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# Motherland

Emily Morelli

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**Motherland**

**BY**

**Emily A. Morelli**

B.A., English Literature, Smith College, 1992

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**July, 2010**

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## ABSTRACT

*Motherland* is a three-part collection of poetry. The first part, “Foreign,” contains poems about Portugal and Brazil. The poems reflect historic events and personal observations. In the context of the collection, they serve as historical and emotional background to my Luso-American identity, working with places and events that came before me and experiences that I explore through the medium of poetry. The second section, “Familiar,” covers the ground of childhood memory, specifically through place and people, and my adult experiences with motherhood and its surrounding events—pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, birth, and parenting a small child. “Unexpected,” consists of poems that are more playful in nature or that originated in a more imagined realm—poems about literary characters, found punctuation, and dreams, for instance.

The three sections coalesce into a collection, progressing from a quest for understanding within a larger context in “Foreign,” to a search for defining moments or experiences in “Familiar,” to a sublimation of understanding or definition in “Unexpected,” where meaning arrives rather than is sought. The preface discusses the process of writing, influences on my writing, and a close examination of poems by Sylvia Plath, Galway Kinnell, and Robert Hass.

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## PREFACE

### Introduction

For most of my writing life, I have concerned myself primarily with content, language, imagery and rhythm. If I ever considered a hierarchy of essentials in what constitutes poetry, these topped my list. I began studying the craft of writing when I was in high school and teachers inevitably valued these components. I sought them in the works of other poets and in my own writing. What would I write about? What was my “subject”? How would I express it well enough in the language and imagery I chose? How would I sing the phrases and thoughts artistically?

These concerns are valid and obviously important to the workings of poetry, and they still drive my writing to some extent. Inspiration for content derives from many sources: experience, dreams, the subconscious, observation, an odd idea, the senses. Language reaches me through reading, memory and research. Rhythm remains so embedded in the body that it drums on its own.

Since working with various faculty members at UNM and working through the process of writing a dissertation, my focus has shifted to the actual arrangement of the elements that create unique form. The crafted placement of all the elements of a poem dictates how a reader receives it. The sculpture of a poem can restrain or unleash emotional meaning. An intentional, thoughtful form enhances language, content and rhythm. It subdues or pushes emotional drive. The contemplation of form gives me a sense of play and a sense of rules. My engagement with crafting has deepened and become the overriding concern, as opposed to theme, or meter, or how much interesting-sounding language I can pack into a line. Rather, I think more about how I can temper and

use those elements to an advantage for the poem's sake, so that the alchemy and convergence of interesting elements and techniques creates a poem's form and intent.

Working with faculty members at UNM has exposed me to various ways of looking at craft and form. I have studied both traditional form, with Diane Thiel, and contemporary free-verse form with Joy Harjo, Amy Beeder and Dana Levin. Crafting form reminds me of the power of the poet to discover what is available in her own writing, rife with happy imperfections and latent arrangements. It is a powerful tool. Form, I realize, is a physical action. The poet rearranges phrases, stanzas, and linebreaks on the page in a way no other genre requires. Working with form in any art means moving from acquiring materials (words, subjects, punctuation, etc.) to crafting with those materials.

In contemplating craft, I realize that a break from intense rhythm, language or imagery is not a failure in vision, but a necessary means to highlighting language, emotion, tension and aspects of story, among other elements, in a poem. As a photographer manipulates the play of light to foreground some object or quality of image, a writer makes similar decisions by manipulating the intensity of language, placement of punctuation, line-length, and stanza breaks at critical points of a poem. In other words, I could cut some wildflowers and throw them in a vase, which is pleasant, or I could cut the stems to varying lengths and break apart colors and shapes to distribute them-- forcing the viewers to compare and contrast, to move their eyes around the arrangement-- for maximum artistic value, evoking whatever feeling I want to evoke. The poet creates unique forms in this same way.

The three sections of Motherland came together from poems sorted into primary threads—Portugal and the Portuguese as defined by history and personal experience; motherhood in all its stages (pre-pregnancy, birth, child-rearing); and other poems that arrived from playfulness with language or more imagined subjects. My initial impulses of finding my “subject” and finding the language and images to fit it are there, of course, but also, I hope, there is evidence of a deeper process of understanding how I want my poetry to be constructed, both in collections and as individually crafted pieces.

#### Influences Traditional & Geographic: Language Grows

The best way for me to illustrate my initial ideas about poetry is to discuss two poems by poets I have continuously admired for their diction, compression, thematic concerns and, what seems to me, undeniably New England sensibilities. I read Sylvia Plath and Galway Kinnell when I feel homesick, when I require a jolt, on rainy days and on poem-optimistic days. In short, I return to words or phrases or complicated metaphors for some kind of grounding and comfort, phrases like, “blacks crackle and drag”(Plath) and words like “houses” (Kinnell). This is the tradition I know, both geographically and academically.

What Plath and Kinnell have in common is heightened diction that becomes the driving sense of a poem’s meaning and evocation of feeling. They are ever aware of sound and compression, of phrasing and music. Strong attention to dense imagery grows directly from the flora of New England, which is so dense in the summer that it vibrates in tones of greens. Compactness is visceral. All those wildly sprouting and spurting plants compete for space, for survival; the richness and density permeate the view on all sides.

In one sense it can suffocate, and in others, it rewards with layered beauty and tiny surprises. Kinnell and Plath both seem to work and see from this geographic reality; over the years, it has become a sensibility in my own poetry I can't escape. It has become, in the evolution of poems for this dissertation, something to watch, because, as foretold in early Plath poems, it can be overdone and choke out the feelings of a poem.

Allowing the light and the air into my own poems feels unusual, but also necessary. Dana Levin's use of the word "unpack" for this process resonates with me. I'm good at packing, at pulling everything inward in a poem, so progression in my work has to grow from unpacking some of the density. I feel light and air will only appear with continued experimentation with arrangement. By experimentation, I mean fiddling with line lengths, stanza breaks, traditional form, and juxtaposing form and subject for a cohesive or jarring effect. It also means knowing when to state something and when to let the reader make associations. In essence, it means moving from the tuck-and-roll to a standing back spring, an opening up mid-air and a radical shift in starting position—taking off backwards and opening up.

In reading, I am learning this. A contemporary influence of mine is Anne Carson, who blends the sacred and mundane with humor and openness, but still retains rhythm, mystery, and surprise. In passages such as, "Kitchen is quiet as a bone when I come in/  
No sound from the rest of the house./ I wait a moment/ then open the fridge./ Brilliant as  
a spaceship it exhales cold confusion," from "The Glass Essay," I find breathing space in her lines. Sound is less of the driving force, but not less important to the poetic outcome. Her ability to craft poems made of the combination of successful long and short lines is particularly interesting to me. She creates mood by arrangement of lines and by varying

the intensity of her poetic descriptions, contrasting the mundane and sacred through diction, syntax and line-length. I gain more of a sense of how to manage foreground and background by reading her poems. Other poets I have read for this “opening up” of form are Louise Gluck, Robert Hass, C.D. Wright and Jorie Graham.

I have also discovered that the opposite of dense imagery and language is not necessarily narrative form; that, in fact, there is no one opposite direction to go. Lyric poems can contain low-lighted moments as well as heightened language; arrangement can allow for traditional “sense” between lyric passages.

### Plath’s “Blackberrying”

In Plath’s poems, her heightened, agile use of language is obvious, and so is her command of myth, story and emotional evocation. But what I really love about Plath is her work ethic, bound up in her identity as a puritanical New Englander with the misconception that she can both control fate and observe herself as its victim at the same time. This victimhood is her least attractive quality as a poet to me, and yet she couches it in such dramatic possibility (“Daddy”) that I know she knows she’s using it, and so she’s believing again, as all New Englander puritans do, that if she works it hard enough it’s forgivable and actually transformed. I begin to believe it, too, when I read her work. I have come to divide Plath’s poems into two categories: the poems that scorch, that take on subjects and emotions directly and, often, brutally, culminating in a more dramatic assessment of her situation; and the poems that quietly evaluate, adopting a more detached, distanced view of emotions and culminating in a more practical assessment of

her situation. “Blackberrying,” first published in the *New Yorker* in 1962, fits into the latter.

Thematically, “Blackberrying” marries many of Plath’s long-term relationships: with the abundance of nature and pleasure, with language, with work, and with the pull of the sea. Plath wrote the poem while her brother was visiting her in England: “Did you see my poem ‘Blackberries’ in the September 15 *New Yorker*? Wrote that when Warren was here last year...” (Plath, *Letters Home*, 466). His presence would have been a reconnection with a significant long-term relationship.

