

**Aviator without a Mask**

**Poems**

BY

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THESIS

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This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and partner, Arik Lubkin.

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## Summary

“Aviator without a Mask” begins by questioning a mystery surrounding my grandfather’s possible involvement as a pilot in the Nagasaki mission and then moves into an exploration of the numerous nuclear tests the United States military conducted in Nevada and in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. A number of the poems in “Aviator without a Mask” adapt language from prior materials, such as declassified detonation footage, government reports, and articles from mid-twentieth century issues of the *National Geographic* as a way to thread the voice of a lyric speaker through a historical archive. This archive has allowed me to think through a tension between two lyric ideals: one, that the lyric speaker sings—often as though outside of mortal constraints—from a place of *individual* loss, and the other, that the lyric creates a *world* from this loss that is paradoxically contingent on the potential of its own destruction.

The poems of “Aviator without a Mask” serve as a kind of test, one for evaluating the construction of consciousness we have come to accept as the speaking persona—and its metaphorical “mask”—of the lyric poem. This study, therefore, investigates the following questions: What do we expect from the world-making voice that speaks in the lyric? And what are our assumptions about its subjectivity and its relationship to historical fact? When the lyric speaker is examined on its own, severed from the person of the poet, it suggests a timeless voice, a presence that can create the world through an utterance like the mythic Ovid, who remakes the world with his lyre. Instead of enacting a speaking voice as though it heralds a world-making persona—immortal, like a god—or creating a lyric persona that is dependent upon the historical fact of the identity of a person, the poems of this dissertation expose lyric presence as a feature of poetic form. “Aviator without a Mask,” therefore, aims to render legible one of the most crucial conventions of the lyric genre by revealing and removing its masks.

The nakedness would rise and suddenly turn  
Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing

*“Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” Wallace Stevens*

## First Thing

You look like a monster, one woman said to another.  
The woman was on fire. This is the first of two screws  
twisted into a wall. One bus is sent on its route minutes before  
the other. This is the first. Thousands of soldiers had been  
lowering their faces to the grass, as though an exercise  
can will an effect. People made their way to the hospital:  
a doctor would look at them, and then they could die.  
You can dip a line of monofilament into a river.  
You can do it twice. The first becomes a second. The second  
becomes a third. Three girls stretched out their arms while the wind  
sheared their flesh. Sheared, not seared, what was left.  
I could have shown you a swimming pool lit with turquoise light.  
It was early. It was a mission. It wasn't the first.

The Sun Rising, Pacific Theatre

Here we have another moment of blue-sky thinking,  
when no one loves you in the morning,  
the tinderbox as empty as a train at 5 AM.

It is 5 AM: a tin knife and fork packed in your pants,  
you yank the sheets up where your neck  
placed an envelope of nerves.

Acrid sky over us, streaked with the tar  
blur of gasoline: the sky knows the machines  
are being fed—that is blue-sky thinking,

when no one loves you less. I want to touch the raw  
cloth of your coat sleeve while you put your body  
inside it: it's like I'm the voice from the beginning

of an opera that speaks from the ceiling  
gilded with octagonal tiles to say, *there are exits*  
*on all sides*. But you are moving like a wheel

riding over a rope, and your lover  
is your hand, lacing up boots through their rusted portals.  
The sky reminds me of nothing, the way it feels

staring into white curls of light combed through stones.  
What I thought was a tinderbox is actually  
a box of bullets. What you thought was the sun is the sun.

## Holy

The nurses have left work. The pilots, too.  
A blank blue *caelum* arcs over us.  
I've returned to a city of men  
with names scrawled in ink across the throat.  
Somewhere, you are hooked up to a machine.  
The monitor hides your face, becomes it,  
black frame and flickering glass.  
You sit at the head of the table in our sunroom.  
I reach across my mother and touch your arm.  
I kiss an area of the cold plastic  
where your cheek would be, and blood  
vessels prickle purple, below, at your neck.  
You are tilting your head—I swear.  
This is my dream. We drink tea. They paint  
the station walls white for us.

## Cloud Cover

*Unable to See the Ocean or Fix Position by the Stars*

When is it time to bomb an island?  
 When clouds stretch into anvils? Or a white veil? Or a mare's tail?  
 Windy, dry spells carry the best fire:  
 the air mass moves like a string mop over the floor.

The clouds will be anvils, the clouds will be veils, the clouds will be hair.  
 Our forces and the enemy are publishing handbooks.  
 An air mass turns like a string mop into the floor  
 of water named *horse latitudes* by early sailors.

The enemy air force published a handbook on clouds:  
 white alto-cumulous resembling a herd of sheep,  
 the calm, glittering water floating with horses  
 where wooden blocks with streamers carry words of warning.

The white alto-cumulous appeared like sheep on a hill  
 when aircraft carriers snuck in on an eastward storm.  
 Wooden blocks with streamers drop from the sky, meaning something:  
 the wind would blow hard enough to strip the trees.

The aircraft arrived through high, scattered clouds.  
 Movie studios pay to know whether rain will fall  
 or wind will blow hard enough to rustle the leaves.  
 We can't see the power of it, swirling.

Studios record how rain sounds, hitting the leaves.  
 We know dry wind carries the best fire.  
 A power we can't see is swirling around us.  
 When is it time to bomb an island?

## The Muse Appears in Your Kitchen

Let's unbraid your hair, wet for bed,  
and comb it loose. Let's talk like sisters.  
See this photo? The pilot half stands—

summer making shadows  
of the grains in his cheek.  
His uniform pulls tight at the cuffs.

His sister's here, watching him  
like a window pushed open, today  
letting air in. He looks at you instead:

his eyes are hooks  
inked with little feathers  
of light. *See what I mean?*

his sister seems to say,  
unscrewing a jar of pickles.  
The runway blurs

at 110 miles per hour,  
wheels lifting up above a snowy scar  
the way the mind silvers, sad.

He's at his mother's house  
on leave—where is she? *Mom*  
he worries at the lens. *Mom?*

## Airman on the Ground

It's another beautiful day in Chicago and I haven't a thing to do  
except listen to the radio. One window overlooks the lake.  
The lights go on and I don't know where I am for a second.  
In fact, I'm writing this letter at a desk

while I listen to the radio. One window overlooks the lake.  
Take care of my car and see that it doesn't freeze up.  
I'M HAPPY OK. I'm writing you this letter.  
Tuesday I'm going for a special test and hope I pass.

Take care of my car and see it doesn't freeze up.  
On the way to the show, I rode in a '42, 8-cylinder, super-special Cadillac.  
If I do ship out I'll let you know—I think it all depends on this test—  
but I don't know where or when. Every day, a couple fellers leave,

and I go to a show. That '42, 8-cylinder, super-special Cadillac  
reminds me of "my" car. Ha! So far I haven't received any mail—  
I'm beginning to wonder. Every day a couple fellers leave.  
I talk to beautiful girls & eat in their houses, sleep in hotels.

What happened to my car? I haven't received any mail...  
So come on folks, at least a letter a day.  
I talk to beautiful girls & eat in their houses, sleep in hotels.  
I feel great—that's why I'm writing a long letter.

