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LANDMARKS

A Thesis

Presented to the

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Shannon Bowman-Sarkisian

May 2009

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

LANDMARKS

by
Shannon Bowman-Sarkisian

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2 April, 2009

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ABSTRACT

LANDMARKS

by Shannon Bowman-Sarkisian

This thesis is a book-length collection of poems inspired by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. It follows a poet/narrator as she struggles to find meaning in a post-9/11 world. The book is divided into three sections: "Inferno," which contains poems of loss, anxiety, and helplessness; "Purgatorio," which consists of waiting, transition, and purification poems; and "Paradiso," which contains acceptance and harmony poems. Many of the poems featured in this thesis are based on my own personal experiences in New York City before, during, and after September 11, 2001. They reflect a movement from terror and loss to contentment and balance.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I attempted to reinterpret Dante's Divine Comedy. Many modern poets have tried to emulate Dante, and a few have succeeded. I don't know that I succeeded in my attempt. Dante's work was a commentary on medieval Italian culture. Landmarks is a personal reaction to specific events in my life. However, I found solace in the worlds Dante created, and tried to create parallels in my own. In The Divine Comedy the speaker finds himself lost in a "savage forest, dense and difficult" (Alighieri 59). He is unable to say how he got there, stating that he was "so full of sleep just at / the point where I abandoned the true path" (Alighieri 59). Dante appears to be in a dream-like state, lost and alone and about to be led into a nightmare. I wanted to mirror the horrific landscape of Dante's Inferno in the first section of Landmarks, also entitled "Inferno."

In addition to Dante's The Divine Comedy, I was also influenced by T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," "The Fire Sermon" section in particular. Eliot wrote that his reinterpretation of Dante was "to present the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast, between the Inferno and the Purgatorio, which Dante visited, and a hallucinated scene from an air-raid" (Eliot 31). In Landmarks I present a parallel between The Divine Comedy and the speaker's fall from grace and subsequent redemption during and after the 9/11 attacks.

Section one of Landmarks, entitled "Inferno," is set in New York City 2001. While Dante is guided by Virgil, my speaker is led into the City by a taxi driver. In "Arrival," the speaker wonders if she's entered a false city: "Maybe it had been created

on a soundstage in / Burbank or the Van Nuys airport like Casablanca. " Something is off-kilter here, and poems such as "Fort Greene Park" and "Ariel's Poem" foreshadow the events of September 11th. Most of the poems in this section are a recreation of my experiences in New York City during and following the World Trade Center attacks. In "Photographs" the speaker watches the burning buildings "bent / in laughter, a gift of fear." The experience is so surreal for her that she is unable to comprehend the enormity of it.

September 11th was a catalyst; prior to the attacks, the Twin Towers were simply two buildings in the cityscape. I never paid much attention to them unless I was trying to figure my way around Manhattan. After the Towers were gone, I saw the way that my country and my government responded, with hate and war, and I grew to fear my own government more than the terrorists.

I titled this collection Landmarks because I often use buildings to navigate my way through cities. I also think of buildings as a way for human beings to leave their mark on the land. It is a way for us to prove our importance and immortality. The World Trade Center was my landmark in New York City. I used it to find my way if I got lost. After the collapse, I suddenly found myself lost, unsure of how I got to this place.

For "Lindsay's Poem" I decided to interview my sister about her experiences during the attacks. She was a freshman at Pace University, about five blocks from Ground Zero and I was a junior at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. We were on the phone when the second plane hit. I remember hearing an explosion and screaming and then the phone disconnected. Later, when the towers collapsed I remember thinking, "she must be

dead." The phones and internet connections were not working at this point. There was no way of verifying that Lindsay was okay. We were both able to call our mom in California in the afternoon, and so by two o'clock I knew she was alive. The next day Pace bussed their students into Brooklyn. Lindsay and I were able to find each other by calling our mom and talking to each other through her. She stayed with me in my dorm room for a few weeks until Pace reopened, but we never talked about what she did or saw during those hours. It took seven years for that conversation to take place.

I didn't realize how affected I was by the "loss" of my sister until I began working on the "Inferno" section of Landmarks. Of course the familiar images of smoke and fallen towers appeared, but other images and memories began to surface as well. I had forgotten about attending a non-denominational service at the Pratt Institute chapel until I wrote "The Curse." I was invited by a Catholic friend. I went because I was still under the impression that my sister was dead. Church just seemed like the place to be. Instead of mourning and communing, I ended up swearing on sacred ground and feeling out of place. This poem is an attempt to capture the mindset of a speaker who is attempting to understand God and the meaning of tragedy but fails miserably.

