

THE MINIATURE ROOM

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE MINIATURE AS METAPHOR FOR THE LYRIC

Since its advent, lyric poetry has embodied in language “a brooding meditation on love and loss” (Santos 20). It attempts to connect reader and listener across the vast broken space of our relationships. The lyric fixes breath and sound in a chain of signs on the page, as visual emblems, and holds them against time, against death. As Edward Hirsch writes, “it seeks to defy death, coming to disturb and console you” (5). Poets and critics have offered many metaphors for the lyric poem—it is a verbal icon (W.K. Wimsatt), a well-wrought urn (Cleanth Brooks), a meteor (Wallace Stevens), or a walk (A.R. Ammons). Philosopher Ted Cohen has asserted that one of the primary purposes of metaphor is to achieve intimacy (Hirsch 15): the writer invites her reader to make a special effort of interpretation, to participate in the making of poetic meaning. Given the intimate space which most lyric poems create, it is unsurprising that so many writers have grappled with the idea of the lyric itself as a metaphor.

My purpose in this essay is to entertain yet another provisional metaphor, suggesting that the lyric poem serves as a miniature, and weaving a brief if inevitably fragmented history of the miniature with thoughts on the lyric

impulse. As for method, I hope to enact that underlying mode of critical thought so crucial to all lyric poets: metaphor.

Early Miniatures

Given entirely over to their work, the medieval monks of Europe worked in an enforced silence. Many images of monks at work, illuminating their manuscripts, remain today. In one image, a monk sharpens the point of his quill, examining it carefully. In another, a monk writes on wax tablets of a diptych using his stylus; his text would later be copied onto the final parchment page. Across the room, another monk might be scraping an animal skin stretched over a wooden frame. Housed within each monastery's scriptorium were desks, ink, parchment, pens, pen-knives, pumice-stone for smoothing down the surface of the parchment, awls to make the guiding marks for ruling lines, and reading-frames for the books to be copied. Natural light filled the large rooms, illuminating the work of the monks. Artificial light was forbidden, for fear of damaging the manuscripts.

The monastic scriptoria produced the first—so designated—miniatures in the form of illuminated manuscripts. "It lights up the pages," Dante wrote in the second canto of his *Purgatorio*, referring to the gold, silver, and vivid coloring of

the initials and pictures in medieval books. The word “miniature” embraces not only all the independent figural scenes in a manuscript, but also the embellished initials, for example, and decorative borders in a text. The first miniatures appeared with the advent of the codex. The page’s defined field, as opposed to the scroll format, enabled miniature painters to turn to panel painting, fresco, and mosaic for inspiration. On the flat page “they no longer needed to fear for the fragility of their colors, a concern which was unavoidable in rolling up a picture” (Walther 17).

These miniaturists were expected to have a knowledge of the technical aspects of painting, as set down in detailed treatises, in order to handle the many and various painting materials correctly. Pigments were extracted from minerals, plants, and animals, often exotic ones, as in the case of lapis lazuli and indigo. They were ground, mixed with egg white or plant gum as a binding medium, and then applied in several coats. The preparation and use of gold-leaf was particularly difficult. The folio ground was first covered with a mixture of chalk, bole, fish glue, and honey so that the gold leaf could adhere properly and be burnished.

The earliest reference to a miniaturist as a clearly defined type of artist comes in 1193. “The word [miniature] is derived from the Latin *minium*, or red

lead, a color originally used for pen-and-ink drawing and also for pouncing (pricking holes and marking the outlines for pictures and initials with tiny dots of color)" (Walther 22). It was the small scale of medieval illuminations that led to an etymological confusion of the term with minuteness (understandably, since it incorporates the Latin prefix *min*, suggesting something small) and to its application to small paintings, such as portrait miniatures.

Miniaturists at this point in time worked primarily in monastic scriptoria. The Christian religion was a religion of the book, and the illuminator's work was considered a form of service to God. According to tradition, each letter, line, and mark made in a book offered the writers remission from their sins, saving them from purgatory. Those who copied and illuminated texts were given a status similar to the author, and legends of their inspired "hands" crop up frequently. "One English monk who was a copyist died at his work. When his grave was opened twenty years later, his bodily remains had perished save for his writing hand, which was intact" (Walther 20).

Lyric Intimacy

"One could write an essay on the theme of hands in poetry, as poetry. So much of postromantic poetry has been about connection and disconnection"

(Hirsch 46). At its core, lyric poetry reaches out to another in an intimate, almost physical gesture. This very personal connection between creator and reader is crucial to both lyric poetry as well as the art of illuminated manuscripts. The early development of miniatures depended upon the intimate relationship between reader and book—not the machine-printed books which eventually replaced illuminated manuscripts, but books that were individually copied out and illuminated, even in some cases by a single hand. This was a one-to-one transference, from the hand of the illuminator to the eye of the reader. Similarly, so much of the lyric hinges on the possibility of an unmediated connection.

The majority of medieval books were religious in nature. The list of their names lays richly on the tongue: psalter, evangeliary, sacramentary, missal, temporal, breviary, apocalypse, Bible (from *biblion*, or book roll), and book of hours. Through these books both priests and laity encountered the divine, privately. Of the illuminated manuscripts which were secular in nature, many were medical, detailing that most personal of spaces, the human body. Others (such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Travels* of Marco Polo, or the tales of the knights of the Round Table) provided narratives for their readers. The reader communed with these books much as we do with poems or novels today. Karen

Armstrong argues that even this secular reading experience is akin to prayer or meditation:

Readers have to live with a novel for days or even weeks. It projects them into another world, parallel to but apart from their ordinary lives . . . It is an exercise of make-believe that, like yoga or a religious festival, breaks down barriers of space and time and extends our sympathies. (147-8)

It constitutes, in other words, in every case a participation *in* or an observation *of* an invisible world.

It is unsurprising, then, that a common proscription for contemporary lyric poetry is that it be “the utterance that is overheard” (Preminger 714), casting the listener or reader as an eavesdropper, drawn into the poem’s intimate sphere. “The profound intimacy of lyric poetry makes it perilous because it gets so far under the skin, into the skin” (Hirsch 6). In both cases, medieval miniature and contemporary lyric, the highly-charged space between reader and creator allows individuals to experience a very personal response.

The intimacy of early miniature art lent itself easily to subtle intrusions of miniaturists’ personalities. In *Self-Portrait on the Letter Q*, a historiated initial in the Saint Memin Psalter of 1200 (a collection of Psalms, sacred songs and poems for worship), Claricia of Augsburg painted a portrait of herself. There were few outlets for women artists at this time, so Claricia hijacked the manuscript, in a

sense, making it a vehicle for her self-expression. She depicts herself holding a circular disk in the shape of an O filled with a design in red, blue, and green. Her own body forms the tail of the letter Q, thus placing herself within the design. Her legs swing right, gracefully as a trapeze artist's.

