Keeping Gardens: Poetry and Essay

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KEEPING GARDENS: POETRY AND ESSAY

by

Deja Anne Earley

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Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

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This creative thesis includes two creative non-fiction essays and twenty-two poems, introduced by a critical essay that examines my work. The poems and essays share an origin in personal experience as well as an interest in language. Specifically, the poems and essays explore issues of family, relationships, spirituality, and observations of the natural world. The introductory essay discusses my interest in re-fashioning individual vision through the act of writing, relating to Helene Cixous’s idea of creating a “portrait of God” through the act of art. The essay also examines the connections between the genres of creative non-fiction and poetry, in creative writing theory and in my own writing process.
Committee Chair—Susan Howe

Reader—Lance Larsen

Reader—John Bennion
Graduate Chair—Susan Howe

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Introduction: Keeping Gardens

On my way to my 518 workshop class with Susan Howe, I begin thinking of my family’s garden, of the bounty my father placed on pests to exterminate them from our figs and flowers. Before class starts, I sketch the beginnings of a poem in my notebook. At first I don’t know why I remember the experience, what I mean to say with the poem. It is just a snapshot of memory, absent of meaning. I workshop and redraft it over months until I know the central question of the poem; I am wondering why I had no problem smashing snails and drowning june bugs, but couldn’t bring myself to murder white moths.

The poem sparks an essay that extends past that garden to what happened a year later—losing our home when a bookkeeper embezzled from the family company. The story feels foundational, as if it were my version of losing Eden. I send it home for my parents to read, but it makes my father feel foolish; I can tell from his voice over the phone that he’s not so sure about me writing essays on family pain. In a 518 workshop with John Bennion, I learn the real problem. I have told the story wrong. I have traced the most negative thread possible through those three cramped years, making my whole family terribly pathetic. The other students in the class tell me that when they reach the end there is no redemption, only pity. I approach the experience again and begin to remember an opposing story. I remember a small but tenacious garden. I remember I tried to live outside and write poetry about planting flowers. I remember my sister has a garden now and a yearly feast from her harvest. I remember the story has two sides and in the act of redrafting, I reshape my past. The first draft of that essay is pitiful because it
contains only my self-pity. The second draft holds the pitiful as well as the redemptive because I re-remember the experience through writing.

I have written poems and essays since elementary school. My early writing is typical, melancholy outpourings of my “soul” on the pages of my journal. But the first poem and essay that I think counted were those about my family’s garden, and our experiences post-garden. There is a reason why that memory feels foundational, so edenic. My experiences in the garden taught me that life, death, good, and evil are not as separate as I had imagined. And the essay extends the realization of complexity into the rest of my life. As epitomized by that first essay and poem, I write because there are certain memories or observations that demand to be written. Most of the time the demanding details are the parts of my life that seem complex, that contain the edges of opposites within an image or story. In my first drafts, I am never sure what I mean to say. But in the process of writing and workshopping and drafting, I come to know more than I knew.

I say I come to know, but that’s not quite accurate. Helene Cixous, whose critical theory reads like a poem, says the poet is “the one that knows how not to know” (588). Cixous’s “poet” is a wide term. “I call ‘poet’ any writer, philosopher, author of plays, dreamer, producer of dreams, who uses life as a time of ‘approaching.’” The poet is one who tests, who approaches life by examining it with the goal of coming to know how not to know. We come to not knowing through a “second innocence,” created from constant “rubb[ing] and exhaust[ing] one’s eyes in order to get rid of the thousands of scales we start with …” (588). The act of writing is rubbing. By retelling stories, crafting them into poems and essays, I come to see things in their complexity, in their
inherent opposition, “to discover the worm as a star without luster. To discover the grasshopper’s worth” (591). To realize my innocence again, my uttered ignorance. In writing about my family’s garden, I learned that I did not have the experience nailed down. Reality was more complicated than the simple story I had told myself for so many years. And according to Cixous, I still don’t know the “real” story, its “real” impact on my life. I only know that I don’t know what I thought I knew. That the experience is finally unquantifiable.

It seems contradictory to say that writing teaches us how not to know. But writing out complexities can be humbling—when I spend time thoroughly examining my own contradictions, when I look at a story from angles I wouldn’t first think of, when I inspect why an image has stuck to me, I realize how scaled my eyes are, how pitifully inadequate are my first impressions of an experience or emotion. You can’t be immature or haughty without realizing it and still expect to hold an audience’s attention. In that sense, the examination of inherent contradiction in myself and the world becomes a tool for self-awareness, and hopefully improvement.

In my poetry and essay, I come back over and over to the contrast of the spiritual and the temporal. Perhaps this a comment on the deeper question involved in my exploration of polarities. That there is tension and opposition seems a given. But how does the opposition actually work? “For it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things…. Wherefore, all things must be compound in one” (2 Nephi 2:11). It’s not that there is good and then there’s bad. The verse says “compound in one.” In some ways, my poetry is about my relationship with God, and my questions about His relationship with humanity. How does God keep this complex world going? How does He see a good
person and judge their sins or a bad person and see their potential? How does He make
good consequences come from bad experiences? How does He understand the
bittersweet emotions—simultaneous sorrow and joy? Perhaps this is why Cixous says
that she is working on a “portrait of God.” For her the task may be different, but for me it
means that the more we pull off the scales and realize our inability to comprehend and
heal complexities, the more we understand the nature of God. Cixous explains
beautifully.

When I have finished writing, when I am a hundred and ten, all I will have
done will have been to attempt a portrait of God. Of the God. Of what
escapes us and makes us wonder. Of what we do not know but feel. Of
what makes us live. I mean our own divinity, awkward, twisted,
throbbing, our own mystery—we who are lords of this earth and do not
know it, we who are touches of vermillion and yellow cadmium in the
haystack and do not see it, we who are the eyes of this world and so often
do not even look at it …. We who are bits of sun, drops of ocean, atoms of
the god, and who so often forget this, or are unaware of it, and so we take
ourselves for employees. We who forget we could also be luminous, as
light, as the swallow that crosses the summit of the incomparable hill Fuji,
so intensely radiant that we could ourselves be the painter’s models, the
heroes of human presence and the painter’s gaze. (Cixous 596)

Cixous defines the portrait. It is not of God, per se, although that definition is part of it.
God is also the Godly, the divine within the artist, which is as often awkward or
mysterious as it is beautiful.
Double Genre

I am standing at the blackboard in front of my English 115 students, asking them to tell me how Charles Simic feels in his poem “A Partial Explanation.” Simic gives us the scene of waiting for his food in a “grimy little luncheonette,” while he longs to “eavesdrop on the conversation of cooks” (77). I am teaching my students about tension in their personal essays, steering them clear of sentences like “I felt so sad.” I tell them that boiling down a feeling to one word is emotionally dishonest. Simic’s poem covers countless facets of emotion, encased in a short set of images. I ask them if they can tell how he feels just from the snapshot of images and thoughts. After a few minutes of silence as they stare at the overhead, my students build the list well. Simic is lonely, bored, depressed, impatient. He is all of those at once in narrow slices that he could not have articulated without the image itself. The image becomes the emotion. The emotion lifts out of the words. The image is the answer to the unquantifiable nature of experience. The image is smart enough to illuminate complexity without inaccurately nailing it down.

It’s more than convenient that I use a poem to teach essay. They flow between one another, stealing material back and forth, stealing technique. Within my own work, my essays teach my poems; my poems teach my essays. As I improve in each genre, my essays learn careful language; my poems learn arch and progression. But just as often the opposite is true. Sometimes it’s easier to find the arch of a story in a few lines than in a whole page of rambling. A poem can get the meat of an experience faster. Or, sometimes the language in an essay refines the experience, makes me articulate my experience or emotion more directly than I have in my poetry. The advantage of writing in two genres that overlap is that it lets me work out my art in two arenas.
Patricia Hampl discusses the overlap between creative nonfiction and poetry. According to her book, *I Could Tell You Stories*, one comes from the other. She argues that “contemporary memoir … has its roots not in fiction which it appears to mimic and tease, but in poetry” (224). Poetry is the mother of memoir. Hampl identifies the reasons: “These are the materials of memoir, details that refuse to stay buried, that demand habitation. Their spark of meaning spreads into a wildfire of narrative. They may be domesticated into a story, but the passion that begot them as images belongs to the wild night of poetry” (224). Hampl’s statement suggests that the images that stick to me build my poems. And, when they are sticky enough to stick to each other, they domesticate into a story. My poems touch on tensions that can be expressed in a single set of images. My essays have more to say about the images, they dig deeper. The blocks of vision develop past a poem and into a longer piece.

