

CALDERA

POEMS

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ABSTRACT

“Caldera” is an original poetry manuscript. It is a synthesis of the poet’s Pacific and western background, education, and aesthetic sense; part of an ongoing discussion about ways in which non-indigenous writers can write about indigenous cultures without appropriating them; the beginning of the poet’s exploration of what it means to be a writer without a clear connection to her ethnic heritage but a desire to adopt and celebrate others; and an exploration of links between form and content, art and life. The title reflects the volcanic landscape of the Hawaiian Islands; the tumultuous, simmering-below-the-surface energy of the human relationships depicted in the poems; and a sense of denouement and the aftermath of an explosive, destructive, but potentially fruitful event. While there is a central semi-autobiographical narrative, the presence of other voices and narratives adds texture and complexity. It is the intersections of these that give the work a sense of cohesion rather than an overt storyline or single topic. This has been a project of diversifying and refining the poet’s style, subjects, and forms as well as finding literal and literary possibility.

Accompanying the manuscript is an essay outlining the process of writing and the goals of “Caldera.” In it, the poet explores features of her poetry and how she has embraced or moved beyond them, focusing in particular on use of the lyric “I”; environment as a means of writing about the personal; cultural influences; the idea that as an adoptee, the poet is uniquely situated to adopt other cultures; and how while shifting the focus of the work from the personal, the forms and process provide a metaphor for the poet’s life. The poet shows how she has used personal content to explore universal themes and to draw connections between life and writing, and how by breaking through thematic and structural boundaries and thereby mirroring some of the decisions in her personal narrative, she has advanced the work. She uses the metaphor of a Hawaiian lei to describe the project, which weaves together different strands of influence.

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PREFACE

Writing my prospectus, I was worried about creating too many constraints, but the main advice I got at my defense and along the way was to let loose a little more, to try new things, and to stop apologizing for what my work is not. For me, this meant not only expanding the topics of my work, but also its vocabulary and forms. With this poetry manuscript, I aimed to push beyond—or at least question—several tendencies, namely, my use of the lyric “I,” a formal style that had become prevalent in my work, and my fears of my writing being seen as an act of cultural appropriation. This is not to say that I have completely stopped writing in the first person or decided to claim other cultures as my own with abandon. However, by prying under these dams, my work has become broader, richer, and I think, more accessible. I have also been able to focus more on what my work does (rather than what it doesn’t do or what I have been afraid of it doing), which is draw from the personal realm to explore universal subjects such as guilt, regret, displacement, and eros. In the process, I have found connections between life and art as well as content and form.

With this collection, I have strived to move beyond poems about my life and relationships; to permit the entrances of words and subjects I didn’t think belonged in my poems; and to break away from forms that once challenged me, but have become convention. These actions—moving, permitting, and breaking—parallel the choices and actions in the main personal narrative within the manuscript. So, I have the paradox of shifting the focus from me, but having the forms and process as a metaphor for my life.

ME, MYSELF, AND I

To date, my poetic comfort zone has been populated by a loud lyric “I.” That voice, itself plural and changing, is certainly still present in this manuscript, but it isn’t the only one. Additionally, in my prospectus, I wrote, “it’s the six months on either side of my move [from Maui to San Diego] that I anticipate generating the most material.” While the personal story of the dissolution of my marriage and the beginning of a new romantic relationship is indeed at the center of the collection, it is just one of several intersecting narratives.

Allow me to briefly share the specific segment of my life that a significant portion of the work recounts and parallels. In the summer of 2004, I returned home to Maui from my MFA program in New York, married a glassblower that I had met before going to graduate school, and

began my studies at UH. Working from home and without many on-island friends, I felt isolated and grew increasingly restless in Kula. Unable to express my dissatisfaction with my life on Maui with my husband because he was the one that provided for and was at the center of that life, I turned to another friend. He and I eventually developed and confessed romantic feelings for one another. Although I knew that I was seeking an escape and that my emotions might be symptomatic of wanting something else rather than the foundation for something lasting, I decided it was enough. So, after several months of covert planning and anguished conversations with my friend-turned-romantic-interest, in early 2008, I left my marriage and Maui within twenty-four hours.

I knew that by leaving, I also had to accept responsibility for what some might see as highly irresponsible, immoral, and cruel. I had to accept the guilt of knowing that I had caused pain for selfish reasons. I rationalized that it was better than lying and staying, but I also knew that it was going to hurt everyone involved. Now, over two years later, my friendship-turned-romantic relationship strong and my ex-husband happily remarried, I have a different perspective on the situation than when I was in the middle of it. I believe that distance, both in terms of time and place, has made it easier to write about and easier to move forward.

An obvious question then is, “Why are these very personal poems something that someone else would want to read?” The last thing I want is for my poems to be seen as some sort of self-help exercise. I myself have issues with poems that are extremely insular and that seem more like journal entries with line breaks. While I maintain that there can be a reciprocal relationship between writing and emotional healing, the poems in this manuscript are still poems, not solely free-writes or journal entries; I have been faithful to them as poems requiring stylistic choices before whatever situation or scene inspired them.

This is one of the reasons I find it important to have some distance from personal material when using it as a seed—to avoid falling into the trap of wanting to tell what happened before writing a good poem. I believe that writing about a personal event having emerged from it yields poems that are more accessible and compelling to readers—less about me—than poems written in the midst might have been. I certainly wrote such poems, but I have revised many of them so significantly that they barely resemble the originals. In my prospectus, I wrote: “I’m...excited to see what happens when I revise poems, whether they become stronger because I am less emotionally attached to them or whether they begin to seem a little watery and are eventually omitted.” While I did decide to omit some poems because even when paired with newer ones, they didn’t seem to

hold their own anymore, I have kept others to provide a balanced narrative. I believe the story of the new relationship is strengthened by the shadow of the old one.

While I have tried to sift out inside jokes, references, and phrases that would *only* be understood by the real people involved in the depicted events, the few that remain are not central to a basic comprehension of the poems. Although I do believe that a reader aware of the backstory and hidden meaning, or *kaona*, to borrow a word and pertinent feature from Hawaiian poetry, may have a deeper appreciation. I do not think that personal material or use of the first person, even where the degree of separation between poet and speaker is slight, necessarily yields poor poems. I can certainly appreciate poems with personal content about situations similar to my own as well as ones that I have never experienced. It's a matter of resonating, which for me, means expressing a thought, feeling, or experience in a way that makes it even more familiar, or at least imaginable and *seemingly* familiar. This simultaneous reach inwards (to the personal) and outwards (to the reader) is what I seek to accomplish in my poetry, and sometimes, the best way for me to do that is in the lyric mode, which enables me to begin from the space between the poet and the reader—the “I” of the poem.

The argument that the lyric “I” marks a simplistic, sentimental, narcissistic, and/or solely confessional poetry is a hard one to make when its detractors have spent so much time revealing the self as a construct and the impossibility of a unified self synonymous with the poet. “The demise of the transcendental Ego, of the authentic self, of the Poet as Lonely Genius, of a unique artistic style: these, as we have seen, are now taken as something of a given” (Perloff). I believe many of the poets using “I” today are well aware of such givens and seek not to prove the sincerity and authenticity of “I” so much as utilize its multiplicity and complexity. Contemporary poets have picked up the shards of the false “I” mirror shattered by Language poetry, taped them together with some of the same tools used to break it, and presented readers with an engaging chorus of “I’s” that are not only speaking, but looking (with “eyes”) back at us. The lyric “I” can thus do much more than reveal and heal the self.

This awareness of and willingness to test the permeability of the quotation marks around “I” is especially apparent in “The Lyric ‘I’ Drives to Pick up Her Children from School: A Poem in the Postconfessional Mode” by Olena Kalytiak Davis. The title simultaneously promises a move away from a flat, confessional style of seriousness and sincerity and combines academic knowledge with the quotidian and personal. In the poem, Davis suggests that there are a multitude of “i’s” at work as well as the limits of the word “i,” which is not even enough of a pronoun to encompass the

possessive without awkwardness: “‘i’s’ morning poem.” Although there seems to be an element of “I” that is Davis the poet, this isn’t ‘just another lyric poem.’ Davis plays with the materiality of the poem, using strikethrough font to demonstrate process as well as quotation and several ‘voices.’ One of these voices appears in italics and is unpunctuated while another, the one with the responsibilities of a mother, uses upright letters and punctuation. The latter is also referred to in the third person as “she,” which suggests that “i” is a name that marks identity, but that the person represented is actually outside of the speaker or poet. Literary knowledge swirls alongside the personal in this poem, underscoring the fact that the lyric “I” is the opposite of simple or self-centered, as seen here in the final lines:

“i” has fucked with the facts so “you” think she’s robert lowell. (but
whoever saw a girl like robert lowell?)
“i” doesn’t care if “you”, silent human auditor, present or absent,
never heard of, could give a flying fuck about, robert lowell.

Davis’ lyric “I” expresses personal thought and ‘what happened’ (“i” remembers that she needs to pick her child up from school), but it is an educated “I” aware that Robert Lowell is the representative of the confessional style, aware of the multiplicity and constructedness of the self and the audience, and aware of the insufficiency of the word “I.”

Here’s Matthea Harvey, also addressing some of the assumed roles of “I” in a poem:

...Poor First Person. Currently she was exiled to the world of
postcards (*having a lovely time*)—& even then that beast of a Third
Person used the implied “I” just to drive First Person crazy. She felt
like a television staring at the remote, begging to be turned on. She
had so many things she wanted to say. If only she could survive on
her own, she’d make Third Person choke on herself & when the
detectives arrived & all eyes were on her she’d cry out, “I did it! I
did it! Yes, dahlings, it was me!”

This poem not only implies that fear of solipsism has, perhaps unnecessarily, stifled (the use of) the first person, but also that the first person and “I” are separate from each other and the poet. “The ironic title, ‘First Person Fabulous,’ suggests the essential egotism of all first person narratives” (Hoagland). But here, the first person is a character seen from a distance, in the third person, who seems to admit that she cannot “survive on her own.” Although Harvey doesn’t explicitly use the lyric “I,” she does further the notion that the first person is not limited to the insular, inaccessible, and intangible emotion of the poet.

While my poems don’t take assumptions of the simplicity of the lyric “I” to task or point out its superficiality as directly as Davis’ and Harvey’s do, my use of it, like theirs, is with a sense of the

impossibility of “I” ever solely or accurately representing “I” the poet. Although many of the pronouns in my poems do have referents, the veracity of the poems isn’t the point.