In "Canto IV" of the Inferno, Dante questions God's will. When he finds Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan in Limbo, Dante asks "O you who honor art and science both, / who are these souls whose dignity has kept / their way of being, separate from the rest?" (Alighieri 74). It clearly bothers him that these men who lived virtuous and honorable lives were denied entrance into paradise simply because they died before Christ was born.

This is his struggle throughout The Divine Comedy. He journeys through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in order to learn how to accept God's Divine Will.

The speaker of Landmarks also struggles to find meaning in a seemingly senseless existence. What God would allow such a terrible thing to happen? The frantic anxiety and helplessness of the "Inferno" poems indicate her desperation and fear. She finds solace in getting stoned and grows increasingly afraid of the outside world. She and her sister regress into a child-like state, curled up in bed eating cookies and watching cartoons. By the time the "Inferno" section ends the speaker has been beaten down by the City. Death seems to surround her and she's quite sure that there isn't any meaning to life at all.

Section two, "Purgatorio," consists of waiting and leaving poems. "Purgatorio" marks the beginning of a journey that begins in isolation and ends in contentment and acceptance. Dante's Purgatorio is a purification and learning process for souls working their way towards Heaven. The speaker of Landmarks is purified through the pain of watching her grandfather die and the acceptance of new love in her life. The theme of this section is transition. The character of the grandfather transitions from life to the afterlife and the speaker transitions from a person obsessed with the dead to a person willing to move on with her life.

The first poem of this section is aptly titled "The Inbetween Place." It chronicles the experience of watching someone die. In stanza one the speaker states that "The waiting feels endless." She still exists in a dream-like state where time and reality are flux, but will come to a concrete place by the time she reaches "Paradiso."

"Last Day" is a poem about saying goodbye. On the day my grandfather died I went to see him. It was frightening, as the entire experience of watching him slowly die of Alzheimer's had been, but I also felt myself full of love. I told him that I loved him, and that I was proud to be his granddaughter. Then I sat down and read to him from his favorite book, Jack London's Call of the Wild. I was surprised to discover that the book was marked (purely coincidently as my mom had been reading it from start to finish) at my favorite passage; Buck's first snow. It felt important to include this detail in the speaker's journey, especially this direct quote from the book: "It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone." As a reader and a writer I am moved by the beauty of the language and the power of that statement.

A year ago I wouldn't say that my grandfather's death was "purifying" for me. I was still grieving. I still am, but there's a distance of months and years that gives me clarity. I have been pulled from the despair that I carried with me for seven years and I believe it has everything to do with my grandfather. My grandfather's death was an experience full of love and respect. Being with him helped balance my understanding of life and humanity. It restored my faith in both.

When I began Landmarks the first and third sections were reversed—the story began in "Paradiso" and ended in "Inferno." But the poems didn't fit that design. It occurred to me that the real story was in line with Dante's; lost and alone in the beginning and content and accepting in the end. When Dante reaches the Garden of Eden at the top of Purgatory he drinks from the River Lethe to cause his soul to forget past sins, and then from the River Eunoë to renew his memory of good deeds. In "Slouching

Towards Broadway" the speaker asks "How can I go back into the darkness / when I've already receded into light?" Like Dante she has crossed a boundary that permanently takes her out of Purgatory and the Inferno and prepares her for the journey into Paradise.

The final section of Landmarks, "Paradiso," contains poems that describe the speaker's entry into a new stage of life. She has shed past selves and become an adult. These are poems of harmony and acceptance. The speaker is no longer concerned with the heavy burden of death and instead focuses on romance and domestic affairs.

At the end of Paradiso Dante writes that "my / desire and will were moved already—like / a wheel revolving uniformly—by / the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (Alighieri 541). He is of course talking about Divine love, but I chose to interpret this as accepting the nature of the universe. Whether or not you believe in God or a higher power, the "wheel revolving uniformly" can be read as the universe being in balance. The speaker of Landmarks is concerned with smaller, daily issues in "Paradiso." Her universe is, at long last, in balance.

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Inferno

Arrival

The thick, wet heat outside slapped like a hand,
flattening me against the wall. It seemed out of
place here, and better suited for a tropical island.