Ultimately, I want to write John D’Agata’s newly minted genre, lyric essay—the hybrid. In 1997, in *Seneca Review*, D’Agata and Deborah Tall articulated what the genre shares in each direction. “The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts.” Right now my poems and essays take pieces from the other genre back to their own nest to roost. I want them to marry. Looking back over my work in each genre, they are already arching toward one another. Some essays and poems cover the same subject matter. As I face my PhD program and think of a dissertation, I’ve considered using the fusion of genres as my form. But for now, I have poems and essays. Separate, but both sketching out a portrait of myself, the early lines of a portrait of God.
Process in Poetry

I sweep the floor of my apartment, thinking about the story in Ether when God curses the land with famine, then with poisonous snakes. The people are so hungry that they follow behind the snakes to eat their carcasses. As I fill the dustpan, I imagine the moment when they finally kneel in the dust and pray for rain. And the lines of a poem come. Complex. Not full of only repentance or guilt or redemption, but all of them contained in the final image. “Quick rain slid along our elbows, / down our foreheads, / into our mouths, / bathing us in mud.” The redemption is caught in the mud, the guilt, the rain, the repentance. The image thinks for the poem, states its complexity. Charles Simic admits in a 1984 interview, “In my poetry images think. My best images are smarter than I am” (77). The polarities of a complex experience come through images. I learn them in a moment. I learn them in the words of a flash of vision.

I collect perplexing images. I journal them and harvest them and turn them loose in poems. An image sits in my journal of a man in London’s Embankment Gardens. He is on a bench, reading the paper, looking almost like the businessmen around him. But the paper is old and his clothes are wrinkled, and he wears glasses pressed to his face with a chain of rubber bands. I think of that man all day in London. I think of him now. I wait for him to wander into a poem.

When Leslie Norris gave the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecture in 1991, he spoke on the tension of opposites in poetry. He feels that working in opposites is such a common principle in poetry that we could use it as a method to judge a poem. He said, “My belief is that the more clearly a poem is actually two opposed poems, the more successful it is” (pg 5). My best poems encompass opposition that tugs within the
poem; my weakest poems are still splitting in two so they can converse. The task of splitting stories that are not my own—but Ether’s, or other’s—is easier. I can see their parts. My own halved stories are harder. They come in pieces.

I am a freshman in college. The man I have been in love with for a year and a half, the first man I believed when he said I was beautiful, the first man I read poetry with, decides to move downtown with his boyfriend. Five days before Valentine’s Day, he tells me the secret. He tells me why we’ve never kissed. For months I am bitter, aching, but also laughing at my own pain as a defense. And the defense extends to a poem one year later. “I spent The Day staring down bouquets that strolled by my window, / tore up three pink ads for long-stems over lunch.” But the poem has been just half a poem for several years now. It has been too witty, too ready to laugh about the pain. Last week Susan Howe marked up my poems and showed me that I meant more than I had said. The real emotion was more multi-faceted than my self-protecting wit. It was also my pain. But I had left the pain out. I revise by taking out bits of wit, adding pain.

Process in Essay

I am in Bath, England, and I attend an odd religious concert in the abbey on a Sunday evening. The performance is not quite in line with the worship I am used to. It involves lasers and audience participation mixed in with glorious harmony. I adore the performance, but my roommate in Bath does not. I feel that we both should be drawn to the type of worship we grew up with, and I wonder how I could possible feel comfortable with both sacrament meeting and the abbey concert. I write an essay about our different reactions, trying to trace my hankering for worship that borders on show.
Philip Lopate, in his introduction to *Art the Personal Essay*, explains the essential connection of essay to complexity. “The harvesting of self-contradiction is an intrinsic part of the personal essay form” (xxix). Essay’s are built on self-contradiction, grown from our deepest complexity. Lopate quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald, making the collapsed opposition the standard of measurement for good writing and genius in general. “The test of first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function’ (xliv). Holding opposites is tricky business. But a good essay (or poem) pulls them apart, examines them, and puts them back together.

I am redrafting my garden essay while on study abroad with Susan Howe in London. During a conference on my progress, I explain the lines of my essay, “We might have left Eden. But we took it with us. It’s a scattered Eden. We keep looking for it.” My father keeps his garden by cutting more and more grass out of our backyard. My sister got a degree to make gardens. My other sister has dozens of tomato plants and a harvest feast every year. Susan Howe looks at me. She tells me, “Writing is your blossoming. It’s your garden. That’s how you’ve kept it. In all your essays and poems.” I do not have a garden. I cannot make things grow. But I create with my words. I make manifest that first beautiful and complex garden. I keep my garden.
Works Cited


How to Drown a June Bug

The yard of the house I grew up in thrived like Eden. Peaches, white peaches, blood oranges, tangerines, loquats, mulberries, pomegranates, figs, limes, lemons, blackberries, apples, persimmons, nasturtiums, corn, sunflowers, sugar baby watermelons, rose bushes, and four bee hives flourished on our acre of land. Even now the list of all the fruit I feasted on straight from the garden feels too long, like my imagination must have added a few trees.

The hours I spent in that garden with my little brother seemed days long. Although I had four older siblings, for me the entire world was the backyard and Gavin. We shaped mountain ranges in the sandbox that my dad built from an old waterbed and our cat used as her litter box. We took pieces of the French-fry shaped ice plant and pretended we worked at McDonalds. We imagined we were surviving the dangers of jungle life alone—making shoes from palm leaves, eating mulberries until our hands and teeth were purple from the juice. After saving our cat from pirates, we went inside for dinner.

When Gavin wasn’t around, I practiced for high school cheerleading tryouts even though I was in the fifth grade. I sang songs to the tiny pink weeds that grew by the peach trees. I conducted research on the book I wanted to write, titled, “Teach Your Child to Ride a Bike in Ten Days or Less.” It didn’t bother me that I hadn’t yet learned to ride myself. I thought that would lend a cutting-edge point of view. I wedged my bike in a narrow mudhole, perpendicular to the fence, and pedaled. The wheels kicked up dirt behind me while I promising my imaginary audience of grateful parents that soon their children would learn to balance without the fence.
In that garden I thought I could do anything. Perhaps I was an undiscovered child prodigy. If I wasn’t, maybe I could make myself one by sheer effort. I would be a famous singer when I grew up; on the side I would write books, act in plays, teach dance lessons, and grow flowers. The garden and my imagination made everything feel possible.

The summer I was ten and Gavin was seven, my father set cash bounty on the heads of garden pests—a penny for every snail. The snails were easy to kill; they hung out mostly in the pink lady plant. I put on my plastic jelly shoes, and Gavin wore his "fast-man" sneakers. We plucked them out by the dome of their shell and stomped them in the gravel; their guts made thick mud with the dirt. Silvery snail slime covered our shoes all summer long.

It took us one season to wipe out the snail population, and the following summer, my dad set us to work on june bugs. Defending figs from junes was harder than squashing snails. Snails are slimy, but slow. Junes are buzzy and aggressive. There wasn’t a pest I hated more. Whenever we went out to pick fruit, we saw them wiggling in the rotted holes they had carved. At times seven or eight shiny green beetles would land and devour a single fig. The worst luck was to pick a fig from the smooth side only to discover the other side was full of junes. They buzzed furiously and flew off. The fig thudded to the ground and we smelled the rot of their feasting. But the purple globes were worth a possible encounter with the junes, especially for my mother. I can’t remember the windowsill above our kitchen sink without a few slouching figs, ripening while my mom washed dishes.
Rescuing the figs promised to be twice as rewarding as snail squashing—two pennies. My dad assigned my older sister Kira to buy enough fabric for two nets, and Gavin spent an afternoon with his little tool set and two hangers, bending them into the handle and hoop of bug catchers. Before venturing out to the real pests, Gavin and I practiced in the living room—swirling the sheer lemon fabric, and plotting how to hold the junes in all their fury. We pretended to stomp them into the Persian rug, grinding our feet, shouting battle cries.

Actually saving the figs was more difficult. There was something sick about smashing junes as they jerked around in the net. Not to mention the awful job of cleaning the net after stomping. After doing that a few times, we experimented with other execution methods. We settled on a bucket from the sand box, filled mostly with water from the hose, and topped off with Lysol Tub and Tile Cleaner. We would leave the bugs swimming weaker and weaker while we went back for another net full. If they still writhed when we returned, we dumped the bucket on the grass and smashed them.