No mail for two days. Come on. At least a letter a day.  
Right now I'm looking at the picture I'm going to send you.  
I feel great—that's why I'm writing a long letter.  
I'm going to rent a camera, but I don't think I'll have prints made.

Right now I'm looking at the picture I'm going to send you.  
I'm going to get the negatives quicker, as I may be shipped out any day,  
and I'll rent the camera. But I won't make any more prints.  
I hope I remain here over the holidays.

I may be shipped out any day. Do you understand?  
It's another beautiful day in Chicago and I haven't a thing to do.  
I hope I can stay here.  
But when the lights go on, I don't know where I am.

## Nagasaki

Once, when we visited my grandfather,  
he spread his hands over the placemats,  
palms up. *This is the plane.* Above the creases  
brushed like bird-prints across his fingers,  
gray wings balanced, stiff as our angry pet cockatiel.  
This is the way my mother tells stories:  
pausing to notice the cardinals flashing  
like wet paintbrushes in the trees.  
*This is the plane* that rested on my grandfather's hands,  
the fragile plastic toy model of a B-29. *This is it.*  
He clicked a finger against one wing. Plastic flaps  
opened. Its propeller spun itself invisible while wind  
argued under its cool dark belly. *They interviewed me  
to do it. I was there, in one of the other planes.*  
The nose was a bulb of glass, inside:  
olive green cloth folded above a fist.  
A face blurred behind the sun-scarred window.  
*This is where I sat.* Glass clouded with breath  
like peeling swirls of glue fingerprints.  
A propeller spun itself invisible. Maybe the B-29s  
looked like distant white-fronted geese. Maybe  
they looked like silver knives in the clouds.  
*After it dropped, we had to count to four. One.*  
*When we saw a bright light, we had to pull out.*  
Two. Maybe Japan looked like a dreaming child  
curled in a blanket. Three. *When we got to four,  
nothing happened.* Five. *We thought  
something went wrong.* Six. *Wrong?* Seven—  
propellers spun themselves invisible; strands of cloud  
tissue caught fire—a forest pond at dusk  
blackening with birds opening up like hands.

## Interview

One chair in a room of chairs is empty,  
but the subject should not sit.  
Describe your bank and turns.

Several others wait in their bunker  
playing bridge. Did you doze  
during practice runs

from Puerto Rico to Venezuela?  
The subject thinks of the halo  
of yellow around the window.

Describe what you feel like alone.  
In a metal case. On a metal floor.  
Do you have a wife?

The subject told one girl  
his family were farmers, from Utah...  
Tell us. What is the difference

between maneuvering a B-17 and a B-29?  
The subject remembers eating a sandwich  
under a coconut tree. We understand

you already almost died  
once: inside your glass house.  
The right wheel didn't descend—

and the ground came closer,  
looked like it would scrape  
your skin off.

You've done well. But how  
about being alone. In the light.  
Get ready for the secret of your life.

## Negative Peeled Back from a Cardboard Album

Morning. Island light:  
glare of water—a blind

surface—skimming  
the text. I choose

three overcoats hanging  
loose from a wire:

white shouldered,  
top buttons open

into empty necks.  
The wind attracts one,

turns a sleeve slightly.  
Officers sleep outside

the frame. Outside,  
the planes tick

with heat. I see a snake  
bleeding out the mouth:

a hose leaking water.  
Tongue to teeth, I feel

a question: slight, slighted—

## Personal History

I'm supposed to be sliding  
 my numb toes into boots  
 to bring the mail out. Three  
 lemons rot in a gray bowl.  
 I used to write letters to both  
 sets of grandparents, my pilot  
 grandfather replying the least.  
 During my tomboy phase,  
 he would try to teach me tennis  
 in a park in Vermont—a hornet  
 pausing around me while I swung,  
 the brim of my Bulls cap  
 shadowing my eyes. The apostrophe  
 of a stinger would always find my brother,  
 his ankles—how he would run away  
 from the empty swings, crying.  
 My grandfather told him once: *to escape,*  
*fly so high, the enemy can't read you,*  
 the clouds wound in balls  
 of cotton candy, the drop  
 tickle in the stomach, the lift—  
 he hardly spoke to us  
 the rest of the afternoon.  
 So my brother and I threw hot dog buns  
 at geese, their toes dragging  
 fans through the water, then pins  
 of light, and the rest of the story is like satin  
 stitches that screen a background with lines.

Tucked into black paper tabs,  
 a photo of an atomic cloud  
 marks the page of an album.  
*I guess it's OK now,* he said, meaning  
 giving it away. It will not make you  
 close your eyes. It does not match  
 the famous image—fireball ballooning up.  
 Our photo shows an intact, darker  
 column a breath—blink,  
 swallow—sooner. *Tick, tick, tick.*  
 Whose? Another official shot.  
 I imagine a page of language  
 appearing woven  
 from platinum—each verb glinting.  
 The surface would be an excerpt

knifed from the hem of a priest's robe.  
A priest's body is on loan  
in one museum, the placard explaining  
how under the lid of the sarcophagus  
a scribe copied the glyphs of a prayer  
too old for him to understand:  
vertical bars patterned with eyes,  
another line like a fret glued  
to a guitar. Did the garble  
protect this body from history?  
Is that what language does?  
I kneeled at the bottom of the glass  
case and stared. Here are the chapped feet.

## Reaction

### *Chicago Pile-1*

I wound through the gothic castle  
    buildings in the university of stained glass,  
 its windows open in early July

   neutrally through metal frames  
 to allow in the sound of electric tools  
    biting around some white petunias

men handled with gloves like marble  
    sculptures of minor gods.

I crossed over the buried

   reactor without thought, trying to learn  
 enough French to pass the language  
    of time: I remember some Sartre.

I finished a translation after coffee and pancakes  
    the morning of my birthday, then oiled my arms  
 in sunscreen and caught the bus

   to the lake, that day a sheen of sealskin gray.  
 A lifeguard in an orange vest  
    had been cutting across the waves

in an aluminum boat when she started yelling  
    words at us through a mega-phone,  
 but the wind ripped them out of her throat—

   as if they were individual knots in a kite string  
 or the model numbers printed on an endoscope wire  
    you swallow like a pill to photograph your inner folds,

the camera then cut out of you—  
    then the garble amplified angrier  
 as the glittered crests began to swell

   faster over the sandbar, our legs  
 pegging us in the muck while the system  
    lit up in hexagons and hexagons

that rose to the waist and refused to be a mirror.  
    That morning, I scrawled in blue pen,  
*Dostoevsky wrote had written, "If God does*

*did not exist, all would be permitted."*

What is a peaceful objective? In the ground,  
scientists embedded bars of graphite with an idea,

as though a giant hand would lift one & rub the flesh  
copy of a person darker—adjusting the neutrons—  
hatching a curve into the thigh. Goodyear Tire manufactured the balloon cloth

protecting the reaction in December 1942.

Students would have been stepping over the bundles  
of ice, rehearsing tables, battles, phrases:

*All would be permitted.* An objective is a thought  
not influenced by feeling. Control the chain.

That winter afternoon, the sun set early—as it does.