As in most self-portraits, Claricia looks to the eyes and perception of the viewer for her reflection:

Claricia has humanized the geometrical and pattern decoration, adding and paralleling the fluidity of the movement of her body with the internal decoration of the letter. She is dressed in contemporary clothing, indicating that she is not a nun, but a scribe and illuminator in the scriptorium in Augsburg (Cheney, Faxon, and Russo 22).

Here, integrated within the text itself, we receive a visual portrayal of persona independent of the manuscript's content.

Portrait Miniatures

The portrait miniature evolved out of the illuminated manuscript tradition, which had been superseded for the purposes of book illustration by printing techniques such as engraving. Painted in watercolor on vellum, illuminated manuscripts had sometimes included a small-scale portrait of the patron either praying or presenting the text to a sacred saint. "In the sixteenth century the French artist Jean Clouet, possibly the first to paint such portrait

illustrations as roundels, further detached the devotional portrait from the manuscript page, creating a separate work of art" (Frank 1).

Like the lyric poem, the miniature portrait insists upon a close proximity between observer and object. Easel portraits present a public self meant to face outward. Portrait miniatures, however, were revelatory of a private self meant to face inward. These miniatures commanded viewers to bend close to attend to their details, an experience fundamentally unlike that of stepping back to appreciate a public, full-scale canvas.

Miniature portraits flourished in both Europe and America by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with strong ties to private life. Just as wallet photographs today allow us to carry our loved ones near, portrait miniatures were frequently painted on commission to commemorate joinings or separations, births and marriages or deaths. All too often, they served the personal function of substitute for an absent loved one. As small in size as one-and-a-half by one-and-a-quarter inches, portrait miniatures were used as personal mementos or as jewelry, wall hangings, or snuff box covers.

Yet portrait miniatures are not just small-scale portraits. What distinguishes them is:

the special quality of intimacy between the artist and the sitter, resulting from a combination of personal object and representa-

tional techniques that create the illusion of intimacy, such as tight framing, the use of plain, flat backgrounds, and the tricks of perspective that make the faces “come off” the surface. (Efimova)

Miniaturists made use of reducing glasses in order to render their subjects in precise detail. If it is true, as Nicolas de Malebranche writes, that “attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul” (Hirsch 1), then portrait miniaturists’ vocation was not so dissimilar from that of the monks in their scriptoria.

Settlers brought portrait miniatures to America with them, as mementos of those left behind. After the Revolutionary War, Americans began to produce new miniature images, the majority of which were painted in watercolor on wafers of ivory sliced from tusk or whalebone. Often miniatures were worn in such a manner that the portrait faced inward, concealed from others’ eyes.

“Unlike many full-scale portraits, miniatures were intended for private viewing by the most intimate circle, the initiated who knew the story behind the portrait” (Frank 34).

This held true for portraits of erotic love, as well as those of mourning. Sarah Goodridge’s miniature self-portrait, “Beauty Revealed,” was given as a gift to her lover Daniel Webster. Goodridge painted an image of her bare breasts for the individual contemplation of one man. The breasts, centered within a rectangular setting, are painted as if surrounded by a gauzy fabric, like a delicacy

unwrapped. No other part of her body is shown. The miniature tradition frequently employed the idea of using one part of the body as a way of hiding a lover's identity, as in the less obviously sensual case of eye miniatures.

"Detailing the eye as a token of love—perhaps an illicit affair—took hold during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (Frank 264). These miniatures remind that love enters through the eyes, and the disembodied eye is an erotic image.

The mid-eighteenth-century miniature vogue reflected changes in family structure. Marriages became more companionate, and families became increasingly private and child-centered. Loss became harder to bear and "contributed to the miniature's popularity as a token of mourning." (Frank 7). The physical characteristics of a miniature embodied its role as substitute for the beloved. Portrait miniatures are composite objects classified as both paintings and decorative arts. A disassembled miniature reveals the complexity of its parts.

"Their relic-like function was often emphasized by a decorative arrangement of the sitter's hair, preserved on the miniature's reverse side" (Elfimova). At times, artists even intermingled the deceased's hair with that of the person who commissioned the portrait. Bits of the beloved's hair could also be chopped up and mixed with the paints that the miniaturist used in painting

the portrait. Unlike flesh, hair survives time and decay. This imperviousness explains its significance in tokens of affection, meant to outlast death. Like the bones of a saint, the miniatures become objects of veneration.

In the 1801 miniature, “Memorial for Solomon and Joseph Hays,” the miniaturist created, in consultation with his grieving patrons (Solomon and Joseph’s parents), a mourning woman beneath two weeping willows made from a lock of each boy’s hair (Frank 130). It was the passionate need “to break through the barrier between the living and the dead and keep the body of the beloved near” (Frank 147) that led people to preserve the locks of hair beneath glass, as a residue of their identity.

Lyric Breakage

The history of the lyric poem is rooted as securely in longing and loss as that of the portrait miniature. Immortalized as the tenth muse in classical times, Sappho persists as the very embodiment of the lyric genre, despite—or perhaps because of—the fragmentation of her texts over time. In Sappho, more than any other poet, the struggle to re-member both the body of her work as well as individual poems, is left more to the imagination of the reader than to words still visible on ancient papyrus. Sappho’s enduring reputation, then, is inseparable

from this struggle between the whole and the fragment, poems secreted away by time versus the hieroglyphic remains.

The fragmentation of the Sapphic voice is implicit within the texts themselves. Fragment 31 demonstrates this most dramatically, where Sappho seems to speak through and out of apparent death in an already posthumous voice. "Tongue breaks" (line 9) she writes, in response to the sight of her beloved with another. She is not only robbed of voice, violently, but fire races under her skin, her ears drum, a cold sweat grips her until she shakes and "I am and dead—or almost/ seem to me" (lines 13-14). Thus, in a poem on the subject of desire, eros is associated with death. The poem's technique enacts the same theme through its broken grammar—fragmented beyond the evidentiary nature of the poem itself. "No: tongue breaks," for example, in addition to the crucial "I am and dead—or almost" in which "and" seems an odd way of both asserting the speaker's existence "I am" and immediately negating it with "and dead," as if to assert existence were to immediately call its negation down upon her.

Likewise, in fragment 31, the face is systematically disfigured and broken down into component parts—tongue, skin, eyes, and ears—that do not function together. This is reminiscent of erotic miniatures' tendency to fetishize a singular body part, but links such passion and the ever-present, mortal threat of

separation. In fragment 31, “what seems dead yet speaks—what speaks of its death—is language itself” (Most 30).