“Blackberrying” also embodies much of her style, ethos and attitude about writing. The conceit that the blackberries are words, language, and that she, as the harvester, rules the process of writing, delights me. What I love even more is the give and take she admits: though the blackberries force her to work at picking them, “they accommodate themselves to [her] milkbottle.” This attitude of control and pliancy, of mastering and suffering a bit for it, shows her ability to sustain a tension between actor and subject. This remains a classic tension in Plath’s work.

“Blackberrying” opens with an image of abundance and the solitary harvester: “Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries.” This image hints at Plath’s blackberrying delight, simply from the repetition of “nothing, nothing but blackberries.” The presence of “nothing,” followed immediately by “nothing but blackberries,” implies both absence and possibility, the writer’s dilemma and delight. Nothingness is filled with only one thing, and the possibility of culling all that fruit, all that poetry, is tempered by the one medium available to her: words. There are “blackberries on either side.” That the “blackberry alley” is “going down in hooks,” repeats a theme, if not just a word, that

Plath fixes on in her writing: the use of the word “hooks” implies her unwillingness or reluctance to take charge; at the same time, it also implies her admittance of the pull of poetry against this hesitancy.

The blackberry alley goes down in hooks “and a sea/ Somewhere at the end of it, heaving” awaits the picker. The poem already exists, heaving, at the end of it all. The use of the word “heaving” implies labor and, perhaps, in conjunction with the sea image, danger. So the sea seems to be at once the process, the poem, the reward and the danger.

Plath describes the blackberries themselves: “Big as the ball of my thumb and dumb as eyes/ Ebon in hedges, fat/ With blue-red juices.” Ah, the juice! Who doesn’t want to describe words as fat and juicy? But blue-red is a blood image, too, and again, the idea of toil, hardship, perhaps a bit of pain, emerges. There’s nothing warm in the thought of the blackberries, nothing flattering in the imagery employed. “Dumb as eyes/ Ebon in hedges, fat” imbues words with a uselessness echoed in her later work. Although “ebon” is a heightened way to describe the color black, the sound of the word falls flat in the ear. Perhaps she already knows that what she feeds off eventually leaves her empty? When she writes that the berries “squander their juices on [her] fingers” she admits her limitations as a writer. She’s not regretful, but honest. This also hints at the futility of writing—the simple act of “touching” words necessitates the loss of part of their ideal essence, so in the handling of words, they lose their perfect state. The next line, “I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me” states her lack of choice in the matter, as if language simply turns up in relentless abundance. Again, she oscillates between her active and passive relationship with writing in these lines.

The second stanza shifts to the sky, and choughs flying overhead. Even the choughs take on the image of writing: “bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.” Nature controls the bits of paper, but how did they get burned? Are they bits of writing that have proven unsatisfactory? Are they the ultimate result of blackberrying? After all, the choughs eat the berries. Plath writes, “Theirs are the only voices, protesting, protesting.” Are they protesting her presence in the berry patch? Has she no claim to the essence of language as nature does? The choughs represent the first instance of sound imagery and it breaks Plath from the visual reverie and perhaps the spell of the sights in front of her. She turns to the sea: “I do not think the sea will appear at all.” The poem-- if the sea’s “heaving” represents the process of the production of a poem-- has not materialized and the speaker doubts its presence at all. Rather, so many berries remain for picking that she soon finds a bush “so ripe it is a bush of flies.” Such ripeness, without the work of production, leads to decay. Such an abundance of language, without the poet’s hand, decays. In the process of harvesting, something, the juices, gets lost, while something, the poem, gets made.

Although the speaker could rush to the sea at the end of the lane, obviously, the second stanza ends with “one more hook, and the berries and bushes end.” The “hook” could be a bend in the lane or a reference to a stand of bushes, but more likely for Plath—in whose lexicon “hook” maintains a significant place (see “Tulips”)—it’s the hook of language, the curiosity of looking to harvest *everywhere* available. Hooks hold her back when perhaps she feels compelled to move forward, and also draw her forward when she might hesitate. She sees the hooks before she enters. The hook is the draw *and* the trap.

By the last stanza, “The only thing left to come is the sea.” This short sentence echoes the concept of the wide-open, larger sea that seems both daunting and simple at the same time. Plath wastes no ornately descriptive language on the sea, because, compared to the berries, the sea poses a less complicated vision. Also, her attitude toward the sea remains complacent and, in description, less energetic than other descriptions (e.g., the description of the flies). The speaker expresses difficulty at even arriving, literally, at this bland scene. She tries to get there, when, “between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me/ gapping its phantom laundry in my face.” Here the speaker is confronted by a force of nature pushing against her, but rather than imagery of the natural world, Plath employs the domestic image of laundry flapping. The domestic interferes between Plath and her two stages of writing: the culling of language and the churning of poetry: between the berries and the sea, that annoying phantom laundry. Natural forces don’t daunt Plath as much as domestic ones do.

Domesticity fights to stop her from reaching the sea. Although Plath was well educated—evident by a *summa cum laude* degree from Smith College and a Fulbright to study in England—some of her work contains imagery of the drudgery of the maintenance of daily life. In one metaphor for her relationship with her father in “The Colossus,” Plath employs the point of view of a cleaner rather than a curator or art historian or intellectual:

Thirty years now I have labored  
To dredge the silt from your throat.  
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of Lysol  
I crawl like an ant in mourning  
Over the weedy acres of your brow

To mend the immense skull-plates and clear  
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

Plath again speaks of work and control in this passage. She *labors* in an attempt to understand. The labor of domesticity creates another layer of tension in her work that I admire, even more so as I have faced the challenge of shaping a new version of creativity after having children.

The speaker moves between the two hills and observes that “these hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt,” a state of innocence or purity that removes them from their proximity to the sea. It is as if the speaker feels the sea does not really exist at the end of the sheep path, or is afraid to get to it. In fact, the sea never does materialize fully in the poem. The visual imagery Plath gives us is literally close to nothing: “nothing, nothing but a great space of white and pewter lights.” Plath employs a different sense to evoke the sea further, both as source of inspiration and as the unstoppable force of production; she evokes sound: “a din like silversmiths/ Beating and beating at an intractable metal.” Her use of sound becomes important if this poem foreshadows poems in *Ariel*, in particular the opening stanza of “Words”: “Axes/ After whose stroke the wood rings,/ And the echoes!/ Echoes traveling/ Off from the center like horses.” Dealing with the subject of language, in “Blackberrying,” means passing through the sensually ripe, colorful and vibrant world of choice to the methodical, repetitive, difficult world of work. If the medium the silversmith works is “an intractable metal,” then the words, in the process of transformation into poetry, are intractable. If the result of this banging at intractable metal is a “din,” then the process of making poetry reduces words not only to sound, but to an equally flat sound that evokes no pleasure.

The title and first part of the poem suggests pleasure, especially because Plath, in her journals, often writes of experiences with nature exuberantly. A reader might expect the poem to describe delicious anticipation. Yet Plath tempers any pleasure by coolly describing her relationship with the berries and the experience of berry-picking. The berries are abundant, deep in color and available, yet the relationship is “unsought,” the berries are described as “big as the ball of [her] thumb” and they “flatten” their sides against the milk bottle. The lack of sensual description—or what might seem to be the most appropriate way to describe blackberries if you are inclined to spend time picking them—shades the poem. When Plath shifts out of the berry lane, the landscape becomes even starker. The hills are untainted, their face is “orange rock” that looks out onto “nothing.” The sea, hidden, and then appearing only as white and pewter light, loses color and variation. It retains, however, a pull—the silversmith repeatedly bangs the metal. The sea’s movement and the sound it produces are constant and unquestioning. The silversmith does not succumb to a sense of futility. He never puts the hammer down. Therefore, the end of this poem implies that Plath, when faced with the daunting task of craft, of expression, moves forward, perhaps without pleasure, but forward nonetheless. The art of words and the making of poems may be without pleasure, yet they are inseparable from the natural order of Plath’s life and surrounding world, from her ability to understand her own life experiences.