“Mike” Test

I was going to write about a crescent  
of honeydew melon. An artist told me

she paints grids when she isn't  
certain how to begin. A grid of steel

stores nuclear fuel below the surface  
of pools in temporary rooms

with red railings. I glanced at one image,  
then checked my email, my nightshade

tank top wet against the dip in my spine  
you might like to touch

and say, Stop. Have a glass of water.  
There once was a structure three-stories tall

built on an island Japan surrendered.  
This building was a bomb.

At its center, liquid hydrogen filled a thermos.  
We nicknamed it after an angel

appearing in the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur'an.  
Or maybe the name could have come

from a football player of the Fifties  
we might remember on Trivia Night.

I think how hammers strike the thinnest  
wires inside a piano. Hard.

Once, we evacuated the coral shore  
my grandfather flew over

in a B-17—the typed label of his photo  
half torn. The Department of the Interior

Master Plan shows where the people will live.  
I swallow vomit after watching

the island wart into an orange bulb. Just before,  
birds glanced off the shimmering water.

Fallout

Two-six, approaching ground zero.  
All test islands seem swept clean.

Elugelab is calm.  
Nothing there but water

and what appears to be a crater.  
Try zooming out for a broader look:

water parrot blue in color.  
Fourteen Pentagons

could be comfortable inside the hole.  
Sorry.

There is so much more that could have been said.  
We don't have imagery.

H-Bomb

We could not calculate directions between Johnson, VT, and Elugelab.

We could not calculate directions between Tokyo, Japan, and Elugelab.

Search nearby, e.g., “pizza.”

Your search for “pizza” near Elugelab, Enewetak Atoll, RMI, did not match any locations.

Make sure all words are spelled correctly.

Did you mean Marshall Islands resort?

We could not calculate directions between Marshall Islands and Elugelab.

The blast will come out of the horizon just about *there*.

Welcome aboard the USS Estes.

You have a grandstand seat here to see one of the most momentous events in the history of science.

It is now thirty seconds to zero time.

Know about this place and want everyone to find it?

If the reactor goes, we are in the thermonuclear era.

You are about to add a place that you believe is missing so everyone can find it.

Put on goggles or turn away.

Do not face the burst until ten seconds after the first light.

Enter a place name: [a few dozen neutrons].

We do not support adding a place here.

Refresh.

Enter a place name: [water furred with wind].

Refresh.

Enter a place name: [zero].

## Reef

Map is not in my thesaurus.

Many is uncountable, a crowd.

And mar: mutilate, scar, and stain.

Map would be inlaid between them—  
a plan in detail of the numberless  
bacteria collecting on the skin

of coconut milk swirling in a shell.

Coral is a kind of skeleton  
alive in the sea. It can slit your wrist.

It surrounds a lagoon. Map  
offers a place as though it's owned by water.  
There is no better flag.

Do the math. Draw a circle. A fisherman  
pulling up ink-wet crabs  
clinging to a net of hemp rope

will think it's strange to see the sun  
rising in the west. Sea stars. Chart the radius.  
Map will always come before scar.

Aircraft

Set climb power. The weapon is on.  
Approaching target area.

Bluish white, a ball  
climbs the sky

a fraction of a second  
old, losing

brilliance in the dust  
pedestal shooting up.

Protection? Curtains,  
clothing, light and loose.

The exclamation point in the sky  
drops

shaped like a poplar leaf.  
The incandescence whitening—

higher, *higher*—in vapor, then in ice.  
A cap becomes a form.

Then it starts drifting off,  
off as the eye

cannot identify  
the air.

Starfish Prime Pantone-mime

*Starfish Prime detonated in space on July 9, 1962*

Monarch orange.

Creamsicle tones.

The purple a chicken bone

pulls off of fat.

The stratosphere has been soaped

ginger and tangerine.

I'll wash until it's clean:

orb orbiting another orb

mottling like fruit that wets

your fingers and lingers

like being fucked. Pool marine,

dynasty green—golf this sky

into a hole. Colonial

is a color. So is blue atoll.

How the radio

waves cut out voices

still speaking into the black.

Gone is the oyster-

white rocket. You can't

take it back.

Declassified 1962

They eat close to the surf,  
laughing as water un-combs  
plum threads  
from a surface that flickers  
quickly in and out of  
sunflowers.

I wait for the sudden  
sunset, postcard orange, sun-  
less as it blooms.  
One of the soldiers has a question.  
He rubs his nose with his thumb.  
Is it that silver

speck up there?  
He's in the cotton white  
kind of t-shirt my partner wears.  
I fold them messily and press  
the armpits to my face—him  
sweat in the boat

seam of fabric.  
“Where the Boys Are” by Connie Francis  
drones from a radio speaker, her breath  
mingling with the gold-  
painted mesh.  
They dig their feet in the sand

peaking here & there like buttercream.  
Suddenly, the song  
stupidly playing  
breaks out  
of shape, and the men  
flinch

then stare  
right at the sky.

## TV Actor Plays the Muse

Me me me me. I've already written myself  
out the car door. I'd been driving through a night  
forest: pines, maples, anxious boxes of houses.

I called my father. I was lost. He said, turn  
around, and there I was, at the side of the road,  
the plants shaped like lollipops. *Bon chance*. Strange

I can talk to you like this. I meant to leave  
by Amtrak for New York with a red suitcase,  
the zippered cloth edged with leather

shutting in my breath: but I woke  
to ice erasing the sidewalk in a long smear.  
My lungs rustle like Mylar balloons. See,

I'm myself, written awake, in socks, cross-legged  
on your bed, wondering about something...how I failed  
you because I lost you in celluloid

fields quiet with soldiers, in *Dr. Zhivago*—  
sun setting, the clouds mottled with ink  
numbers of what you owe. I rub off my table

with a ripped rag. I can't talk to you  
like this, like I left you in Paris, where a painter  
is warming her hands over a bowl of boiled water.

Inherited Recklessness

*Begin afresh, afresh, afresh*

The mad man on the roof  
yanks the gutter away from the wood.

The mad raven puts its beak  
into the feathers of its tail.

The mad physicist satisfies a craving  
for some neutrons.

The mad afternoon begins with a string  
of black clotted clouds.

I'm telling you this from the corner  
of a community herb garden.

I'm telling the thirteenth century  
to part its lips and blow.

I'm telling the second-rate indigo pattern of that coat  
to *stop it*.

I'm telling you that we're far away  
from the tractors in the soy.

This healthy cup of mint  
water will clean your throat for Thursday—  
this healthy temperament as smooth  
as the nails in a monastery floor.

This healthy lacquer paint tastes  
strange to the neighborhood children.

This healthy barrenness  
sits in my body like a box of Saltines.

My fake ancestor has been telling me  
to locate her bones in a field.

My fake can of sugar will rub my temple  
with its index finger.

My fake tree will always return

to a box in the attic.

My fake box is fake  
because its bottom isn't taped.

I'm a long way from the industrial west  
side of the city.

I'm along the river, standing on this rock  
painted with an *X*.

I'm along for the ride:  
I didn't even know it's your birthday.