However, the reader’s desire to locate the poet within the “I” does add a degree of interest. Does the poem read like a confession? Does it seem real? Why or why not? How does the poet achieve that effect? What does the perceived ‘truthiness’ say about the reader? These questions, to me, are more interesting than whether or not something really happened exactly as the poem suggests. The lyric “I” signals a performance—poetry is an art, like acting or painting, after all—and it’s the way that the self is presented and where it resonates with the reader and his/her sense of self that makes the poems more than a means of healing, self-expression, or an exercise exclusively for the benefit of the poet. Gestures towards authenticity or fragmentation must be suspect.

Although the poems of “Caldera” are not overtly experimental, the reader still takes part in the construction of meaning. Returning to my “I” as mirror metaphor, the reflected images are not only of the poet, but of the reader as well. I think of the pronouns—not only “I” but also “you” and “she” and “he”—as a space for double exposure, where two faint images are laid over one another and the points of similarity become stronger and clearer.

In an article calling for a new kind of poetry, John Barr writes, “the lyric poem by far dominates as the kind of poem written today. And the sole function of the lyric poem, ubiquitous as its footprint has become, is to personalize the subject at hand. Stated more generously, the aim of the lyric poem is to realize what it is to be human. Lyric poets understand the world through themselves.” I neither see this as an excuse to go with the status quo nor an indictment of lyric poetry, but rather, an opening. If the poet finds a means of understanding the world through him or herself in the lyric poem, and the reader can find him or herself within the poem, within the pronoun, then s/he too can discover a new means of understanding the world.

To provide the reader an entrance, my poems generally have “a single, particular, specified consciousness, speaking in a relatively identifiable situation” (Zapruder), but the pronouns are up for adoption. Rather than using “we” in a universal sense, I use singular pronouns or imply a “we” limited to two, to keep the experiences described on a more intimate, personal level. These are not poems for the world, so much as poems for each individual, each “I.”

While many of the what Tony Hoagland calls “skittery” poems of today reveal selves that refuse to “risk their detachment, their distance, their freedom from accountability,” my poems reveal selves that “commit themselves to the sweaty enclosures of subject matter and the potential embarrassment of sincerity.” The question is whether the reader is willing to take on that self, to

adopt “I,” for the duration of the poem. While more ‘experimental’ poems use disruption to “recover mystery in poetry, to offer multiple, simultaneous interpretive possibilities for the energetic and willing reader to ‘participate’ in,” my poems, especially those using the lyric “I,” often strive for the same goals but with an air of simplicity and stability, that, as I said, we have been taught to suspect.

Take for instance the last stanza of “Waves from a Window”: “Now looking / down on— leaving— / my island, I am all whitecaps.” This seems to be a straightforward, first person stanza, and in the context of the manuscript and with a basic knowledge of the poet’s background, it appears autobiographical. One isn’t sure when this occurred, but the voice and situation are unified. And yet, the reader must insert him or herself into the poem, into the “I,” to understand what it would mean to be whitecaps—“the ocean’s desire / to leap out of itself”—which in turn, implies the impossibility of self containment. Behind this performance of plainness is some skittishness after all, reflecting both the speaker’s restlessness and the constant shifting and changing of “I.” Rather than be frustrated by the inability of “I” to *be* the self, I see it as an opportunity to delve into and play upon its inherent multiplicity and instability. It is the veil of singularity hiding a fractured, fragmented, falling apart self that makes the first person so appropriate for the story of a failed marriage and budding affair. The literal masking parallels the performance involved in relationships in which one must keep up appearances and give the impression of a whole self despite whatever destructive fissures may lurk below the surface.

As I noted earlier, guilt is also one of the themes of this manuscript, both within the central narrative and in my formal and stylistic decisions as a poet. Just as I had to accept and ultimately let go of the guilt accompanying my decision to leave my marriage, I have had to let go of any sense of guilt or regret that I have felt in writing about the personal, for using “I,” and for writing poems that some might call “self-help” and others “Confessionalist.” Again, rather than simply abandon or staunchly defend the lyric and the personal, I have tried to maximize their potential.

Charles Bernstein’s tongue-in-cheek poem “Self-Help” provides another rejoinder to the idea that personal poems aren’t for public consumption. The first sign of this is the fact that it’s written in the second person. The poet could certainly be addressing himself, but that would only underscore the multiplicity of the self and how even when we’re helping our selves, we’re only helping a fraction or a facet of them. In “Self-Help,” calamities big and small lead to glass-half-full realizations like “Hurricane crushes house.—You never seemed so resilient” and “Global warming swamps land masses.—Learn to accept change.” In this case and in other poems that might more

accurately be considered and condemned as self-help poems, it's a conversation, a raft that saves both reader and speaker (even if they are pieces of the same self). As Bernstein concludes, "Self-Help.—Other drowns." The reader may adopt the voice of the speaker, the pronoun "you," or both, recognizing his or her own multiplicity and the internal conversation among his or her selves. It seems to me that it's poems that *don't* stir the reader, that remain haughtily inaccessible and impersonal, that don't provide such adoption opportunities, which are the most egregious form of self-help, written for the satisfaction of the poet alone.

As a reader, I can and do enjoy and benefit from art that involves personal material. Again, it's not the subject so much as how it's handled that matters to me. Jack Gilbert's *The Great Fires: Poems, 1982-1992* is an excellent example of work that is personal, that involves healing, and that can also be appreciated by a broad array of readers. I am also reminded of Carol Muske-Dukes' *Sparrow*, which is for the most part an elegy. "A private matter *Sparrow* may invoke, but it reaches the center of so much loss—personal and public." This blurb by Adrienne Rich speaks to the simultaneous inward and outward reach that I mentioned before and the idea that the personal can matter to the public. Many of the poems that resonate with me seem to have been based on real-life experiences and relationships. However, it is not the experiences embedded in the poems that I resonate with so much as how the poets provide new ways of seeing my own life. 'Mainstream' poets like Louise Glück and Robert Hass, who write lyrics in the first person, may be discovering the world through themselves, but they also provide means for readers to know themselves better.

To avoid writing poems comprised of "lingual beauty" and little else, as Dana Levin writes, "like elaborately decorated cakes in a supermarket refrigerator...promis[ing] sensational tastes that in the end amount to light confections, dissolving at the tip of the tongue," I try to imbue my poems with life, and what better life to draw upon than my own? While I have an urge to tell what happened because I have a sense that the closer I am to the truth, the better chance the work has of resonating, I also want to demonstrate linguistic style and finesse. Rather than just telling my story, I want to tell it beautifully, creating a partnership between language and disclosure.

And while few of my poems display markers of "today's 'experimental' styles—fragmented narrative, random jumps in space/time, multiple voices and points of view, disrupted syntax and abrupt shifts in diction, to name a few—" (Levin), the manuscript does to some degree. Although I can summarize the sequence of events now, the demise of my marriage and the development of my new relationship were not so straightforward; lives and relationships were fractured and overlapping, so it makes sense for the manuscript to display some of that disruption and confusion.

Although the sequencing of the poems is partly chronological, they also meander outside of the timeline of the central narrative, from biblical scenes as in “Lot’s Daughter” to specific dates as in “Photograph of my Father, c. 1967.” There are also, often quick, geographical shifts. For instance, in the first section, the setting moves from Waipi’o Valley to Selangor, Malaysia to Kula within three poems.

One of my challenges in trying to let go of constraints was not overcompensating and thereby creating more. Mid-process, my desire to limit my presence in the poems and to make them less about me led to a liberal use of third-person pronouns, occasionally vague language attempting timelessness, and a recurring lack of specificity. More than once, Susan mentioned my use of lyrical clichés like “emptiness” and “absences,” thereby reminding me of the phrase “origin and ash,” which comes from a poem by Pablo Neruda and was introduced to me in my MFA program as an example of the power of coupling abstract ideas with concrete ones. Incorporating more place names and earthly details seemed like a natural way to keep my poems more grounded. By trying to make the poems accessible to others in first drafts, I drained them of their unique voices. Without place names and evidence of the contemporary setting, the originals were bland rather than timeless and universal. The revisions incorporate more details that tie the poems back to me and this time in my life, but also demonstrate the broad scope of the manuscript, which keeps it open to many readers.

A point raised by another helpful reader along the way was that even when I used “she” instead of “I,” it still seemed like the same character—a thinly veiled version of the poet. Naturally, even when I take on the voice of a historical character, an inanimate object, or another person, an element of me remains. But to create more texture and to suggest that “she” and “I” are not always the same character, and certainly not always me the poet, I have included other narratives besides my own, written in the first, third, and even second person.

“His Mistress” and “Mission” are two examples of poems where I use the first person, but where the “I” is not the “I” of the central narrative. In the latter, the “I” is that of an imagined character, a white, possibly missionary woman in Hawai’i whose surroundings have forced her to question what she knows. In the former, the “I” is someone trying to imagine the unknown power of the pet cat of a woman much like the speaker of “Mission.” Such poems complicate the manuscript by adding levels to the “I.”

The places where the lines between pronouns blur are where I think the manuscript is most interesting. For instance, how might the “I” in “Mission” or the “she” of “Apparition” relate to the

“I/she” of the central narrative? That said, I generally use “she” more often for earlier versions of myself, ones from which I have more distance. As suggested above, where the lyric “I” does still appear, I hope that it challenges readers to try to experience the poems from a first person perspective, leading to connections to similar experiences from the reader’s own life or acknowledgement of a unique way of seeing things.

I also didn’t want the reader to necessarily know which “he” was which man in my personal narrative nor did I want to limit myself to just two of them. Because the poems are not just a matter of telling what happened, there are several variations of each man determined by the speaker’s perspective and the portion of the respective relationship being depicted. For instance, the “Half Story” series is based on my early relationship with my now-ex-husband. Thus, the “he” there is different from the man in “Pheasant Hen,” a poem depicting a scene from later in the same relationship, at a point when the speaker is beginning to feel restless.

To keep the manuscript from becoming a comparison of the two men or the two relationships, I have also included other men, imagined and real, related to my narrative and not. Again, I think that this provides a nice contrast that keeps the manuscript from becoming obsessive, but also yields interesting parallels. When it is the two men in my personal story, I like the idea of them occasionally being indistinguishable, of sequence blurring, and there being a certain degree of interchangeability. This emphasizes the duplicity and anonymity of an affair.

