

Burn

By

Vivian Kathleen Johnson

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Prof. Tom Lorenz  
Chairperson

Committee members\*

Prof. Elizabeth Schultz \*

Prof. William J. Harris \*

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The Thesis Committee for Vivian Kathleen Johnson certifies  
that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Committee:

Prof. Tom Lorenz  
Chairperson\*

Prof. Elizabeth Schultz

Prof. William J. Harris

Date approved: \_\_\_\_\_

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*When we want everything to change  
we call on fire.*

—Gaston Bachelard,  
*The Psychoanalysis of Fire*

# **I**

## **An Ember under the Deepening Ash of Days**

## **Rise and Fall**

Here I stand  
in the Colosseum, all  
cleavage and smiles, dazed

by ghosts of gladiators,  
dazed by ungodly sun.  
It's Rome, August,

in this photo you snapped  
a few months before  
our marriage. How

could I, at twenty, know  
the future, the past,  
where all roads finally

lead, how moonless nights  
would find me, decades later,  
in this dusty Kansas town

in a house of arches,  
feeling the heat of history  
bearing down?

## **Controlled Burn**

Late winter dusk.  
Land undulates  
like the smooth curves  
of a woman as they drive through  
the Flint Hills on the way to  
somewhere else. Gray highway  
under gray sky. Earth dun-colored,  
denuded. He steers in silence, wants  
no music. She has nothing  
to say. They're on the way  
to somewhere else. She feels  
numb: a blank canvas, a white sheet  
of paper, a treeless expanse.  
Soon, spring will come,  
and with it so much  
will go up in smoke.  
Like these hills,  
she hungers for fire.



## **Eclipse**

The first time you called  
your voice passed over me  
cool as a shadow.

## Mosaic

*I want to make  
the intricate tessellated moments of our lives  
a floor of jade, obsidian, turquoise, ebony, lapis.*

Arthur Sze, "The Moment of Creation"

## Winter

Corelli's *Christmas Concerto*, chocolate and oranges in a sunny chair,  
red scent of cinnamon, colors chasing like children through December air.  
A new year promised to open, open as a stained-glass window might,  
if it could, a passage to salvation. Then the year turned, and so did he.  
The future fell silent, a diamond ring into snow. He left and took  
the colors with him. Even my dog's white fur felt cold. Raw winds  
whipped and moaned. Nothing to do but try to hold on.  
It was the time of violet shadows. Violet, color of the end of the known  
and beginning of the unknown. A twilight world. I could have wandered  
into a picture on my wall, say Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow*,  
followed those lean dogs of winter wherever they might lead. Anything  
but the gray procession of days and dread, endless walks down gravel roads.  
Where is your God now? Hope is a hard, hard stone.  
January's moon rises, a broken piece of milky quartz. Opaque. Cold.

## Spring

Colors gradually resurrect themselves after weeks of fathomless blue.  
Opalescent sunrise, sliver of ghostly moon. Even the darkest hues  
are something to hold onto. I hear polished obsidian in Bach's *Ciaccona*,  
onyx thunderheads in the voices of the *Carmina Burana*. I've given up  
on God and promises. Colors speak to me: forsythia branches  
arranged in a silver vase, jellybeans in a jar. Redbud trees  
emerge in the woods. Their green hearts shimmer, orchid branches reach out  
like arms. This world is more than the sum of its parts. I wear a ring  
with a sapphire star and fill the house with hyacinths.  
I plant rosemary and try not to remember. By April, green and new  
are the same syllable. The word for him doesn't exist. Sudden storms  
stir winds of change. I walk in woods of malachite, emerald, peridot.  
And red still burns at the opening and closing of days.  
The sun is a blood-red garnet. I won't let go. I'm learning a new language.