At the taxi stand an attendant told me to move,
then led me into a yellow cab parked on the street.
I plunged my hands into the depths of the mauve

seat to recover the buckle. That belt was broken, too.
The driver said nothing while I struggled to strap myself
in, thinking about the sliver of glass embedded in my

ex-boyfriend's left elbow. He was flung through the
windshield of a taxi cab in Mexico. My taxi was a glider,
smoothly transitioning lanes on the Van Wyck. The landscape

was strangely empty, no skyscrapers or bridges, just
endless brick houses and asphalt. Perhaps
I had made a mistake, had landed in the wrong city.

Maybe it had been created on a soundstage in
Burbank or the Van Nuys airport like Casablanca.
Was I searching in vain? Was it too late to go back?

Then I saw it, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, a giant
looming in the distance. Soon after, we merged onto the
Brooklyn Queens Expressway. Slowly the city crept

up on us. The buildings taller, closer together.
No sunlight could reach us here. Everything old,
unprepared for an earthquake. The City appeared,

dwarfing everything. "Where you going, girly,"
the driver asked. "Willoughby Avenue, Brooklyn,"
I said. He grunted, stepped on the gas.

Fort Greene Park

Dante sits above the sea-bleached bones in Fort Greene Park.
shadows spread heavy across the landscape. Here is Dekalb Avenue,
there is Moe's and the Alibi, art students getting drunk in the dark.

Over on Myrtle, the post office closes. The sky tints indigo blue,
then fades to black. A fight breaks out at the Five Spot, men break
bottles on countertops, blood leaks onto the linoleum and a few

young girls spill out into the street. Brooklyn's finest arrive to take
official reports. The girls order sesame tofu at Dragon Garden, eating cheap
before disbanding for the evening. The police, bored on the sidewalk, make

jokes about white girls who dance at black bars. A bar back sweeps
broken glass into the gutter and eyes the officers suspiciously, wonders
why they haven't left. A foul smell settles on the crowd, a rat leaps

out of the sewer and into the empty bar. Back at the park, Dante wanders
past childless playgrounds. There are no stars out tonight. Tree branches sway
like boney arms, scratch his tunic and his skin. As the wind blows he ponders

the ghostly swings and hollow slides. The place filled with laughter by day
turns sinister at night. The families sleep safely, ignorant in their homes.
In the soft focus of daylight the powerful never fall, the great city will stay

unchanged. But darkness incubates a subtle shift. For us a terrible beauty looms.
Dante walks beneath the eternal flame, listens to the city's old bones. He hears
the change in the air, whispering softly, "Something wicked this way comes."

Ariel's Poem

This is the way things fall
apart. Sometimes the side
walk crumbles, and the call

Comes but it's easier to hide,
Turn away, we're just joking.
In the end we're glassy-eyed.

Angels with skeleton wings
Smile as the daylight ceases.
On the platform a bum sings.

The C train severs Ariel into pieces
on New Year's Eve. Nothing was ever
the same after that, we lost our faces.

Your teeth, my tongue pressed together, a blur.
Birds pecked at our eyes with abandon. It was
too late for me to pretend to be demure.

There was a sign above
the doorway, but we
could not read it:

Per me si va ne la città dolente,
Per me si va ne l'etterno dolore,
Per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore:
Fecemi la divina podestate,
La somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
se non etterne, e io etterno duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.

Photographs

The beauty of a day unmatched, the sky sinned
only by the crippling bang that went off. Silent
telephone lines, a crisp yellow sun. No wind

stirred. I walked to the window, bent with laughter,
a gift of fear. Within the panes bloom pillars of fire,
a collapse. A reporter says I think

It is gone. How did I come to be in this corner room
With a better view? My neighbor stands drenched
In the brightening day. We are strangers entombed,

Sharing intimate moments with camera lenses
Pointed downtown, but for one woman who
Clicked away at our faces.

Lindsay's Poem

My sister is sleeping in—she has an 11 o'clock class and why
bother greeting the day until it's absolutely necessary? The phone
on the tiny desk attached to the foot of the bed rings & rings & rings.

It is her sister asking 'are you looking out your window?' And Lindsay
looks, sees the smoke and tells her sister to hold on. She runs down
the hall to Misba's room but before she reaches the doorway an explosion

shakes the building. The other students are screaming and the cell phone
connection is severed. Outside big clouds of 8 ½ x 11 computer paper
pour out from big black holes. Large chunks of debris are falling, some falling

faster with arms and legs maybe fifteen of them and Lindsay realizes what those
are and that she is wearing neon green pajamas with a Tigger tee shirt and no bra.
She stands watching through the window while one of the boys takes photographs.