Miniature Rooms

The tradition of portrait miniatures ultimately gave way before the force of a new technology, photography. In the twentieth century, the miniature has remained vital by finding new, more sculptural forms, though its links to memory and absence have continued. Just as a portrait miniature consists of assembling diverse media (locket, image, hair, etc.), the modern sculptural miniature makes use of mixed media. Interestingly, two prominent examples of this genre have both transformed their fields into bona fide art forms, specifically Narcissa Thorne’s miniature rooms and the shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell.

The best known doll’s house miniaturist, and one who changed the direction of what was previously only a hobby, was Narcissa Thorne. In the 1930s it was fashionable for museums to display full-scale period rooms, but the cost in money and space was becoming prohibitive. By this time, Thorne had collected an enormous quantity of miniature antique furniture and accessories. Working with jewelers, she commissioned a series of miniature rooms for the Art Institute of Chicago—which are now part of the Institute's permanent collection—

that accurately portray multiple periods of American and European architecture and interior design. In so doing, she transformed small-scale replicas into an art form.

The philosophy behind these rooms was one of reproduction and remembering the domestic arts and architectural design of historical periods. They are also marked by absence; Thorne would not allow human miniature figures to be placed within the rooms, feeling that static dolls would disrupt the illusion of the rooms. These are empty spaces, and observers are given only hints of their inhabitants—a child's toy on the floor, an open paper, or a chair pushed back from the table. One peers closely to look into the box of each room through its fourth glass wall, brought into intimate contact with the absent inhabitants' world.

Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard remarks that for many people, "the fact that there should exist a homology between the geometry of the small box and the psychology of secrecy does not call for protracted comment" (82). However, artists such as Thorne and, later, Joseph Cornell dedicated their life's work to considering exactly this connection. Cornell's shadow-box assemblages can't help but bring to mind the boxes in which portrait miniatures were once secreted. But a box is by its nature a holder of secrets, an intimate place, encasing

an engagement ring, a gift, or a body interred. Cornell's glass-fronted boxes become transparent windows into an inner life, and the moment of opening those whose lids are opaque marks the crossing of a psychological threshold.

Cornell's boxes contain three-dimensional collages of objects scavenged from flea markets and antique stores. While they now can be found in museum collections, their creator often conceived of them as gifts to friends or those whom he admired. The mysterious little worlds he built in his boxes could take years for him to complete, and his technique relied almost entirely on the strange and powerful juxtapositions of everyday objects and symbols.

Small in scale (most of the boxes measure less than two feet), they make us face up to the power of objects—toys, seashells, paper cutouts—by acknowledging freely that “things” are not always just things; they can also represent the parts of ourselves we want most to hide away from the world. His first box, 1936's “Soap Bubble Set,” is a construction that includes a map of the moon, a clay pipe and a doll's head, with no soap bubbles in sight. And yet, the nonexistent bubbles are evoked to remind us of the brevity of life itself. The shape of the doll's decapitated head, of the moon's celestial sphere, link these bodies very concretely to the idea of a transience and loss.

Lyric Dwelling

Cornell's boxes, though removed in time, manage to capture the spirit of the very first miniatures. Just as his assemblages are contained by the physical confines of the box, early miniatures were collages of image and text held within their own shallow box of sorts—the page. In *God Measuring the World with a Compass*, the name given to an image of God in a twelfth-century moralized Bible, God steps out of the page's frame, drawing our attention to its box-like nature. In one hand, he holds a compass; in his other, a universe whose shape suggests a fetus within a womb.

This image exemplifies what a lyric poem aims to accomplish: the immense made intimate as the object grapples against its own limitations. Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard writes that “if a poet looks through a microscope or a telescope, he always sees the same thing” (172). The lyric poem is frequently brief, yet like a genie springing from its bottle, conveys an emotional impact much larger than its container.

Because, indeed, the lyric poem *contains*. “André Breton described poetry as ‘a room of marvels’” (Hirsch 32). The very word stanza means room in Italian. This conception of the poem as a physical space is what links the lyric and

miniature traditions. This connection occurs not just at the level of content, in which one considers the poem as an intimate object: letter, tableau, detail, illumination, or portrait. To stop there would merely link the lyric tradition to that of Horace's notion of *ut pictura poesis*, the idea that "as painting, so is poetry."

Rather, it seems that this relation between the miniature and the lyric exists even at the level of form, so that the linguistic structure becomes a repository for fragments of voice and memory, making the familiar strange in much the same way that Cornell's boxes do. The language and thought of medieval philosophers can be juxtaposed suggestively with a contemporary voice, the poem's images threaded through like bright ribbons—disparate elements all grafted into something new.

The familiar form of the sonnet itself arguably becomes one of the most sturdy lyric dwellings. The fourteen brief lines force a focus similar to that of the physical confines of the fine-arts miniature. Due to the long and celebrated history of the sonnet in the English language, readers, as well as writers, are aware of the poem's outlines and experience a nearly physical jolt when such expectations are thwarted. A thirteen-line poem leaves readers as aware of its

lost fourteenth line, its incompleteness, as of a lost limb, creating a “ghost sonnet” of sorts.

This sense of the poem’s form as physically present may help explain why, in his recent translation ancient of Greek lyric poems, poet Sherod Santos reports a frustration with his original free verse sketches.

I ended up feeling that something was missing, that sense of the made thing that forms such a bracing counterpoint to the day-to-day concerns of these poems. Accordingly, I’ve chosen to work in a variety of meters and stanzaic shapes ... though my stock-in-trade has remained the commonest English measure, the blank verse line. (24)

The well-crafted, modern lyric poem can certainly be written in free verse.

However, even then, the poet’s awareness of its specific form provides a necessary pressure, or counterpoint, to language and emotion. “One must love space to describe it as minutely” (Bachelard 159) as a medieval miniaturists. This love of line and stanza, and the voice which must fill it, inhabits any poet of lyric bent.

So many poems written today hybridize narrative and lyric modes. That is, they make use of a narrative scaffolding in order to arrive at the lustrous center of the poem, its lyric moment. The realization that a poem—be it sonnet or free verse—can be conceived of as a physical space, to be arranged and filled

much like Cornell's boxes, should be useful to poets attempting to unmoor themselves from this framework. The poem is framing enough, capable of containing both the intimate and immeasurable.

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THE MINIATURE ROOM

The minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world.

– *Gaston Bachelard*

One

Box Series

1. *Hotel de la Souris*

Attic insulation, path-coursed & mounded,
betrays the rodent nest, its denizens, as do
their droppings like tiny dashes – stray
punctuation swept into my dustpan. *Complete
beauty, wrote Alberti, is never found in a single
body, but is distributed in the many.* The first
container we dream our way back to must be
our mother's womb, egg-warm & flowing
round. But mice know how easily death will
admit one. Forgive them. Living & dying,
after all, amount to the same unquenchable
thirst. The glass's mouth blown a beggaring O.
Like a furred tongue, each dumb gray lump
I find curls in upon itself, a vowel to be
buried in dirt's gravel box. In a half-lull, I wait;
no final reflex whip-flicks forth. It will hold.