This poem foreshadows Plath’s later view of language, words, crafting poetry, and futility. “Words,” the final poem in *Ariel*, addresses these sentiments more directly and harshly. In “Words,” Plath evokes a colorless, empty landscape as well, filled with sounds that offer no comfort to the speaker. Here the extended metaphor names words directly,

and the sensory image Plath uses to convey the futility of working with language is, again, sound: “Axes/ After whose stroke the wood rings,/ And the echoes!/ Echoes traveling/ Off from the center like horses.” Unlike “Blackberrying,” this poem does not acknowledge choice or suggest a relationship in picking or choosing language, but deals with the aftereffects. The lush possibility of the fat, juicy berries have gone. In their place, “sap wells with tears.” Plath writes, “Years later I/ Encounter them on the road---/ Words dry and riderless, /The indefatigable hoof-taps.” Dry words, juices no longer left to be squandered. Plath’s language here, though, is still rich with consonance and rhythm—“indefatigable hoof-taps.” Although Plath still uses metaphor, she deals more directly with the connection, both in the title of the poem and in her direct naming of them in the poem. We see shades of this at the end of “Blackberrying,” where the turn to the sea, to the world, has produced a “din” that the speaker does not fight, but acknowledges. In “Words,” not only does she acknowledge the din, but also, by using the metaphor of “words” for *riderless* horses, she admits her lack of control over language. The line “From the bottom of the pool,/ fixed stars/ Govern a life,” implies that she does not control her fate, or the creation of works and the treatment of words, but that fate is pre-determined. Plath again evokes a water image, but this time the water does not move, does not make sound, but absorbs it. The richness of this poem exists in Plath’s ability to write about flatness, emptiness, barrenness, with the momentum of rhythm and detached sound. By “detached,” I mean her ability to pay attention to consonance and assonance without heightening it, so that the result is poetic, yet dry. Unlike her earlier poems, that use assonance and consonance conspicuously, “Words” reflects her ability to use it subtly, almost subversively. For instance, “indefatigable hoof-taps,” repeats the hard “t”

sounds and soft “a” sounds. There is a weariness in the rendering of this image. The foot-taps are tireless, but the speaker is worn. The difficulty of saying the word, “indefatigable” with its long and short vowel sounds and the range of consonants from “d” to “f” to “t” to “g” to “b” to “l” relay this difficulty of spirit. Plath had a natural ability to infuse her feeling into sound in a surprising and apt manner. One of the reasons I’m drawn to Plath’s work is its sense of relentless pursuit: to harness sound and language to express her hardest feelings, the things she cannot contain. If you cannot harness the feeling, you can at least harness the language to describe it.

Her precision of image is always present as well, from her more dramatic poems to her quietest. Her images present a visual clarity that I too have adopted and for which I have a proclivity. I have noticed, in the course of working on my dissertation poems, that in order to write more sophisticated poems, I have had to develop a better use of other sensory imagery. I also recognize the importance of balancing any type of imagery with more expository moments in poems. “Blackberrying” balances this with the presence of an “I” in the poem who narrates the experience without relying solely on images, so that when the images do arise—the hanging bellies of the flies, for instance, and their wings—they present a natural shift in the reader’s imagination because they present a heightening of the speaker’s attention. We move from what the speaker sees to an internal evaluation of it, through shifts in diction and through declarations. For instance, the lines, “The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven./ One more hook, and the berries and bushes end,” comes directly after she describes the flies in heightened detail. She moves from description, to evaluation, to visual location in the blackberry lane.

The form of “Blackberrying” suggests control as well. The poem is 27 lines long, broken into three stanzas of 9 lines each, and the movement between each phase of the speaker’s experience is clearly marked with stanza breaks. The lines are similar in length, with the exception of one short line “Ebon in the hedges, fat.” Because this is the only direct description of the berries without simile, it begs interest, especially since it is the shortest line of the poem. The longest line of the poem vividly describes the flies around the overripe bush: “Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen....” The direct description of the berries pales in comparison: “ebon” and “fat” are fairly non-descript adjectives. The line length has a job here: because it is comparatively so short, the line stands out in a way the description does not. If Plath intentionally draws attention to the flat description by cutting line length, what does she communicate? Her duplicity of meaning again works here: the line seems both significant and insignificant. The words, the berries, are both significant and insignificant to her. Her ambivalence emerges by the juxtaposition of line length and content.

I have learned from Plath repeatedly that constraint of form can work well for harnessing feeling. In “Valentine (for Corey Myers),” I tried to work in stanzas of four lines because I wanted the traditional idea of a measured love poem to stand in contrast to the disturbing experience of seeing a crime victim’s heart in a coroner’s photo. Originally, I had envisioned writing a direct address to the heart in sonnet form, but it seemed too coy for the seriousness of the moment. I feared it could be construed as a tongue-in-cheek poem and I feel more reverent about the experience. It seemed more respectful to write the poem in a more traditional shape but without a traditional form. In a way, this meant my content could be more direct and open. “Words” uses stanzas in

much the same way. Plath's line lengths vary for effect, but the stanzas are all five lines long. The reader moves through the poem in a regulated way, yet the poem moves from a specific, concrete image to a general concept—from "Axes" to "Govern a life." The directive goes from close attention on an earthly object to the control of the gods. The content opens up with each formal movement. The restraint of the formal structure allows Plath to carry the reader forward without overwhelming her, stanza by stanza, to the larger thematic concerns.

### Kinnell's "Blackberry Eating"

Compared to Plath's poem, the title of Kinnell's alone shows a marked shift in perspective on blackberrying as a metaphor for language and the act of picking blackberries as a metaphor for process. He emphasizes consumption in the title, not the "picking" or process of selection that Plath emphasizes in entitling her poem "Blackberrying." The importance of the word "eating" in the title carries several implications—that blackberries, or language, are a necessity to Kinnell; that Kinnell values the nourishment of consumption rather than selection; and that the poet or blackberry eater has the ultimate command and responsibility over the process.

Even Kinnell's process of picking differs from Plath's. When Plath selects berries, "...they squander [juices] on [her] fingers." Kinnell doesn't use his fingers--rather, the berries land directly in his mouth: "as I stand among them/ lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries/ fall..." He has little to do with the selection process here; are the berries ripe and heavy enough to fall from the stalk on their own? He squanders nothing by allowing them to select themselves. Where Plath's berries, "accommodate themselves

to [her] milkbottle, flattening their sides,” Kinnell’s berries fall whole to his mouth and do not change shape until, he writes, “I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge (them) well”. Plath’s berries are stored and carried off; Kinnell harvests and consumes his on site. This, to me, means that Kinnell’s process requires less *thought about* control, yet more controlling action. Instead of Plath’s description of give-and-take, Kinnell offers us a direct, succinct act. Because he brings the whole stalk to his mouth and squeezes the berries as they fall to his tongue, the entirety of interaction is in using. Plath’s references to squelched juices and accommodation in the milk bottle make selection a process that implies negotiation and interaction between the chooser and the chosen. Where Plath’s relationship with the blackberries seems a struggle for control, Kinnell’s is more organic and mysterious; an irony, because Kinnell makes his intentions for blackberries to serve as a metaphor for language much clearer than Plath does, with the lines, “...the ripest berries/ fall almost unbidden to my tongue,/ as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words...” Perhaps, because he emphasizes the mystery of origin, or poetic inspiration, by discussing the black arts and the natural, physical qualities of blackberries (“their icy, black language”), he can write more openly of the connection he is making, because he admits to a lack of command over such arts.

Also, Kinnell’s decisive actions imply a certainty absent from Plath’s poem. Though he seems certain of the transactional process of the relationship, the mysterious nature of it, however, resides in some of his earlier images in the poem: “the stalks very prickly,/ a penalty they earn for knowing the black art of blackberry-making” and his description of the blackberries as “icy, black blackberries.” His use of the word “penalty” implies the dangerous nature of the “black art of...making.” He repeats “black” or

“blackberry” seven times in the poem. The “black art” connotes not only mystery, but voodoo or witchcraft. The blackberry eater does not understand the art, the berries do; the poet does not know the art, the words do. The only thing left for the poet is to write, or to arrange the language that comes to him—to squinch and squelch. Kinnell’s admission reveals his concern lies less with the control of *collecting* as it does with the enjoyment, or even physical sensation, of *creating*. When faced with abundance, he does not doubt or hesitate like Plath, but accepts that “...the ripest berries/ fall almost unbidden on my tongue/ as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words....” For Plath, this uninvited relationship is a “sisterhood,” but Kinnell never defines his relationship as a mutual bond. Rather, the words come and he takes them. There remains a clear delineation of who does what in the process here, and what each brings to the process. The words do not “stain” Kinnell, nor do they accommodate themselves to his process. He, in turn, does not handle them, except in the most sensory way—on the tongue, in the mouth. He “squeeze[s], squinch[es] open, and “splurge[s]” them, *all with the tongue*.