No one moves or says anything for a long time (maybe minutes maybe hours
but probably not days) until a tapestry of smoke rumbles towards the river
and the street is veiled in ash.

The Curse

Andrea invites me
to a non-denominational
service. Having nothing
to do but wait,
I go.

Father Lynch gives me a poem,
Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could
Not Stop for Death." I stumble
upon *a swelling of the ground*
and "fuck!" flies out of my mouth
before I can stop it.

I should be praying for my sister,
who is surely dead, and the others
lost beneath concrete blankets
but instead obsess about
the word muttered on holy
ground.

I turn to Andrea,
"I said 'fuck' in church,"
blush, because I just
said it again.

First Night

On the balcony with Jomo I share a joint,
watch the blank space and smoke, think
my sister is somewhere over there.

This is the first time I've seen the City
unlit but for the orange light flashing
atop the Empire State Building. Where

is the Chrysler? South Street Seaport?
All of my landmarks start to blur
in the dark. I imagine the fire

men pulling steel away from concrete
but finding nothing. Jomo's girlfriend
comes home, stares at me with crazy

eyes, makes me paranoid. I do my best
to appear sober but my scent betrays me.
She thinks it's funny this way, my nervous

ramblings amuse her, my hand sweeping
across the railing, "She's out there some
where. I tried to walk across but I can't"

Regression

We had always believed that we were safe,
that the authorities would protect us, but
the authorities began pointing their guns
at us (we, who had barely left childhood
behind) and insisted that our revenge
lay in Baghdad.

They seemed to relish the idea
that they were Absolutely Good and that
we, with our lesbian moms and our sleeping
in on Sundays, had been exposed as
questionable patriots.

Sensible Lindsay feared only bathing,
knew it would take too much time
to escape in the event of another attack.

I became afraid of everything:
the tree-lined streets, the sky,
the A train, dogs, my peers.

We huddled inside, sharing
a twin bed like when
we were small girls watching
action movies where
underground heroes
defended the City
from evil villains.

New York couldn't call for back up.

Solace

We head for Katrina's apartment in twos
and threes looking for a little comfort food
and hydroponic weed, past the junkyard
puppy with a malformed foot.

Everyone sits on cushions, eats chocolate
chip cookies, passes the blunt to the left.

It is dark. The moonlight filters down
the airshaft and into the kitchen.

We inventory our losses.
Someone's overweight cousin
on the 106th floor, another's
grandma in Pennsylvania.

They tell me I don't hurt so much.

I walked past those buildings
every day in high school

Funny how I believe them until
I return home.

What California Doesn't Understand

The year after didn't happen on television. National Guardsmen parked tanks in front of universities. They pointed machine guns at students as they walked across campus. They stood on subway platforms with attack dogs at the ready.

The newspaper told us that Anthrax was everywhere. The television said that another attack was imminent, that we should duct tape our windows in case a biological weapon was dropped. Stores sold gas masks and full-body "protection" suits. People

bought them and wore them on the way to work. Pillars of smoke continued to rise and blow with the wind. Some days it was heavier than others. It always appeared clean and white, but the smell was dirty, burnt asbestos and other things, unmentionable things.

Fliers were plastered everywhere. Photographs of wives, husbands, fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, lovers, thousands of them were printed on 8 ½ x 11" computer paper. Pictures of people on vacation, getting

married, at family gatherings, smiling, laughing, posing next to their vital information; height, weight, age, marital status, what floor they worked on, who was looking for them, why it was important to find them. Ghosts were everywhere. We were a haunted people,

a lost people. We went to work, to church, to school and the faces of the dead followed us. A picture drawn in crayon, the words "Daddy come home soon" written across the bottom. Our own deaths were promised to us on the nightly news.

It was the adaptation of an old city to a new landscape. We stood on balconies and stared at what was no longer there. We gave blood, brought coffee to firemen, cops, volunteers, said "fuck you" to duct tape, pulled our windows open and screamed at the nightly news.

Charity

Dan decides to take us
into the City. We were going
to go to Krispy Kreme
but it's been razed

so we take the A train
to Chambers Street, walk
to the blockades and the
Starbuck's across the street

load up on free coffee four
cups high, head out towards
the ruins.

We hand the cups to dozens
of policemen, firemen, who
don't look changed at all.

You Can't Write a Poem About September 11th

But
The smoke blew into Brooklyn
smelling of burnt asbestos

Endless sirens on the BQE
called out belated warnings

Office detritus and ashes floated
onto the promenade

The A train trembles slowly
through the WTC station

Someone threw red roses out
the window and onto the platform

Every time
a plane flew overhead
the people ducked

Upon My Return to Ground Zero

I walk the circumference of the work site,
See only the blockades that prevent
Unauthorized eyes from gazing at the plight.

