidic pleasure.

Freshly washed blonde hair and vaginas
huddle, hum drumming, barely hidden
beneath the gossamer fortress of short skirts.
And patchouli or sandalwood and
jasmine undertones mingle with salty sweat
droplets—flailing pheromones—forming
on the circular unders and lace-covered nipples.

Punch-hitting-hard, hanging testaments
to testosterone, pound about in measure.
Penises examine, hoods spread like Cobras,
size-up the competition for a race that
began hours before the lights dimmed.

Lies permeate the ridges of empty glasses,
lyrics flip somersaults inside half-deaf eardrums,
juggling, turning tricks and performing pantomime
for the king, emperor, the only one who can get
the fools to listen, *the beat*. But even he can only
court them for so long, until dethroned
by the true great conqueror, *the one-night stand*.

Monday Morning

cold porcelain snaps dragon-waves,
singed neuron-rockets through my cheeks,
down the back of my sleepy thighs like hot
and acidic yellow spills into the bowl,

you— inches from me, close enough
to smell the ammonia—run the sharp edge
down the froth of menthol peaks on your face,
white puffs like Mamma Daisy's meringue

the flushing gurgle of everything going down
nearly swallows your half-eaten voice that sounds so
painfully different from his, the boy I could never have
peed in front of, who never saw me without make-up,
and who occupied your body twelve years ago, but now
habitat to some man who greets some woman with
I'll iron the kids clothes, if you'll make the coffee

I remember positioning the canvas and stakes to cover us,
spring tulips, from the silent predator that dances across a
heavy-breasted, dying winter, lavishly sucking out her last
breath to sprinkle, shower, scatter it onto everything,
but not us, I made sure we were protected, so then I don't
understand why it seems we are bitten and burned, numbed-dead

but there are times, without cause, you kiss me,
replaying footage from when it was all unscripted,
and in the midnight of the fluorescent morning,
the boy returns with her, the girl who wants to be
pretty with giggly seduction, both of us alive again
but both aware that it comes and goes, washes in
and out, circles through cycles of rejection and
redemption, as the Hebrews in the book of Judges,
forgetting and remembering we are the other's Yahweh

Song of Myself,
is it even worth hearing?

starts off in some low voice, key, note,
whatever,

a

loathsome
fashion that seeps so often into my brain
the cells, stems, transmitters,

no,
not atoms,

who knows really

it's all steel guitars and harmonicas
anyways

but I'm sick of football,

can't we ever go anywhere

the check comes the same day as the bills do

don't fit in my jeans from last summer,

find something else to whine and

complain about

the dishwasher, stopped up

stench

rotten sea-weed tight around a dead
armadillo

the landlord says the plumber's on his way,

everyday

then the heavy

electromagnetic induction sets in

loud screeching over amplified metal

waves

I don't wanna hear it

figure it out yourselves

stop it right now, you two

add

color to the sound

so what if your Ninja Turtle doesn't have his nunchucks
I don't know what your brother did with your Heart-A-Thon
Packet
if you rub another spoonful of peanut-butter on your sister's shirt I'm . . .
hearing the words
but
I can't
understand
them

and fast like bass it all speeds up, popping up and down
kernels of corn
inside a leather-skinned drum
for a minute it's
hey, hey, I'm good
homework's done, laundry's folded,
kids bathed, fed, and tucked
everyday I'm hustlin',
but wait

bubble-gum is better,
sweeter, fresher
everybody wants a piece
of me
a taste of sugar
that I just don't have
enough of,
squeezing out every little grain
to give away,
soothing and cute little tunes of
cucumber-melon lip-gloss
raking around,
pushing out
a note every now and then,

but the flavor runs out so
fast

My Husband, My Castle

Hidden within your walls I dwell,
And house my intangible treasures.
My guardian of rock and steel,
a structure in height beyond measure.

Yea, a harsh exterior it may,
only to those unwelcome inside.
For what good is a fortress, with an unlocked door,
to a sleeping queen, as I.