2. Joseph Cornell

Beauty belongs to the small. Nothing
that I have seen cannot be contained –
sublimity of starry sky, infinity, all
illusion. Burke believed we submit to what
we admire, but love what submits to us.
I believe that in each of us burns a universe,
dying down to bony relic & feather-soft
flurry of ash. The body itself a mere
casket craving the key that can unlock it.
Fill my final hold with characters mated
& strange: a seashell, map, & metal spring.
Graft scrap of wallpaper to the butterfly's
stiff satin sails. Set me loose among
memory's strata, scavenger. Unmoor me.
Let me navigate this cell's secret door &
rise once more on legs made up of flower.

3. For Jack Gilbert

We make what we can of this world.
The barn swallow's throat feathers rust-red,
a conflagration sparking off into song
liquid as water. *It is the fact of being brief, being
small & slight that is the source of our beauty,*
you say. This bird belongs to air, a welter
of jewel-like images teeming & turning,
bright swords in sunlight. *Like a wooden ocean
out of control. A beached heart.* Its rafted
nest floats, cup of mud pressed against its
own limitations like fruit to its rind.
Eggs nestle deep within, brown & white
spotted seeds. In death or birth it is
the same clay chalice rising up on all sides
that swaddles us, undowned, as we orbit
& spin through heaven's cold, open space.

4. *The Insistence of Geometry*

"Melencolia I," Dürer, 1514

I choose this life, this meager box of tools:
millstone, metaphor, polyhedron, pen.
Washed up, in a slump, I refuse your wings.
Too dog-tired to climb some ladder to God
knows where, I take the bat's webbed
hand in mine. My compass points down.
Each year this body buckles, arcs round
as I assume a newborn's sibilant shape,
rumpled & robed – a taffeta sea quite unlike
the ocean, running true as your lines' rule.
Hand of mine, the compass points down
to nowhere I would take. Battered, I am
too dog-tired to climb some ladder to God.
Washed up, in a slump, I refuse your wings,
millstone, metaphor, polyhedron, pen.
I choose this life, this meager box of tools.

This is a Letter

This is a letter to the worm-threaded earth.

This is a letter to November, its gray bowl of sky riven by black-branched trees.
A letter to split-tomato skins, overripe apples, & a flock of fruit flies lifting from
the blueing clementines' wood crate.
To the broken confetti of late fall leaves.
This is a letter to rosemary.

This is a letter to the floor's sink & creak, the bedroom door's torn hinge moaning
its good-night.
This is to the unshaven cheek.
To cedar, mothballs, camphor, & last winter's unwashed wool.
This is a letter to the rediscovered,

to mulch, pine needles, the moon, frost, flats of pansies, the backyard, hunger,
night, the unseen.
This is a letter to soil, thrumming as it waits to be turned.
This is a letter to compost, egg shell's bone-ash chips, fruit rinds curved like
finger nails, & stale chunks of bread.
A letter to the intimate dark – mouth-warm & damp as a bed.

This is a letter to the planet's scavenging lips.

The Soap Bubble

Breath-swelled planet, light swirls
wildfire up your slopes, steep
& fast. What I want to say is
something like we never die, or
fire's a visible reminder of form,
how we exchange one for the next.
Fiery tongues soft as rose petalings,
as pellicle of soap, dropped from
on high. Divinity made clear
if only I had ears to listen. I lack
humility, sense of proportion, what
I want to say consumed like flash
fuel in language's copse. The hills
burn: heat's cleansing smudge laying
ash for what's to come. Firewhirls
tornado treetops, ignite crowns
into candelabras. Even as I think,
the hammered sphere disappears,
thinned gold-fine. What did I want
to say? *Iridescent, trace, marble, flame.*
Something plain.

Sappho: Portrait Sitting, 1877

The Aegean slate splinters & splits.
When Mengin drew the black drape
down, baring both my breasts
to his studio's chill air, the nipples
tightened – yes, this is what it is
to be Sappho, hair's soot-thick
smear drowning small tilt of face.
Is not my corpus a corpse of sorts?
Papyrus unscrolls from my womb
like a child's paper-doll chain, limbs
& heads scissored, the rest left
for scrap. A tortoise shell, my lyre
dangles, reminds: the most common
lines, when rent, are what poetry
is made of. The *don't strip bark*
from the evergreen or *I'm tired* or *so much*
cracker fell in bed last night, we'll need
to change the sheets. Dwarfed by dark,
element-exposed, we cast our words
out to sea to be pestled by sky's
mineral force. All that is spit back,
granular, will be what survives:
dead to light, ears pound & sweat
pours over skin's sallow grass. Bark-
tired, so much fails. Night sheets.

Phial

Elizabeth Bishop in Worcester, MA

I will not be that which scatters,
that which exists in pieces.
My mother's mind, my father's
body, whole as flocked gulls
working to tear mussel
from shell, an indeterminate
cluster of white on the break-
water's slick black. Only

to blast skyward at a child's
windmilling approach, wings
beating air. Loss: that thunder.

Ailments range my bed-table,
a menagerie of glass phials.
The swell of each vessel's hull
a print of its blower's breath,
contained. On my back,
air sloshes tidal in the chest's
basin. Lungs push breath
out & take it back like a girl
swinging. I want
to house its current, to be

its phial, bright sprig of cardinal
flowering the bed.

Often, I think, my body tries
to shake me off, a long tan
tangle of housecoat.
I gather its folds about me,
its indiscretions: skin's dry scales

& jerking dance of limb.

Too weak to walk, I cannot
learn these new orbits, the path
from armoire to bed
to window. At night, I click
my flashlight off & on,
a headland beacon blinking

I am here. I am here. I am here.

Oxidation

What has been abandoned need not be
unloved or forgotten. In the far back
corner of the yard, the wheelbarrow rests
on its side, the blue paint adored

by rust, wood handles loose with use.
In winter's late-day light, I find it
beautiful as anything that's made its place,
fringed gold by embroideries of grass.

It is comfortable here in plain sight.
Rust corsets it, sides flaring like a horse's.
When the time comes, let it. Let the fine
red lace cast its veil over my insides.

Ontology of the Miniature Room

If life is a stage, then props are its truest
players: minuscule harpsichords strung
with moving keys, tiny books splayed open.
It is best to hint at habitation, but not
insist. Let the slight indent of a bed's
neat coverlet conjure the prim & purring
cat, how it will sleek between candlesticks,
claws hooking the hand-stitched rugs.