LEI OF THE LAND

Although the settings of my poems are not limited to the islands, I believe that growing up in Hawai’i has given me a unique appreciation of place and made it an excellent vehicle for expressing the personal. The land, or ‘āina, provides a less egocentric, possibly more palatable, means of accessing the “I,” the language of eros, and the psychological ramifications of the narrative backbone of the work.

In her critique of Dennis Kawaharada’s *Storied Landscapes*, ku’ualoha ho’omanawanui questions the use of the word “landscape,” which seems suspiciously void of an indigenous people: “...the term ‘landscape’ implies a pastoral scene devoid of Kānaka Maoli, a *terra nullius* waiting to be conquered, colonized, settled” (142). When I refer to the land, it is not so much for my personal possession or use as a backdrop or blank canvas, so much as an acknowledgement of the palpable presence and character of the environment, and in the case of Hawai’i, the land itself. In this way,

my work aligns with Hawaiian poetry, which has an abiding appreciation, respect, and love for the 'āina.

Since I began writing poetry, readers have noted an element of eros in my work, which I have attributed in part to growing up in a sensuous setting where the environment is often anthropomorphized. Many of my early poems about growing up on Maui emphasized the sensual and tactile aspects of that world.

In an introduction to a small selection of poems showcasing eros, Marilyn Hacker writes “Eros is often the fuel of the lyric imagination, which chooses to use words, sentences, musical structures of language to re/member the beloved, to enter that inexhaustible source of—not uniquely ‘carnal’—knowledge which is another person's body and mind.” One might think that an affair would be the perfect subject for a poet with this sensibility, but writing about love or sex in a sexy way can yield very unsexy results. My challenge was to find balance between eros and the subject. As I have long linked eros and the environment, it made sense for me to turn to the latter when confronted with the subject of the former.

Along with poems that are overtly about physical relationships, there are poems that imbue the land with eros (or highlight that existing quality), and still others where I have tried to see human relationships through the environment, as in the concluding poem, “Portrait of an Affair as a Guava Tree.” In that poem, rather than taking on the voice of the plant in an effort to make connections between its imagined life and my own, as Glück does in her flower poems of *The Wild Iris*, I have used the third person, perhaps in a subconscious, protective effort to separate myself from the subject, but also to provide a distanced perspective that I think others can appreciate more than an imagined confession.

In addition to providing a means of writing about relationships, and the coupling of people and ideas, my connection to the 'āina has underscored my separation from it as well. In my prospectus, I wrote, “While I consider Hawai'i part of my identity, it is now also linked to the relationship and time of my life that I left behind there.” Indeed, it has been difficult to accept that the place I believe has most significantly influenced my identity as a writer is intertwined with a life that I rejected. Because the then-new relationship, along with an unfamiliar sense of displacement and non-rootedness, was developing on an emotional level while I was still married and in Hawai'i, some of the later, 'Hawai'i based' poems reflect unease. Instead of homecoming and comfort, Hawai'i in this manuscript, is often linked to a sense of not belonging and a desire be somewhere

else and with someone else as well as unsuccessful efforts to make things work and to force contentment.

In my prospectus, I also wrote about a kind of settler kaona and a former Hawai'i resident diaspora. I still think that there's something to be said about these ideas. There is a local knowledge that one develops living in any place, but its currency (in the sense of time not money) naturally fades along with one's engagement with the respective culture and environment. Although the influence of growing up in Hawai'i remains in my work, my knowledge of what living there now is like and its overt presence as a subject in my work is waning. While part of me is sad to see the traces of Hawai'i thinning in my work, distance makes it easier to see and appreciate the strongest ties I have to the 'āina, the most important memories I have of it, and the main issues that I dealt with while there because they are what linger the longest. How I write and think about subjects will likely always be influenced by my time in Hawai'i.

In my physical move from Hawai'i and my literal efforts to move away from my identification with Hawai'i and my own life as subjects, I have tried to open my ears and eyes to the quotidian and the larger world around me. My newest poems have taken a step away from nostalgia for childhood experiences growing up in Hawai'i and the excitement of romantic trysts to a curiosity about the world at large and my current environment and activities. Writing the dissertation, I was inspired by such disparate things as stories that I heard on NPR while driving, a toy in a Cracker Jack box, and the sound of the train that passes near my home in San Diego late at night. Now, instead of wondering about the train trestles dotting the landscape of Hawai'i, I ask my partner how to say "train" in Serbian and then marvel at the onomatopoeia in the answer.

Although my material list has diversified, I still believe that the lei metaphor borrowed from ku'ualoa's work is apt (although admittedly modified) for my own project, which weaves together different strands of influence with varying degrees of prominence. While the work still displays sensibilities developed growing up in the islands, such as a personification of the environment, some of the brightest flowers in this latest creation have been plucked from my current life in San Diego, my yoga practice, and my exposure to Serbian culture through my partner. Here, I think of the ribbon leis that one often sees at graduations in Hawai'i. The basic structure is still there, but the actual blossoms aren't from my backyard in Kula. However, these non-traditional materials may be more travelable than fragile flowers. I believe it is still possible to speak of my hānai-ed culture and haku-ed poetry, although I may need to learn the Serbian or Sanskrit words for "adopt" and "weave" for a more linguistically representative description.

I think of my upbringing in Hawai'i and hula training as the hala backing to the haku—structurally integral and yet unseen. This layering and the presence of unseen forces gives the manuscript added texture and depth. It also goes along with the manuscript's themes of secrecy and unspoken thoughts as well as its acknowledgement of a spirit world. In addition to clandestine meetings between lovers, for example, there is an elusive lizard goddess that makes a brief appearance as well as imagined scenes described by unseen narrators. Notably, in "Mission," it is when the speaker begins to acknowledge the unseen that she uses the phrase *nā akua*, the plural, Hawaiian word for "gods."

My decision to break the manuscript into three sections also goes along with the haku metaphor. Structurally, there are three strands, each of which has a sprinkling of the recurring themes. I think that this helps to underscore the narrative arc—marriage, affair, new relationship—as well as the presence of three main characters in a love triangle. In addition to reflecting the general tones of the poems therein, the names of the three sections—Wai ("water" in Hawaiian), Agni ("fire" in Sanskrit), and Vetar ("wind" in Serbian)—speak to the broader themes of masking through language, cultural influence, and the presence of nature. I chose to use the Hawaiian word for water for the first section both because many of the poems in it are set in Hawai'i and because the element appears frequently within them. "Wai" also evokes the idea of source, in terms of life giving water, and its English homonym (if the 'w' is pronounced with English phonetics), "why." The second section, which loosely parallels the emotional affair, is titled "Agni" or "fire," thus reflecting the flames of passion as well as destruction. The Sanskrit word for fire, an important concept in the yoga tradition that I have adopted in which one uses breath to ignite internal heat and power, also goes along with the title and the idea of land as a metaphor for self. Finally, I titled the third section "Vetar," which means "wind" in Serbian, the language of the culture that I have most recently been learning to integrate into my life and work. I chose "wind" over "air" because I like the ongoing movement and direction that it evokes.

FORM FITTING

Again, I have tried to diversify the poems in "Caldera" in terms of subject, style, and form. Often however, when I'd try something different, like a poem about current events, without stanzas or a set line length, I'd look at it and think, "That's not me," when of course it still was, just a less familiar version. I realized that I had developed a set notion of what my poems should look and sound like. Recognizing this self-limitation, I became even more determined not to be ruled by

“should” so much as guided by possibility; here again is a point where the writing and personal experience parallel each other.

As I noted in my prospectus, my poems are generally short lyrics, less than a page in length. I often use a hybrid of formal and free verse, where I establish a line and sometimes stanza length, which I believe provides rhythm and structural integrity, and stick with it for the duration of the poem. Even in college, when my poems were more abstract and used less punctuation, I found that they seemed to settle on a line length and that stanzas provided some tempo and organization. But this was pretty much the extent of flexibility that I allowed.

Although many of the poems in this manuscript continue to follow this pattern, I have tried to break free from it occasionally. In the past, I have been encouraged to use more of the page, allowing lines to slide across it horizontally. I have found this especially effective when trying to create hazy memories composed of fragmented images or to give poems a sense of lightness or instability. I have also tried to let go of punctuation more often, and while I rarely majusculate, I have done so in a few poems where I wanted to highlight the multiple meanings created by line breaks. While I still like to divide poems into stanzas, I have tried to allow my lines to be more jagged on the right edge and to not squeeze the poems into tight little boxes. While this sort of restriction can certainly work depending on the subject—for instance, in poems describing feelings of constraint—for the same reason, it now seems fitting to loosen the formal grip that characterized earlier work. This way, there is a visual and formal freedom reflecting the sought and found freedom in the narrative. Finally, I still agree with what I wrote in the prospectus about “formal free verse” being able to underscore relationships and rhythms in poems, but as in life, these are not always constant and can change quickly. In writing these poems, I found it quite possible, if not necessary, to sometimes mix square quatrains with longer couplets and breathy, unstable tercets.

On the vocabulary level, I still pay a good deal of attention to sound and often use alliteration, which I think can be hypnotic and evocative, but I have tried not to get carried away to the point where it becomes silly. There are also certain words that I have to be careful not to repeat too often. It was the appearances of such “watch words” that sometimes dictated the order of the poems. On the other hand, it was my organization of the poems that, on several occasions, led me to find new ways of saying what were revealed to be common themes, verbs, and images. While I think some repetition can create cohesiveness, it can also be tiring.

Another way that I have tried to open the manuscript, and thereby connect the form to the narrative theme of moving beyond boundaries, is by incorporating more contemporary language. In

the past, I've tended to steer clear of current events, politics, and any vocabulary having to do with the internet. It's as though I've tried to keep my poems pure somehow by keeping them technology and real world free, but doing so turned the poems themselves into anachronisms. This is especially strange because without technology, there's no way that the narrative or this dissertation could've occurred; it's only with text messages and email chats that my current relationship developed from a friendship into something more. And it's only because of such modern conveniences that I experienced situations unique to contemporary relationships. So, without completely chucking the natural world, I have tried to open the door to the questions and insights that come with status updates and computer-generated "friend" suggestions.