## Guilt Offering

*The goat shall carry all iniquities to an inaccessible region*

So I kissed a goat on the mouth. I was warned.  
I looked too fast into its eyes,  
two black stitches. Then I found myself  
putting my palms over ridges of fur,  
quivering, lash-like, into my fingers.  
I smoothed the bones and skin.  
I believed in you. I put my lips over  
the ear, then a force shoved me under  
water—

O the light, an ode  
fingering my hair. A scab  
shelled off a cloud pouring  
smoke into my mind. Get out.  
White goat. You were in the trees.  
Now I am in the trees. I keep hearing  
what I said: *I made the skull.*  
*I made the brain.* Come, animal  
with my voice, I need your mind.

## Pool

Across the street two Santas have been smoking for twenty minutes.  
 I am carrying a pound of hard green pears. I have nothing to say.  
 The community swimming pool, glittering in the ground, is covered by a tarp.  
 The underworld has been sealed. And all I have is my body

to carry and feed a pound of pears—it is like having nothing,  
 draping curtains pulled from a box over myself.  
 The underworld is sealed up, and this is all I have: my body  
 to clothe and walk to the bank in under the black trees, the sky

draping starkness, this pulled curtain, everywhere. In a box I will put myself:  
 we only live on in the memories of three generations, I've heard,  
 clothed and walking outside while we move through the black trees and sky,  
 being within them as ourselves. Six people can step inside a sheet of cut paper.

We only live on in the memories of three generations—I heard this  
 from a man lecturing the branches of an ash tree—  
 being in them, ourselves this way. When people exist in names marked on paper  
 all each person has is their own body and the trick itself: being.

A filthy man lectures the raining branches of an ash tree  
 while two Santas smoke. Twenty minutes pass.  
 All I can say I have is a body and the trick itself: being,  
 until the community's swimming pool, glittering in the morning, opens.



## Memory Mock-Up

I rode an elevator to Lookout Point. A shoebox factory  
rippled the river and flung cotton strands of smoke into the sky.  
In front of me, below the window, on a plastic model,  
the factory did not exist. Ignoring is not the word for the stars  
obscured like pinholes in the cedar air. Or a satellite.  
Or the cloth collar of the white shirt your lover threw over

a chair. Here are optics: a black bulb bluing your teeth.  
And what do you say when you wake up  
in a room rotating around you, *strange, strange*, until a voice  
explains with the measuring tape of narrative, object  
to object? I'm visiting this place. This place is my body.  
In the morning, the clematis clinging to the neighbor's fence

gleams inside its fuchsia petals, and I run  
through the vines to a brick tower with a ramp  
where old men and women push themselves against metal frames  
to a van. Its engine rambles, and everyone is quiet.  
I imagine poppy wallpaper wraps the walls of rooms, bodies  
sleeping with black beads placed on the tongue. "There is a war going on,

you know." And I'm making a bridge out of toothpicks  
and bone glue: triangle, triangle, take the weight. Yellow  
joint. Take the pressure. Trust me. What is the name  
of the river? Look out, I am wiping gesso on a canvas  
with a wide, flat brush. What is the name of the space in the mind  
of burned-out apartments, three in a row, hollow

with a stench of singed mussel shells? Waiting with some children,  
I believe in the structure that still stands, blackened, will always stand.  
We chant: Someone had an idea. And we filled a cup with oil.  
Someone had an idea. And we filled a cup with salt.  
We lit it on fire, and we put it out.  
My neighbor washed all of her red linens, and on the line,

they signal a hurricane or an invasion. Her crimson  
sheet screens the seed-pod husks,  
sunflower heads burned out by the sun. A dress,  
three shirts, and a pair of pants: red. Red. Pay attention.  
In the twentieth century, an electric drum washing machine was invented  
in Chicago, its inside coated in zinc. I *pliet* in front of the portal,

pulling a blanket out. Its folds are spoon shaped.

So. I rode an elevator to Lookout Point. I'm cold,  
 thinking about my bare bed, a map of my form below me,  
 my hands hovering over the compressed foam.  
 I think of a wound-up, tangled phone cord dangling  
 down the wall. And I'm in the kitchen I knew as a child,

the floor marked up near the oven. I genuflect in front of this  
 absent corner of mind. Why is today the day  
 for color, like the animated water, more orange than cardinal,  
 in *Impressionism Sunrise*? I wish it weren't a cliché to name it,  
 how paint quickly takes in light. I feel the light in my hair,  
 and in an hour it's gone. Once upon a time, an old woman

left a bag of Empire apples on the landing of my apartment,  
 and I ate one, and slept and slept, and became her. When I woke, a mouth  
 pressed against my mouth. Once upon a time, in a city  
 garden, tomatoes were warmed inside to their jewels and spotted  
 the morning, like when you stand up too fast.  
 A storm was brewing in the scribbled clouds

pulling apart as though a brush wiped water across them.  
 Once upon a time, I stood in a glass tower, the sparkling cars  
 moving underneath me in an even pulse.  
 I rode an elevator to Lookout Point. And next to me,  
 as though I peered into a mirror, I saw a condemned bridge,  
 a prior bridge, rusted and not even particular. A year ago, this very view

of a factory that pulls water inside its walls, a motion I am  
 not supposed to see, did not exist. A year ago, these sparkling cars  
 crossed the shadow bridge, without warning, and continued over the river.

### The Muse Sits on the Edge of Your Bed

There isn't much you can't do with an egg.  
Begin at the beginning, ax head propped  
flat across two nails: here and there. Watch.  
Like a screwdriver, you are losing yourself

to a tiny cross of metal. *More*. Bite  
a crab apple, then bite the furred vein  
of a geranium leaf floating with lipstick  
petal dabs of red. *More*. Eat the echo

I safely carried here: one quart of the cold  
slap of ocean that broke across my shins.  
It will taste like blood. Good morning. You breathe  
air piped in from an archive of viola da gambas.

I'm waking you up to wash your hair  
with a confusing sentence. Think. Don't I  
keep you from running into the road again & again—  
sparrow-eyed blind by the aluminum light—hit?

## Hawk Parable

One morning, a woman had been building shelves in her garage when one of the men helping her brought one, the feathers glossy as they spread over his shirt. She noticed the nape: birch-bark white, brown grains in it. This story isn't from a book, though *A Forgotten Past* is tempting.

From a distance, a hawk looks like an eagle. An eagle shows its eye on the back of a dollar bill. It hadn't rained in so long the air smelled like crumpled paper. She noticed dove feathers—engraving

gray—in the thistles from the things that refused to leave. She Googled “hawk eating dove.” Someone made the video by holding his hands very still.

The eye reflects nothing.

Feathers cling to the hawk's beak as it hammers the puffed breast. Make it mean something. She watched until the dove started breathing hard, the way you might, running down a dirt path, the sun burning shadows out of the ground.

The man set the hawk down on the concrete floor, turned away, and switched on the band saw. He pulled a 2 x 4 through the blade. The hawk had been stunned by a car, I guess, and woke back into itself—

a natural thing that will glide on a current.

The woman wanted to paint it.

She went inside for her camera. When she returned, the bird was gone.