Our proof of existence lies not in action,
but in the traces we leave behind. That chair
pulled out, just so. A satin-green pillow
elbowed askew. To enter a room is to be
flooded by departure, by impressions fixed
upon cushion & wood in silent palimpsest.

Artemisia Slaying Holofernes, 1620

Let men take what comfort
they can in a Judith young & lithe.
Caravaggio's girl bends, recoils
as she extracts her reedy vengeance.
Each Judith I make bears my own
visage, apron & brow gored by
paint & all its specklings, lush-
fleshed, sleeves pushed up like
a kitchen maid's. She eyes the neck
stalk, guiding her blade with care,
hand steadying his head, not afraid
to press her weight into the work.
His eyes I paint open as a fish.
Eight years later, his hand's seal
still waxes my mouth. Let his blood
wet her, let it stain her gold
dress, flaming hot, his splayed legs
visible. It is because men rape
that they cleave to the belief
we're incapable of facing the body's
own meat. They ignore the dinner
we disembowel nightly, butter
massaged into a fowl's fatted muscle,
our fingers beneath its plucked
& dimpled skin. I want to forget,
take memory by its hair & hack,
done with it. Want to drop it
like a ham, or trophy, in my sack.

A Leaf, A Hare

1. *Penelope*

To arrive, one learns to journey
 light, & so we molt, reptilian.
I coiffe seething braids of hair,
 a-hiss. Beggar-red & sun roughed,
he tells of his travels. The loom
 that is his voice shuttles its tale.
Each day unravels. He chucks
 my chin, as if to say, *really?* But
this emptying defines us. Marriage
 a flaxen heap of threads upon
the floor. Not yet that morning
 I wake to alone, death's worsted
light cool as it strips him beyond
 my repair. Time's the harder course.
How could I not come to love
 the lay, its repetition, how it beats
the filling yarn into place? *Patience.*
 A leaf, a hare, still treadle into view.

2. *Odysseus*

Nothing less than the world
 tapestries her lap, a cauldron of form-
lessness for her steady fingers
 to pick amongst, calling litter
of thread to life. A leaf. A hare,
 haunches gleaming & bunched,
ready to spring across the linen's
 dun to its far border. Her lips
mouth faith. Patience. What
 was I to do when her chill body
held itself so distant? Root about,
 mud-mucked, until night's aching
riptide dragged me down, only
 to be retched back up on that
sandy shore? Her webbed face
 unreadable. A troop of swine
issues from her loom. Fidelity is
 a witch's craft. What was I to do?

3. *Duet*

Time is the harder course.

 A cauldron of formlessness, each
day unravels. Her chill body
 held itself so distant. I wake alone,
ready to spring across this
 empty night's aching riptide,
its repetition, how it beats. Is
 fidelity nothing less than the world,
a flaxen heap of threads upon
 the floor? A leaf, a hare tapestries
her lap. We molt, marriage
 a witch's craft beyond my repair.
It strips him, haunches gleaming
 & bunched reptilian. How could
I not come to love her fingers,
 mouth, & lips? What was I
to do? Arrive, seething, on that
 sandy shore, dun to its far border.

Two

Extremity

"Study of God the Father," 1555-1560

His hands rubbed blood-
bright, Primaticcio struggled

to bring forth a man in his own
image, the kind of monster
who'd hoard holy relic & limb.

These nine muscled arms all
that he could manage.

A hand surfaces, wrist up,
palm flat as a waiter's beneath
his dinner-laden tray. Like

a worm chopped to pieces,
caught & scattered, the segments
curve amid death's
throes on his pinked tablet.

Faith is a grisly contest.

This portrait devours sight.
Eyes awash in the body's
red, it casts itself over my retinas –
phantom green flood, a prayer
to ligament & gristled limb.

The hand makes the man.
I recognize him:

(stanza break)

God the Braggart, God the Afflicted,
God who Holds-the-Line.
God the Tempter.
His fingers reach for mine.

Ghazal in Minium

The powder is poison, red-heavy, earth. I write what I see, St. Hildegard said. Flames erupt from her forehead, flood her brain, heart, & breast.

Like two pears wrapped in tissue, the breasts reveal themselves.
Like cold & sculpted stone, they desire breath upon their skin.

The disease woman crouches beneath her diagnoses. Never say fear fuels the hypochondriac, but passion. Life softens & she clutches tighter. *More.*

Like a pale sack filled with rocks, the skin of the engorged breast smarts.
Like a sunburst, stretch marks flare cinnabar, rays from her nipple.

Self-Portrait in the Letter R: Remember, straight head & spine. Imagine your vertebrae as beads on a string that runs to the ceiling, to a hand unseen.

Winter Solstice

The sun stands in place,
unable to stir above the slight
green smudge of horizon.

We rise with our only son
to see the longest night stretch
far past the second black

cup of coffee & shower. Frozen
to the stoop, a robin's body,
neat as a gift. Starlings shift

inside sky's gray dish, loose
iron filings. The curtain lifts.
All is turbid dawn-blur, drizzle-

rigged, as the earth tips back in its
boiled-wool cover, dead flint.
Stiff & sparkless, it reminds me

this is the season of stillness.

Tableau

1. Christmas Eve

On the mantel, this silent scene, motionless
amid the heat expelled by our hearth's open

cave. Fire's chiaroscuro spit & clamor
strikes the figures' porcelain robes where

they hang in folds, crevice of throat & eye
sunken coal. The trough's straw-sculpted

maw fills with dark, empty until midnight.
This crèche should embody beginnings,

holy birth, but the darkness to come
inhabits it too thoroughly. See how it slips

into the stable – the cattle low & stamp
the stalls, trapped by massing smoke. Their

hooves paw kilned dirt. Only one man need
notice, need lift the bolt & slide it free:

let them nose their way out, break for safety.

2. The Adoration

whether on your knees or squatting
to worship is to labor, as any saint knows
in water or walking
let love pour forth from you, wetting both your socks
then rest & push again
faith is like that, one step forward, one step back
keep your chin down
(that which is distant is all that is worth seeing)
whether on your side, your back
the posture of adoration, the posture of suffering

3. The Nativity

Snow swirls the night air like a nebula
& already he is lost, retiring to grottoed barn.

He tosses on his makeshift bed
before rising for work, worried about taxes
unpaid, the donkey to be fed, & when
he'll get a decent night's rest.

He has seen enough of open sky & stars.

He wants the splintered crisscross of beams,
material he can hew according to desire,
wants to lift his thumb to her teeth
& have her tweeze each wood sliver free.

4. The Epiphany

A thin music's strain accompanies the infant's every breath.

The branchings of his lungs stiffen, heavy as tree limbs
outside, fragile bouquets of twig piled thick with old snow.