I am swept away with the local regiment,
Let them guide me down the sidewalk,
Up stairwells to begin my descent.

The tourists gather to stare and squawk,
Photograph themselves before a great
Emptiness. I watch uneasily, quietly skulk

Away from the snapshots, a bouquet
Of white tulips clutched in my hand.
My nerves begin to deteriorate.

Can I demand
A quiet moment in the Financial District
During rush hour? I stand

On Church Street, listen to the tick
Of footsteps on pavement. I head for
The bright lights until I reach a brick

Firehouse with a plaque on the wall, dead
And dying flowers on the ground. I bend
Down, pray as I place my tulips before

The alter. I walk away quickly,
Glance around. Am I afraid
Someone might see me?

Ted Berrigan's Family

I am unfolding chairs in rows inside St. Mark's. It's dark and maybe snowing a little. There might be a few other unpaid interns with me. But I feel somewhat alone listening to the satisfying snap click of the chairs.

After the chairs are laid out I run the box office. A woman asks for a senior ticket. "Can I see some ID," I joke. She glares at me. I meekly take her money, hand back the change. I don't tease anyone else that evening.

The stage is well-lit. I stand below watching from the sidelines. Ron Padgett walks on, reads a sonnet, then introduces Jim Carroll as "our resident rock star." Carroll takes the stage. The audience whispers excitedly. He looks like David

Bowie (not like Leonardo DiCaprio at all) and he reads a sonnet also. Everyone reads a sonnet. Alice and Anselm and Anne and all of the famous people I've read but never seen in person before. They all read sonnets and look very comfortable and happy to be there.

Afterwards all the people who read sonnets hug each other while the audience watches. I watch, too, and break down the chairs. Alice looks so lovely just like a mother poet should look, regretfully maternal (*I'm wife I'm mother I'm myself and him and I'm myself*

and him and him she wrote). I fold chairs and stack them in piles and wish she was my mother and that she was giving me hugs. I wish the lights shone on me a bit, that someone else was stacking chairs for a change. My family faces a different ocean,

one that I haven't seen in months. They fade away, ceases to exist until there is only Alice with her smart haircut and handsome son having a family reunion without me. They are serving wine and cheese with crackers in the side room. Everyone empties out,

someone turns out the lights. I think maybe it's time to join them, I'll have a glass of cheap merlot and smile and introduce myself but instead I walk down First Avenue to the L Train and then the G Train back to Brooklyn and it is snowing slightly.

When I Change

You sometimes look
at me like
I don't know
what I'm doing
which scares me
'cause it's true.

Once I tried
to pull your shirt
over your head
but it got stuck.

Turns out it
was too small.
I felt bad
for all the tugging.

Your lips sank
down into a perfect
horseshoe right
before you busted
loose.

It is a correction,
wordless warning.

No Headline

The City is encroaching on me.
I can't ignore the smell of dog
shit in the morning like I used to.

The R train stops suddenly
because it ran over a man
just like the C train ran over
Ariel.

I imagine those people on New
Year's Eve impatiently waiting
for the train to move not knowing
what lay below on the tracks.

I could be one of them, just another
annoyed Brooklynite.

Purgatorio

The Inbetween Place

The waiting feels endless I hold
your hand it feels like a skeleton's
all bones and paper thin while

your eyes are all that's left of you.
Sometime you come back to us,
smile while I moisten your lips

with a tiny pink sponge on a stick,
so I talk about the places I remember
that you once knew, too. Later, at

home I leaf through your baby pictures,
the old house on Beacon Street, your
mother, summer trips to New England,

gathering stories to tell you upon my
return. *Oh, the house was so tall* I will
say, *You're mother was so beautiful*

and you will come back from the inbetween
place where you hover most days, your
eyes making contact with my eyes instead

of blurring off into the distance like a star
gazer's.

Tiger, Tiger

The traffic stopped
remained still would
not move at all

until everyone exited
their cars. Our thoughts
weren't laid out in subtitles.
We smoked cigarettes

with each other, enjoyed
the company, joked about
the efficiency of NYSDOT.

How could we have imagined
the orange/black pelt escaping
into the darkness, the round
face peering in confusion
at the oil slick lanes of the I-278?

Up ahead taillights begin
disappearing
we returned to our cars,
go back to pretending
no one else exists.