Kinnell writes that this squinching and splurging happens “in the silent, startled, icy, black language/ of blackberry-eating in late September.” Although the action takes place on the tongue, it is still “silent.” The tongue’s role, in this instance, is not to facilitate the act of speech for the human but to unlock the juices of the berries, the words, so that they “speak” themselves. The “silent, startled, icy, black language” belongs solely to the berry. The use of the adjective “startled” to describe the “language of blackberry-eating” mimics the initial surprise of flavor when a berry bursts open in the mouth, which correlates to the initial surprise of discovery of language for the poet; yet it is an “icy, black language,” which describes both the color and temperature of the juices

as well as their independence from the writer, the squincher, the eater. Ultimately, Kinnell describes the boundary of language that separates it from the poet. By this I mean that Kinnell's use of the words "icy" and "cold" shows that even if the poet retains the ability to "open" language, the words do not respond warmly. There's no mention, for instance, of the melding of berry taste, or language, and the mouth in a mutual reaction. Physically, the mouth would warm the berry's juices, but Kinnell values the iciness. The poet discovers and splurges what language itself possesses.

Kinnell's ability to revel in the sensuous reminds me that Plath's *poetry* often lacks sensuous description in reference to body—yet her *journals* are full of such descriptions: of eating, of pleasure, of sex. In many ways, Plath's control in her poetry parallels her desire for control over her body. Pleasure or sensuality in poetry may have been a boundary too daunting for her to cross. If in "Blackberrying" she hesitates about what to do with the world's physical abundance, she was hesitant too to explore the body's sensual abundance in her poetry.

In the metaphor of eating, Kinnell's handling of words depends on physical assertion, and, in the final image of a silversmith banging at intractable metal, Plath's does as well. Both poets recognize creating poetry as a physical process, paralleling other physical processes in the natural and manmade world. Both poems combine natural imagery with human physical exploitation and the consumption of natural resources. I believe this is an apt representation of language and writing because my own response, as a poet, to the natural world has to do with collecting, retaining, shaping and wanting to understand it. For example, in my poem "Housestory," objects for use by people coexist with the natural world that permeates an old, neglected house. Mice and storms appear

alongside slips of paper and bottles of alcohol. A stonewall serves as a reminder of a birthing barn. In recognizing the need to handle nature, Plath and Kinnell recognize their need to shape the world. Kinnell appears more at leisure with the process; only Plath is interrupted by domestic life. Perhaps that fact of Plath's status as a wife, mother, and woman in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties (and Kinnell's relative freedoms as a man) made direct manipulation of nature and poetry unseemly for Plath at worst, and utterly impractical at best. In "Ariel," a baby's cry permeates the wall of the room in which Plath is writing, as she is manipulating words and experience, and she must choose to ignore or respond, continue or quit. Domesticity flaps in Plath's face, not Kinnell's. Nothing reminiscent of daily domestic life interferes as Kinnell lifts his mouth to the stalks.

### Forward Influences

As the beginning of this preface attests, I have gained particular insight into the crafting of form during my time in this program. At the beginning of my graduate study, working with Diane Thiel, I experimented with traditional form and wrote a pantoum ("Fernando Pessoa's Glasses Wrote His Poems") which won the *Blue Mesa* graduate student prize. I also experimented with meter more extensively than I had before. Working with Dana Levin at the end of the MFA process has really defined for me what crafting form can do for most of my free-verse work—how attention to punctuation, line length, order of stanzas, white space, and the presence of stanza breaks can change the energy of a poem. I had hoped to have someone give me direction in this area, especially in how non-traditional contemporary verse literally *informs* content. I feel a mystery has dissipated: I

now have new techniques I can employ in the process of revision, where a poem (and the poet) reaches its real power. In revision, tinkering will reveal the possibilities of form for my discovery, but I also feel that I would not have understood how to think about form in this manner without learning from Professor Levin how to study it.

Professor Levin's approach to syntax is similar. In working on a "speech acts" exercise (an exercise that encourages the use of tonal shifts by changing syntax; for instance, by including an interrogative or imperative in a poem), I rewrote "Valentine." Because I originally wrote it as a direct address, it fit the exercise and the assignment seemed an opportunity to strengthen the poem. One crucial moment in the piece, when the heart begins to "speak" to the narrator, felt a bit flat in the original:

The wound unscabbed,  
unshut, centered in the photo,  
in the heart of the heart,  
  
talked like a mouth  
that couldn't stop  
to my imagination,  
sealing me back into you [...]

In the exercise, I changed it to:

The wound unscabbed,  
unshut, centered in the photo,  
in the heart of the heart, where  
  
she slipped the knife, the hole that  
flapped and swallowed, a taut mouth--  
and surprise!-- it spoke nonstop [...]

By using a different "speech act," an exclamation, coupled with the interruptive dashes, the reader gains a more immediate sense of how the speaker felt at the moment of confrontation with another person's detached heart. This exclamation makes it seem as if

the event really happened and was not an imaginary moment as the speaker gazed at the photo of the hole in the heart. I would never have allowed an exclamation point (so vilified in writing classes) to elbow into a poem without this exercise.

### Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas": A California Take on Blackberries

To discuss the relationship of form and content, it is useful for me to look at Robert Hass's beautiful poem, "Meditation at Lagunitas." Frankly, contemporary poetry seemed so unmoored from what I was used to reading, from what I'd been taught, that I found contemporary poetry in general intimidating. In "Meditation at Lagunitas," Hass uses the word "blackberry" to discuss a relationship with language, which also connects, at the end of the poem, to a love relationship he has had. The use of "blackberry" as a central metaphor for his ideas of language in general makes this poem particularly apt for this essay.

If the poem explores what is lost in life, relationships and language, the word "blackberry" serves as symbol for what gets lost. Hass writes, "Or the notion that,/ because there is in this world no one thing/ to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,/ a word is elegy to what it signifies." The meaning of these lines hinges on the phrase "no one thing" and the word "bramble." Hass could have written, "nothing," rather than "no one thing." The difference between the two is the duality that "no one thing" brings to the line—making many things (as well as nothing) correspond to the bramble of *blackberry*. The use of "bramble" alerts the reader that *blackberry*, as any word, contains a tangle of associations and "things," is a mere symbol—and yet, because of that, a word *itself* means nothing. In this, "a word is elegy to what it signifies."

Hass's momentum comes from defining this contradiction and predicament early in the poem, so that any time he italicizes a word, we begin to associate loss with it. When he writes, "talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice, / pine, hair, woman, you* and *I...*" we follow him in associations we think are his alone, yet apply to everyone's experience with words and what they describe, mean, and evoke. In "talking this way, everything dissolves" we are left with both nothingness and unity in nothingness. Associations and evocations tethered to language are both universally abundant and empty as a way of *defining* human experience. Seven lines later, he writes, "orange-silver fish/ called *pumpkinseed*" and we know that we can never know what those fish completely *are*, even if we know their name.

Hass's use of italics unifies ideas in the poem and acts as repetition of sound, meter or stanza lengths might, signaling significance. After Hass describes his memories of the woman he "made love to," he writes, in closing the poem, "Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings/ saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*" Because of the momentum of associations attached to italicized words, combined with the specific images of his memories—"the way her hands dismantled bread"—the reader feels the impact of the loss in the repeated *blackberries* more effectively than if Hass had used the actual word "loss" or "love." He creates a new sense for the word "blackberry," building a more powerful symbol than the abstract word itself by using a single concrete object that he has layered with meaning. This way of working metaphor without the conventional directives of metaphorical language--such as setting up an extended metaphor from the start of a poem ("My life it stood a loaded gun," Dickinson) or using metaphor or simile to directly link *two* ideas-- creates a new technique for creating poetry.

In a conventional metaphor, two unlike things are shown to be in strong and surprising relation: for instance the choughs and burnt paper in Plath's "Blackberrying." But by the end of Hass's poem, the reader realizes that "blackberry" can mean more than one thing, and therefore links more than the conventional *two* ideas. Hass infuses a word with meaning while admitting that language has no meaning. The context of the poem creates meaning for *blackberry*. Without the poem, the particular meaning would not exist.

Unlike Plath, who pounds like a metal smith at language to create poetry, or Kinnell who "squeezes" language to exploit its potential, Hass embraces the futility of language and relies on associational relationships between words to build energy in a poem.

The form of Hass's poem must complement, encourage and intensify his intentions. Hass's line breaks create pulses of momentum and meaning that mimic the thoughts he expresses. For instance, the first two lines establish a premise with end-stopped lines: "All the new thinking is about loss./ In this it resembles the old thinking." Hass comments on old and new poetic form. Just as the idea that "old" and "new" thinking are both about loss, conventional and experimental poetry too concern themselves with similar objectives: transforming idea into art with the least possible loss of meaning, through technique, whether it be rhythm, syntax, line break, language, or the problem of structure. By definition, *all* poetry has certain techniques and recognizable form, whether conservative or avant.