## Wilderness Road

The trees appear to hang key rings—  
    numbered coins of trail markers

nailed at forehead height to account  
    for distance. Where will the road widen

so a plow can force snow there, packed and built  
    into the ferns, before turning back?

I run as though I'm leaving you  
    where the north air

dips into the lungs  
    and trappers might have slept.

Quiet, quiet. Where does it  
    come from, the laughter

filtering through the pines like ash?  
    I find the end of Wilderness Road a theory,

a paved edge that starts  
    over in dirt, forbidden

from December to May  
    says a sign. I think of ice

ruts and white static filling in  
    slowly between the trunks

the way your knees peak the sheets  
    in an impossible posture for sleep,

your blue eyes open through their lashes.  
    I catch sight of a pond before it changes,

dividing into green and black  
    like quick marks someone made with a brush.

I will wade through the hair below  
    the surface of the water striped by wind.

I think I hear a car: it doesn't appear.  
    Then I feel the forest shift above me

in the blue to gray traffic  
of far tops of trees.

One theory is this could end  
in vines. I imagine them tethered

to a flower a kayak could drift over.  
This morning, your lips made an *ah*

as though you agreed  
with something inside of yourself.

The surface is not a mirror: I held a paddle  
then pulled & pulled through it.

A few Bud Light cans flash from the ferns.  
Leaf shadows pass over my hands.

I believed in the end of Wilderness Road  
until I found it

doesn't exist: you keep going  
further into the mountain.

## Darkroom

Now we've come to a room with a psalm and a candle.  
 We've come to a stranger in a black suit

who not only begins with Nietzsche,  
 but ends with Nietzsche.

I think of my pillow and the last dress I wore  
 to a funeral—how I laid it on my bed

this morning and smoothed the creases.  
 A woman is wearing her furs on the bus

in this May, 5 o'clock light.  
 I'm in another time. A part of my self is

in the shadow flickering beneath the gap  
 of the door: back & forth, back & forth.

As in, I really did hear your question.  
 You're ahead of me—

you've inhaled my voice like bleach  
 spritzed into the air. And a boy's mother

drips water on his upturned face  
 with a black umbrella. And an escalator

carries an infantry of happiness  
 down into the earth. Fuck it.

Confess. Then leave what is said  
 like a sonogram strip in the grass.

But the position of the hands?  
 I will always check for a matching name

printed on the mailboxes up the block.  
 I will look for the name in anyone.

## Children of the Flood

We finally knew at the heist of our house  
by water—a depth trick of the cold  
that wicked up our jeans—what our father  
had seen. He'd watched the camphor clouds

smother the tiny screws of punctured light  
that connects the beams of something huge  
moving over us toward daylight, his hands  
measuring the distance in quintiles.

Rats were already floating in the street, choked with floss,  
their pink claws among the diapers and Styrofoam.  
It rained. The streets became the trash,  
the trash the water. Our neighbors scooped plastic

bottles in garbage bags & slung them back at the current.  
And then they did it again. But our father  
would lift us in the structure bolted for animal weight.  
We believed in death. So we obeyed.

While the adults forced the horses and stubborn sheep  
on the ship, our job was to lure the *winged* ones—the doves  
the most difficult as they scooted up to wires  
we could only touch with the mind.

And we closed the door on life and lived in the hull  
through wind and rain, and through our thought:  
the seeds of gooseneck strife buried,  
the softened roots of trees tilting under the garbage-

glutted water. We waited. We thought we could see the wind  
slapping the water—a white shock, the ridges stilled by the sun.  
The sky was a jar of blue that held us in the light.  
Our father was listening for nothing: we knew the sound

of bones settling in mud. And the dove,  
we were to catch it—plastron fluffed,  
a shield of health—when it came back to us.  
But we were children. We coaxed it

out of the beams above the oxen. We fed it  
grain from our hands. It was already sick.  
*So is the earth*

*dry?* we wondered.

But we said, *Throw it. Throw it out.*

## House

Looking about us, we see motionless figures.  
They seem strenuously to be tensing all their muscles.  
They scarcely communicate with each other.  
Their eyes open, they stare rather than see.  
They listen rather than hear.

## Riddle

I was born into a white room.  
Castle. Teapot. Wigwam.  
These are familiar fires.  
Let me bandage you  
in history. A decimal point  
nails a zero down.  
My names are given quietly

like flowers. My love,  
my life is half  
bound and gagged.  
I am the twine.  
Eggplant. Corn. Daisy.  
I am the twin.

### Song for Holding Tanks in a Vault

Under my house, no cavern can hold you alive  
forever: nervous, your creator hums. I do not believe  
in your concrete heaven, animal of Los Alamos, animal  
exhaling threads of toxic floss that needle the lungs.  
Pilots training above me in the desert air earned silver  
bomb rings. Red fins, metallic tip. Tinnitus, piccolo pitch,  
crest of a countywide siren—my ears are splitting.  
I'm not sick yet. But the pink land covers you

like an infection. I shovel sand over you,  
in my mind. In my mind, you are dragging my body  
to the fire, bruises printing my arms. I'm in my mind.  
This is my mind. Get me away from the blood center  
of a hibiscus. Get me away from the pure  
charm of a bell. Everything is burning. This isn't hell.

## Repository

## I.

I woke at 3 AM because my right ear itched, as though I'd been swimming or a friend yelled a secret into my hair at a party. I live in a city in the middle of the country, and the red swirls of the worst storms moving over a map often miss the dot that represents me. The wooden fire escape off my kitchen overlooks an alley of garages a value of gray that reminds me of the moon. Some evenings, I'll stand at the railing listening to dishes clatter in the sink of the apartment above me in the dark of electrical wires and lampposts and watch the yellow specks arrive overhead in a line—points moving together in an argument. They enlarge in the shape of tilted X's. I should count my credit card points and charge a flight to Carlsbad, where my grandfather trained, and rent a car to Alamogordo. I should study my great-aunt's handwriting. She kept a leather book of his addresses, her pen lingering on the tips of the "H" of his first name before sketching out the parallel lines that look like railroad track. I linger there too, prairie grass braiding the rails. *I can't hear you*, my friend screamed in my ear at a stupid party. *I can't hear you*.

## II.

We know how ancient sailing is from one hieroglyphic record: a square sail means a ship from another land has appeared on the sea. No Greek sailing map of any that might have been drawn more than two thousand years ago has survived. Christian monks preserved early English poems—trees becoming Christ. *It cannot be expected that they would have interested themselves in the technical equipment of sailors*, my book tells me. It is out of print. In lettering the early songs by daylight, then candlelight, these monks happened to create an archive. I want to disappear into this information as though I'm kneeling on a raft, the woman who appears from the water to lift the king onto her lap, wipe the blood from his eyes, and vanish. On Friday, there was an incident in the underground repository at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant twenty-seven miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico. Eleven personnel were working at the surface when the alarm triggered in the Central Monitoring Room. Contamination drifted across the countryside twenty-six miles west. Waste should be isolated from the biosphere until the risk posed by a possible release is acceptably small. Therefore, knowledge of its location must be maintained and passed on to future societies. Know how the Great Pyramids are 4,000 to 5,000 years old? A range of future societies may exist near the site during its regulatory period of 10,000 years. In 10,000 years, the Earth's axis will point away from the North Star—a position midway between the bright stars Deneb and Vega.