Walt's Poem

You are everywhere these days. I see you at the promenade, at Fulton
Ferry Landing. You are in the guardrails and the homemade ice cream,
in Patsy's pizza. What can I do but sit here and write? The sunlight rolls

across the surface of the East River. The tide and light give the City
a golden hue which I mistake for grandeur. What is this place? I am
lost among a thousand poets' footsteps. There you are Walt, laying

bricks squarely in their place. The careful wordsmith. A man of
the people. There was no bridge, only the great billowing masts
of ships blocking the towers from view. How your heart must have

ached to read those lines—You've fallen cold and dead—not only
from the grief but the terrible rhyme of it (*This arm beneath your head*?).
An old and bearded man settles in next to me like a lanky bird. "Who

are you to judge," he asks, "I've seen your work and it's nothing to write
home about." I'm ecstatic. The master has seen the nonsensical ramblings
I call poetry? "Yes, I've seen it," he grumbles, "and it's crap. You traveled

3,000 miles for nothing. go home, little girl." I smile. He reminds me of another
curmudgeon I know. "Do you like ice cream? Do you like pizza?" I pester him,
egg him on. "What is there to like?" he asks, "and aren't you lactose intolerant?"

His eyes never meet mine, but stay fixed across the river. "This is not my New
York," he tells me, "This is not my Brooklyn. This monument to money, this flash.
The church steeples buried beneath the Financial District."

I want to hold his left hand like I used to hold my grandpa's thin and boney appendage.
The skin would be powdery and soft. Cold and warm at the same time. Mine are always
soft, hot-blooded, chubby like a toddler's. I reach over, but he pulls away, stands up,

turns. The back of his brown jacket faces me. A voice floats over the shoulders.
"You're a sweet kid," the jacket tells me, "this city, it's too much for you. Head
West. Get married. Have a lot of fat pink babies. Forget the river and the bridge. It's
already forgotten you."

Succession

Their eyes watch us
endlessly as we go about
our day

unaware
of parallels

so much was lost
is lost

we yearn for
understanding

a better life
eternal life

is not ours to
demand.

The Day After Kurt Died

It is 11:45 in the suburbs
it is 1994 on a school day
and I don't know if I will
catch the number 27 bus
when the last bell rings

I walk through the cool
halls buzzing with voices
and buy a burrito that turns
my stomach

I go to math class and Mr. Ross
reads aloud my score on last night's
homework (55 out of 100, another F)

Amanda says she is going to Seattle
but I am too afraid to run and don't
know why she's going anyway

and I feel my chest caving in and I am
thinking of hiding in my bedroom while
he howled into a microphone and we all
knew he didn't want us for a Sunday.

The Train Ride

1.
The thick buzz of an idle train engine. The rustle of turning newspaper pages. A dry autumn cough. The clanging bells. The distant, disembodied voice of the conductor: "Safety announcement. If we need to evacuate, please stay fifteen feet away from the

tracks." The metallic creak of cars and chugga chugga clacking as we move down the track. The squeaking of brakes as we stop. The background beep as the doors open to let passengers on and off. The footsteps of people looking for seats. The intentionally loud

voices of important people on their cell phones. The sickening click of nail clippers. Why am I always on trains and airplanes with people who think it is appropriate to groom themselves in public?

2.
The blurry fences, trees, and telephone poles as we pass. Brown wooden pallets stacked outside of a construction site. Gray granite piled high in open cars on the Union Pacific line. The bright yellow, red, and green of a Mayflower truck. The dull blues and grays of

the interior. The red lettering on coated phosphorescent pigment emergency signs instructing us on how to open the windows. Multi-colored graffiti—fat, loose letters on cream colored buildings facing the tracks.

3.
The hard plastic windowsill and thick rubber lining where I rest my elbow. Rhythmic vibrations moving up from the wheels to the floor to my feet to the seat to my body. The softness of my clothes. The pinch of my underwire bra. The dampness of my hair,

framing my face, brushing against my neck. The gentle metallic presence of my ring and necklace. The not-quite-soft cushioning of the seats against my back and thighs. The itchy fabric against my forearm.

4.
The crunch of the hard outer shell breaking between my teeth. The shock of menthol from my curiously strong Altoids gum. I feel it in my nasal passages as I chew. The dull mint that remains after the initial bite fades away. The neutral sorbitol, gum base, xylitol, and hydrogenated starch that is left after every bit of flavor has been washed away.