On a matter related to both structure and content, I have also tried to create more openings at the ends of poems. During my master's program, Lucie Brock-Broido encouraged students not to let our poems shut at the end, but rather to open and elevate. Philip Larkin's "High Windows" was one of her many examples of a poem that instead of clicking shut with a pat ending, left the reader with opportunities. At the end of this rather bitter poem comes:

...the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (lines 17-20)

Larkin moves up, out, and away from the temporal subjects and crass tone of the rest of the poem. Just as I have a tendency to establish and stick with neat stanzas, I also gravitate towards sometimes too-easy endings. In my revisions, I've tried to create more openings and breathing holes, but without following Larkin's example too closely and letting the poems vanish into thin air. One way I have tried to keep poems from clicking shut is by ending with a question rather than an image or gerund as in "Mission": "Do you know nā akua watching / from torch ginger the color of communion?" Another is to suggest that the story is just beginning as in "Lot's Daughter," which ends with the ominous, "The two of us / now alone with our father." I've also tried to leave a little more meat on some of the poems in this manuscript, to push beyond the obvious finish lines, and to prevent them from becoming too anemic.

In trying to create such openings, I've realized again that content does tend to color the trajectory of individual poems. For instance, although I still occasionally ask "What if...?" and try to imagine different arcs, the poems about my marriage—a love story that had a beginning, middle, and end—usually want to click shut more than the ones with elements drawn from or reflecting my

current relationship, which is ongoing. There's more space in the latter; those poems don't seem limited to the story of two people that came together, lived together, and moved apart.

The one poetic form that appears in the manuscript is actually borrowed from another culture and both challenges and aligns with my usual style in different respects. The ghazal is a Persian form of Arabic origin "composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous" (poets.org). "Traditionally invoking melancholy, love, longing, and metaphysical questions" (poets.org), the ghazal works with many of the themes in the manuscript. However, while the ghazal may look similar to other poems of mine comprised of couplets, it involves a set rhyme scheme and non-sequitur shifts between stanzas, unlike most of my largely narrative poems. These two features provided different constraints for me to twist and move around. I believe that these poems provide a refreshing tonal and stylistic thread within the manuscript. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of the ghazal that made it such an appropriate choice for this collection is the tradition of the poet embedding his/her signature or name in the final couplet. The ghazal thereby invites the poet to insert a riddle in the poem, a secret way of revealing identity.

ANXIETY OF APPROPRIATION

While physically leaving Hawai'i was a matter of getting on a plane, moving beyond its borders in my poems has been more difficult, not so much in terms of my ability to write about other places as my ability to escape the lingering anxieties about writing about Hawai'i that I developed when I was living there.

When I started writing poetry in earnest as an undergraduate on the east coast, I never questioned my right to write about Hawai'i, and delving into memories of growing up on Maui seemed like the best way to follow the adage "write what you know." However, when I returned to Hawai'i after graduate school, it seemed increasingly important to question my status as a Hawai'i poet, and Hawai'i seemed to be an increasingly off-limits subject despite having spent the majority of my life there. I was forced to ask what I was supposed to write about if I couldn't write about what I knew, and if I could ever really know a place that I was told over and over again was not only not mine, but someone else's. Returning to the idea of thematically and formally testing and breaking boundaries, just as the neat little stanzas that I wrote in for so long—what I thought of as my *métier*—were actually a yoke, so was my timidity about using material from cultures that are not necessarily my own by birth.

Although trying to situate myself as a transnationally adopted Korean American poet that grew up in Hawai'i gave me a better understanding of some of the considerations to be made when dealing with cultural material, the experience was also often extremely frustrating; in exploring differing perspectives and trying on and invalidating various labels, I found myself in literary limbo. What I saw as a natural impulse to describe my attachment and sense of belonging to a place and/or the experience of a particular population was seen by some as a desire to claim a space rather than simply acknowledge its influence.

In my prospectus, I wrote, "In my haku-ed poetry, the Hawaiian culture and my experiences growing up in Hawai'i add a degree of texture and complexity to my otherwise very western style. Attempting to mute this voice out of fear of offending would do the work a disservice by making it less honest and more constrained." Although this would suggest that I had already recognized and come to terms with the potentially paralyzing effects of such fear, when writing this essay, I still found myself mired down by a sense that I needed to spend more time explaining my position and my understanding of labels like "local," "settler," and "Asian American." I felt irresponsible not furthering these memes. In this respect, I have fulfilled my promise to "explor[e] the marks that have been left on me academically, culturally, and personally." Living in Hawai'i not only influenced my poetry in terms of topic and style, but also the way in which I write and think about culture and identity.

My yoga practice, reflected in several poems and most notably the title of the second section, is an example of where concerns that I developed in Hawai'i have affected my engagement with non-Hawaiian cultural material. I long shied away from yoga because of the problems I had with what seemed like people picking and choosing aspects of an entire philosophy and lifestyle, and then writing over and commercializing them. It is not difficult to see similarities between some American yoga studios and tacky lū'au. However, having let go of the guilt and shame of being part of a western society that seems to lap up and caricature ethnic cultures, I can now see that my fear of appropriating was a limitation that kept me from enjoying the benefits of a practice that would never condemn sincere attempts at understanding it or even just taking "what works for me." My fear also kept me from discovering means of engaging in the practice in ways that *are* culturally responsible, respectful, and non-aggressive.

While I am grateful for the experience of growing up in multicultural Hawai'i and believe that I treat the Hawaiian culture with respect in my writing, I am somewhat relieved to be living outside of the islands and the tight hold of labels that often felt inaccurate or like accusations in the

Hawai'i context. And here is where my work and its evolution echo my life once again: by leaving the environment where I felt anxiety, displacement, and guilt, where I felt that I was not being true to myself, I have found a new level of personal and artistic freedom. Just as I was seeking freedom from convention in leaving Hawai'i and my marriage, I have been seeking freedom—or perhaps more accurately, possibility—in my writing. Once again, I haven't forsaken myself or my style, but rather found more depth and more areas for exploration. I have let go of the guilt of being seen as a colonizer, thief, or adulteress.

Perhaps it's partly because I am adopted and have little knowledge of my biological parents or genealogy that I am ready and willing to embrace and integrate the cultures that surround me into my life. As an adoptee, I am confident that biological ties have little to do with a person's ability to parent or one's cultural affinity. I've never had the urge to seek out my biological parents or even to visit the town outside of Seoul where I was born. If anything, I've felt the anxiety of not wanting to know about that facet of my self and not believing that I'm somehow missing a part of my identity by not finding out. It's not that I reject my ethnic background; I am simply more interested in other cultures and places than the ones to which I "belong" genealogically. I have been more compelled to learn about the world that has influenced my identity than my biological family or history.

Like adopted philosopher Kimberly Leighton, "my memories of and stories about being *myself* have always included my being *adopted*" (146); my sense of myself as Korean came later. Rather than being a condition, like a disease, "being adopted has been an identity of *possibility*; it has been a way to make sense of the tensions produced by being *both at once* the product of one's environment *and* someone whose meaning always exceeds that environment" (147). Being adopted is to be and be aware of multiple identities and processes—biological and social.

Leighton uses the phrase "adopted identity" in two ways: "to suggest the possibility of claiming an identity based on the *history* of the production of one's identity, that is, that one was (literally) adopted, *and* the idea that identities are neither born nor made but are *adopted*" (148). There is often a great deal of emphasis placed on blood ties, birthrights, and inheritance, especially in terms of who can write about what, but being adopted has made me more open to the concept of the adoption of identity, which is not the same as possession. "To be adopted...involves including in *being* those processes of *becoming* which not only affirm who we are, which not only give us the means with which we can assume an identity, but which also make the articulation of an identity impossible" (169).

Leighton offers “a way to re-read identity as *adopted* in order to highlight that identities, as objects of our desire, can be seen as both locations of subjection and places of potential freedom” (170). Note the connection here between “locations” and “places” and identity. For an adopted person, that location may not be geographical or genealogical; it is more process than place. For an adopted poet, for whom language and identity are always linked, it is an ongoing revision and mixing of influences. This instability should not be perceived as a sign of confusion or alienation so much as recognition of identity as something constantly received rather than something inherent and inherited.

Although “adopt” is often used to mean “appropriate,” my efforts to incorporate multiple cultures in my writing may be best described as those of an adopter. Like adoptive parents who fully embrace their child(ren) as their own offspring and want to keep them from feeling ‘other’ while simultaneously respecting where they came from and encouraging them to feel pride in their heritage and who they are as individuals, I am trying to create a cohesive family or lei without diminishing the beauty and integrity of the individual components. To better reflect the sustaining, supportive impulse in my adoption, it may be even more appropriate to use the Hawaiian word *hānai*, which not only means to adopt but also to nourish and to raise. Again, rather than being hindered by the possibility of appropriation or limited to the subjects deemed appropriate for my ethnicity, rather than trying to determine what I am not doing or not including or not recognizing, I am focusing on what the work does do, include, and recognize.

In fact, I align my work more with that of predominantly white, ‘mainstream,’ contemporary American poets than any other group, which may already be clear based on some of the poets that I’ve already mentioned as influences such as Glück, Hass, and Gilbert. Like each of these poets, I write poems with a narrative bent that aren’t focused on sound, or image, or pushing envelopes (but hopefully incorporate a little of all three), and that use colloquial language and fairly standard punctuation. I veer away from poems that look like verbal shrapnel scattered across the page or that rely on random generation.

There is a stark, even astringent quality in the poems of Glück that I especially admire, and I can turn to almost any of her poems, especially in *The Wild Iris* and see how the simple tone, but also the interesting pairings and questions created by line breaks, have influenced my own writing. For instance, it is a similar plainness in voice and purpose in this excerpt from Glück’s “Vespers: Parousia”:

I try to win you back,
that is the point
of the writing.
But you are gone forever,
as in Russian novels, saying
a few words I don't remember— (lines 10-15)

that I am striving for in “Afterword”:

I want to fix us
in ink, to save the irreparable,

impossible thing
we were, that now,

in three photographs,
is the glossy black

space between us

Both excerpts include a sense of a lost relationship and a desire to capture it in writing, a comparison to something more tangible but still vague (Russian novels and photographs), and a lyric “I.” Although I use more regular stanzas, the line lengths in both poems are also similar and the punctuation the same as it would be if the poems were prose. As I noted earlier, I have a tendency to take this plainness too far sometimes, which is why it’s important for me to include markers of time and place, to make the work my own. My inclusion of nature, particularly plants, is another place where my work echoes Glück’s. The plants that appear in my manuscript, ranging from guava and mango trees to frangipani (the word used for plumeria in many places outside of Hawai’i) to larkspur, tulips, and lilies, keep the poems literally grounded, provide evidence of their geographical scope, and underscore the lei metaphor.