## III.

I didn't believe my mother when she told me how she and her sister, who shared a bedroom in a post-war bungalow, turned out the light and pulled the sheets up to their chins. *See you tomorrow*, they said to each other in the dark that night in October 1962. The scene that ends *Dr. Strangelove* replays only a handful of the atomic detonations we tested and filmed. I recognize some by shape, such as Baker, which we exploded underwater at Bikini Atoll. We buried tools and clothes from some of the 106 atomic bombs we exploded in the Pacific and the 911 atomic bombs we exploded in Nevada 2,150 feet below ground surface. We buried it in the Permian-age salt bedrock within the perimeter of New Mexico. One June morning after my summer class ended, I pushed through the library doors and crossed the atrium. An empty escalator continued to create & flatten steps without students on them. I found the fire stairs at the side of the building, wanting some exercise after giving the mid-term exam. Scribbles. Sighs. Furrowed eyebrows. *Were my students confused or concentrating?* Tarps wrapped the book stacks into translucent corridors, and industrial fans rustled them gently. My skirt caught a little on my legs. A sign taped on the wall told me how to get to the other side of the stacks in cardinal directions: *Head North. Go down stairs. Head South.* Before the magnetic needle, sailors followed the sun by day and the stars by night for three thousand years. The whole northern quarter can be picked out by a group of seven stars—called the Bear, or the Plough—that neither rise nor set. These stars circle a fixed point above your head.

## IV.

Like asbestos, radioactive material collects in the hair cells of the lungs. Unlike a cigarette, nothing you breathe in comes out. The report issued by the Sandina National Laboratories in the early '90s argues that we must consider how to warn future generations about drilling into the repository when our language, values, and relationship to symbols have reoriented. We decided against an over-statement of danger, such as "immediate death," because the effects of being exposed to radiation can take years to appear. In one sequence of proposed markings, a child touches the waste—a trefoil. You can shape a trefoil with a string by joining the ends of a knot before pulling it tight. This symbol appears on signs like the one fixed to the brick wall of my elementary school. I remember noticing it during a game of four square, where you draw a Punnett square with chalk and stand inside it with three other children and try to trick each other into bouncing a ball on the dividing lines. The three-paneled symbol indicated something important about the building that made me glad Someone was In Charge of Things. After the child—who we will read as male—touches the symbol, the trefoil transfers to his chest like plate armor. The child is special now. He could have been sickly, unable to run as fast as the other children. Now he is different. Trees appear: a grove grows sacredly around him. The child will become an adult because he stands taller in the trees—the symbol still on his chest. Flowers at his feet also indicate scale. Daisy. Daisy. Daisy. An additional frame might show his body in death. The trefoil splays over his ribs, like a soul.

V.

Another rainy June morning, and I'm sitting by my half-open window in a long-sleeved shirt. What bothers me most about the Sandina Report on the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant is how it assumes there will be no human memory of radioactive material. The rock and water nearby may not look, feel, or smell unusual. But the site itself should announce, *Something made by humans is here*. Message kiosks will include languages of the United Nations—Arabic, English, Spanish, French, Russian, and Chinese—and the largest group of Native Americans in the area: Navajo. How can we assume that after all markets become seashells, racks of data servers melt in warehouses across the globe, and after we have appeared here in 7,000 years, we will marvel at this sand field? *Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*. Blossoms of beardtongue here and there. A marker can be an effective warning if it survives, you can find it, its message reads as a warning, and this warning initiates appropriate action. At 23:14 Mountain Standard Time, there was an incident. At 16:35 the next day, the shelter-in-place order lifted and non-essential personnel were systematically released, building-by-building. Typically, management does not welcome “questioning attitudes”: workers do not feel comfortable identifying issues like degraded equipment. Right now, the URS Corporation owns the Nuclear Waste Partnership LLC. The Nuclear Waste Partnership LLC runs the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. You can click on an “ethics” link on the URS Corporation website. Here: an image of hands cropped at the sleeve—one suit black, the other with a graphite-sheen to the weave. These hands clasp in a handshake. *We are subject to the laws and regulations in each of the counties where we conduct business*. Both hands belong to white men. It's another rainy June morning, and I'm sitting by my half-open window in a long-sleeved shirt, feeling cold.

## VI.

The plan is that buildings, parking lots, and roads will be removed to return the surface of the area to its previous condition. Maybe part of the main building holding the hot cell should stay. Future archeologists could study it. One of the facial expressions the Sandina Report suggests we carve into the marker looks like Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. We want faces that portray horror and sickness. We do not want these faces to be stolen and displayed in museums and private collections. Watch a face change for you, looking at something in the distance then smiling for you, as though a spotlight moved over the eyelids and chin. We assume human facial expressions are universal. *Were my students confused or concentrating?* A design conveys levels of information: this message is a warning about the danger. This place is a message. Nothing of value is here. This place is best shunned. It commemorates no highly esteemed deed. We once considered ourselves to be a powerful culture. You can line up the star-rise angles of Sirius, Canopus, Arcturus, and Vega with the accompanying map to see when the site closed.

This is not a place of honor.

## Yucca Flat

We couldn't understand this location.  
Three thousand feet above this spot the bomb will explode.  
Try right clicking on the map.  
An officer orders the infantry to move. The closest.

Directions. Las Vegas: seven hours, forty-six minutes. Bicycling.  
I reach up.  
Two hours, three minutes.  
By car.

I rip the lens right out of the goggles.  
It was a plastic lens.  
The silence before the roar.  
My hands over my eyes.

In the flash  
I could see the bones of my fingers.

## A-Bomb

*Operation Crossroads, 1946*

This was not my idea. The fliers elected  
to paint a woman's lips on me. Kiss. Kiss.  
Naval carriers, abandoned, wait in the lagoon.  
I am their supervisor. I make men drop  
white mice by hand into a cage.  
They huddle on deck ten nautical miles away.  
I make hills crinkle like cabbage. "Bikini target"  
sounds like it means *cunt*. I've heard men  
say that all over my shell. Inside,  
I am time. Sacrifice me. How shall I  
unstring the clouds? Easily? Easily.

Song Pulled from a 1954 *National Geographic*  
*with wires, needles, or beads of radioactive gold*

It isn't like the skin to choose transparency:  
 coffee too cool in a cup to blister the tongue.

When does the energy in your bone invite ghosts  
 to pick through your skull and touch the brain?

My coffee cools hardly hot into my palm.  
 Who knew the iron v's of a linden leaf or dragonfly wing

could write through the skull and scratch the brain?  
 The material lifts lighter than a pencil scoring a game:

one for the iron veining your arm, a leaf, or the glassed wing of a fly.  
 Burn it longer than coal—more mixed in with the ash.

I won't watch it lift like a signature from a page  
 or a piano wire that circles all the ships of the navy.

We burn coal and dream of more in the ash  
 the way alchemists always almost made gold in a lab.

And a piano wire will hum and hum for the dead.  
 And a remote control will protect you from the self in the mirror.