The next year the snails had found another plant to relax in, and the junes buzzed past our purple figs. I paid special attention to the pink lady plant and the fig trees because I had saved them. And we had a new assignment, the most cunning threat yet—we were asked to take on the white moths that feasted on our salad nasturtiums and the leaves of our sugar baby watermelons. The bounty for the moths was an incredible fifty cents. But while my brother went out netting them for hours at a time, I saw it differently than I had the year before. It was too strange for me that something dainty was worth the price of twenty-five junes. I suddenly didn’t like the thought of all the snails I had stomped and june bugs I’d drowned. It bothered me that the new pests didn’t slime shoes.
or buzz in my ear, that I often confused the moths with flashes of sunlight, and that they landed like ballerinas on the petals. I hated how easily they fled. And yet, I liked that they escaped. After the best maneuvers, sometimes they still shot out of my brother’s net, ready to land and feast again. The moths were too complex. I wanted to save both the watermelons and the white moths. It may not be true that that was the first time the world felt morally complex, but it seems like it was. Because I couldn’t decide whether it was good or bad to exterminate those moths, I never caught one.

In February, just a few months after the summer of the white moths, we lost the house and the yard. When a bookkeeper embezzled from the family company, it sent us into a financial spiral that eventually led my family of eight to a one-bedroom apartment beneath my grandmother’s house. Despite our prayers before and after we moved, we lived in that basement for three years before we crawled back out. In my mind, my father’s efforts to save the garden and hire us to defend it are connected to the years he spent trying to save us from financial ruin.

At that age, I didn’t know much about why we lost our house. My parents threw around words like mortgage and foreclosure, and I used them like I knew what they were. But I didn’t realize the house wasn’t ours until we had to leave. I thought if my Sunday dresses and Madame Alexander doll were in my closet, and if my cat had her bowl of food by the Tupperware cupboard in the kitchen, and if the pioneer painting hung in our dining room, and if my dad was the one who planted the new banana tree, and Gavin and I were the ones who showed the snails and junes who was boss, of course we owned it. Later, we were shocked when the people that moved in next made the house theirs. They
painted it red, extended the porch past the big windows above the garage, and replaced most of our trees with vinyl fencing and equally spaced lampposts up the long driveway. But no matter how I’ve seen it change, our house is vivid today, held in my mind the way we left it, the way it looked from the rear window of our van as I balanced on a stack of mattresses in the back and whined to my parents.

My father worked for the family business—Safeway Insurance Company. It was a piece of my childhood that I did not question. I figured everyone’s father worked with their grandmother and had every weekend off. Everyone’s mother bought two carts-full of groceries on Wednesday afternoons.

In fact, while the embezzlement was happening, no one understood it. As much as my grandmother checked and re-checked the books, she couldn’t figure out where the money was going. The Earleys are a long line of trusting individuals, so I wonder when the possibility of crooked bookkeeping crossed their minds. My grandma was the first to stop taking salary. She dipped into the life insurance money from my grandfather’s death to pay office expenses. Eventually, my dad and my aunt stopped taking salary as well. But the family kept working to see if they could somehow recover what had been lost. While my family took home little to nothing for the hundreds of hours they spent to save the drowning business, someone was stealing much more money than anyone should get for keeping books.

Things got bad before we left that house with the yard. Money became all that my mother talked about, and my dad always looked tired. But I didn’t know what being out of money meant. All I knew was that I got a lecture from a tense mother whenever I asked for the smallest thing or mentioned finances. I knew I was supposed to pray for an
improvement in our “financial situation” to a God in Heaven who didn’t seem to be listening. And I knew my dad was grumpy. In the months leading up to the move, I sometimes avoided him completely, and sometimes refused to do the dishes so I could prove he was home. If I didn’t make him angry, it was like he wasn’t there at all. There were probably more weeks than I’m even aware of where we had no money for groceries and we lived off the cans of food storage in our shed. Two of the beehives stopped producing honey. The pomegranate tree died and my dad cut it down to a stump. The rose bushes, the blackberries, the white peaches, the new banana tree all failed to produce their crop. My dad was putting all of his time into saving our finances, not the garden.

We still played in the yard, but I was getting older. I stayed inside more, reading books and writing fairy tales. Gavin played outside by himself with a little wooden fruit crate that he had attached his old bike training wheels to. He name it Herbie and spent hours sanding and painting and then re-sanding and painting. He rigged it to the back of his bicycle, and rode around in circles in our driveway all afternoon.

As the business nose-dived and our parents told us to get ready to pack our things, I was more aware of my brothers and sisters. With no money for the mortgage, we lived for six months without a payment. After three months, my brothers and sisters made a running joke out of the federal marshal coming to post our notice of eviction. We imagined what would happen if he came without us realizing it, and some innocent visitor brought it to our attention. Our best joke was that my sister’s date would pick her up for the Sweetheart’s dance, hand her the paper with a shy “This was on your front door,” while she turned the color of her dress, and my family laughed hysterically in the
kitchen. It wouldn’t have been so funny if it had actually happened, but my older brother and sisters carried us through on their humor.

They even managed to make us laugh on the day we moved out. We got one last standard order from the taco shop around the corner—eight of their bean and cheese burritos, and two orders of hot carrots. We ate them on the chairs from our kitchen table—the last things left in the house. Although it was sobering to eat in the empty kitchen, we laughed at the black burn in the linoleum where years before my brother had panicked and thrown down a flaming tortilla. A carefully placed rug had concealed it for years. But with the rug already packed, my brother was open for attack. I sat backwards on the chair, and looked through the slats, laughing at my brother. I was trying hard to see if I could keep my sister’s jokes and the heavy feeling in my mind simultaneously. That day the result of my experimenting with my emotions was a switching from comedy to tragedy until Gavin and I climbed onto the mattresses in the back of the van and we drove away. Then there was no experimenting. I must have told my parents eight times in the five-minute ride to my grandmother’s house that I didn’t want to move. They told me again what they had told all of us, that we would be moving again in three months.

It was evening, sprinkling rain when we pulled into the separate driveway on the side of my grandma’s house. There was an old green truck at the front of the driveway with four flat tires. We had a small yard bordered by a cobblestone walkway. A green and white awning covered the doormat. There was a security system sticker on the front door that my dad told me someone put there to scare away would-be thieves.

It took until bedtime to carry the boxes into the apartment and situate temporary beds on my grandma’s couches for the kids, and a mattress for my parents in our
It was quiet in my grandma’s living room. We had slept over before, but that was different. I’m not sure about my siblings, but I cried myself to sleep, trying hard to be quiet. When I finally slept, I kept waking up, feeling like I had lost something small, like a watch, only to realize it was much more than that.

I was awake the next morning before my parents came to get us up for school. I could hear more birds in the trees outside than I had ever heard. I thought maybe my grandma lived closer to the San Diego Zoo than I remembered. I thought maybe someone was playing a nature tape to make the “homeless” kids feel better. But no one was playing a tape. I decided it must be God. Before my mom nudged me awake, I imagined God placing more birds than usual in these particular trees, and then touching me awake a few moments early so I could hear them—His way of saying things would be okay. But I forgot the comfort of my imagination when we went downstairs for breakfast. My mom looked exhausted and my dad was still sleeping, his back turned to us and a green blanket pulled over his side. She had cleared boxes and cooked oatmeal for breakfast. I didn’t remind her I hated oatmeal. We ate our breakfast on overturned boxes and went to school.

My mother found a lily of the valley growing from a crack in the path around our patch of lawn. One afternoon after school, she took me outside to show it to me, how it grew out of the rocks where you wouldn’t think there would be enough soil. “Deja, there are even eight flowers on it, perfect for our family. See? We’ll be okay.” I wanted to pick it and put it in a vase on our kitchen table, but my mom talked me into leaving it there. I remember thinking of that flower as a good omen, going to visit our symbol
when I felt sad. I don’t think my mother shared our symbol with my other siblings. She knew I was already a sucker for metaphors.

Another afternoon, within our first few days in the “hole,” my mother and I went to Salvation Army and bought a few cheap hot plates. Every night my mother cooked over those hot plates and lamented how little space, how little money we had for food, how she had no idea what she would make tomorrow and every day after that. One night she made a stir-fry that we ate over toast with mustard or soy sauce. She asked me to make a salad and I refused. Instead, I watched *The Simpsons* with Gavin on the couch, while I could hear the vegetables sizzle, and the toast pop, and my mother complain that I never helped her. I skulked to the table only after she hit the TV off and demanded that Gavin and I come and eat. I sat down dramatically, and the end leaf of the Duncan Fyfe table buckled under the unsteady two-by-four that held it up. The wok of stir-fry landed face down on the carpet, and the towel full of toast scattered. Some of the thick stir-fry landed on the leg of my jeans. My mother started to cry. I stared at the green peppers and mushrooms and corn and onions oozing down my pants and in a pile on the floor and felt sick at what I had done. But I didn’t apologize.