5.
The lingering, dusty scent of a recently smoked cigarette. The artificial sweetness of my water lily body spray. The musk of hair products from my morning shower and beauty regimen. The almost-burnt smell of a toasted bagel—someone's last minute breakfast.

The spicy hint of a man's cologne. A faint antiseptic smell from industrial strength cleaner. The overpowering aroma of garlic and fish. The stench of body odor. The warm smell of coffee with cream and sugar. The underlying scent of humans packed in close together.

Intern

I still love you sometimes.
During those moments I force you
Into the basement of my mind.

Here no light can filter through.
A single light bulb flickers.
There are no windows to use,

Only stairs and empty bottles of liquor.
You are carefully filed in chronological
Order, locked twice so I can forget quicker.

My defect appears to be biological.
The sordid recollections grow hostile,
Each thought mutates into illogical

Expectations that fester for awhile.
Better to shed you like so much dead skin,
I know when efforts have become futile.

First Saturday—Brooklyn Museum of Art

This is the way museums ought to be;
the doors open after dark, the masses
entering for free and getting drunk on

cheap beer and dried paint. In the courtyard
a Puerto Rican band plays while everyone
dances *one-two-three-one-two-three-one*

We take the elevator upstairs to look at
the Basquiat exhibit a long line snakes
out so we wait and wait with our beers

becoming warm and empty. Once inside
we take our time looking at walls and
feeling important for being inside after
hours looking. It all makes sense and it
seems like we shouldn't be there but

we are thanks to the Target Corporation's
generous donation.

Fielding Dawson's Memorial

I am serving sangria at Fielding Dawson's memorial.
Hettie Jones says, "I never knew anyone named Fi
Or Fielding before," then gives us a hint of a smile.

Poets from Sing Sing recite verse from memory
Standing at the front of the back room in St.
Mark's Church, each one a bard and a parole.

The audience quietly listens without complaint.
The readers speak each word deliberate and slow.
Somehow I feel my presence here is a taint.

It is as though I am looking in through a large window
At a private moment. The people look raw, exposed,
Sitting primly in the chairs I unfolded two hours ago.

No one's eyes are dry, everyone remains composed.
Still I am enveloped by the grief of my acquaintances.
It remains with me long after the last door is closed.

Last Day

I've known it was coming all the while
waiting, making preparations for this day
but here it is and the sound of your gasps

frightens me I don't want you to suffer,
I can tell that you suffer because the air
won't go in like it's supposed to. I could

run out to the hallway, or scream, or cry
but instead I sit in the rocking chair next
to your bed and pick up the copy of

Call of the Wild my mother left, start
to read where she left off. My favorite
passage from your favorite book. Buck's
first snow:

It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone.

The Search

I searched the cabinets,
the closets, the desk in
your home office

my throat periodically
catching among
old issues of
The California Pelican
and Bunk Johnson's
Hot Jazz.

All of the wine
in your cellar
became vinegar.

I took a 1970
Chateauneuf du Pape
anyway.

It wasn't what
I was looking for.

Surely I would
ferret out something
of you, your
voice on paper
for me to unfold,
touch.

I found you
in the footlocker
beneath the basement
stairs, in unsealed
ivory envelopes
containing your
Army Exchange
Ration Card,
Immunization Records,
and a letter the Army
censored for "Non-Vic"
content.

Latent Prints

I try to remove my finger
prints but they are every
where and invisible
dammit.

The evidence is cataloged
and stacked against me
like pennies on a countertop.

Once again my body has betrayed
me. Even my DNA can't be trusted.

I will be hung by a double helix.

Slouching Towards Broadway

How can I go back into the darkness
when I've already receded into light?
There is no beast slouching towards

Broadway. Our birds witness only
the mundane. A woman in heels on
her way to work. Children on the side

walk jumping rope. How can I remember
loneliness when my bed is filled with
warm limbs and heavy blankets? I listen

to even, content breathing and realize
I am the cause of this contentment.
The days of blockades and German

Shepards blur into the past.
Instinctively my hands clench tighter.
For so long I have defined myself by

the emptiness. I don't know who I am
without it.

Spirit's Willing

The body falls down:
her delicate bone structure hidden
by bruises blooming across cheeks.

She awoke with flagstone rock against skin.
Living alone in the hills, stubbornly refusing
to give up stairs she's no longer able to navigate.

Her sons and daughters beg, then threaten,
she knows that this will fuel the argument.
She cannot let them find her like this; bloody

in the dirt she pulls herself up in spite of a broken
pelvis and missing teeth, somehow finds strength
to crawl inside and make that phone call.