Censer-like, the vaporizer offers up its menthol, its mist.

I have known nothing so well as I know this wet face,
its veins tracked like bird's feet across earth's white crust.

5. Candlemas

Knead loaves of bread with milk & holy
water to place beneath spring's first furrow.

Plant garden seeds in an egg-carton. Wait.

Warm them on the kitchen counter –
green shoots flicker on soil's black lake.

Sweep the floors with salt water. Batter &

pour a dinner of pancakes, round gold disks.
Kindle soft candles, beeswaxed stars,

in every window. This is how light must enter

our world: sharp & bright as a sword,
suns blister-cupped by a woman's

corded arms, consuming her like a wick.

Cartography of the Sublime

It does not take a mountain to lift
the human soul. A distant train's dirge,
winter's brief thaw leaking the bluff's

sides, trees reefed & skeletal, a simple
recognition & something quickens, even
as we flounder, swine in this land's trough.

Transport seekers, spiny-haired & mud-
spattered, who is to say the way is up?

Black Frost

Next door,
the dark fruits revolve & fall.

When you give up hope
in godliness, there's not much point
to keeping clean —

let them dirty themselves,
let the chill night run
its black cloth
across their skin.

Somebody's always done for,
just like we always said,
just like the thin line of ants
snaking our walls,
every line leading back to the same
sweet poison, three clear
tears on the strip
ripped from a cereal box.

Remember:
the cold has no voice
& our neighbor will sleep for days.

It can only be
the intercom swarming,
buzzing *we have come so far*
it is over.

The oven opens its mouth,
the last thin blue towel
folded in fourths

& placed on the rack
to pillow our nap.

Let the paramedics serve
as pallbearers, they are
accustomed

to the cold body
with its shock of dead hair
unwashed for days,
strands black

as the apples dangling
from our neighbor's tree.

Poem in the Manner of Frida Kahlo

after "What the Water Gave Me," 1938

A volcano's searing ring haloes the skyscraper's glass & metal skin.
In a boa of smoke, it sinks, flame-licked. Sheets of ash shower the sky.

Some crookedness is in this thing. Have no faith, the obstetrician says, as if
he grapples giant eels. I never knew how much blood there could be.

Rust needles give way beneath my rubber-soled boots, the sun seeping
in clots. Pines rise thin & black, spoking into furred stars overhead.

Or will it go like this: stooping, I lift the wooden bowl. Inside, absence
sticky as its curves. & out, smooth & beautiful as a finely-sanded skull.

Weeping willow branches snake through the park's matted grass &
I watch a boy haul one free, only to brandish its length like a whip.

The bathwater cools. With a toe, I open the drain. Muscles & cords pull
taut, still, as I listen to its noisy emptying, my body laid out in the tub.

Self-Portrait as Miniature

What a wafer of a casket, this ivory
oval strung about your neck. Beneath
the covering glass, my hair
gleams light as a ghost's. Bend close.
I am meant for no one. But you,
I fit the palm of your hand.
Think not of the strap that secured
my slack jaw or the way each sitting

decomposed me. Turn me
around. Ever facing inward –
my limned flesh warm as the chest
where I rest – you must approach me
as you would a secret. I whisper.

Curator of Fruit

Isabella Dalla Ragione, arboreal archaeologist

It is the old women I love
 most, the remembered
piles of pear, plum, apple,
 cherry, peach, medlar,
& quince that they cellared
 beneath their nuptial beds,
where it was cool. I roast
 pear with cod, pickle plums
in vinegar & salt. How I want
 to possess the smell
& taste of all that's past,
 to graft scion & rootstock,
bind them tight. I desire
 life itself, to turn my land
heavy with musked
 orbs of imperfect fruit.
A rutted road thrusts over
 potato fields to the *Fiorentina*
tree, black-freckled pear,
 its bark split & gowned
in a lichen intricate white.
 The life I've chosen is not
my own. I know that many
 could say the same: the trees,
blushing old women.
 It is no cause for complaint.
Marriage is a stony bed,
 is want. Inedible flesh
bagged in its spotted skin,
 the sap's inexplicable rise
to sky, & early morning, love

heavy with the smell of winter
pears, firm & crisp & cold.

Three

Putting Him to Bed

1.

Bath steam coats us, whiting's sifted
dust. The girdled sun bores down,
as night collects like cuttlefish ink
in the heavens' glazed bowl. *If you
take away the light all things remain
unknown in the shadows*, said St. John
of Damascus. My son agrees. I must
be Byzantine, must don a visage
chromed to green, must let no pity
escape my constant eyes. Though
*no one may enter that place, there
are many rooms as to surpass all belief*,
or so I have read, in sleep's palace.
Yolk of me, it is past 8 o'clock,
& I just cannot read one more story.

2.

I close my son's bedroom door,
lamp-black rectangle in a wall pale
as pulped linen, as cotton rag.
Back curved, knees tucked to chin,
my husband floats the sofa's swell,
a bright segment of tangerine. What
we feel for each other during this
is best left unsaid. Of his unicorns
Marco Polo wrote: *on their tongues,*
in fact, they have long sharp spines.
How to say thank-you, how to *be*
thankful? It must be something like
what an explorer feels for sleep,
finally closing her eyes to the stars'
strange array. The old blanket's
weft reassuring, familiar on feet
that seek out another's in darkness.

3.

Sleep with me, my son begs. I lay down
beside him & dark's fingers mold our skin,
a study in stasis. The terror of the formless
surrounds us. Horror is just another
mother of beauty: the Grand Khan's palace
dome that *glitters like crystal & can be seen*
shining from a great way all around bought
at the cost of nights populated by nutria,
distorted trees, & toads staring with goggled
eyes. I have no wonders to offer. Just
my body, immobile earth caught by
this blue palpitation, the moon's pilot light.

4.

Sleep with me, he says, the sibilant S
a serpent twining through the margins
of the room, sinuous as any Venetian
canal the young Marco straddled
& rode. The clock's luminous face
a verdigris moon lipped in gold-leaf.
Stuffed cotton batting's animal lumps
all that lie between him & *a sea*
so tempestuous, it is continually eating away
the land & scooping out trees at the root.
Remember to retrieve all manner
of curiosities. Khan-like, I wait
arborescent in rose-breath. I cannot follow.

In Which I am the Serpent in the Garden

Our saucer magnolia sloughs its heavy petals,
pink flurries edged with dark.

Its blossoms
sag open, freighted with a rich perfume.

My son, not yet two, heaps them back atop
the lowest-hanging blooms. What is it like,

to live unencumbered by death, unhemmed
by certitude? Mortality presses & fences –

I fear most the clear field, its carelessness,
childhood's feral innocence, & its cruelty.
On our stoop, a daddy-longlegs
drawn & quartered.
The thread of its leg quivers.