What I wanted was to be smacked for it. I felt that would make us even somehow. But my mother did not smack me. She sat crying at the table for a long time. Then she slowly started to clean up the carpet. I didn’t help her. There was some part of me that wanted attention, that thought I had the right to be a brat. We ate cheese and avocado sandwiches. Whenever we ate that, it was the sign my mother had reached the end of culinary creativity.
I worried about telling my sixth grade teacher we had moved because I was afraid she would ask me why. I didn’t know what I would say. When she did ask, I kept things vague. Back then, I pretended that it never happened. We only moved five minutes away so it wasn’t hard to pretend that I still lived in my old house. I never invited friends over. I never talked about where I lived. It seemed people talked a lot about their bedrooms when I was in middle school; I stayed out of those conversations. When we passed the old house on the way to church or the grocery store, my whole family would turn and look. First we just looked at the For Sale sign, grateful it didn’t say “Foreclosed.” Then we tried to get a glimpse of the new people.

I had the hardest time not telling my best friend Cori, who was always hinting that she wanted to come over. We walked home together, and we played at her house often. But she had her own room and bookshelves that always had new books on them, and bookends made from a giant purple geode. When Cori suggested that we hang out at my house, I suggested that we meet in the canyon and go on a walk through the neighborhoods of the boys we had crushes on.

One day Cori showed up at my house to see if I wanted to work on our campaigns for 7th grade class office. I refused to come out from the back bedroom where I had been reading all day long. My mom begged me to come talk to her. Even though my cover had been blown, I didn't want Cori to associate me with that tiny kitchen, the ratty couch, or our dirty carpet. I felt like if I stayed in back with the covers pulled up to my chin, pretending to be sick, she would forget it was me who belonged to the tiny apartment. She finally left, and neither of us mentioned that she had come or what she had seen.
If I had that time to live over again, I hope I would be less ashamed. Keeping it hidden intensified my bitterness because I imagined everyone knew and had judgemental opinions. I wish I had at least told her the what of it, not even the why. When we were doing art projects on Cori’s sun porch, I wish I had told her about the perfect house I lived in for the first twelve years of my life. About how we had a garden, and my dad grew more kinds of fruit than most people had even heard of. I would ask if she’d ever heard of a loquat. I would tell her that the house was peach-colored and two stories and had four bedrooms and a huge kitchen and dining room and big windows that gave a cross-breeze in the summer so we never needed air conditioning.

And I would have told Cori before she came over that we lived in a tiny apartment below my grandmother’s house that we nicknamed “the Hole,” that it had a separate entrance that you couldn’t see from the front with a green and white awning over the doorway and only a spot of grass in front with a brick border around it. Inside, the carpet was blue and dirty even after we had it cleaned. The kitchen was really just a corner of the living room and every time it rained, the basement flooded and water soaked the carpet.

I would have told Cori that my parents slept on a hide-a-bed that folded out of the couch. My brothers slept in the back bedroom where we had two mattresses stacked on top of one another; and Gavin’s was a crib mattress. We filled the rest of the tiny room with all of our dressers—stacked so high they covered the window and I worried they would fall over while my brothers slept. My sisters and I slept on mattresses that were stacked in the corner of my grandma’s living room. Every night at nine, our dad would send my sisters and me upstairs so he and my mother could go to bed. He pulled their
hide-a-bed out of the couch that they paid fifty dollars for at a garage sale. It reeked of cigarette smoke. My sisters and I hated to go upstairs. We begged to be able to talk to our mom, outlining quickly what important things we still had to report. And sometimes she’d softly reason that we could, and my father would groan, but we were still allowed to stay for a few minutes before we went to our beds. My father would turn over and start trying to sleep while my mother sat up in bed, rubbing moisturizer into her face while I told her what happened during lunch. My cousin and aunt, and my cousin’s six-year-old daughter lived upstairs with my grandma as well. They watched TV until we came up. As they left, my cousin slammed her sewing stuff around to make sure we knew what an invasion of privacy we were.

I would tell Cori about the light green shade of the small bathroom where my older brother spent most of his time listening to loud music and doing who knows what else. The rest of us crowded in the living room, all sitting on the couch at the same time, watching TV, kicking each other, hating that we had to live so close.

I have no idea how Cori would have responded. I sometimes wonder now what she remembers, how she explained my odd behavior at the time. Did she know we were poor? Did she know I was jealous of her purple geode bookends?

Gavin and I didn’t get along as well in the new house. Actually, none of us really got along. Because it wasn’t an option to all spend our time inside, we escaped into our various obsessions, intensified by how much we needed them.

I escaped in books, devouring my latest from the library, perched atop the stack of dressers, folded into the pile of blankets in the back storage, or out on the patch of grass
with a blanket. When it was raining and I was angry, I ran to the car and shut myself in there with my book. Once I read in the rain on the welcome mat under the awning. My back was against the door and I was crying again. I had worked myself up by thinking about all the ways my life was unfair. When my dad opened the door to leave and I fell back, he laughed hard. I told him I hated him and ran to the car to finish my book.

Gavin left the apartment via Nintendo, Sega Genesis, and television. He followed Super Mario and major league baseball players through their world until it was time for The Simpsons, the one program we all enjoyed, once we had battled for our positions on the couch. Gavin caught every episode of his favorite sitcoms, their most faithful viewer.

Garret was either in the bathroom listening to Rage Against the Machine or he was gone—with his girlfriend, busing tables at the Italian restaurant close by, and getting into more trouble than my mother knew. My mother felt like she needed to stay home rather than work to be there during his teenage years. By the time we left that apartment he had been convicted of driving under the influence and arrested for shoplifting from Target.

My sisters were gone so often that I don’t remember how they managed to escape while we lived in the apartment. Amara spent most of the months in Uruguay on her mission, leaving from the big house and coming back to the horrors of her family’s cramped life.

Kira worked two jobs and made me laugh at myself when she was home. We became friends during those three years. Kira and I would play the “you-don’t-know-pain” game, which consisted of competing for one-upmanship in tragic experiences. Kira usually won with some story like when the kid in band committed suicide a week after he
kissed her. But she admitted I was still young. I had a pretty good list so far, and plenty
time to gain enough tragedy to win.

Meesha spent hours with her boyfriend at the picnic table outside when she
wasn’t away at school. My strongest memory of Meesha in the apartment is when she
slouched in the chair between the table and the refrigerator, waiting for my mom to notice
her engagement ring.

My dad threw himself into whatever business endeavor seemed promising—
Amway, Consumer Byline, international banking deals, a scripture case company. He
came home excited to tell us that the funds of our big break would be coming through
“Monday or Tuesday of next week”—the now humorous phrase of eternal hope in our
family because the “next” never switched to “this” and no one was more heartbroken at
that than my father. He walked into every deal believing it was the guidance he had
prayed for, but crooks seemed to migrate to every new idea my father had.

My mother watched every moment of the O.J. Simpson trial, cleaned the tiny hole
we lived in, and petitioned God for a change. When we were in desperate need of dental
care, my family loaded in the van and crossed the Mexican border. I got my first two
 cavities filled in an office where I couldn’t even read the posters on proper flossing.
They told my little brother he had gingivitis. My mother got a root canal.

I didn't tell anyone about what happened to our family until years after we moved
to Utah. I told my friend at a sleepover, and that was only because she told me about her
Dad’s drug addiction, and I felt obligated to return a secret. And it was nerve-racking
even then. It felt like my worry over telling Cori; I thought that even my new best friend would judge my family, think we were poor and stupid for not being able to get out.

The problem with keeping those years a secret was that it made them too big of a deal. Maybe if I would have told people about it then, I wouldn't have been angry about it for so many years. I wouldn't still have some part of me that feels my story is worthy of pity. I would have remembered that I didn't disappear while we lived there, didn’t really crawl in a hole and lose my personality. I would have remembered more often that my father planted a garden.

He planted lettuce, basil, chives, and peppers in round orange planters at the top of the stairs leading up to my grandma’s house. When he watered them, the water cascaded down the steps like a little waterfall. The list of what we took from our garden was no where near as long. But my dad was still there, still planting things.

And I didn’t really disappear. After the first year we lived there, I decided that if there was no space for me inside, and Gavin was always playing video games, then I would live outside. It would be like the Eden house, only better. I would come indoors only to sleep. I would turn into one of those weathered, wild children they made Disney movies about. The first step was to plant the package of pansy seeds I bought with my babysitting money in the planter on the side of the house. I asked my dad for help. I wanted it to be one of those special daddy-daughter moments. But he insisted that I figure it out on my own, even though he was sitting there and he could have told me. He made me read the back of the package to know I had to plant them 1/16 of an inch down, six to eight inches apart. And they never grew. I watered them faithfully with my
picturesque silver watering can, and they never even sprouted. In my journal I wrote a poem about it, comparing it to my tragic unrequited crush on the middle school football star, Jesse Brierly.