While "Meditation at Lagunitas" has no obvious formal arrangement, Hass directs the flow and meaning through line break and the arrangement of lines. It consists of one stanza, and one complete thought. Though Hass connects many associations for the reader, he articulates one emotional truth: loss. His longest lines are reserved for lush

imagery, which correlates to Plath's density of imagery: "with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,/ muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish/," Hass describes the speaker's "childhood river." We feel the rush of his sensory memories in the length of the line. When he writes, "she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous/ as words, days that are the good flesh continuing" we feel the rush in the first line of his growing thoughts linking emotion to words. Working primarily with long lines throughout the poem Hass sets us up to absorb the significance of the last two lines by virtue of their comparatively shorter length: "Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,/ saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*" He varies explication and mystery, by varying syntax, diction, linebreaks and length of lines. This allows the reader to move in and out of foreground and background, varying the intensity of experience, making the poem accessible yet surprising. The metaphor for blackberry as language may not be new, but the way Hass introduces, develops and ultimately defines that relationship brings new insight.

Hass' idea about language also reinforces the idea, for me, of the necessity of varying imagery and explication for effect. If all words carry association, there can be a democracy of words on the page, and the poet not only manipulates meaning through word choice, but also must choose arrangement to emphasize intensity and heighten meaning, or create some hierarchy of imagery. Where I once thought image alone must convey connotation and a sensory effect, I now see that arrangement of images also can create connotation and meaning.

## Beyond Influence

By reading, discovery of technique is possible, but the only way to (really) write poetry, which should be my own and can only be my own, is to take technique and use it to the advantage of my strengths, in hopes of developing new strengths in the process. I would not write at all, and especially not poetry, if I were not continually driven by language and rhythm. But I will not do much with those elements, and I will not continue to write poetry, if I do not continue to cultivate the techniques of working with the possibilities of form, both traditional and unconventional. This presents itself as the most organic way to change my poetry without changing the essential voice that I have developed and cannot escape, for better or worse. Returning to the idea of air and light, I see that shifting attention to syntax, line length, and sculpting meaning through a heightened awareness of overall poetic *arrangement* will allow that change from density of imagery and sound to a more balanced distribution among other techniques.

I predict this practice will also teach me to write a collection of poems as an envisioned book, rather than as isolated acts of initial inspiration and revision that do not connect thematically. I do not mean to say that thematic connectivity is essential to a collection, but that an overarching purpose in *how* I write poems, beyond content, will deliver cohesiveness in vision. I will need to study poets who take risks. I will need to develop a stronger eye for others' innovations and hold fast to the tasks of inquiry as I read and write.

Addendum to Preface: Cited Poems

## Blackberrying

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,  
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,  
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea  
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries  
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes  
Ebon in the hedges, fat  
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.  
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.  
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—  
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.  
Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.  
I do not think the sea will appear at all.  
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.  
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,  
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.  
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.  
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.  
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,  
gapping its phantom laundry in my face.  
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.  
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me  
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock  
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space  
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths  
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

Sylvia Plath

## Blackberry Eating

I love to go out in late September  
among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries  
to eat blackberries for breakfast,  
the stalks very prickly, a penalty  
they earn for knowing the black art  
of blackberry-making; and as I stand among them  
lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries  
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,  
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words  
like strengths or squinched,  
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,  
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well  
in the silent, startled, icy, black language  
of blackberry -- eating in late September.

Galway Kinnell

## Meditation at Lagunitas

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.  
We talked about it late last night and in the voice  
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone  
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,  
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,  
*pine*, *hair*, *woman*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman  
I made love to and I remembered how, holding  
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,  
I felt a violent wonder at her presence  
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river  
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,  
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish  
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.  
Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.  
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous  
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.  
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry*, *blackberry*, *blackberry*.

Robert Hass

Words

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,  
And the echoes!  
Echoes traveling  
Off from the center like horses.

The sap

Wells like tears, like the  
Water striving  
To re-establish its mirror  
Over the rock

That drops and turns,

A white skull,  
Eaten by weedy greens.  
Years later I  
Encounter them on the road----

Words dry and riderless,

The indefatigable hoof-taps.

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

Sylvia Plath

Motherland

Reader

You're up in the night, rowing in the top bunk  
across a gutless sea, spread out in words  
hammered into the shape of an iron-clad boat.

Captain of the night squad, mapless,  
you'd row anywhere with the authors who've  
convinced you to undo the locks and give out

your phone number. You'd race yourself  
across the pearled Atlantic, looking for shipwrecks,  
if the marching lines of words could dunk

your head into intoxicating pools, plow your feet  
onto Earhart's island. You're mainlining a gateway  
story on your excursion across the world from me.

I can hear the seagull flaps following. They caw and  
caw but scraps don't fall because you're too clean,  
efficient with the scrape of your knife, your oars, those eyes.



## I. Foreign

## Prince Henry, the Navigator

navigated nothing but stayed tangled in royal bloodlines atop  
the dry white cliffs of Sagres, schooling sailors  
in building caravels, astronomy, the arts of cartography.

It took twelve years to coax the sailors southward down the slip  
of Africa. They feared monsters rising from boiling  
equatorial waters, or their skin mysteriously  
turning black.

When they reached the villages, the sailors' skin  
stayed white but bloodlines blackened, monsters  
rose from more tepid temps—

98.6 degrees, to be exact. Then the monsters stored  
the men they found in the cargo holds  
of Henry's ships—those men whose skin was black—  
unmoored the ropes and sailed back to Portugal.

Uncle Albert in Africa

1.

Bela-Olhão sardines, bodies  
packed in oil, in mud,  
the hem of tin can, blood field.

How the winds bow, how dirt  
throttles dirt--

Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia,  
the sound of flowers—

other sounds.

2.

Monteiro's hornbill, marbled teal,  
Black scoter, smew, northern pintail,  
Great cormorant, red-throated diver.  
Tawny pipit, tree pipit, meadow pipit,  
water pipit, little grebe, black-crowned night heron.  
European honey-buzzard, coming to  
carry you home.

3.

An incantation:  
ground, paper, water

absorb the bones  
of another sardine,

of another funny skeleton--

fasten the word *lucky*  
to a yellow button slipped  
into the fold of a map.

4.

In the Blackstone Valley, along  
the muscle of river, in the corner shop  
on Broad Street, at the Clube Lusitania  
festivals, in the schools, the underpasses,  
the mills, the bedrooms, you left  
a hint of your eye, a chunk curve of jawbone.

Aftershocks  
(Lisbon, Portugal, 1755)

The day God died-- the day of the *feira de São João*—  
King Joseph ordered a city of tents built on the outskirts,  
ten miles from the mounded rubble.

That night, winds blew smoke his way.  
He lay curled against the forest floor, wanting  
to feel first in body the earth's next fury.  
He heard the sound of hoofbeats  
off-rhythm in the woods, the river's  
rushing muscles, unstrung.  
He dreamed the stones of São Jorge splitting  
sleep's fabric overhead and river water forming  
a hunter's body to consume the quay again.

When he woke, he kept his eyes shut  
until he could sit up to meet nature at eye-level.  
Lisbon's hills still in flames, the stone  
buildings razed atop his subjects' bodies,  
he ordered gallows built in *Alfama*,  
*Bairro Alto*, the *Baixa*  
to keep looters from his riches

but he could not kill the tremors, the currents.  
In the tents he held court—  
white hair unsprung,  
red eyes shaken loose,  
less king than carrion.

At Mt. Carmo, Lisbon, 1755  
Earthquake

Some nuns prayed  
as they ran, some slipped off the act.  
Some wished they had stayed home  
and had hats, and doorbells, and people.

What got buried belonged in a letter,  
caged in hands, sealed in heads—  
everything buried belonged  
in a coved trunk with clickless locks—

even the girls  
who had come from the hills or sea, traveling by horse  
into absolute silence,

even the girls  
who, when the quake began,  
rocked in their robes  
betrothed to the rhythm of prayer.

At Mt. Carmo, Lisbon, 1989  
Beethoven

No convent here-- just open, arched doorways,  
two caramel-colored ruined walls,  
the ground, chairs of musicians, a cacophony of scales.

Practice notes perfume the air a sweet olive.  
The young woman in love skirts tree roots in the square  
to meet the orchestration.  
Her silks prickle, her hair catches  
notes, sings back.