I know your chambers
of plush and sumptuous retreat,
your tables filled with breads and fruit,
and cellar stocked plentifully with drink.

I know your hearth which ever burns,
with flames that attend to my soul.
I know the places that you think are hidden
and would rather I did not know.

I know the walls in which I've mended
and those still in need of mend.
I know the walls in which I've tattered
and am cautious not to do so again.

Husband, in you, I have found a home,
a place for my soul to reside.
And within you I rest all my trust
and cast my worries aside.

tothechildrenofpolygamy

tell me, why is your Father
shaped like a combination
lock with cold metal, ridged turns,
disc rotation, digits inscribed
into the mechanism—permutation,
combination—failed entry otherwise?

Brown Bag

Tomorrow morning I
stood in the checkout line
at the all-night supermarket
holding onto my
 vegetables
like Yesterday might never come
to the counter
to
check me out
 ring me up,
finally does

 but his mind is on the
customer who came before me

Earlier I watched someone shop-lift
three red, seedless grapes
 fondle two cantaloupes
 and a kiwi

 in the middle of the produce section

I felt guilty
for not getting involved
 not telling
someone

 so I stole a pack of gum
to
relieve my conscience

 now that the clerk begins to appreciate my presence
it's time to leave
 isn't that always my luck

outside
the parking lot
is never filled with the same
cars that are
parked at the other

super-market across town

I remember my dad once
said, "I can't be in two places
at one time"

and ever since then
I have
never been in more than one place at the
same time, though
everyone keeps asking me to be

the drive home is like tasting swiss-cheese
for the
first time

I can't remember feeling that way since
the first time
I tasted swiss-cheese

only everything is about time
what a greedy bitch
she must be

If I try, I can probably quack
like a real duck

and then

I can drown out the silence that
links me

to all the other silent places in the world

because

I'm not in the mood to relate

not with those places

not with their people

nor with the present participle

adjectives they keep stored

in

their

pockets

My driveway is wet

but

I

don't remember rain

I won't take the bags
into my house
I would appear gluttonous
amidst the hungry
of the neighborhood

I'll walk
next
door
and yell at the pricey foreign vehicle
that does not belong to me
although it should
yell back at me in defense of itself
and its owner
is really just a punk

Some days I write things down
like the temperature
and date
see if I can use them
to form
some sort of algebraic equation that will give me
the

answers
to all the phone calls
from bill collectors
and dead people
keep coming to me
reminding me that
one day
we'll
be together

what I can't
think about is
the fact that
they're telling the truth

Mannerisms

Last night I scraped polish from my fingernails
with my teeth.

I washed the itchy flakes down with cheap wine,
while you snored, like brewing coffee
on the sofa next to my chair.

But that was easy
for us both.

Tonight I won't tuck words away,
within the pillows of my tonsils.

Our conversation won't be cushioned either.
You can help me wash the lettuce,
grate the carrots before dinner.

I will bang pots, slam
cabinets, to prepare your ears for what is to follow.

Middle School Wishes

I went to middle school
with a girl who didn't like me.
Julie was her name.

She had black hair with streaks
of blonde,
and beady brown eyes,
with tiny wrists and ankles.

I couldn't win her over,
like I could most people,
with my smile.

Actually, she hated me
to smile.

I kind of thought she was fierce
like she might jump
from her desk
and slam an elbow into my ear.

She knocked my social studies book
from my hands,
in the hall one day,
and said she was sorry
with rolled eyes.

I wanted her to move away,
leave,
anything
to keep from having class
with her
snarled nose and lips.

But I didn't want her to die.
Even though *I hate Julie*
was scribbled
all over my notebook when

she did.
But I didn't wish for it to happen,
not that I can remember.

Still yet, after sixteen years,
I feel guilty sometimes.

I know it's not as if middle school wishes
come true. Although, I'm pretty sure
I never even wished for it in the first place.

I mean, I cried
when I heard
she had died.
And I went to her funeral.

No way would I've wished it.