“I planted flowers and they never grew
just as the love I had for you
never
had its
chance
to
blossom.”

I admired how the last line breaks made the poem look like the roots of a plant going down into the ground.

One night I pulled our little exercise trampoline outside and jumped under the stars. I insisted that my family leave the television on, and the door open, so I could still hear what was happening. I told myself that I would spend time outside on that little trampoline looking at the stars every night. I would say my nightly prayers out there. I would become one with nature and talk to God at the same time. But I only managed the habit for two days.

Gavin wasn’t always playing video games and watching TV. He still made improvements to Herbie. And he spent an entire summer fascinated by a broken marble cutting board he found outside. I still have a little triangle of it that he “autographed” for my birthday.
Although it was hardest to be in the cramped apartment when Garret was home, he often served as the comic relief. There was no middle ground with him. My mother was either crying for him, sitting on the front steps with her head in her hands, or she was laughing at his experiments with self-tanning lotion. One hand print, on his belly, just to make sure it worked. I once found Garret’s journal in the back bedroom and read it from cover to cover. His English teacher made him write for the first ten minutes of class, so it was mostly wandering observations on his classmates and boredom. Still, I liked Garret better after that quick read than I ever had before, maybe since. Underneath his cranky exterior, he was clever and sensitive, and worried about what people thought.

By the time Amara got home from her mission, we had gotten so used to our living conditions that her reaction surprised us. We still laugh about her trying to straighten the stacks of videos around the television and getting so frustrated that she yelled, “How can you live like this?” and started to sob. We looked at each other and didn’t know what to say. We didn’t know how we lived like that. We just did.

Kira and my mom watched decorating shows in the mornings. There was once a special on decorating in small spaces. This inspired them to put tablecloths over the boxes stacked in the corner. We laughed about the “homey air” for weeks. We thought of taking a picture and sending it in to Lynette Jenning’s show to say thank you.

Meesha didn’t live there with us much. Before she married, she went to college in Idaho with the help of an anonymous donation from someone in our ward. Even when she was home in San Diego, she studied horticulture and had a summer internship at a botanical garden in Escondido.
Now that I’m older, I think a lot more about what my dad went through. Having a little more life experience, it’s amazing to me that he didn’t give up—leave his family and try to make it on his own. But that is not him. Instead, he was our source of perspective. On the anniversary of the day we moved in, he declared a family holiday. Every year we watched *Groundhog Day* and ate pizza. My dad would tell us that our time in the hole was just our chance to get things really right, to figure out how to treat each other, even though every day was as tedious as if we’d been living the same one for weeks. I might have believed that our situation gave me license to act horribly, but my father didn’t. He knew the world didn’t owe us anything. Every year we hoped it would be our last Groundhog Day, but we joked that even after we all moved out, we would come back to celebrate our family holiday with our aging parents, still living in the same apartment, the carpet still hopelessly stained.

As awful as it was to have no money and no room and no stove, my mother would sometimes tell me she liked living there. It was like a cocoon. No visitors. No invasions of privacy. She built a routine—making tea in the morning, going on a run, watching OJ, talking to her kids, and thinking up dinner. Alone, but simple. In some ways my mother still prefers that kind of life. If she could have just her husband, her children, and a few daily simple tasks, that would be her ideal.

My mother once told me that in the early days of their marriage, when my family’s financial struggles first started, they believed they could change their situation by changing their attitude. She confesses they even went to a hypnotist, trying to tap into the powerful forces of their own minds. The hypnotist had them chart their goals and
dreams on a big poster board they kept in their bedroom. As hard as I try, I can’t quite imagine my pragmatic parents in the office of a hypnotist, or carefully marking off progress toward a distant goal. I do remember a vestige of those days. I remember my mother’s mantra that she shouted above the roar of the vacuum or as she walked down the hall toward her office, punching her fists in the air, “We refuse to give up! We will continue boldly, firmly, and insistently until our good appears!” Depending on how emphatically she shouted the word “refuse,” I knew how badly she needed to hear herself say those words. That mantra still comes into my mind when I feel like taking the easy way out of something.

But no matter how much she used the brain-changing mantra, she says they ultimately had to do something more profound to make their “good appear.” My father started a letter campaign with the IRS, asking for a tax settlement. Finally, after a year, they granted it—something they rarely do. It felt like God released us, plucked us up, and landed us in Utah. And even though I hated my parents for that move too, it was the change we needed. My father used the money from the sale of the insurance company to pay for a course in computer certification. He completely changed his career when he was almost fifty years old.

But our scattered days weren’t quite over. We moved to Utah in the summer, and in the fall, four days after I started school at my new high school, my father announced he found a job in Denver and we had three days to pack and move.

I gave up in Denver. Angry about having to move again, I refused to make friends. I barely ate, I slept as much as I physically could, I missed school at least once a week, and refused to attend seminary. I treated my mother horribly and kept a stash of
seventy dollars in case I decided to buy a one-way ticket back to California or even Utah.

On the way home from church one Sunday, my mother was chastising me for my rotten behavior. I looked at her and said, “Mom, there is no way that God could destroy my life like this and still expect me to do things like attend seminary. He can’t possibly expect me to care.” That idea made perfect sense up until it came out of my mouth. As soon as I said it, I knew I was dead wrong. My mother looked at me like I was crazy. “Do you honestly believe that?” I was stubborn, and defended my ridiculous idea, but I knew she was right. Look who I was talking to, the woman who still kneeled by her bed in her nightgown and talked to God so long that I often waited outside her bedroom door, jealous for her attention.

After awhile, I figured out how to survive Denver. Although it felt too late make friends, I started to like my time alone. I spent lunch periods in the library, sneaking baby carrots out of my backpack and reading T.S. Eliot. On Wednesdays, when I had a half day, I would buy myself a sandwich and eat it in a park while I listened to jazz on headphones and watched Canada geese out on the frozen lake. When it got cold I spent the seventy dollars on a winter coat.

We moved back to Utah after that semester. All told, it took us three years to have our own house, but our situation was never as bad as it was in the Hole. We at least had our own apartment. Now our house is blue. It’s ours. My dad has cut out half the backyard to fit his garden. He threatens to give up the grass altogether. The pear tree by the back fence gives us a hefty crop, and last summer three sunflowers kept watch over the tomato plants and the basil. He can’t grow everything that we had in that first garden; the climate is different. Some old trees would never survive. New fruits thrive.
But the story isn’t finished. This summer my parents will move again. They are empty-nesters faced with zero retirement, so they will pick up and move in with another grandmother until they find a second house. Their plan is to build equity on multiple properties in hopes they can save enough money to retire. They are not happy at the prospect. Every time I talk to my mom she mentions how much they don’t want to move. For them it feels like what they have to do to survive. It means someone else will pick our pears in the fall.

I keep remembering gardens. For a while I forgot about orange planters, the lettuce, and the little waterfall. I forgot about the lilies of the valley. I forgot that I had tried to live outdoors. I forgot about the park with the frozen lake and the Canada geese. I forgot that Meesha got a degree to make gardens. We might have left Eden. But we took it with us. It’s a scattered Eden. We keep looking for it.

Every fall Amara has the family over to her house for a harvest feast. She arranges bouquets of flowers—orange and yellow cosmos, red Moulin Rouge sunflowers, scabiosas, and salvia with silver fuzzy leaves. Picking flowers for the bouquet is the chore that her two little girls look forward to all year. Amara says it makes her feel rich to harvest, to share. We eat her own creations, made from the seeds she carefully chooses and starts on her windowsill. Butternut pesto pizza. Tomato salad with four kinds of tomatoes. Zucchini and yellow crookneck quiche.

We’ve had the feast every year but this one. She moved just before it was time to harvest and she had to leave her garden. She left thirty-six tomato plants, not to mention all of her other flowers and fruits and vegetables. Her new house is nicer, but the garden
is pathetic. She tells me it’s like trying to write a poem in a notebook already full of someone else’s ideas. The first thing she did was rip out the aspen that grew right in the middle of prime garden territory. She told me to plan on a feast next year, but she aches for the garden she babied back at her old house.

My dad has been tracking down a good mulberry cutting since we moved to Utah. On one Saturday, when we were living in Utah but we still didn’t have a house or a garden, I remember that he spotted a good tree. We were on our way to a wedding reception downtown and he stopped the car across from a German bakery. We watched him take his pocketknife to the tree, cutting a tiny stem.