Armação de Pera, Portugal

From the balcony, we watched boats depart for the night, searching riches in their current incarnations. Maria Helena pointed to the curve of lights with the ember of her cigarette, turned. *Come, let's study my jewelry*, she said, and slid the glass door behind us.

The jewelry box spanned the vanity. She laid her treasure out in rows. *From my father*, she said, of a polished brooch wound in vines. *My mother*, holding open a locket that had lost its chain. She traced the gold earrings laced in filigreed folklore and put aside a pair to wear next day. She plucked the final bracelet from its line--a goat's head carved in ivory--and held it up.

*From Angola*, she smiled, *from my life as a girl. I never wear it*. She fastened it around my wrist—it wouldn't lie flat, so I let it loose. *From a boy*, she said, *It was not as they say, Angola. It was beautiful and without trouble*. She took the weight from my hand, kissed the gateway of the goat's head, its horns. *From a boy who was killed later*, she said, *in the war*.

Digging in Freixo  
(after Seamus Heaney's "Digging")

In the small mountain plot of land allocated  
*Monteiro* in Freixo, women worked  
at the river and in the kitchens and fields,

a lifetime of lunch linguiça squeezed into their calves' casing,  
their spines Darwined down to an ultimate center of gravity,  
knitwork liphairs deflecting dirt.  
They found spades as fancy as crinoline or ribbon--

valued the essentials:  
flanks and rumps heavy enough to absorb  
the shock and spinning so they could bear down to slick a potato--  
club-footed food-- from the brown-gold pot of dirt  
hour after hour, or stir the *caldo verde*,  
or take any blow without hitting the ground.

## Horse Man

Sunday, *a baixa*.

One leg crosses the other over  
the grid of Lisbon streets,  
a series of barnstalls  
among the backdrop of  
shop windows with silver crosses  
clamped to black stands  
before velvet acreage.  
He examines with the side-eye of a horse's distrust.

His marbled legs own slowness  
and quickness— intent shaves  
movement, so that  
a slow horse appears swift.

The mane? More a rooster's  
coxcomb, in a deep coal-heart  
black piled on his head, upended.

He becomes the blue of flames.  
A breath, smoke  
trotting up in tendrils.

Fernando Pessoa's Glasses Wrote His Poems  
(*pantoum without an end*)

Without them, he would have walked into walls.  
Note how they are always with him.  
Some may say the mustache wrote the poems,  
but I don't think so; I think the glasses are to blame.

Note how he is never without them.  
Their cheeky prominence may suggest a ruse,  
but I don't think so; I think the glasses are to blame.  
See how comfortably they perch on the nose.

Their cheeky prominence--you suggest it's a ruse,  
but consider how they try to disappear.  
Note how comfortably they perch on his nose--  
You're meant to see them without *finding* them there.

Consider how they try to disappear,  
then let them. Think of the things they saw--  
you're meant to see them without finding them there--  
his dark stars and cold seas, the split selves before the mirror.

Sweet as a Nun's Guts

Endless dirt sprouts a cork forest and olives  
on the way from Lisbon to the southern-most ocean, giving  
way to the stone fortresses built to block the Moors,  
cobblestone paths to invasion and safety, depending.

I stop in Lagos and eat *barrigas de freira*, nuns' bellies—  
sweet dainty cakes soaking grease into doilies.

In Faro, the bones of monks recycled  
from a cemetery adorn the Carmelite church chapel,  
arms and legs arranged to frame skulls with grinning teeth.

Even though messages should arrive in the blood—  
Carthaginian, Roman, Moorish, Portuguese slips,  
replicated in the skulls of people selling or tending—

it's in the pastry, the emulsion of egged sugar—  
the crystalline embrace absorbed  
by the teeth, the tongue, the stomach.

## Lisbon

The Saturday night drunk  
boys rip down zippers,  
urinate against the church's streetside.  
Parties flood the funicular  
lurching down to *Restauradores*  
and the cool, damp tunnels  
of the subway system.

Tomorrow, old avian men  
in the courtyard of *Castelo São Jorge*  
will dust the chess tables with  
the incense of their Sundays  
and suck their gums for moves.  
The churches will swell  
with their black-clad wives  
accepting the host  
that will briefly block tongues  
so accustomed to disapproval.

But tonight, the world of God and  
Lisbon runs on the bar pulses  
in *Bairro Alto* and the soft hissing  
sound of young piss as it arcs,  
flattens and drips down the old stones  
in dark, lacy roadmaps.

*Bunda*  
(Rio de Janeiro)

My father and his Brazilian friends  
called me *a brasileira*  
because of the geography  
of my birth, and he flew me  
back one day when I was  
sixteen to Salvador de Bahia,  
São Paulo, Rio, where

the busboys thought  
I was his lover and  
a *carioca* with corkscrew  
hair walked Avenida  
Nossa Senhora de Copacabana,  
her *bunda* exposed to the world,  
a tee-shirt and lucite  
heels her only defense  
against the elements.

When she passed the hotels  
of glass and men,  
suits replied with glittered  
zippers and the bellhops puddled  
into their slouched coats,  
keys burned to their palms.

Somewhere in the recesses of her twin perfections  
snugged a jewel-toned thong: a border  
dividing my country from hers—

where no guests could get in or out, because  
the doormen's hands hovered the handles  
but couldn't open the way.

The Man Who Never Was  
(for Francisco Monteiro)

My grandfather died after a two-year stint  
at the Institute of Mental Health  
in Warwick, Rhode Island  
long before I was born.

But I found him one summer  
in Lisbon, Portugal, where I learned I  
was a failure at my father's language.  
Instead of going to summer classes, I rode the city,  
looking for something to fuse me there.  
I found him

wandering crazy in the winding  
underground tunnels of  
the Marquez de Pombal station.  
When he came to me, arms out,  
resting a hand on my warm  
head, saying *A carinha!*  
I knew it was him, just as I had imagined,  
in a grey hat with low-crotched  
black pants, white shirt:

Portuguese, animal-dirty with pigeon dung,  
sick, crazy, loving me,  
driven into the burrows of a rabbit's den.

St. John's Feast  
Valley Falls, Rhode Island

The band blares John Philip Sousa right into the ear  
of the Virgin, who is chipped and weighs a ton.

She wants to get off the pedestal, but the four  
Portuguese Dads biting their lips as they  
shoulder the poles won't relent.  
They heft her down Broad Street and  
around Calvary Cemetery, crunching acorns on the macadam.

She longs for another person's songs,  
anything but the anthems and the doggerel,  
chatter and noise in the procession, the church,  
the cemetery. She whiffs the red  
wine-soaked beef, salted and turned  
on the spit over the abyss of charcoal

they've lit for the crowd—the twins in matching  
ankle socks and dresses and black-laced *avós* whose  
pleasure hides in their mouths:  
the meat and *pão* and heavy  
red wine. That's where the Virgin wants to sit—

next to the old women on the scratchy cross-hatchings  
of aluminum folding chairs, near the hissing,  
tongue-clucking, immaculate gossip.

## II. Familiar

## Running Burrillville

You could hear our hard footfalls on the black path that led to the woods,  
past the shed where Poochy shot her own heart  
in seventh grade for fear she was pregnant.

It was ninth grade. I placed last in every race. I'd been taught  
to sign the alphabet from A to Z and back again, killing class-  
time racing letters through my hands for prizes of candy  
or colored pencils. The teacher knew no deaf to speak to,

but his wife had just died. I ran with the alphabet in palm, making letters  
rush for no reason, chains of words timed to the falls of my feet—  
past the iron-gated graveyard, whose markers never frightened us—the Puritan dead  
common as fieldstones, as Queen Anne's lace along the road—

we could not wake the dead,  
no matter how hard the falls, how shocking the letters:  
f-e-a-t-h-e-r, t-r-e-e, g-o-d-l-e-s-s. Around and around  
the town of green planked woodsheds and rusted  
snowplows, fallow fields and mossed-over stonewalls,

we ran Burrillville as if the code of steps could reveal  
our futures, and I signed the alphabet— a letter a footslap, ballons rising  
off the page, my only way of speaking to the world we passed—  
Trinque's carshop, the volunteer firefighters, the house where Poochy lived.

## RISE Camp

The day Jaime Munro fell from the tree,  
the August afternoon, breezy, humid  
immediately preceding Capture the Flag  
gametime—after you'd walked

by the plastic barrels weighted with half-eaten lunches  
smelling of soured milk,  
after you'd stringed kiln-dried beads you'd made yourself,  
after you'd sat in the darkroom inhaling  
acufine developer, etching evidence of your mediocre eye,

after Jamie Munro's yellow polo shirt had untucked  
from his chino shorts, obscuring the white  
braid sailor-boy's belt, before you'd fallen asleep  
against the melted vinyl stationwagon seat—

that day.