This is not the day she had envisioned unfolding.

Paradiso

Lines

It was Sunday, maybe
it was Monday but that
was the day you leaned
over and touched my hand.

The lines blurred,
became soft.

The constant rushing
of the subway brought
me to the end of you

your sound like
coffee grounds
in my mouth.

("this is
madness")

bodies exchanged
and lost.

The closet was open,
you could see all
the details.

Hakone Gardens

I want you
in the bushes, the clouds
making empty threats of
rain.

Maybe that already happened
and I forgot as the puddles
evaporated around us.

We thought we would get
married that day, me in
an Ivory gown, you
in a well-pressed suit.

Where is my tiara now?
unworn in the closet
next to the chopsticks
we bought and used once.

Shadows of Self

The bedroom
window is open.
We are caught
between lingering
loss and rhythmic
thighs pressing
against us.

Fire burns
beneath moon
light wind whips
sand into our shins.
It doesn't hurt
much.

Twelve Minutes

The instant has passed.
You were a blur and
I cannot forget the
outline (fuzzy at first,
then clearer as I moved
closer).

I scrubbed myself
vigorously in the bath
while you watched, wiped
soap from my eyelids.

Steam moved up and
against white tiles
and skin, left tiny
droplets.

Your fingers were small
spiders writing poems
and short summaries
of your day.

My neck fit nicely
against your triceps
and the motel's
starched pillow.

Insomnia

I watch the moon
through the uneven slats
of my bedroom window.

It is waxing half-full;
a toothy, lunar grin.

The occasional cloud passes by
partially (or fully) obstructing
my view.

My fingertips touch the fingertips
of my love as his chest rises with
deep, easy breaths.

He exhales,
the sky clears into morning.

Morning Stroll

The grass in Campbell Park
is crystallized with frost.

Someone has spit on the ground.
Every ten feet or so is marked
with saliva.

Highway 880 stretches above
me creating a made-for-TV
movie.

Call me Jane Doe.

Halfway through to the other side
I decide that if I reach the emergency
call box, I'll survive.

I pass the yellow box with the blue
and white sign, keep running until
I see a wild, one-eyed cat eating
kibble under a tree.

I Would Rather be a Rock Star

My brother is writing a song
in the basement of Swig Hall
where he is doing laundry. He
plays notes on the keyboard
and it's very lovely to be
in the humid basement of
a residence hall where
everyone is quite blond
and athletic looking.

But I hide behind my laptop
in my apartment not even
in a coffee shop with free
Wi-Fi because I can't write
poetry with someone looking
over my shoulder all the time.
I am a true artist, my pages
fill up and spin out of control,
are hot to touch like burning
in my hands. I stuff everything
into envelopes, mail it off.

Spiders

I let the spiders in
because the flies united
against me, brazenly landing
on my hair and skin
as if they belong there.

The fat black buzzing
didn't stand a chance
against the delicate gray
violence all long legs
and quiet moving

along the places where
the walls meet the ceiling

I loved the spiders,
learned to tolerate
the silken traps laid
across my bookcases
and window panes

until the morning their
brick-colored cousins
appeared

large chelicerae bared
as they scurried crab-like
along the bedroom walls.

These cumbersome new
neighbors moved aggressively,
even audibly, into the far
corners of my apartment.

I cupped them beneath glass
jars, released them onto
the thick green leaves
of morning glory outside.

Yet they came back,
demanding a place
at the table and
space on my pillow.

The Outside Cat

We opened the back
door and rescued what
looked like our cat from
what also looked like our
cat.

But actually it was a
cream-colored feral
with a flat face and
a guttural drum voice.

Our domestic had
been attacking this
cat who wanted only
to rest for a minute
after (probably)
being chased by
wild raccoons.

So we hid her in
the bathtub with a
bowl of tuna fish
and a dish of water.

Reverie

In sleep we
define ourselves
differently, you
defend me, fight
wars in my honor.

The bridge fell
ever so slightly
into the crevice

the sky limits my
movements. I am
trapped looking up
at a waning moon.

I love you endlessly
while simultaneously
cursing your name.

The Cave

Ferns grow against the light
keep pushing towards
something unseen.

What is the difference
between a stalagmite
and stalactite?

I ask myself while rubbing
my fingers against rock
walls wet with slime.

Someone was here before
me. There are remains
of a fire, tree trunks
configured nearby.

The memory of sunlight
fades, here there is only
the sound of water on stone.