He collected four or five cuttings like that. All but one died immediately. He nursed the last one for a year until a late frost got it. And he still looked for mulberries. He finally ordered a tree from a nursery for both Amara and himself last year. Amara left hers when she moved. My dad’s is still growing. I don’t know where he’ll end up. I’m not sure what house I’ll take my kids to when it’s time to visit their grandparents. But I know he’ll have mulberries. I think of climbing that tree someday. I think of my hands stained purple from the juice. I think I will feel rich.
Bounty

Our father taught us to kill:
One cent for every smashed snail,
two cents for every drowned june bug.

Snails crept the corners
of the pink lady plant.
We stomped gravel thick with guts,
and wore silver-slimed shoes for days.

June bugs attacked the figs,
eight writhing on a single fruit.
We swooshed nets through
the sweet stink of rotten figs
and bug sweat.
Then we dunked them all
in a bucket of bubbly death soup
and crushed the ones still wriggling in the grass.
June bug murder was worth the extra cent.

The garden thanked us
for purging her of pests
with a vase of pink ladies on the counter,
fig jam on morning toast.
The next summer she whined
when white butterflies
ate holes in her salad nasturtiums.

Our dad placed bounty at fifty cents.
But they didn’t slime or buzz,
and they chewed and flew
before my yellow net could close.
Smokey

My mother drove our cancerous cat
to the vet and to be put to sleep.
Burial was twenty-five dollars extra
so she brought Smokey home wrapped in a bath towel,
tucked her in the back seat.

I stand on the porch
while she buries my cat in the rain.
My mother with a shovel,
her slick black coat.
Fall Back

When our house celebrates the redemption of daylight, my mother dons dress sweats. Holst’s “Jupiter” accompanies her dance from face to face as she shakes hands with clocks to close negotiations, wearing a small smirk of victory, ordering the hour to return. She teaches us to sip that sweet second when we sneak under covers, knowing we’ve won back an hour, surrendered, secured for morning.
Silent Night

Ari can’t hear carols.
And when she plays the angel in our nativity
her message for the shepherds is a silent one.
I dip to help her feel the rhythm
while her mother plays the piano.
My niece is spread-eagled but graceful in my arms.
She swirls the gold ribbon
we used for her costume
as if she hears every note.

Earlier that day,
all through her mother’s duet,
Ari screamed screams she couldn’t hear
and considered the lights at the back of the chapel.
Her tiny fingers cried “more”
long after the sacrament passed.
Hyacinths

He slid away minutes after
the machines were turned down.
Given another spring,
grandpa would have plucked his stubborn
purple hyacinths all season.
Lovely, but too abundant.

His old body had been holding his young self
like he used to hold me by the campfire—
loose embrace, whiskers brushing my cheek.
I was held, but anxious to hurry off,
do something new,
put his body to the side.
Earley 38

Sleeping After Ten Hours at the Fabric Store

I dream the screaming ladies follow me home,
pushing their carts still packed with Christmas-in-July bargains.
They line up at the foot of my bed,
demanding two yards, sixty-three yards, forty-two centimeters,
an acre of slipping satin, and sixteen inches of leopard print fleece.

I plead my shift is over.
I can’t cut fabric in my sleep.
But grandmas keep shoving forty-percent-off coupons under my pillow,
furious I am out of Santa-suit velvet.

Shift to the kitchen table,
and they are all my grandmother,
crunching saltines and drinking milk to unwind.
We snap jokes and giggle over zipper lengths
before I tuck them into their carts,
curled under scratchy batting,
bolts of flannel for pillows.

I tell them I finally forgive them
for being too sick to see my debut
in Hansel and Gretel when I was ten.
I tell them we’re moving the patterns
to be close to the notions.
I tell them I will cut again tomorrow.

Then I glide them home through rainy streets
and park them on their doorsteps,
murmuring for drinks of water
and new thimbles.
Salt and Vinegar

My roommate and the boy
who sunk to one knee with a ring
after two weeks of dating
kiss and discuss Halloween in our living room.
Their kisses sound like stirring macaroni and cheese.

*I’ll be Cruella Deville and you be a dalmatian.*
Okay.
*I’ll be Snow White and you be a dwarf.*
Okay.
*I’ll be Little Bo Peep and you be a sheep.*
Okay.

She calls me in as audience to hear his story about his red pet frog
and she’s lying on the sofa like a diva—pale skin, dark hair, head tipped over the edge,
asking him to get a can of olives, complaining of her third migraine this week.
He’s kneeling like he never got up.

He mutes commercials on the cartoon network
and she swats his hand from picking at his chin.

*Stop it. Now tell them.*
*Listen to this. He’s just so cute.*

As I leave, she covers his eyes during the panty hose commercial.

Just before midnight I hear her lead him to his car with their salt and vinegar chips
to read their daily chapter of *Between Husband and Wife*.
She asks him,

*For future reference, do you have a strong preference in toilet paper brand?*
No.
*Good. We’ll get the cheapest.*

Down the aisle of their future they shuffle.
She hunts for a bargain.
He pushes the cart patiently, quiet.
I brush my teeth,
promising to never marry a dwarf.

I refuse to admit I wanted to be folded in a hug like she was this morning,
arms in tight and leaning into him,
groggy with morning breath at 11am.
Nothing Shines While You Sleep

My sister and I loosen knots
from 18 hours in the family car
by catching fireflies.
Tonight she looks twelve and not thirty
as we slink behind the winking lights
and clamp them in plastic cups
topped with scraps of shower caps.

Once we’ve captured four lightning bugs
we race to the hotel to show our parents.
But all the flickers dwindle in the dark bathroom.
They will not twinkle
no matter how long we gawk at the cups.

My sister’s husband and sweet pink girls
are at home, six hundred miles away.
I don’t know why she joined us,
leaving her garden and girls to Nick.
To us, she mentions water for her tomatoes twice,
cold medicine for the girls three times,
Nick, only when she worries ten is too late to call.

The next night on the road,
the bugs in tall grass
look like stars that wandered down
for a break from their responsible loft.
They glitter in streaks,
thousands of quick flashes.
I say I once heard if you smash a firefly on your face
it glows for at least an hour.
My sister keeps watch out the window,
tells us Nick was watching TV when she called.
We are quiet.
She looks old.
The Washing. The Ironing.

When her son tells her he is gay, 
she tells him to tuck in his shirt.  
She blames the sloppy flaps of his oxford— 
hanging below his sweater, 
attracting the sinful, befuddling him.  
She tells him she’ll straighten him out, 
but he must start with his shirt.

Things are quiet.  
He thinks of her habit 
of ironing dollar bills. 
Every morning she buys a ticket 
for the train to work, 
feeds the machine her crisp currency.  
She stays by to rescue:  
when the picky machine rejects 
the bills of other commuters,  
she trades their wrinkles,  
their hasty wads, their torn corners,  
for tidied tender.  
She takes home their crumples,  
irons them flat.
Summer Lightning

Can I fall for angles?
The ninety of knees
when you sit next to me?
The forty-five of elbows
when you trap summer lightning in your camera?
All of the delicate, angled webs
when they burst in the black above the cedar?
You keep catching things to develop them later.

Deciding what arcs between us
is as easy as measuring lightning’s fine angles,
the math homework of angels,
the dizzy geometry of a love that flashes.
When Frozen

You once caught ice in your camera,  
made it warm, lovely, without melting.  
The trapped reeds in the river.  
The rusty door to the mineshaft.  
The frozen waterfall.

We held hands in your coat pocket,  
and you kissed my cold earlobes.  
The word we was still stiff from new use.

You nearly caught the ice climbers  
in thorned shoes,  
scaling the waterfall.  
Brave, you said we could rent gear,  
follow them up.  
See what we didn't from below.

Later, listening to jazz, kissing between washes,  
I watched you develop in the studio.  
Before you hung negatives in the tall box to dry,  
we tried to tell if any were worth printing.  
Shadows are opposite then.  
It may be all cold and no climbing.  
Lights are dark, darks are light.
The Unfortunate Marriage of the Sun and Moon

Sun does Moon’s laundry each morning,
wrings night’s ink from his coat,
tucks him in her bright blanket.
All day, he’ll sleep. She’ll burn.
At dusk, he’ll rise. She’ll sink.
All night he’ll pluck the linty stars, fling them.
Costuming

If I had known
you planned on our original scene,
I could have played like a diva.
I’ve already muttered the lines
of a hundred of our blurry goodbyes.

Instead, I stood on last week’s set
with the lavender carpet and the fireplace,
holding hands with no one but the clock.

Once I caught on,
I swapped sets to the kitchen,
cut onions,
and earned a standing ovation
before my first witty snap.