Jaime Munro fell, and it was blessed.  
Broke his arm so badly bone shot through the skin.

That day, I saw the gleaming white *ulna* –  
even though I thought I didn't want to, I had no right to –  
saw his face splotched red as he sobbed, noticed  
the small mole on his cheek, checked the smirk  
I'd learned from him.

## Mausoleum

My brother buried the cat's offerings—  
squirrel, bird, mouse—  
because order provoked him:

funerals,  
funeral directors, the precision of folding chairs,  
pearl-gray gloves clasped behind the backs  
of hired pallbearers—

He confided in materials:  
popsicle sticks, scraps of wood, masking tape rolls.  
The coffins were crisp and cloth lined,  
sarcophagus-shaped, shaded with strokes of brown marker.

He buried their fragile corpses by the old stone  
blacksmith shop where big-booted men  
once stepped on rats and got working.

## Mollusks

Quahoging in the silver fog off Colt State Park, we are knees  
and rolled trousers,  
recruited by Great Uncle Herb,  
the mill manager, and his rubbery  
wife, Mary. They have no kids.

Every moment in her life requires dignity--  
the way she cracks ice into guests' glasses;  
the way, in the early-morning  
parking lot, she undoes  
her pink sandals by standing  
on one leg and leaning  
with a light touch against  
the side of the just-washed car.  
She will never let us turn

the dial of the television.  
This is what old people do.  
It was Uncle Herb's idea,  
his hands on his hips  
above the white belt circled  
through his pressed, red pants  
that suggested earned leisure,  
mild mill successes.

Wading in the bay, Herb and Mary  
wander low tide,  
feeling with their naked feet for the quahog,  
willful shells that tunnel into mud to be let alone.

The fog guts how far I see,  
the grown-ups sway and stop, turn  
heads as if to listen, then look down at nothing,  
gray water linking them in a tenuous  
string of strayed boats.

I'm more interested in the empty  
shells that wash ashore,  
the sharp silver grasses

bending in the wind,  
and what's to eat for me

when the hour comes.

## Housestory

Drawers open:  
mice in the act of death,  
minor tools, a matchbook.

The dust bunnies are tumblers  
of stars and sleep, salt and love.  
The mice meditate  
in a liquor cabinet among  
the bottles of medicohol.

In the study: second hands and springs,  
small slips, typing paper under a window  
whose reflection of a lit bulb  
obscures fingerprints on the panes.  
Rooms belong to all the inhabitants  
not here, and if you packed them,

you'd have plate upon plate upon plate  
upon plate, then wood and dirt and water,  
hay, a pile of leaves from the bottom of the pond,  
the scent of skunk cabbage and magnolia, over-

bloomed. You would cut the daylilies in their flames,  
hear the storm that shakes the walls  
of horsehair plaster,  
the storm that hurls

the rains that together with a root  
undo the rock record of a thousand cows,  
slicked with storm, with milkings.

Thankful Smith, 1800

To be a woman named Thankful  
could bury someone as she  
contemplates her babies' bodies  
under the flower-carved headstones  
on the high hill between orchard and pasture.

All day she'd make candles, soap, clothes to cover  
the next one and the next, bread, butter, game--  
breakfast and dinner.

Cat-o-nine-tails bank the brook  
by the hay field, make a line  
by the swamp museum of apothecary  
bottles, slivers of china, broken stoppers  
from Thankful's table.  
The brown flowers thicken  
with the same mass and density  
of babies' calves.

Burdensome name, burdensome body—  
the relief of walking, brushing haytops  
with fingertips on the way home from the hill,  
the respite of stealing past water:  
the need to carry her skirts.

Praise for Aunt Margaret's Post-Stroke Talents

She could take  
the good arm and hand, shake  
the pack up near her mouth until the butt popped

up like a midway gopher—no gun to get, she clamped  
her lips to the filter, pulled her head back (satisfaction)  
and dropped the slack pack  
against the formica—*slap!*

Her hand gripped the lighter without looking, thumb spun  
the wheel—*catch, catch*—  
a cocked head, tight lips, one closed eye trained—  
she balanced the dancer flame to paper.

Martha Hodgins' Sex Talk

*Fifteen minutes of pleasure, a lifetime of pain:*

my grandmother's third-act motto.

You'd think she never knew  
translucent dragonfly wings, one hot soap-bubble,  
the electric arc of sun spots.

She inspected fabric at the Ann & Hope mill.  
She was a plucked poppy in a shiftless field, bright  
head tucked to the no-good anomaly, marshalling bolts.

You'd think she spent  
no time in bars on College Hill  
repeating her drop-out story of  
*close the window* instead of *close the door*  
in eight-grade French class,  
dropping her money into glasses with the boys,  
going home in their cars and repeating the right phrase this time:  
*shut the door, shut the door, shut the door*  
against the click of evening insects.

To an EPT

You legislator, you  
buttoned-up doctor—  
what a relationship we have.  
You break news  
like Walter Cronkite.

If only we could connect beyond  
the formality of interview—  
play twenty questions,  
truth or dare—  
we might make friends,  
although we'd never swap  
clothes. You might come to  
appreciate my complications.

What do you feel, poker-faced  
lover of desire's denouement?  
So much depends

on your flat red mouth  
glazed with urine  
resting on the bathroom sink.

I'm water  
drip, drip, dripping on the Continental  
Divide, tea leaves swirled  
at the bottom of an exquisite cup, I'm  
the ox waiting for the yoke, the dog  
whose owner disapproves leashes,  
a hostess, a guest  
admiring the bedroom of body—

Speak, little stick, sing me a song.  
Name names while I know  
not myself for four minutes.  
Say not what I am,  
but why I am here.

## Ultrasound

I intended to slip in and out  
of my appointment, but Dr. Rayburn  
pulled the stethoscope from his neck,  
folded the paper tape measure to his pocket.

I lay back, my black shirt pushed  
from the rising moon of you. The nurses  
hung up their phones. You floated to the  
screen, summoned from the ocean, turning

and coming back. I kept falling further into  
hunger, while Rayburn searched for the  
bubble in your brain, a purse of damage,  
the marker of who you'd be.

He glided the wand along the moon,  
culling predictive measurements:  
the thickness of your neck,  
the length of your tibia.

Because I had not eaten,  
the light glittered out to dark.  
I was sightless  
Slipping into your calm spot,

the black center of the moon,  
discovering blindness as it always is—

dark sovereignty lush as a cloistered  
garden. The electric whispering  
painting the prospect of you.  
Together, we lay listening.

## Birches

Who tacked the poster into the white ceiling tiles so that lying  
on their backs the women saw the stand

of fall birches, rather than the nurse's  
eyes while she held hands, metering information about where pressure  
would next come, or the doctor's, as he stood to rest his hand

on a shoulder, a ritual intimacy to eclipse the intimacy  
of what they'd just done, saying,  
"Good luck to you," as if to thwart future accidents?

When the women stand, the aspens recede.  
A token to pocket, to carry forever –

a yellow-sweatered population, clean,  
ready to be made into matches,  
to be struck by lightning or  
stay another avalanche—  
the club of birches—roots holding hands in the underworld.

Wise  
*for DJM*

Trickster, master  
of coils and passages,  
corporeal;  
night swimmer of concentrated  
currents; climber of memory,  
keeper of filaments,  
of everyday accidents;  
little squeezer  
of time--

the world  
a cord you played  
in your grasp:  
you drove rhythms,  
scared doctors,  
confounded machines  
meant to monitor

your vitals--  
This was your original mischief:

your heartbeat  
your heartbeat  
your heartbeat

Aldo's Crying

Fire, your longing, your  
long-throated longing--

I'm holding you not because you  
need to be, but because  
honesty ripples like a salve

through your throat, your eyes,  
your fired-up muscles, all the initial  
spark of egg meets sperm.

Crash and bang, my wave,  
my magma.  
Sweep us  
out of our chair to other landscapes.

I ought to feel guilty  
to love that orange ignition--  
to hope for it,  
to encourage it

the way a cellist  
milks a low bowstroke to keep  
the plangent, pure note going.

On Picasso's "Motherhood"

I appreciate the naked baby,  
lips flanged and arms slid in place  
around the breast, a tight and swollen  
ankle on the hip. As for the mother--

dainty flowers in the hair,  
eyes shut, lids rendered thick,  
scribbled lines rejoicing from her head--  
I'm not sure they tell you what they should

unless the painting rests along its side,  
so that she's lying  
asleep against a couch,  
the baby refusing naps that day--

then the scribbled lines take form:  
She eyes the floating marks against her lids,  
the tally of her days rocked out of order;  
or all the ways she used to throw her hips--

now Picasso's onto something here.  
He's doodled out her tired wanderings;  
He understands how little rule is there.