One element is now another like gold grown in a lab:  
 I've seen the gap in the bridge between an oil field and the sun.

We can control a substance remotely. Like a second self in a mirror,  
 no sound calls to you from within the walls.

The gap between an oil rig and the inexhaustible sun  
 closes with words: *isos* (same) and *topos* (place).

No smoke emerges from behind the concrete walls.  
 Sometimes, I sense the presence of forces, unheard and unseen

from a single place. *The same place.* How  
 a beam of neutrons releases through an open lid.

Hold your breath against what you can't hear or see:  
 your doctor may ask you to drink one of the vials.

Through an open lid, a beam of neutrons will release

the way the energy in a bone could invite in your ghost.

What is the thing your doctor asks of you? Drink.  
Your body can be made again, transparent.

Marie Curie

When our baskets filled, I would step  
                   off the boat and balance in my palm  
 an apple finer than the others—cold  
                   skin that cracked under my teeth.  
 There was one dream: nationalism,

                  the exposed nerves of beet roots  
 tangled in bullock carts  
                   moving slowly toward the factory chimney  
 choughing its thing at the sky.  
                   Some sentences escape me.

*I take the sun and I throw it.*

                  I remember the stoop-shouldered men  
 tracking equations the professor's fingers  
                   tapped across the chalkboard.

*I take the sun and I throw it*

                  in an attic like a servant's room  
 warmed by a skylight  
                   topping a middle-class house. No heat,  
 no water—but a kitchen chair  
                   and petroleum lamp that I covered

with my two-penny shade. I would wash  
                   my dress in a pail and mend its hem.  
 When I wanted a treat,  
                   I would walk through the Latin Quarter  
 to the creamery and eat two eggs.

                  When I came back to myself, I would ask  
 why I fainted, my stomach  
                   round with radishes and cherries.  
 In this atmosphere of wrinkled linen,  
                   I would wait for the poplar leaves—

my window shut tight to their branches.  
                   I would dress myself in navy

for him, my blouse with robin egg stripes.  
 My husband's jacket boxed his arms  
 in a cut ten-years old. We owned two bicycles.

We celebrated up the boulevard Saint-Michel,  
 watching the city pass us from the top of a bus,  
 our faces pinked by the sun.  
 And we lunched on bread and peaches,  
 slept in a room with faded wallpaper,

and slept through the night. He had no sense  
 of time: a few thousand pedal strokes,  
 then we arrived at a pond grown in with grass  
 where he gathered irises and water lilies  
 for me while I slept. Once, he dropped a frog,

light-bodied, that peed into my hand.  
 And in our little flat, I would peel parsnips  
 and onions for the noon meal.  
 When I woke with the autumn light,  
 I left for our shed

in my lab coat without a hat or a scarf.  
 I met the wagon usually loaded with coal  
 in the street that morning.  
 I touched the cloth of one sack & cut the strings  
 with a bread knife & opened its mouth

& put my hands deep  
 into the ore, the pitchblende mixed with pine needles  
 from Bohemia. It was like creating nothing  
 out of nothing, all summer  
 in the shed without cupboards:

particles in glass tubes on shelves  
 we nailed into the wall,  
 bluish outlines glowing like what  
 we couldn't describe.  
 I sat in the dark,

in the violet activity, and watched.  
As a child, I would dig up mud  
with the tines of a fork  
and form the dirt into huts,  
pushing windows in with my fingers.

There is an actor among us  
that lives in the earth  
and in the air. In the evening,  
we would return exhausted,  
our arms prickling in red veins:

our best disguise is an appearance.  
I would sit barefoot on our front step,  
scraping it with my shoe.  
I loosened sand from the toe.  
I also wanted a child.

## Hiroshima

For a few seconds or minutes, he went out of his mind.  
Dark clothes absorbed and conducted it to the skin.  
He noticed a pumpkin roasted on the vine.  
The fire was coming closer on the wind.  
From east to west, the city toward the hills,  
everything whiter than any white I'd seen.  
No sound of planes. The morning still.  
To the south: docks and an island-studded sea.  
Just as I turned my head away from the windows,  
the bottle of blood crashed against one wall.  
In the basement vault, the X-ray plates were exposed.  
Water the size of marbles began to fall.  
Because of my irresistible urge to hide,  
foliage seemed like the cool core of life.

## Elegy for a Shadow

*Steps of Sumitomo Bank, Hiroshima*

Archive of a person, you cross your legs  
below the sun. It looks like a bundle of linens  
climbs the stairs above you  
daily as a bell pulled in a tower.  
Early enough for an errand, carrying papers  
folded up in your hand, you once moved through the air  
graying the road in half of a grace  
held by a sheen of ox-blood leaves.  
In the muscle of the stomach where worry is swallowed,  
jasmine began to cool. Can I call it light,  
knowing what came? Kettle scorched,  
lips and throat gone before calling out then  
marbling in a pattern you might cure with balm  
nightly until your eyes would cataract into Jupiter pupils,  
open as an owl's, only blind.  
Particles jump out of thought:  
quills of light, heels of molten glass  
ripped up from the ground by wind.  
Someone else shielded in a room underground  
took a breath, then another breath—  
umbra of gums bleeding under the teeth.  
Vapor is a value. Suddenly, you were every-  
where when the bank door unbolted,  
x-marks tracked like minutes marked in dust.  
Your mind webbed with heat in one second.  
Zone of noon. Stolen form. I can't name you.

## Not Necessary

*It is not necessary to imagine the earth being destroyed like a nova.*  
- Einstein

What causes ruin? A silvered box,  
a signature, a map tidied with a pencil?  
Open a door: the room smells like ammonia  
and singed cloth where the blood comes,  
wet, from the corner. Outside, a man will stop  
to scoop some dirt into his hands and offer you  
his balance bowl of blackness. So it is  
not necessary to imagine the earth.  
What word comes through the mouth  
of a mask swinging, greenly, from a tree?  
Imagine all the bank vaults blown—  
pink wheels of light, the shudder, again  
the gunner shouting inside of glass.  
No white curtain hangs from pins behind a table.  
There is no forbidden word. God.

Dream of the Morning Before It Split

I almost see your thumb  
following the groove  
like a river on an atlas.

This plane won't be parked long.  
You chip a stone out  
of the tire, your mind

waking up as ash  
light pours over the tents  
patterned with palms

like photographic fixer  
stripping the silver  
that would blacken out your eyes.

What will you see from the bottom  
bulb of glass? The warp  
of August air

metals the sea. You turn  
toward the sound of your name  
as though your father

called you to its engine.  
Oh. Step under  
the wing: only a shadow blade.

Oath Inked in the Air with a Crow-Quill Pen

After unhooking from a chain and after  
its hinge fused the hemispheres,  
what looks like a balloon  
was driven off by a shirtless boy—

the metallic pit compressed inside of it.  
Pilots signed the curve like a cast: *Here's to you.*  
They wished themselves all over it.  
Because of crows fighting on the roof

of my apartment  
in a city in the United States,  
I'm going to make a promise in ink  
that has an idea of a crow in it—

the way history becomes a diagram  
promising a room  
where the windows keep shifting positions.  
The crows mark me

with their black feathers.  
Above my kitchen, some military jets  
cross out the clouds  
for an air show. It's August again.