Both of us cool, composed,
certainly no longer in love—
we said our lines
and sautéed around the linoleum.
You rushed off stage left
before I took my bow.

The playhouse was quiet.
No one stood but me.
Five to One

Five days before Cupid’s holiday, a red teddy bear grinned from a Hallmark bag in Matt’s back seat. Assuming he finally knew we were in love, I held the thought up to look at while falling asleep, smeared it on my lips before work.

I surrendered my rosy notion only after Matt clarified that he liked Dan more. I spent The Day staring down bouquets that strolled by my window,

tore up three pink ads for long-stems over lunch. But he wanted me still stitched in and standing by. He asked me over to meet their cat, but not Dan.

And I stayed even though I could see their family portrait hanging on the wall,

a red bear tucked in their bookshelf, its blind goodbye.
Pansy Thieves

After a day on my couch with no one but a book,  
I drove myself to Shopko to pick out an alarm clock.  
But I intended to mix with cantankerous old ladies,  
to cheer myself with the pepto pink of the Barbies.

When I left the parking lot,  
he had one thumb hooked in a Harley belt buckle,  
one hand holding a cigarette, pinky in the air.  
His accomplices loaded the backseat of a mold-colored El Camino  
with pansies, hot merchandise from the outdoor garden event.  
His eyes warned me away—  
to put my alarm, disposable razors, and cupcakes  
in the passenger seat, and go.  
And I did,

but I nearly U-turned. I wanted  
to steal something lovely,  
to be in-cahoots.  
I would have settled  
for the sick glow of his cigarette.
Elephants and Apples

A girl stretches over bushes, feet steadied by her grandmother.
She offers green apples to the thumb-snout of a zoo elephant.
His folded face sniffs her nail-painted fingers.
I shame the woman in my mind:

Your grandkid is two fingers
from a nose that can’t tell apple from pinky,
a nose that need only loop and tug
to snatch and snap.

But, out of apples,
the whole girl hops down
and walks to the lions,
holding grandmother’s hand.

I eye the baggy beast:
his flies feasting,
his ears flapping,
his lazy tail twirling.
Eating my lunch in Trafalgar Square, I get my picture taken

If your Texan grandma
begged the fountain ducks to hold still

or if your German nephew scattered pigeons
on a May afternoon

if your Pakistani boyfriend
posed like admiral Nelson

or if the American teenagers
reclining on the lion’s back
draping their arms around his neck
sitting on his paws
picking his nose
giving him bunny ears
and a kiss

belong to you

look for me to the left
one inch tall
eating my yogurt
wearing a red sweater.

I’ll haul my camera home on Tuesday.
But my image will scatter the globe—
going home in rolling suitcases,
showing up in glossy prints,

accidentally re-wound when your French cousin
hit the wrong button

trapped forever in a film canister they dumped
when they snatched your great aunt’s purse.
I Became Aware of an Unrolling

London

Matisse made his shell,
his vibrant snail,
while sick, propped in bed.

First he held a cased curl
cupped in the puddle of his palm
drew it snaily, real.

_I became aware of an unrolling,
found an image in my mind
purified of the shell._

He screened oranges all afternoon,
considered greens all evening,
interviewed blues on pain.

He took scissors,
snipped patches of painted paper,
swirled a wild coil.

I take the empty grey line to the Tate
because I’m itching to soak color,
crawl in through the orange window,

unroll from a shell,
sneak in his snail,
ask his colors to patch me up.

I dip my toes in marmalade,
fall in blues, dry eyes with fuchsia petals,
nap off loneliness in watercress.

Waking, swaddled in color, I’m ready to go.
I took the grey train to get there.
The red line gets me home.
Winchester Cathedral, Tower Tour

*England*

The tower begins in the crypt.
The staircase is guarded by
a stone statue of a featureless man
reflected in the flood at his feet.

Climbing the spiral, I grip
the rope railing, curve into
the wall, create ballet positions
to fit my feet on the steps.
If I lived two centuries ago, I’d fit fine.

Recalling the tiny slippers
and slim rose dress
in the Bronte’s museumed bedroom,
I see Charlotte flip these corners
just ahead of me.

My feet echo.
But her words,
her ache for shadowed heaven,
loop in my mind,
lead the way up.

I twist past a butterfly
lying in a windowsill
amidst dust, cobwebs, flies.
I imagine the orange wings
landing, settling slowly.

Pinned down,
would Charlotte say we will have wings—
red, feathery,
sprouting from our shoulder blades
like the angels in the stained glass?

Or will we use our feet—
tired, shoulders covered in dust,
wading through flood,
like the statue in the crypt?

If heaven arrives in the bell chamber at noon,
Charlotte and I will host lunch in twelve beats,
the butterfly perched on her ear,
teaching the angels how to place their feet,
teaching the statue how to fly.
Green Hell

Mexico

A tourist complains
to the toothless man behind the bar,
“It’s revoltingly green. I will not live in green.”
She hates the emerald borders
of the 200-year-old fireplace,
the puke quilt,
the lime shower curtain.

I nurse an apple beer and a travel headache,
toasting to her eternal anguish.

May kudzu climb her walls
and lime Jell-O swamp her floor.
May peas slime her hair,
and mold crawl her skin.
May she bathe forever
in a tub of guacamole,
picking eternal lettuce from her teeth,
her mother a frog on the faucet.
Cada Regalo Perfecto

Mexico

Watching three orphans scramble on half-buried tires, and the others grip pencils and crayons as if we’d given them chocolate, I turn my purse inside out.

The Altoids to a boy who sketches me on his new chalkboard, looking up again and again to get the nose right—a Sesame Street oval.

My lipgloss to a slouching girl with an unpronounceable name who loves geography and sweeps the cloistered walkways every day.

The crackers to a sweaty boy I snatch at group picture time to be my friend for the count of three.

My frozen water bottle to those we watch through the back window of the bus who jump and wave in the dust and trash and shattered flowerpots next to the technicolor Cristus in the dry fountain, His robe magenta, His arms open, a plump bird perched in His hand.
Lack
_Ether 9:34-35_

Of course we ignored the curse.
We had so many tomatoes
We left most on the vine.
And they shriveled
when the sun burned too long.

We munched them first,
watched the ground crack.
Neighbors followed their flocks north.
But we stayed in dust to droop,
to drop.

Snakes slithered in
to kill the scarcely living.
Hollow, fading,
We trailed behind their creeping
to survive on scaly carcass.

Only after all,
empty of the last snake,
we lay our heads on the sand
and admitted
we were hungry.

Quick rain slid along our elbows,
down our foreheads,
into our mouths,
bathing us in mud.
Scramble to Heaven

The first time I walked through Bath, England, my friends wandered ahead while I stopped to examine the façade of the abbey. On either side of the entry, sculpted angels climbed the ladders up the height of the church. I couldn’t forget them. I carried them around like a symbol. No matter where I walked in the city, I recalled the image of fourteen angels decked in dresses and wings perched on the rungs. Some looked down, coaxing us to join the scramble to heaven. And some looked at the rung above—determined, serious about getting to God. On a study abroad where I was wandering through England, already wondering about my relationship with God, I felt a part of the angel’s task. I imagined myself on a rung.

The abbey sits in the center of the city, next door to the Roman Baths where green water and ancient mythology still bubble up everywhere. I can’t help but think that the religious men who carved the angels and ladders did so because they were trying to reference the name of their city to Beth-al, the place where Jacob had his ladder dream, instead of the Pagan Roman baths. Or at least refer to both. Today Bath seems conscious and even proud of the mix of pagan and sacred.

In fact, while in Bath, my friends found a random advertisement for “Abbey Mode.” The performance would take place in the abbey on a Sunday evening, and promised to be a “psychedelic adventure with lasers and music and audience participation.” It was free, and sounded harmlessly strange, so a few of us decided to go.
When we entered, the pews were scattered with white balloons, not yet chubby with air, but looking like they were waiting for us. The rib vaulting and the elaborate walls were lit up with a purple/blue glow in the chancel and red up the aisles.

A priest at the front waited for everyone to settle down. He explained. A local composer had organized and arranged this performance, which would be a commentary on the sacred and the common, the church indoors and the church outdoors and how they blend and crash. He turned the time to the composer.

The composer outlined the four elements of audience participation and we practiced our roles: twiddling our lips with our fingers, whistling from high to low, releasing balloons to let them whiz around the abbey, and clapping four times in a row. My friends and I laughed self-consciously as things got started.