I have also been inspired by non-white, especially Polynesian, poets writing in English including Joe Balaz, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, Hone Tuwhare, and Albert Wendt whose oeuvres incorporate markers of place and ethnicity as well as poems that do not. They demonstrate that being an indigenous poet does not necessitate writing poems about indigeneity. I admire how unlimited these poets are in terms of subject, style, and form. They don’t (seem to) worry about writing in traditionally European or American styles, but rather take them into new spaces. Their work has reminded me that being a non-white poet does not automatically make someone an ethnic poet nor does being an Asian that grew up in Hawai’i make me a local or settler writer trying to distinguish myself from other Asian American writers. In Vilsoni Hereniko’s note at the beginning of Tuwhare’s *Deep River Talk: Collected Poems*, he writes that the collection

...speaks in many voices, from different vantage points in time and space, and on a wide range of topics and themes. Through the eyes of the poet, we encounter the physical world of our surroundings and the emotional world within us. In seeing what he saw and feeling what he felt, we can experience our world anew. (vii)

This goes back to my idea of using personal material to provide the reader with a new vantage point, and as I noted before, one way to do this is to help and challenge the reader to see through the “I’s” of the poet. In his introduction to Tuwhare’s collection, Frank Stewart notes the “luminous weaving of voices in rich conversation” including those of the natural world (3). I appreciate and would like to emulate Tuwhare’s “weaving” of languages and traditions as well as his use of the land and its sensuous character. I also often find his various line lengths and rhythms similar to some of my own work. Take for instance the first stanza of “Yes”:

I like the Way
you slip out
of your things
pausing
between zip and
catch of breath
as if you were
punctuating
a movement: a phrase
of love. God (lines 1-10)

While this poem doesn’t incorporate cultural material or necessarily evoke a specific environment, it uses the first person, simple language, and clever line breaks to tell a playful story about physical love, highlighting detail and gesture, which is something I also strive to do in some of my poems.

PAPA WEHEWEHE ‘ŌLELO?

With the inclusion of cultural, linguistic, and geographical markers, I had to decide whether or not to include a glossary. While I argued for including a glossary in my prospectus, because the manuscript wound up with fewer foreign words and cultural allusions than I expected, and because part of me thinks that it’s somewhat presumptuous to guess what words will be familiar to readers, I decided not to include one. I do not want to limit my audience to those with backgrounds similar to mine, but I also do not think that the omission of a glossary makes the manuscript inaccessible.

My poems include far less non-standard English than the collections of, say, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, who also does not include glossaries, and while this has disappointed some of her readers unfamiliar with Hawaiian Creole English (see Amazon.com reviews), it has not deterred

them from reading and understanding her work at least on some level. In fact, it may have even compelled them to read more closely or aloud. While a glossary enables a poet to provide basic translations or definitions, particularly in the case of Yamanaka, much language, which includes sound and even the visual element of the text on the page, is not translatable. In the case of my poem “Tracks,” for example, it is the sound and onomatopoeic quality of the Serbian word “voz” that drives the poem. Providing its English equivalent (“train”), would I think, flatten the word and the poem.

The venerable editors of *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English*, on the other hand, *have* included a glossary. Although I am not fluent in any Polynesian language, I have rarely consulted the glossary when reading poems from the anthology, and when I have, the unknown word has not always been there. Using the book as a companion text for Albert Wendt’s poetry workshop, it became clear that the short glossary entries were almost always only the tip of the iceberg, or island, as it were. While it may be argued that glossary definitions can act as a starting point for an interested reader, I also think that not providing an easy answer can actually enhance one’s reading and understanding of a non-English word.

Recognizing the layers of meaning in words, it is somewhat surprising to me that Haunani Kay-Trask includes a glossary for *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* because her use of Hawaiian words can be seen as an act of reclamation and exclusion of those who do not speak Hawaiian. Trask seems to use Hawaiian words with the sense that sometimes the English equivalent will not do, but then allows those equivalents to appear at the end of the book. If using the English word in the poem itself would dilute the poem, I’m not sure how including a glossary doesn’t do essentially the same thing. While Trask’s publishers may have requested the glossary, as I am essentially my own publisher, I have decided not to include one based on my understanding of the effects of their presence or absence, and the demands of the manuscript.

I’ve also decided to forego a glossary because I know that any definitions that I could provide would be relatively simple and based on my own understanding of words from languages in which I am not fluent and therefore subjective and/or colored by the poem. Rather than compelling an interested reader to seek additional information on his/her own, a glossary might seem falsely definitive. As I noted before, I felt that a glossary or even starred definitions at the bottoms of my poems containing non-English words might close doors rather than opening them. I am certain that many readers, especially those with a deeper connection to or understanding of the languages from which I have borrowed, will be able to add a richness and texture to their readings of which I was

not even aware. I think this may be especially true of Hawaiian place names. Finally, including a glossary at the end of the book might make it seem like the poems cannot stand on their own, outside of a collection, when I fully intend for them to do so.

CONCLUSION

The opening paragraph of my prospectus promised “shifting landscapes, a mixed cultural identity, and eros. It is the intersections of these as well as the recurrence of several voices and figures that will give the work a sense of cohesion rather than an overt storyline or single topic.” I believe I have remained faithful to the basic ingredients and the promise of finding unity within multiple voices and environments.

Considering the layering of voices, the presence of nature and eros, and the narrative at the heart of the manuscript, “Caldera” remains an appropriate title. As I wrote in my prospectus,

Caldera...reflects both the volcanic landscape of the islands as well as the tumultuous, simmering-below-the-surface energy of human relationships that I often try to depict in my poems. It’s meant to evoke a steamy, smoldering, and potentially dangerous feeling. It is also meant to provide a sense of denouement and the aftermath of an explosive moment—destructive, potentially still in the process of collapse, and the marker of new beginnings and life.

By breaking through thematic and structural boundaries and thereby mirroring some of the decisions in my personal narrative, I have been able to advance my poetry.

“Caldera” is, as proposed, a synthesis of my Pacific and western background, education, and aesthetic sense; another complicating answer to what it means to be an Asian American writer from Hawai‘i; part of an ongoing discussion about ways in which non-indigenous writers can write about indigenous cultures without appropriating; the beginning of my own exploration of what it means to be a writer without a clear connection to her ethnic heritage but a desire to adopt and celebrate others; and finally, a demonstration of form fitting content and the relationship between art and life. This has been a project of both diversifying and refining my style, and finding literal and literary possibility.

I. WAI

HIS MISTRESS

If there are 'aumakua, let mine be the ship's
tom brought to the islands in a dinghy,

flea-covered, rat-fed, held by the scruff
in the pale hand of a young missionary

woman. Let it be the feline that harbored
the first mingling of spirit and foreign

devil when his seneschal mistakenly fed
him ancestral bones wrapped in kapa.

Let it be the calico she kept without recognizing
the new prayer in his purr or the generations

watching her sleep, the pet of the woman
who never understood why she dreamt

of leaping from cliffs or why her darling
no longer responded. Let my guardian be

bound to mistress and mountain,
myth and missive, slant-eyed and seeing.

DEDICATION

This is for all the aunties—the alaka’i in maroon pā’ū,
the tarot readers, the Sunday School teachers.
This is for the girlfriend that found out nine years in.

This is for Squid Lips who taught you to use
a soda gun and the blonde ballerina watching
stolen candy melt in the wrapper. This is for the lies

you told at the doctor’s, the in-laws’, your new school,
and the boy who got detention for not calling you
a bitch. This is for the scar where you never had

your tongue pierced. This is for all the gold stars
and white lines. This is for the roommates
you stole from and sold to. This is for all the whales

you coveted. This is for the five you’re still borrowing,
and the singing scholarship, Fulbright, and job
at *Marie Claire* you almost convinced us you had.

This is for the midnight trip to the hospital with sheets
in your purse. This is your confession to hoarding,
your apology for having none. This is the almond croissant

weighing down a letter drafted months before,
the front of the card reading *Heart frees a friend to fly*.
This is for the valedictorians and parents and candidates

who walked you down aisles, who learned to tolerate poems.
This is your three-ring centerpiece and your time
to give the haloed lady you’re named after a call.

WRECKAGE

My father once told her that rather than die
in pain, in bed, or even in her arms,
he would buy a boat and sail away
without provisions, compass, or destination.

It was afternoon when we returned
one day to find him gone and the shelves
empty of Bligh, the Lusitania,
the pipe he'd quit smoking but kept.

The clippings about the boat he built,
though too late to break the record,
their Pacific crossing, even the fire,
were gone. When he returned that night,

he said he'd wasted their time on water,
boats, and chances, that he'd finally taken
the waste and thrown it away. I cried,
imagining his books in a heap,

toppled, separated, pried open,
rolling in garbage, their bindings ripped
and mauled, pages of shipwrecks tearing
free and sinking in bilge and loss.

RADICLE

Get home girl
and you'll remember

why you will never
leave those green fields

again. Get past
the question-

shaped clouds
drunk on their own dew

or get used to losing
and finding each other

never. Get home
to your man—

the one you promised,
to where you promised

to take root, drink
rain, land.

HALF STORY I

Eager to surprise him
with breakfast from the café

across the road, she sneaks out
barefoot, waiting to slip

on her smacking sandals
until the bottom of the drive.

Ten minutes after ordering
their usual, with a side of ham

for the dog, she huffs back up
the hill, steadying a stack

of covered plates with her chin.
Hearing her careful steps

and the soft crush of foil,
he climbs back into their loft

bed, fully clothed, and closes
his eyes. She pretends

not to notice he's already
filled the dog's food dish.

SPEARFISHING IN WAIPI'O

The boys were eager to try
their three-pronged spears

on crawdads lurking between
river rocks. At first, steel struck

only stone, jarring the water
and straightened elbows.

Ripples multiplied the magnified
target. Yet when the boys sank

lower, dared open their eyes
underwater and steadied

themselves with free hands,
the treasure—tangled legs

and feelers—came up quickly.
The hunters' heads bobbed

to the surface with each kill,
like the rolling humps of one

sea-serpent. They examined
each skewered trophy before

sinking again and swimming to
the five-gallon bucket on shore

so all one would have seen
was a garden of spear-flowers

sprouting from the stream
with splayed red blossoms,

straight stems tilting to graze
the bucket edge, shedding

their petals and snapping
back into the rushing water.