Knowledge is the apple's humble gift.

He needs to see the way brown pulls itself up over the moist white flesh, like a sheet.

I pluck an apple from the fruit bowl & slice it,
luminous, a fan of moons flowering his plate.

Still Life with Gilt Goblet

We are not unlike this
opened meal's wet insides:
a dinner roll's gilded crust
broken, the glass
tipped, a single lemon
sliced & peeled in infinite
spiral of rind, tablecloth
jostled, the platefuls
of mollusk cracked wide –

the Dutch knew much
about the body, arrested
& rent in their attempt
to paint the soul,
to disclose the oyster
by its watery light alone.

Vernal Equinox

The forsythia explodes, a struck
match. Branches tinderred by
wind betray my desire, my long
canary love. A hundred flamey
mouths unfurl, petal & spark
arcing down: what it feels like
to give & burn. I want to catch,

kindled, into bundles of hard
yellow buds – arms & legs, even
the loose strands of my hair fire-
working out. I want to break
into blossom, my limbs flailing
in air's current like a man on fire.

Book of the City of Ladies

1. Annunciation of Christine de Pisan

I slouch over my chair's pommeled
arm, shut up by edifice of word.
Each illuminated leaf makes of a page
a box & makes of a book a room.
The texts tower about me, peopled
by women devilish & wicked. I am
famished, a monstrosity in nature.
How can I revel in the simple gasp-

grasp of my appetites? When will
my good mother call me to my dinner?
Day's last rays finger my lap. Tumblers
rattle, revolving – the click of metal
gear on metal fills me & releases,
fierce as the key-sure light, fitted tight.

2. Christine de Pisan, Laying Brick

Daphne, Dorothy, Rebecca, Anne,
Gertrude, & the Magdalen –

waist-high, the city wall wimples.
Each joint must be watertight,
handmaid Reason reminds, lest
my project be lost to winter's snap
& freeze, lest my labor be still-born,
a lifeless wheeze. Vermilion lakes
blister my palm. I butter bricks
& shove them into mortar's bed:

Sappho, Catherine, Artemisia, Eve,
Marcia, Lilith, Hildegard, & me.

Detail

"The Virgin with the Veil," Raphael

Not the veil, but the fingers that hold it.
My son winds himself in our sliding
door's sheer drape. His fists stretch it
as if punching some taut membrane
from his face. This is our game:
he turns in his cocoon & I unghost him.
Frozen mid-act, the fabric
rasps my finger's pads. He laughs.
My hand still remembers our early
nights, the careful ritual of wrapping.
I would tuck the white blanket
tight, his arms folded in like wings.
Sleep. Not the veil waiting to be shaken
free, a handkerchief's bright flash,
but the fingers. It is terrible. Not
the veil, but the fingers that must hold it.

Catherine Blake

I flush my paintbrush against the water bowl's sides.
A cloudy tail spirals up in its wake. For me,
each morning dawns to a disk of fire not unlike
a guinea, & this he will not forgive. My paper

glows out yellow like the sun rising & singing
to my husband: *Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God*
Almighty! A swarm of angels crying to him,
he says, & though I try to see otherwise, it's just

the bees that have roosted in our eaves. The dry
husks of their bodies bat the window panes.
I dip my brush's tip & swirl it round
a lozenge of paint. Only here, in the window's

mirror-glare, do I see more than he:
white feathers spit from my lips instead of air,
sticking to me, a gutted pillow's snowy innards,
til I am waxed & feathered as any saint here.

The Tempest

Clouds orchard the sky, dangle
flush globes overhead. The storm
has not passed. There is no
rest, I know, just my son's cry

splintering the silence. A flash
both serpentine and bright.
If sleep's slick waters could slip
their banks and cover me

like a sheet. If the telephones, tea
kettle, even the rasping green
sofa's slipcovered twill could be
quieted. Below the water's purled

surface, a stillness pours. Please.
This, the uninhabited moment.

Saint Anne to Her Daughter

"Madonna & Saint Anne," Leonardo Da Vinci

It will not work. He'll never
fold back into you, body curled
tight, a kitten in sleep. He leans –
seems always to lean – away.
Everything you do pulls death, thick
& woolly, closer to your emptied
flesh. There is room. Skin sags
your shrunken belly. Remember:

there is always room now
for death to clamber into your lap,
heavy as a child & bleating.
It's in your weight on my legs. The last
prickings of sensation fade, numb
as when you first emerged, smudged
with blood & vernix. I knew:
the fingers tipped with blue.

Four

Harem of Saint Marcia

"Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait," 1403

In this studio, I have been licked & loved,
awash in oil, have known her brush's
muzzled flick & tease. She does only women,
stroking curve of breast & dimpled thigh.
In life, we are chambered saints, framed flat
as flowers left to lean against her wall.
Pots & palette arrayed, she paints my nuptial
face. Please, good lady, extend your hand
to mine – we are virgin merely as men define.
& you, so well-versed, must be past ready
to die. Hungry for the grave, I am duplicitous,
image piled on image, oval glass & panel.
Lay me across your chest. Casketed in that bed,
I will minister you until your back curls
& dark slides over in its long & final scrape.

Nocturne

I sleep with my eyes open as anyone
of sense. Night rivers about me
as I sink below its surface & lurk.
Let the devout trust darkness.
I have seen the cat's brood, burlap
sacked. Have seen how the hot
bodies of the faithful worm, mewling,
blind in that bag's belly like a many-
headed monster. *The crocodile is
the image of the hypocrite.* Fine. Call me
what you will. Better a pretender
than the kittens, the fisted rock,
or the hand that releases its burden
to black water. *Our father who art in heaven.*

Galileo's Daughter

Father, I send you this electuary of fig,
nut, rue leaves, & salt.

A plague beats our convent gates.

Crystals of arsenic burn at my wrist
& float in my lap's jet folds.

If your silhouette were to scorch
the parchment sheet hung between us
I would know what a woman knows,

curtained within her bed, when
the black form of her lover approaches.

Two Photographs

Vietnam, 1969

1.

None of them look the camera in the eye.

Center: a stack of new fatigues
fills one man's arms. Far left: my uncle,
helmet cupping his skull. I know him
because the caption reads *Bruce –*
in background with back to camera.

The other two men seem more vulnerable,
heads bare & exposed, dark clipped
hair coming to a point. Aim here.

All four men keep eyes cast down, bodies
mimicking the attitude of prayer. They look
their enemy in the eye, learn its lush
green face, the undulating earth
that would take them in a wet embrace.

2.