Earlier that day we had sat in Sacrament Meeting in our careful Sunday clothes, listening to reverent music and planned talks. It’s the worship we are used to, the worship most of us have participated in for our entire lives. We had come to the performance because we thought that if it was in the abbey, we could trust it to be near our own spirituality. I liked the sounds of the Priest’s introduction, but I wasn’t sure what he meant. Sitting in that pew, I worried it would not be so much spirituality as downright sacrilege.

The drums start low. Primitive. They pave the rhythm for the choir and orchestra who march down the aisle, dressed in black with satin purple sashes like beauty queens, and silver glittered masks like jesters. In formation at the front and down the aisles, standing at attention, holding their satin yellow flags at an angle from their waist. I watch
their facial expressions. Some mouths are pulled in seriousness below their sparkly masks. Some mouths are twisted in embarrassment, painfully aware of their costuming, their role in this scattered melody. I like the shy ones better for looking as insecure as I feel. But I watch the solemn ones. I want to laugh at the show, but I also want to understand it. I want to know how the church inside and out intersect.

The rector stands to offer A Prayer of Eternity, acknowledging the complexity of God and his creation. A swell of horns and organ, and vaulting choir voices—powerful, sock-knocking harmony. If I close my eyes so I don’t see the sparkly jester masks, the performance is normal—tones of glory, praise, sweet ascending sound. I feel it saturating me, vaulting me, spreading to my toes. This is the feeling I hoped for, but I didn’t expect to get in such jumbled worship.

Timid bells ring over the chapel. Peppered with bird noises, feet stomps, lamb bleats, a man on a microphone who is either moaning like a mad man or mooing like a cow. Ending with a diminishing shhhhhhhhh. I’m not sure what to do with this shift, how to fit the sweet saturation with lamb bleats and moans. But I decide that God’s creations are not at odds with His glory. Why shouldn’t there be a few lamb bleats mixed with the melody?

The signal to twiddle. Apparently, I am an incompetent lip twiddler. I switch back and forth between laughing too hard to do it, or laughing because it tickles. For the last two of the ten seconds I sit back and listen to six hundred people buzzing their twelve hundred lips. Why buzz? I remember a friend once told me that his mission was one part spirituality, two parts madness. A smattering of sunny baptisms, but more often drunk men falling at his feet swearing they’d seen Jesus.
The signal to whistle. I accepted my incompetency at whistling when I was fourteen, so I purse my lips like a pro, but I don't attempt a sound. I imagined the whistles beginning in the vaulting and nose-diving to the soles of our shoes. The participation, as silly as it is, appeals to me. I like sending our sound to all corners of the cathedral, filling the space.

Projecting bats on the vaulted ceiling. Or doves? Or ghosts? Interrupted oddly by the pattern of the ribs so they flash and distort, looking either more eerie or more holy. I can hear everyone asking what they are, and I suspect the confusion is part of the point.

The din dies. We hold our balloons, ready. Breathe into them. And release. This is my favorite moment. The white wings fly, a blessed riot, up to the doves in the vaulting, making crude sounds and making us laugh. One gets trapped between mine and my neighbor’s shoulders, ricocheting like a pin-ball game until it falls, deflated. And we all clap, led by the composer. Four times. We file out with the jestered choir.

For me Abbey Mode was the mind-tugging that delights. The abstract elements in such a concrete religious space worked in my own sense of sacred. But mine wasn’t the only reaction. My roommate in Bath, Janae, detested it. We discussed it while we got ready for bed. She said it was absurd, irreverent in the most unsettling way. And I can see her point. If anyone had tried to pull that in my church at home, I would be the first to hit the vaulted ceiling. In another place or another mood, I might have been equally offended. I generally get nervous when people make post-modern statements on God and religion. But from where I sat on that particular Sunday evening, the statement seemed sincere and interesting.
As Mormons, we emphasize individual spirituality, working to create a quiet, reverent environment to receive personal revelation. Church is not designed for entertainment. There is no performance by a single leader, no dancing, or wild singing, or sheep sounds. The creation of the meeting is dispersed through all the members of the ward: as weeks pass, everyone gets a chance to speak or teach. And when you are not speaking or teaching, ideally your mind is engaged in the subject; you should be taking what they say and applying it inside, allowing it to saturate. At times, when my mind is wandering too much to engage, or the speaker is uninteresting, this model doesn’t work as well. I sit through church for three hours and go home with very little below the skin. But many days I actively engage. When something is said at the pulpit, it resonates with me.

I have no problem with reverent church. But there are times when I crave more flash, more performance. In high school I preformed with the Utah All-State choir. Nearly a thousand of us stood in the Tabernacle on Temple Square and sang for our parents. We started with lovely sacred numbers, and closed with a gospel spiritual, complete with dancing, and clapping, and hallelujahing. When we left, my sister confessed she had slept through my concert. All except the gospel number. She clapped and sang as we walked back to the car, teased about writing President Hinckley to say she wanted all church music transferred to the gospel genre. I secretly agreed with her that the last song was the best, but I was nervous that I did. I was embarrassed that the song had been my favorite from the start. Shouldn’t I have adored the sweet reverent melodies? The ones I was used to? Why didn’t we have an occasional gospel number in church? Did God not like that music? I didn’t know what to think; I watched out the
window all the way home. The question lingered, tugged on my mind, made me wonder about worship.

Later that year, my AP Art History class took a trip to San Francisco. On Sunday we had the option of traveling several hours to an LDS meeting, or, for the sake of experience, attending the famous Glyde Memorial Church, whose parish was mostly the homeless of downtown San Francisco. A few girls made the trek to the Mormon meetinghouse across town. All my friends had picked Glyde, and I was curious, so I decided to go.

Glyde met in a huge auditorium with a stage in front; our group of ten students sat in the balcony. We were a little unsure of what we were in for, and I kept wondering if I should feel guilty for not opting for Sacrament Meeting. I could not have imagined what I traded. Most of the meeting was a concert: a church choir, backed up by a rock band, set up on stage and played some high-energy songs on God’s love and our sin and the world’s tempting snares. While they sang and played, a slide show projected behind them. The woman who operated the two slide machines stood near us, rocking out while she projected. Sometimes it was just one picture on the screen, while she covered the other lense with the palm of her hand. Other times she kept both hands poised in front of the projectors and switched back and forth between the two. Up on screen a woman flipped between two dance moves, in sync with the hand flips. It was clear by the way the slide woman handled the machines that she took her job seriously. Her expertise with the slides was part of her worship, her Sabbath gift to God.
Periodically throughout the meeting, someone got up to the microphone and said it was time to give someone a hug. That made me extra nervous. I didn’t know that I wanted to hug the homeless. I tried to hug only within our tight group, stick to my friends. But we stuck out in that church, and people in the balcony flocked to us at hug time. Although I’ll admit I was hunting for evidence that the people we hugged were indeed homeless, they were some of the kindest strangers I’ve ever hugged. They asked me where I was from, and when I told them I was from Utah, their faces lit up. “Oh, you’re Mormon! You all have the most beautiful choir! Someday we hope to be that good.” You want to be like my choir? I thought. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is worlds away from Glyde Memorial, style wise. It surprised me that they’d even heard of them. I left Glyde Memorial in love with their style because of their sincerity, and the way they made my soul feel like rocking out, shouting hallelujah with an electric guitar backup.

In ways, my experience at Glyde had nothing in common with Bath Abbey. It was not a post-modern statement. The purpose of their performance leaned less toward art and more toward sincere worship. But I thought about Glyde a lot after the Bath performance. I loved it for the same reason—for making me feel something I didn’t expect to feel. For broadening my sense of the divine.

In Bath, once Janae and I established we had different opinions, we didn’t discuss Abbey Mode. It seemed too hard to explain why I loved the strangeness. I’d have to take her back to Glyde or to All-State, and she still may not know why I loved the lasers and balloons.
Just before we went to bed that night, Janae asked if we could sing a hymn. I thought that sounded contrived, silly. I wondered if she wanted to do it to cleanse herself of Bath’s blaspheme. Even in my everyday spirituality, I don’t make it a habit of singing hymns before bed. But I decided it wasn’t worth hurting her feelings, so I did it. Turned over on our sides with the covers pulled up to our chins, we sang *Be Still, My Soul*. I expected that without weird lighting in our ceiling and the chance to release white balloons to the heavens, I wouldn’t feel God again that night. I was surprised when the song touched me. Our duet in a Bath hotel room meant something, too.

As I fell asleep, I thought about the ladders—about the angels going up, coaxing others. When Jacob had his glorious dream, he slept on stone pillows. If I had had Jacob’s pillows that night, maybe I would have had a dream—rocks and angels together. Perhaps an angel tumbling up to heaven, carrying a balloon and twiddling her lips. Careful not to fall off the ladder. Shout hallelujah. Get to God.