SELANGOR RAIN

Waking, she assumes
it is late, the sun
high but hiding.

Resolving to skip
battered morning
conversation, she slips
back into ikat
dreams of mossy
faces and wet
feet leaving slow-
drying prints past
capsized frangipani.

A trapped ant
clings to his teepee,
chlorine-shocked,
as darkening sky
dims her reflection.

With the first drops,
a spider caught
mid-purl crumbles.

Splash rings cross
and cancel each other.

Selangor rain collects
in heliconia, crystal
snails creep, fatten,
and slide into her empty
gut which shakes
and sends her down.

UPCOUNTRY DUSK

I lose and find you over
every rise in Keokea, following

your dusty truck to the small park
where General Sun still looks out

across the last lava. I am already
on the ground when you cast

a blanket in the air that settles
like a checkered jellyfish. I feel

the earth under my shoulder
lift and hear a string of runners

popping near my ear. Tiny white
spider roots fall onto my eyelids

fluttering open to see your silhouette
against the scent of torn grass.

MEDICINE WHEEL

For Mahealani

When she washed with sage smoke,
her hair rang. Beneath eucalyptus
stretching up into sun and black
spots that could be leaves or burning,

my child hands made everything
hot—amethyst crystals, more hands,
a bowl holding blue corn flour
for offerings, the cowry shell

at the end of my braid. I was
twice as old then as you will ever be,
when she thought it was too late
to have you and gave me your gifts.

Our mothers were both waiting
when you were born, almost
praying to her brown belly
resting in your father's hands.

A tiny tree drank the thick yolk
she couldn't finish. This, at least,
is what I heard. I rarely saw you,
but was told of your blindness,

the gray cloud growing over
your eyes, the shrugs, her faith.
My shells and amulets collected
dust, the pheasant feathers frayed.

Three summers later, I heard you
asked for me, that you were sorry
everyone was waiting on you
again. You died on my birthday,

scattered days later into August
and a stream in 'lao, your father
holding the empty gourd,
her hair stiffening in the shadow.

STRATA

Driving into Mānoa, we went straight for manapua.
On the way back to the car, the warm pink

package blistered with valley drizzle. Winding up
slick green hills, past sweetheart messages engraved

in roadside strata, you pointed out mile markers
you used to pass biking home from the hot-shop.

I pictured you sailing down, dodging cars,
looking like a photograph I once saw, taken

when you were a still lean apprentice,
learning to gather glass and to be someone's partner.

The night-blooming cereus and the wilting
tendrils cluttering our crumbling rock walls

on Maui mean more having seen these dewy routes.
I wonder less about their missed explosions

than the dry stalks reaching down to reservoirs
of starlight and a version of you I don't know.

SWITCHBACK

Silverswords gleam and grow
faint as we slip into dark

dormant volcano. You run past,
stirring black basalt. Footsteps

like a match strike leave
the burnt scent of clouding

dust as your outline blends
and is swallowed by sleeping fire.

I follow all night, quickening
my pace at each bend until I am

almost running to carve your back
and shoulders out of now

lightening sky. Pele appears
at dawn, for just a second,

when the sun ignites
the serpent trail—a zigzag flash

in a bowl of cinder. Then I see
you, without lasso or explanation.

HALF STORY II

The soil's grown rich and hard
beneath the tangle. Her job

is to carve the creeper into square
blocks using a machete and shears.

He gropes and gathers the thorns
close to his body, leaning back

to reveal the vines she's missed
that hiss on her clipper blades.

Long stalks of dried grass slide out
when he shakes a section loose,

tailing him and the dense snarls
of weeds to the compost pile.

Snipping and pulling the sticks
still jutting from the dirt, she finds

a struggling fig tree that's been
shrouded by the liana. They pause

to undress its kinked limbs spread
wide and low across the ruffled earth.

CREW

The same hands that hauled
the thick green mooring at two,
scoop butter balls, cut limes,
stir melting ice in mai tais at five.
Good servers can take eight

plates on a tray for four, but ten
tables in fifteen minutes is too slow
if the bartender needs more ice
and the pink tablecloths are kites.
When camcorders shake the sunset,

even the galley girl knows to pause
and watch the flat sea swallow.
Then it's time to bus tables,
change trash, get them to dance.
At nine, we wave them away,

count camera flashes, unhook
our bow ties. *Walking or staying?*
Staying. Leftovers are gone in twenty
(last to finish cleans the heads).
It's best to be barefoot when hosing

the deck. Only orchids float.
Scraps and muck shoot into rocking
darkness. Debris and droplets leap
from everything bolted and Simple
Greened. Money from a sweet relish

jar is divided into piles of varying fluff,
each with one end tucked under
until the empty bottles are in boxes,
the slop and silver double-bagged.
We throw fingers for remainders:

ones and twos, odd man wins.
We grab our cash petals and crumpled
clothes and click on the flashlight.
The captain meets us at the stern,
each of us with a pack on back

and a box or a bag or a tub in front.
One by one, we step onto ocean.
The dinghy surges and spits
away from the boat. The thin line
startles taut, testing the cleat, burning

the skin. We float in salt air, jerking
with the rope until the sputter
and hum drown the silence
and we slip away from the unlit
boat, bouncing our weak beacon

off catamaran ghosts and fishing
spirits, all gutted gray and tilting.
Bright landmarks grow and form
underwater constellations. Invisible
elastic between two lime circles

contracts until they stack. Red,
right, return. Buoys welcome us
into the drowsy harbor. Olive
water soothes with soft slaps
like a tongue pushing the roof

of a mouth away and saliva
breaking. Our idling vessel
nestles in among the other husks.
We tie off, part, and continue
the caravan in our sleep.

HALF STORY III

They drive talking as if they aren't
touching, their fingers mixing hours

past the airport turnoff, the stray
cat town, the kite-surfing beach.

Now as the plane lifts, she looks
for his truck on the road below,

finds the steeple of the Holy Ghost,
and counts three lots over to their cottage.

She imagines his dog trying the space
of the empty passenger seat. At home,

he thinks of her when the door sticks.
She was trapped all afternoon one day,

but laughed when she told him how
she'd battled the sliding screen and lost.

He goes out to water the new lawn
before sunset, but stops to tend

the rosemary near the house where,
if she were home, he could hear her.

MANGROVE GHAZAL

It's easier to unhook a mango by pulling up.
Her shoulders drop. She sees his eye pulling up.

Holding hair, her heels dig in. Ripe.
Sweet tumbling down. Her ride pulling up.

Slicing into yellow, they slide through green.
Left hand dripping, steady right pulling up.

She leans on his neck, palm against his lips.
Arching muscle, froth. Reins across thigh, pulling up.

At the top, 'ōhi'a blossoms fire. Dew-tipped.
Resting, his head whips back, satisfied, pulling up.

This is the place to watch clouds roll into valleys.
She swings over, off. Gray sky pulling up.

Slink along the ridge, then sink to sea level.
Aloha moon! Midnight tide pulling up.

RAIN DANCE

Our last night was caught
up in clouds. Every time

the trees rustled, I asked if
it was raining. You shook

your head. The slight
slope of the corrugated roof

makes rain unquestionable,
as certain as *last*.

From our bed, I looked
out through the dew drips

and fog, at the dark
tree shapes imitating rain.

You held both of my feet
in one warm hand.

APPARITION

A field of sand dunes
shawled in callous leaves and white
half-moon blossoms flutters

in the warm wind—
the exhalation and summons
of the lizard goddess rising

from the salty pond,
bangled in brown seaweed,
flakes of her plant skin

clinging to her wet, almost
human form. Her yellow eyes
scan the thirsty land

braced for the shuddering rasp
that comes just before she sinks
back into the sea. Her tongue

shatters the call into a thousand
sighs at the absence of once
abundant offerings.

PHEASANT HEN

You found the carcass,
a brown speckled mound
rising from the fireweed

a few feet from our house.
Dogs, we thought at first,
but then I saw the faint

outline on the window.
A round splotch, a pair
of muddy triangles below,

and two dusty arcs
on either side. She hit
tilted slightly left.

Our heads mimicked
the angle, quizzical, sad.
The shades always drawn,

I asked the dull mark
Where was she going?
As I let my eyes relax,

I saw the reflection:
perfect sky and slope,
Kahalawai calling.

BUILDING THE BOMB

The second his truck slipped
over the hill, she'd scramble
from their warm bed into her lab.
In one room, she'd bake cookies.

In another, she encrypted messages
for nameless applicants, rearranging
their words into faces with eyes.
Meanwhile, the bomb grew.

It hid in the corner, muttering.
It called her on the phone,
appeared on her computer screen.
Talk to me. Finish me. Use Me.

The wires multiplied like lies,
each snaking to its own socket,
through and around curfews,
over and under oceans, sleek

in their single purposes and knotty
at their shared finish line. She set
the smallest traps to mask
the deadliest switches. Each day,

she swept and let the hair grow
back, the last glyph disappearing
just as his truck came over the rise,
a tan sun to her domestic day.

DUSTS OF US

Had I only imagined the red
kitchen walls, loose tea, Joplin

hair, I would not need
to keep calculating how

many years we've been passing
each other, and you could be

an island in my future. We've been
sifted together into a history

revised every time we breathe.
Scattered dusts of us

try to re-collect everywhere:
in late snow, an old record

store, certain shuffling gaits. I still see
a possibility of settling, but

we spin so fast that when I think
you're reaching, it's me holding on.

You're tired of vanishing.
Let's meet in water as particles,

become sediment, silt, clay, stone,
inhaling the same drenched air.

II. AGNI

MISSION

Spinster is such an English word. I am
queen here where maidenhair laces the wet

walls of cliffs I climb before jumping
into cool water, bubbling as the river

Jordan never could, needlepointing my body
like a child's primer: *Anemone. Barnacle. Coral.*

My boy brings me steamed roots
in coconut milk. We swim and eat,

drippings imprinting the warm round
rocks. Strange wet shadows disappearing

in sun—evidence of things unseen. My God,
where have you brought your bride?

My veil and fitted dress drag along
the forest floor. There are no seams

in the slippery white skin beneath,
just gaps for breathing and my green

eyes. Do you know nā akua watching
from torch ginger the color of communion?