A woman becomes a silhouette.  
*I rubbed the rays—*  
*albumen strings through my fingers.*  
Her silk textile has been tattooed

in blood ladders up her back,  
and I have taken her  
though she turned away  
from the photographer and closed her eyes.

Did she think she gave her exposed self  
to a doctor instead of the blink  
a lens catches from the light  
reflecting off of skin? I am still

moving through this.  
Let the dew point be my witness  
that I do not know  
what it means to look at anything—

like prints of fruit crate art  
where there is a griffin  
guarding three oranges and decide *why*,  
its lion tail curled in an O.

O as the gray pipe of the security camera  
fastened to the corner  
of my building is my witness,  
I will never be able to do

anything but give you an image  
of your own shadow stretched out emptily  
over the ground.  
*I am almost here now.*

The shadow is an airplane  
arriving low over a road  
that converges with another road,  
splits two fields,

then opens to a town  
dotting a shoreline with peaked roofs.  
I only have a copy  
of this view

extending to the sea—  
the sea stippled like silverpoint,  
the oldest way to strike out a surface:  
glue mixed with ground bone.

## Birds of Southern Nevada

We named the first test in this area Able—  
sometimes a spade replaces a heart.

Scorched vegetation greens with thistle:  
the house finch feeds in flocks.

In May, I caught sight of an osprey circling  
sage scattered with fire. To the south,  
I found a roadrunner nest! Structured with snakeskin  
and pinfeathers, it cradled four eggs in the engine

fan of an abandoned plane. In September, we exploded a tunnel  
in a drift mined into a mesa. Green heron.

One specimen: the bird sick and unable to fly  
in October. November. Western Grebe:

I lifted an ill one from the road  
like a pillow case. Then I found Jerusalem

cricket shells in pellets left by migrating hawks.

The degree of disturbance decreases  
as the radius extends—I've studied seismic shocks.

See those two lakes and the sloping flats around them?  
Mourning doves, estimated at 5,000, would come for the water,  
skimming it in the evening. And in the heat  
of midsummer, many would cool in the caves.

*Sing the tune without the words.* I recorded several

thousand of them from the access road. Swallow.

Crow. Magpie. Collection records: *none*. The president  
created the Peace Corps in 1961. I've even seen ravens here  
in the sun, appearing like paper cutouts on utility poles.

*I've heard it in the chilliest land, /And on the strangest sea.*

My present study is limited by these boundaries.

Thus

*adapted from Brecht*

If you represent a cloud,  
perhaps showing it  
unexpected—  
soft and strong,  
rapid yet  
gradual,  
will you look out

as if

to say:  
isn't

it just  
like that?

## Notes

My grandfather's possible involvement in the Nagasaki mission has remained a family mystery. I found an entry online for my grandfather's squadron that said one team "flew weather and recon for A-bomb." We know from an address book that he trained for a time in Alamogordo, NM, a site of the Manhattan project, before shipping out. (Trinity, the first atomic test in the US, was conducted at the White Sands Missile Range near Alamogordo.) He told me he was interviewed to fly "the plane" that dropped "the bomb," but was not chosen for the core fleet. I have no definitive proof he was there.

"At the point where manifestation really occurs (on the outer skin as it were of representation) presence is post-catastrophic...Poetry incorporates as a *rule*, as the *differentia specifica* of its kind, the sacrificial history of presence." - Allen Grossman in *Summa Lyrica*

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"Aircraft" adapts language from Declassified Nuclear Test Film #70 ("Atomic Weapons Orientation Part Five - Effects of Atomic Weapons," 1956).

"Airman on the Ground" adapts language from letters my grandfather wrote to his parents when he served in the United States Air Force during the Second World War.

"Birds of Southern Nevada" adapts language from *Birds of the Nevada Test Site* published in the Brigham Young University Science Bulletin's Biological Series (volume III, number 1) in June 1963 and Emily Dickinson's "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." Able was the name of the first test of Operation Ranger conducted on US soil on January 27, 1951, not to be confused with a test by this name conducted in the South Pacific as part of Operation Crossroads on July 1, 1946.

"Cloud Cover" adapts language from the article "Weather Fights and Works for Man" published in the December 1943 issue of the *National Geographic*.

"Fallout" adapts language from Declassified U.S. Nuclear Test Film #12 ("Operation Ivy, Parts 1 and 2," 1952).

"First Thing" incorporates details from a passage of Richard B. Frank's *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* excerpted in *The Manhattan Project* (ed. Cynthia C. Kelly) published by Black Dog & Leventhal.

"Guilt Offering" quotes as its epigraph a phrase from Leviticus 16:22 (*Tanakh* version, new JPS translation).

"H-Bomb" adapts language from Declassified U.S. Nuclear Test Film #12 ("Operation Ivy, Parts 1 and 2," 1952) and from Google Maps.

"Hiroshima" adapts language from John Hersey's issue-length article for the August 31, 1946 *New Yorker*, published as a volume by Alfred A. Knopf later that year.

“House” adapts language from passage “26” of Bertolt Brecht’s “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (ed. and trans. by John Willett in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*).

“Inherited Recklessness” quotes as its epigraph the last line of Philip Larkin’s poem, “The Trees.”

“Mike’ Test” adapts a sentence from Declassified U.S. Nuclear Test Film #56 (“Enewetak Cleanup,” n.d.).

“Marie Curie” adapts language from *Madame Curie*, a biography by Eve Curie originally published in 1937 (Pocket Books first printing, 1946).

The epigraph of “Not Necessary” quotes a sentence from Albert Einstein’s “Atomic War or Peace?” published in the November 1947 issue of *The Atlantic*.

“Repository” adapts language from the Brookings Institution’s article, “50 Facts About U.S. Nuclear Weapons,” the report prepared by Sandia National Laboratories, “Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant” (printed in November 1993), Percy Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias,” E. G. R. Taylor’s *The Haven-Finding Art: A History of Navigation from Odysseus to Captain Cook* (American Elsevier Publishing Company, 1971), the “Ethics” page of the URS Corporation’s website (urs.com), and the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Environmental Management’s Accident Investigation Report, “Phase 1: Radiological Release Event at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant on February 14, 2014” (April 2014).

“Riddle” adapts the names of three nuclear operations conducted in 1954 and 1955 at the Nevada Test Site and in the Pacific.

“Song Pulled from a 1954 *National Geographic*” adapts language from the article “Man’s New Servant, the Friendly Atom” published in the January 1954 issue of the *National Geographic*.

“Starfish Prime Pantone-mime” adapts into its title the name of the hydrogen bomb shot into space on July 9, 1962. The poem adapts names of Pantone colors.

“The Sun Rising, Pacific Theatre” borrows “The Sun Rising” from John Donne.

“Thus” adapts language from Bertolt Brecht’s essay, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (ed. and trans. by John Willett in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*).

“Yucca Flat” adapts language from an interview of a cameraman who filmed one of the atomic detonations at the Nevada Test Site in 1951 from the nose of a plane and language from Google Maps.