Their backs are all we see. Single file
the line of men snakes through foreground's
flat grasses toward green hills, slopes
gentle as burial mounds. One of the men
humping gear is my uncle, machine
gun in hand. I've forgotten which. Their backs
are all I see. *Am I crazy*, my father said, *or*
are the back of his head & ears unmistakably
Bruce? I study the image, the shadow of ears
protruding from each man's helmet.
My uncle has no face. We are unable to
remember. This is how it happens,
how features erode, interchangeable as
a set of ears. Their backs are all I can see.

All That Is

There's a bit of Chinese emperor in us all.
Of daily details, I have a thousand –

this butter-scraped piece of toast,
its crusts scattered like tea leaves
in the gentle indent of my breakfast plate –

all interred in language's tomb like
life-sized battalions of terra cotta men.

I will admit to knowing Qin's desire
to contain a life with one great wall,
jeweled sky chandeliered over mercury

rivers guarded by infantry & archer.
But such cavalry can bring no comfort.

Better to let you rock back, neglected
& unfixed in this earth's cold bed,
to leave you to the soil's rooted arms.

Let them pull you up so you fly apart
& flower me with all that is pink inside.

God Measuring the World with a Compass

Illumination in a moralized Bible, c. 1250

Blue-fleshed fingerlets, uneven as a shoreline,
reach up into dark space from wavy rind.

*If God must needs have made things according
to number, weight, & measure, then he must be*

troubled by the chaos cross-sectioned
beneath his instrument's sharp points, the curved
contours of this planet's bulging body,

cosmos circumscribed by two hinged legs
like a cantaloupe halved upon my counter.

I scoop sticky seed & fiber free.

We are so small. Beauty's daily disarray of vine
straggles my garden's weed-pocked patch.

Sun-glazed, the irregular globes of melon swell.

Winnowing

Parrotia, hosta, portulaca, spiderwort's eight-legged blooms. His toy robin vised to chest, my son wrings mechanical song from plushed stuffing. *False spirea, paper bark maple, daisy, the Louisa crab.* Even in his sleep, I hear when he clutches her, hear her inky fluting tossed to the night. My own flocked words are dun lumps fitted to the body's rookery. Are warm balls of dough. *Weeping cherry, lavender twist, Oklahoma redbud, fringe.* All I do is press. *Impatiens, hornbeam, black-eyed Susan.* Their soft & feathery fan blows open, emerging from throat's shadow like a bird breaking for open sky.

Yard Elegy

1.

The Midwest's humid bowl fills, laboring
my movements. Slender-stalked,

the peonies stoop under ponderous blooms.
Their profusion of ruffle rivals any gown.

Within each flower, tiny ants cluster
& pillage for sugar, peeling the tissue-thin

petals of each balled bud. This must be
how life reveals us, nudged imperceptibly

by the slightest heft, until the soul
slips free in deathbed's thick sweetness.

A single vase can suffuse a room,
its ineluctable scent sacking the body,

as if to talcum it violet, rose. On the table
beside my head, the bouquet, in lush repose.

2.

Like the rinds of a lime, a hinged moon, or
a four-eyed augur of death,

the luna moth clings to my window screen,

hindwings flaring & mouthless –
she is as she was meant to be,
perfect & light as air, her inevitable demise
made manifest in her very design –

but such intimacy with death, its bright sickle,

is too much, so I turn out the light
& let the moon hook night's distant velum,

my own end cocooned within me.

3.

The pink curl of another nestling lies
dead on our drive, wrinkled &
featherless. I lift it in a clutch of towels,

then drop it in the trash. Death
is as close as the next strong gust, as easily

opened as our front door, the damp
pre-dawn grass cooling my son's feet.

Such a fine threshold – the rim of a nest,
the line where lawn ends & the street's dim
grave stretches wide. The young

are drawn to edges, to the place where
beams of light bear down upon them.

4.

Like a lady shedding her stays, the maple's bark drops away.

Like house lights doused, room by room, the mimosa fails: last year one limb &
this year two, branches that never split into leaf, never bloom.

Like the desire that follows a jealous fire, the sapling's foliage flares, withers, &
falls – only to unfurl again before August, & then no more.

Like a pregnant belly, the infested stem of each cottonwood leaf, aphid-choked,
breaks & sinks in a slow green rain.

5.

Everywhere, death. The clod of cat
dung I sift from the sandbox barrow,

that inch of standing water deposited
by last night's rain in my son's pool,

new mushrooms spreading their soft
gray umbrellas over our yard. I know

that I cannot protect him, even as
I latch him tight in his swing & push

until the tips of his sneakers brush
the pear tree's leaves. He squeals –

the vowels break from his open throat
in violent delight, soaring – not,

I imagine, unlike the final moment
when the soul bursts into flower.

The swing's red bucket tolls back &
forth, carrying him with it, in rapture.

Summer

Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1573

poses, in profile, face composed of plump
orbs resembling muscle & ligature
stripped of skin, baroque as a green-grocer's
pile – pears, plums, cherries, & garlic
with the split shell of pea for a mouth.
Summer is what it is, God says. Vegetable heaps
spill from plastic crates, & farmers shove
handfuls of green bean, potato, & leek
into paper bags. I pace our market's stands,
seeking ripest tomato, sweetest peach,
berry pints so plush they burst on the tongue.
See, they say, giving themselves over, life
laid out before me like a proof. How to bear
what must follow? *It is what it is*, God insists.
Arcimboldo's portrait lashes, it scoffs.
No, I say to open air, to the sheathed
pyramids of moist green corn. Wit makes
more of this than overripe display, dissected
& arranged. It is what it is. Call it solace.

NOTES

In section 3 of “Box Series,” the lines in italics are from *Refusing Heaven* by Jack Gilbert.

In “Black Frost,” several phrases are from poems by Sylvia Plath.

The italicized phrase in “Poem in the Manner of Frida Kahlo” is spoken by Laocoön in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

“Curator of Fruit” is indebted to John Seabrook’s article on Isabella Della Ragione in *The New Yorker*.

“Putting Him to Bed” quotes Marco Polo’s *The Travels*.

The italicized portion in “Nocturne” is from the twelfth century *Cambridge Bestiary*.

In “God Measuring the World with a Compass,” the italicized portion comes from Bonaventure of Bagnoregio’s *Commentary on the Four Books of Sentences*, as translated by Umberto Eco in *History of Beauty*.

VITA

Rebecca Dunham was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and received her B.A. from the University of Virginia, her M.A. from Hollins College, her M.F.A. in Poetry from George Mason University and her Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She was the Jay C. and Ruth Halls Fellow in 2005-2006 at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as the 2005 *Indiana Review* Poetry Prize winner and a 2005 Academy of American Poets Prize winner.

Her book, *The Miniature Room*, won the 2006 T.S. Eliot Prize and will be published by Truman State University Press. Beginning in September 2006, she joins the English faculty at the University of Northern Iowa.