AFTERWORD

I have thrown myself into routine:
a month of colanders

and sharpened knives. I know
I'm failing, forgetting

all that should be written
and then hidden.

I want to fix us
in ink, to save the irreparable,

impossible thing
we were, that now,

in three photographs,
is the glossy black

space between us—
Riverside to Kula

want that will not leave
me, that I wish upon you.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MY FATHER, C. 1967

Wild even when he looks
down where his hands hold

part of her, greasy and intricate,
still epoxy and plan. His

broad shoulders pin quivering
harbor reflections to the wall

behind him—a liquid halo
fretting over her construction.

He admires the strength he has
given her—small yet hard

enough to hold his weight
and keep him safe below deck.

When they are off course,
she will rock him in her

belly and heave him out
into the rain to tie her steady.

UNDERGROUND

It seemed so natural
the way you slid the back
of two curved fingers

down her lithe arm,
tender even in the sea
of oblivious people

riding separately in the same
direction. I tried to hide
among them, watching

with the faintest sensation
of the internal imprint
a gesture can have

at the back of one's throat,
the dull pressure of an image
that will repeat itself again

and again. Perhaps I knew
at that moment, as your hand
caught hers, what I wanted—

that softness and disarming.
Even now, I return
to that instant, knowing

if you ever touched me
like that, I would be
yours, terribly, irrevocably.

BUTTERFLY

I'm still writing about you, fixing
every moment in ink, straining out

imperfections that don't go in poems,
for instance, the dark brown stain

pinned like a butterfly to the center
of your crisp white comforter

the next morning. At first, I hid
the malformed wings under my thigh.

When you left, I steeped the hem
of my nightshirt in a glass of water

near the bed and wrung it out over
the dun dry smear. It spread

into an ugly flower with a murky center
and translucent petals that I rubbed

and blotted until the corona faded
and the Egyptian cotton began to pill.

Writing these words, it's as if I am tearing
the fabric around the undiluted blood,

stretching it over a hoop to hang on my wall
—an uneven heart, a crippled moth.

WHITE LIES

It's been three years
since we took that walk,

pausing to steal
white tulips that wilted

on the way back,
three years since I waited

for the perianths
and pollen that clawed

and closed my throat
to fall on their own.

Today, when I confessed,
you joked that we had

been based on lies
all along. I reminded you

that just because
something isn't good

for you doesn't mean
you love it any less.

DREAMING RIGHT

The path bore no footprints,
only echoes of crushed shells

and a faint smell of chalk.
The air was crisp, perhaps

Mediterranean, and your hand,
equatorial. I've never let myself

study your eyes long enough
to dream them right,

and now you say I never will.
So this was not a premonition

and I'll never know where we were
going, for once, unguarded.

I leaned into you, looped my arm
through yours as we walked

from glaring whites and creams
to cool stone slabs.

On a half sunlit stairway,
we stopped where the light stopped.

I wasn't surprised by the kiss,
but that my dream didn't borrow

details from another affair.
You reminded me of no one but you.

PARACHUTES

*I'm holding your hand
Across a broken bridge*

But you won't fall
(If you'd only,
I'd run to the edge)

You just refuse to see it

I don't want to
Prove anyone right

*The problem is you don't
Believe it—that no one else would*

I've always believed
In flying, but shouldn't I
Try to secure each feather?
Be sure the gray weather will hold?

*Off the record. You know
What works in a poem?*

My turret is small
But the view is lovely

Avoiding the inevitable

Those that slander security
Have little to offer

*With you stability lies
In the amorous accident*

What good is it
To leap into the cold air
With no opposite
Ledge in sight?

*When you say,
"She wanted more
but couldn't have more."*

It is wrong to want
A parachute?

SEASHELLS

In a minute
 of thoughtlessness,
of letting ourselves

and others wonder,
 you set seashells
on my bare thigh—

polished ovals
 like opals, blushing
spirals striated by sun.

I would've let you
 cover me completely,
would've held

my breath until dark,
 but just as I began
memorizing the pattern

of pinks, beiges,
 browns, you swept
them into the sand.

TEA GHAZAL

Sipping conversation, she saw him stall to be the last, staying on.
Her petals crushed against him when she passed, staying on.

No pictures, only letters signed without address.
In his home, she agreed, when asked, staying on.

Faint melody next door. They look up, lips open.
He repeats her questions about his past, staying on.

He brews tea, she reads shelves. Touches where he has.
They laughed at the storm when the lights flashed, staying on.

He pulls a long strand from her mouth. Orange pekoe.
Stretching cotton overhead, off. Beads and glass staying on.

The shade snaps up. Spathodea shadows mottle her eyes.
She pretends to rise. Stretching. He shifts fast, staying on.

She knots the sheet around her to boil water.
He fills the kettle. She turns to face him, her mask staying on.

FITTING

Sometimes I forget it's simple things
like winks and lace that undo men,

that lead to lines like, *Feel
what you're doing to me.*

Simple things undo me too,
like the way he pulled me close

by the front pockets of my jeans
in the middle of the Hillcrest market.

Even now, I feel the corset
of his fingers beneath my ribs.

I wanted to shrink, dissolve for him.
To be the tiny, tailor-made

thing he was looking for. To fit
the way his hand fit over mine

when he reached over and put it on
the stick shift, for that instant before

I knew he'd done this with others,
to feel car and girl tremble under him.

INFLATABLE

Like a limbered balloon
between pursed lips, your promise

of a whole day to pretend
we love only each other

has a bitter, chalky taste.
The excuse of learning,

a conference I should attend,
yields the first tinny breaths

of air, lets in light, thins color.
Dark plum blooms to ripe

pomegranate. Still two days
from full circumference

and shape, I am swaying, warm
with static, taut with anticipation.

GOING HOME

It was almost feline—
the way he leaned
further into her hand,

willing her fingers
to cast themselves
like a net into still

damp waves of hair,
bidding her nails
to scratch harder,

go further, before
contracting, catching
soft curls in a fist

that let him let go,
the wheel slipping
through his loose grip.

VENICE GHAZAL

In these warm island hours, her eyes close, silencing
distracting light. Nearby, a pheasant crows, silencing

the twittering trees. Slow breaths sync across azure
oceans, familiar ghosts. Languid lexis flows, silencing

uncertain bees. Alley sunsets through furrows of wildfire
smoke, fluttering ashes like black snows silencing

her fingertips becoming his fingertips. Four o'clock:
she's drowning while dreaming, supposes silencing

her thirst will help. Drinks the cold clear water down,
lets it drip and run until it soaks her clothes. Silencing

her without warning, or hands, or reply. She's filled
with soon and someday we'll pull the coasts silencing

us together or build a bridge. Poor smitten arsonist.
In these quiet hours, her eyes close, sigh and sing.

NAUTILUS

I can't close my eyes without seeing
our skin, can't rest

on this bench where passengers
pressing in on either side

remind me of body, make me
conscious of breathing, clothes.

I am nautilus—the constant curled
echo of us shifting

across cotton sheets—a flushed clasp
that cannot cry out.

LOT'S DAUGHTER

He slips out, hardly opening
the door—a single syllable
of many voices enters and is

soon forgotten in the ceramic
sounds of our meal—spoons
dragging across glaze.

In the smoke-warm room,
our company dines, seemingly
deaf to the thunder outside

that I imagine pinning Father
against wood. Desires
splinter through as our guests

empty their carved cups.
I expect the roar to enter
our home at any moment,

to feel my mother scrambling
against me. Now hearing
the horde clearly, our visitors

look at my sister and me,
approvingly. We are offered
to save them, but the crowd

will not take us. In the brief
time it takes the two lithe
men to pull Father inside,

I glimpse stars and a crowd
of half-naked men—old, young,
scholars, beggars, my lover—

a slaving swarm. Blind
fluttering moths. Outside
the melting city, six wavering

shadows stretch slenderly
before us, rippling over sand,
away from sulfur. My wrist cools

from the stranger's grip. We are
four, then three. The two of us
now alone with our father.

LAUNDRY

Eyes closed, I feel the bed lift,
sense the brightening sunlight

as you rise and leave, warm
wet on my belly and chest. I bite

the flesh beneath my thumb,
let my hand fall to my side.

My sleeve pulls a thin damp
trail across my ribs, stiffening

as it cools. I slip the dark
thermal scrunched under

my neck overhead, arching
as you clean and kiss my skin.

Today, I find the hardened
patch on the crumpled right

wrist and hold it to my face,
having you in my hand again,

your hand in my hair again.
Sandalwood and chamomile.

SURVEILLANCE

Maybe my father's in love.

Except this time, not with the ocean
or my mother.

Secrets change
your sense of sound.

Everything is a door
opening or a door closing,
someone eavesdropping
in your own home.

No one is really sleeping.

Work calls all the time
and you never answer.

You've always got ten windows
to click open or shut.

The best messages
are memorized
then purged.

Meanwhile, you're living
with the person you're hiding from.

He tells her to wait
in the car and dials
a frantic SOS.

He's says he's protecting her.

When you love someone, you hide
your superpowers. You can't tell her
you can see through walls.

Superheroes like us don't want anyone
to be mad at either version of themselves.

We have to love
in secret.

MAN SWALLOWS PEA

It'd taken a lot of hacking
to dislodge the first one,
inhaled just after art school, final
project left blinking in a dumpster.

The shriveled seed surfaced
unexpectedly one night,
around the time their gray puppy
in a lavender collar arrived.

He swallowed the second bean
at a Christmas party with a hard pat
on the back and a cold beer
that soothed his throat.

Sometimes it was hard to breathe,
but when he asked his wife
if she heard the rattling or felt
the tiny tremors, she lied.

In its moist corner, the dry pea
expanded like a ball of glass,
thinning to transparent
and then yawning a slack mouth

with a tiny pointed tongue,
a colorless dagger searching
the wet world, prodding him
to action. Certain it was cancer,

he handed her the scalpel.
She knew either blade—
cellular or steel—would be lethal,
and sliced. Hearing the hiss,

she plucked the shoot
from the infected soil.
The cut was clean but deep
and both the pea and she were gone.

CODA

I remember the morning you came back to me,
unexpected, a wounded desert thing needing larkspur

and lilies when all I had for you was spalted
birch and my mind's frail version of the burning

flowers outside your window. I knew you would
find me, just not so soon, or so broken. You tried

to take my photograph one day while we were walking,
but something must have happened or never did.