### III. Unexpected

Actress

In last night's dream  
I had a part in an acclaimed movie  
that turned out to be a play, actually,  
and I could not recall the words I was meant  
to say. Dresses, pillowcases—

the stage a billowy bedroom,  
a world of whiteness, I knew  
I was sunk—

I knew I didn't belong  
to SAG, had neglected to commit  
to memory the script.  
I learned I had been praised for  
last night's performance  
but when the stagehand

pushed me under the lights—  
onto the blacked  
floor mapped with x-shaped tapemarks—  
I had no lines.

Valentine  
(for Corey Mylers)

Oh, heart. I anticipated you too greatly—  
after all the stories we'd been told—  
while the other jurors squinted at the hole

centered in the photo, looking  
for the scoop on their own anatomy.

I, astonished when you landed  
in my hands, noted how  
cleanly the cleaved ventricles

aligned with the edges of the plate  
the coroner left you on to  
prep the camera. How vivid

and plenary your chambers!  
So awfully young, we both were.  
I peered at the hole,

the wound unscabbed,  
unshut, centered in the photo,  
in the heart of the heart, where

she slipped the knife, the hole that  
flapped and swallowed, a taut mouth—  
and surprise!—it spoke nonstop,

your story ribboning a satiny spool—  
passions and pinnings,  
slippery visions in a blood wash:  
the girl, the fight, the knife.

## Elvis's Stained Glass Peacocks

That last summer, as they watched  
from the armoire doors, he'd  
come down on a balmy night  
in darkness, his washed-up  
weight floating to the dining  
room table. The chair, railed in  
thin ribs, creaked to  
the curve of his fatty back,  
the table stepped out  
to let him in.

Slowly he'd raise a shaking  
hand to the lavender  
tablecloth, then the other,  
the spark of rings, the ballooned pads,  
his Rolex ribbed like a worm.  
Palms up, for awhile,  
a mess of black creases.  
Then he'd flip them,  
dance fingers on the tabletop,  
two by two, the Virginia reel,  
or stroll across the promenade.

Or once, he had them hug.  
Stuck together like cakes of soap,  
they alighted from the table  
toward the hull  
of the snuffed chandelier—  
then, his two hands began to sing.

## Notes on Craft

Never quiz answers from a  
stash of lead photo albums  
or a paperlined china cabinet.

At the gym, avoid the mothers  
with huge areolas, the middle-aged  
women with winged tats and landing strips.

If possible, put your face above the steam  
valve and count; let the eucalyptus find  
a cough. Take corners faster lest you be seen.

Pull yourself into the current,  
swimming crosswise,  
as you would slice a cut  
of beef to disguise toughness.  
When the honeybee

wiggles his map to guide  
you to the hidden store of generous  
flowers, affect a blank stare,  
don't go.

## Editorial

One morning I find question marks  
on the bathroom floor, limp but irritated.  
I pile them, keep the curves from catching,  
shake my towel where they hook,  
offer a soothing lullaby.

There's a pawn place on Fourth and Menaul  
and I'm set to haul my find,  
but they dig in, skid the tile  
on their fat black dots.

I think I know who sent them—  
now I think of it, really quiz myself—  
commands, assertions, that should  
have been questions all along—

They're unimpressed  
as I coax them into a paper bag, spinning  
my rolodex to figure who might need them.

They ought to be recyclable, easy to bequeath,  
they ought to be worth some cash.

Winter Harbor, Maine

The only way to get anyone up from the dark rock  
of sleep is the small tease—  
the promise of a current of chum or money

gilds the water's cold-bloodedness,  
the snow's nine-month grip.  
All summer days adhere to this diesel.  
Anything worth having hides,

molts, returns harder—the women who  
make soy soap or bee's-wax balm,  
dip candles in February, the kids  
who ride the bus to the common school,  
the lobster-catchers hauling rope at dawn.

Cursive handwriting and the creature's  
claw mean motility on both ends.  
The bedrooms, the soft nets, the cash—  
all sweet tricks to the afterlife  
and before.

## Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë found Jane in a moor stream,  
scooped her up with a large, knit net and  
brought her home.

Jane prepared clotted cream and scones  
in the evening, fed the children who came out  
of the bushes and headboards after dark  
and taught them puzzling verbs in French.

Charlotte and Jane compared tales of gruel and chill,  
clergy, consumption, chaos, kept a running tally,  
and while Charlotte wrote the stories down

Jane painted disastrous scenes  
of lonely ladies with gigantic heads,  
hovering over mountains, over corpses.

Together, they hand-sewed costumes  
for Charlotte's siblings, who appreciated  
gauze and muslin slapped together into wings.

## Tornado

In Red Cloud, Willa Cather weather snags me.  
A deadpan cop in a pointed hat  
swirls his baton toward a gas station,  
points me down the stairs of 7-11.

Willa Cather's people unfold in the basement  
on stacked layers of RC Cola and  
soup cans-- two farmers in turned out  
overalls, a greasy, hip arm-folder in black pants,  
teenage girl and red, wailing baby, the embroidered  
grandmama who shepherds without rolling her eyes.

As I sit, I think I should offer my seat,  
but they're fixed already, each on a cardboard rocket.  
They stare into the air, not reading me. Farmers discuss  
what's touched down. The store manager counts bags  
of chips, smacks a pen on her chin.

The rollercoaster gray wind plows  
through town, shreds pantries and linen closets,  
snatching shoeboxes, photo albums, baby teeth,  
spoon rests, rifles, spider plants, cars, pets—  
you know.

We are the cool riders of the basement boxes—  
my buddies, my crew, my astro-compadres  
shooting off into the gust in our separate, hull-less crafts—

## Self-Portrait

Outside the world embroiders  
signals. I found a yellow flower,

some words and paperclips.  
The busyness loads a gallery--

green knitted trunks,  
flakes of snow in a dog's  
spoked fur. It pokes at

the thimble, inverted, dimpled.  
I'm stuck, but sure.  
Black is white; brown, blue other  
likenesses.

\*

Inside, the plush wonder swallows

another licking. Red,  
purple, owlsh

calls and a thrumming sheen.  
I found a yellow flower,

Some words and paperclips.  
The world seemed to want

a tailor, the silken whoosh, matched selvages,  
the aligning pinprick —

\*

I could eat metal in the fashion of rust.  
I could whip at a sheet's edges on the line.  
These are but two examples  
of deeds I have rejected.

\*

One time, I sewed. It wasn't difficult--  
the slipstitch from outside, along

the seam to another needle-thread hole  
back out, over and over.

The whole point was simple:  
I kept trying to find the slub that would derail  
the needle, that would break the polished sateen.

## Ghost Father

I dreamed you in time's catalogue,  
surrounded by  
equations with little numbers

hovering in smoke. You stood  
by the white-laced, greenish  
blackboard, making notations, waiting

for the bowl of water that  
might revive you.  
A branch, a slab, a reflection,

so little they breathe:  
all these ways I see you.  
The branch asks:

Who will turn the page  
on the tiny calendar?  
The reflection says: find someone

to stretch and heel. Your ghost looks  
for ways to enter the room,  
to walk over the head of a nail.

Oboe

When I played I had the power to kill  
someone or love. The ocean jostled my heart.  
Mr. Jalowy swallowed his mustache.

The rings of Saturn crossed like bows on strings  
and tulips bloomed in bowls of fire.  
Polar ice caps melted-- no, stopped melting.

The doors of the house blew open,  
crickets spit milk, the stone wall slipped.  
My father drove in reverse to our table.

People fought with fists to own the smell  
of waxed cork. In the middle of song,  
the tree limb cracked and lava stilled my longing—

a road erupted out all the world's stones.

## Flux

Time to make an aqueous atlas,  
the entire seventy-percent surface:  
waterfalls, cold currents, stagnant gutters,

hidden lakes for lovers, drowned  
quarries, springs. Tidepools pose a problem—  
amphibious apartments between land and sea—  
but include them anyway with a faint blue asterisk.  
If we find the water, we will find our things—

glinty minerals, Ansel Adams' camera, potato peelings,  
diamonds washed from our hands at the sink.  
We can put them in a casket and float them home

over the blue-green bobbing heat from far continents,  
a now-trackable acreage of bodily squabbles, thanks to our atlas,  
a record of the current's tug, its loyal attention.