I like to think I'm still chemical somewhere, smiling
through my hands, waiting for the wash. This last time,

I watched you for several minutes before breathing
your name, softly, certain that I was seeing ghosts.

Even now, knowing you are not mine, yours is the voice
I return to, full of static, tremor, and sand.

III. VETAR

TURNING POINT

In the French engraving
Opening the Gate at Lyon,

a knot harnessing
two bay ponies to two

heavy wooden doors
blossoms in fine bristles.

I've felt it before—
not the strain of the rope,

but the ache of the rusting
hinge time has tried

and failed to weld
together—the hard

conversation,
the grinding embrace

of barrel and post
catching and sticking,

wearing each other
down, eventually

giving way, friction
unnoticed, moment

of resistance lost
in a shudder that echoes

for days, years,
now. You and I work,

talk, make love, silently,
cruelly, like the hinge

the artist's drawn
as one continuous cut.

INTEGRATION

Bring your eyes
to the edges of your island,
sink the rules back to your heels
and rock your intuition
gently, from side to side.

Let go of the dates,
years, things—especially
the things.

Remember standing on the shore,
feet buried, held still
by equal and opposite forces.

Return to this place
whenever you smell the soft
lips of monsters
promising thin-rimmed,
long-stemmed contentment.

With every inhale, lengthen,
create space,
uncurl. Pull free
from the sucking sand.

Set your intention
and rise onto all fours.

FULL GHAZAL

He dreams Allah as a bowl of clear, simple sound,
Like windblown weeds tossing on a hill sound.

She finds solace in chukars and peacocks
Telling stories two farms over in their frilled sound.

Upcountry estates and paddocks are safe.
Seashells whispering alternate versions kill sound.

They listen to time passing, flapping out.
No current or breeze in the narrow, still sound.

Dying on the deck. He waits for her.
She hasn't read the end. The wound will sound.

Her lips sealed, throat constricted, the fire builds.
She can't send word. Only her eyes spill sound.

A man is waking and looking out his window.
No elegy, complete surrender. Ample, sound.

WAVES FROM A WINDOW

On the isthmus, cane
field tassels shimmer

Westside slivers sprout
out of habit along winding pali

Hawaiians gave names
to winds in valleys
with an excess of the invisible

When first I saw and distinguished
sea from sky, thousands of dead
fish dappled the surface

White gashes on the lake
we left when I was four
were always bloating

I didn't know then
the word for the ocean's desire
to leap out of itself

Now looking
down on—leaving—
my island, I am all whitecaps

TWENTY-SEVEN

After twenty-four, it's inappropriate
to measure in months.

He has habits and haircuts.
There's no wondering

if her eyes will stay blue.
He sleeps through the night.

She's discovered your differences
and demands avocado.

He's caught you shuffling
through whole weeks blindly.

You've speculated
on what she will look like tomorrow,

how you'll appear in her
clavicles and exasperation.

No matter how much you plan
or undermine the rules,

this creature cannot
be limited or legitimized.

LAST LESSON

When the professor covers her
hand with his own, she is

careful not to flinch, even
as their skin warms and he

admits, *You're making me
nervous*. Outside the hotel

bar, they pause before
a window display. The taste

of lemons still lingering
on her tongue, she admires

a necklace of bronze-
colored leaves, imagines

them flipping coolly against
her chest as they stride away.

At their last meeting,
in his office a week later,

he gives her a thin elegant box.
When she opens it,

without him, the forgotten
leaves burn, leaving marks

more indelible than the ink
of the fountain pen before her.

TATTOOS

I went out the night I left,
 spent the hours trying

to feel regret
 etching my chest,

imagined lines fattening
 and filling without knowing

the final designs:
 fine talons and whiskers,

two pools of flesh
 divided by a black S;

you as samurai
 clutching jacks and pipe;

diaphanous tentacles
 undulating under

a pulsing pillow head.
 We planned and drafted,

scouted shops to carve
 and tame this odd family

but my back is still
 a blank, unbroken canvas.

CRACKER JACKS

I think there's a poem
in the missing peanuts
and the lackluster prize—
two-dimensional
and pseudo-educational:

*Fold my face along
the dotted lines
to find out who
I grow up to be.*

I turn the tiny page
to learn the drawn
and quartered image
is George Washington—
a politician in the place
of a plastic ring.

TOMATOES

Two days before your return,
 I came home to find three of my wards—
the tomato plants—knocked down
 from the porch railing, one

rolling back and forth on its side
 in the sadistic breeze, black edge
of contorted pot grinding
 into humiliated stems, inscribing

a bright stain on the composite.
 The leaves, so proud that morning
when I decided to keep them
 perched there one more day,

had adopted a defeated gray.
 I propped them against the fence,
swept up their penumbrae of soil,
 and began examining the damage.

Some boughs had snapped clean,
 others fell slack at deep creases.
I thought of trying to mend one break
 with florist's tape, hoping

the bandage could carry enough
 water to the tiny green orbs
that had blistered from blossoms,
 but shears were the only solution.

TRACKS

The *voz* calls through the fog,
halting midnight traffic,

daring the moored
to raise their sleeping sails

and race alongside
its rumbling hooves.

Voz, the groan of the horn
like a closed-mouth sigh

from the back of the throat
Voz, voz, voz, the rhythm

of the coupling rods
cantering up the coast.

As one warning fades,
another takes its place

in the canon of rolling oms
never hearing each other.

Voz, a flight grounded,
a voice demurring.

RELIEF EFFORT

Expiration dates are just suggestions.
Try something exotic. Tell your daughter,

*We had to get a special card from God
to come here where they weigh everything.*

You survived the storm's eye to do more
than make canned peaches and kidney beans

work together, but for now, pretend
you're a kid again, won over by astronaut food,

though this is military. Pretend you're playing
cards after rebuilding someone else's home.

FINDINGS

There are places I can't find anymore.
I was certain I packed everything.

But along with the lamp, steamer,
and spoons, I left recipes and routes

to cliffs, fishing spots—maps I thought
were mine, that couldn't be returned.

There are keys I've lost to boxes I kept,
little coffins with black walnut inlays

and velvet lining to hold the holiday
gifts I wear as amulets and defiance.

Tiny clasps catch and tear in the wash.
I am captivated and cleansed by the gale

I started, stunned by the rotting trusses
and trips meant to keep us afloat.

THE CHURCH WOMEN

whisper that you spend
too much time praying alone

with him. *Nothing unholy*
ever happened she said.

He said *Never did*
I love her more than I

should have wanted to.
She gave him up. Sunday

morning, he watches the door.
Mass mailings once signed

with *Love*, without God,
now end *In His Love*

because he's afraid of his own.
He loved her too much

to understand God
tangled in being.

Vows

Head in breast, heart
in hand, three weeks of letters

written in advance, tomatoes
plucked and stewed, fears

aired, itineraries discarded,
signature leaps leapt,

dinners in the backyard,
fresh shirts in Hoi An heat,

easy quips unspoken, long
trips and buttered toasts

to South America, to northern
lights, to fat noodles,

striped socks, Saturdays,
and shared ice cream, melting

away missed flights, lost
sunglasses, those years apart,

making way for today,
clamping hold and having.

THE MORNING THE ZEN MASTER DIED

a new email appeared in his inbox:

Are you afraid of death?

Select every profile
photo as if it's your last:

Smiling behind aviators,
top three buttons undone,
striped linen trailing
a dusk-lit beach cruiser.

His mom writes on his wall
on his birthdays and Halloween.

Occasionally, an automatic
function encourages me
to reconnect or play tag
with my ex. Attachments
have never frightened me
as much as the morning
of my take-home exam.

Below the paper clip icon,
a message two lines long
told me our dog had died.

Compassion was a phone call,
the only one since I signed
papers that came with a bonsai
—*bonzai!*—pushing out
of its blue glazed box
in my kitchen window, yearning
to walk on its knotted roots.

HATSHEPSUT

You found me searching
for caverns, scanning
the desert for absences,
intestines hewn out

of hard earth, their lining
inscribed with instructions
for slow absorption. I felt
your footsteps in my sternum

before I heard you gnawing
at the walls—my walls—
and tasted the acidity
of chisels and wire brushes.

Your speculation renews
stone, the shape of my eyes,
the flush in my forgotten
skin, my endangered name,

but you don't remember
or perhaps never knew
the hollowness I felt most
when you were near,

the blissful dread that
haunted and preserved me
for your fumbling discovery,
your common hands.

My dear advisor, hidden
architect of my separate
heart, you're the ghost.
You can't hurt me anymore.

LANDED

On a needle-covered beach,
I pre-claimed my arrival.

A weeping Columbus,
I planted flag, not seed—

a full-grown tree split
and employed for flapping

declaration—in your open palms.
Liberation, I promised,

was as inevitable as the rain
that rocks the wattles

near his house every winter.
I left that home for yours,

for your foggy mornings
and scrawny jacaranda.

And it is enough. I've traded
the forest in the clouds,

the land where I lived,
for the land where I love,

belonging for freeways
to anywhere but back.

ICARUS, FALLING,

thought, *When the wind blows*
it's over. Blue slid by and grew

colder as he watched
the last, singed feather slip

from his hands, hover
and disappear above

him, carving arcs,
flipping to face sky,

then ocean, then sky,
fluttering like the ash leaf

that catches in my hair,
the leaf I release

as you would have
if you were walking

behind me. Before me,
my shadow sharpens.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book was originally set
in Konstantina, a typeface created
for but since lost by an engineer
during a layover in Copenhagen.

Reminiscent of Garamond
for its delicate feet and feathery italics,
it was long thought to have been
inspired by the script and stationery

of a poet who sent a series
of letters to the engineer's family
home in Belgrade, seductive
in their unknown content and shape.

PORTRAIT OF AN AFFAIR AS A GUAVA TREE

The scars appear at all angles,
each escape route tried and sliced,
where some knowing gardener

kept the slippery twin trunks
from growing too far apart.
About two feet from the earth,

the branches must've learned to live
parallel lives; they go unscathed,
writhing skyward but separately

into nebulous green—two flocks
of leaves mingling and forgetting
they are siblings. Trembling

around golden fruits and white-eyes,
the leaves don't look back or below,
don't try to couple or break free.

This morning, they seem to hover
in mid-air, unattached to the quiet
trunks consumed by sunlight.

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