## Summer

Hours fan out like mammoth sunflower petals.  
A wedge of lemon cake waits on an amethyst plate.  
Afternoons linger long and late. Color is its own language,  
running rampant as I reach for it. Why try to hold on  
to what's over? Sunlight escapes into the dark. Iridescence gathers:  
dragonflies around a murky lake. Instead of gold-flecked midnight,  
this silent bedroom, that full moon harsh as an interrogation light.  
One definition of desire, always waiting for what never came:  
two palettes combining, incandescent days. Nothing prepared me for  
evenings blue as topaz. Turner painted with his brightest red  
though he knew it wouldn't last. Van Gogh believed yellow was capable  
of charming God. Even tomato vines, the potted basil on the porch,  
smell of summer's citrine. There's nothing not stained with color.  
Across the road, wildflowers dot a field, brilliant as gemstones.

## Fall

He said it's all about letting go and then he did.  
After the shatter, I keep stepping on the brilliant, the hard, the sharp.  
Nothing is clear anymore. My world turns colors, so many shades  
between creation and destruction, between loss and gain.  
So many scattered pieces of love and hate. All year I wait  
for autumn, but gold days pass; amber memories burn.  
If everything we touch goes, why do we yearn  
to hold on? Color is its own language and my only fluency.  
Light filters through trees, each ruby leaf  
holy, illuminated. Hummingbirds hover between  
fading lantana blossoms. A heron flies in mist over the pond.  
Bees buzz in thyme and lavender. Bluestem blows in the wind.  
A shooting star streaks across black sky, leaving  
a magenta and cobalt question mark, briefly, above us all.

## Love

means nothing.

Even the word itself is vacant.

See how that capital *L* forms only half

a frame. It can't hold

anything. And the *o*,

so completely hollow.

The *v* throws empty arms up

into vast white space.

And the little *e* curls into

itself, at the end, alone.

## Double Portrait

(After Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*)

Sitting here on beach rocks,  
we're just two bodies,  
unmoving shapes on a shore  
of silt and rubble, two voices lost  
in the weak surf. If anyone were listening  
they'd hear our voices  
losing. Waves advance  
and retreat but do not wash us. Nothing  
washes over what is  
over. Time won't allow it. It gives  
only distant cries of seagulls,  
an owl's call high above  
the space of an afternoon, wide blue  
we'll never escape into.  
If Seurat were painting this scene,  
he would do it in beads of blood.

## **Still Life in February**

I sweep my hand across your face,  
a faded photo, you as a boy. Gone.  
Dreamless sleep. Your hands  
not touching me. Bach instead  
of Al Green. Gifts I don't receive.  
Jokes I can't recall. Not hearing  
the phone ring. Gray days thinning  
to dust. Gravel on a road.  
Ice glazing windows. Waking up cold.  
Every word I never said.  
The whole earth holding its breath.

## **Portent**

The night you arrived:  
northern lights shimmering red  
in black winter sky.

## Bloomsday

*shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall  
and I thought well as well him as another . . .*

James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Molly's soliloquy

Yes well Molly got it wrong it's never many men or just any man always only one like it's just this one June day as relentless sun burns as we head into the open golden throat of summer roadside daylilies shout in orange what blooms today is gone tomorrow therein lies the rub the tale the one that lasts much longer than a day the one that ends when I do in the distance the nervous glitter of a city in fading dusk all these stars fallen down fireflies flickering around me while Van the man sings everything that I do reminds me of you and it's true there's this shimmer that wants to turn into pure gold my daughter in a black bowler at midnight watching Alex and his droogs while following along in the book it's my *Clockwork Orange* summer she says later in bed listening to Ludwig van passions come in deepdown torrents to us both full copper moon through the skylight so bright I can't sleep keep remembering Billie Holiday's voice in the car last summer I'll be looking at the moon but I'll be seeing you O yes so many sultry nights of heat lightning distant thunder but no rain never any rain the scent of damp grass wild clover on the open window's breeze wide awake in the dark again silk gown slipping cool over warm skin soft night air a lover's caress without the lover yes she said whatever you are seeking is seeking you so much blooms so much stays buried how to escape from this shadowland of longing how to live in the flat bright daylight of the real world again someone wrote that desire is a question that has no answer still I will how can I help it I will offer my Yes.



## **Subtleties of a Winter Twilight**

Evening descends. Here  
in the blue shadows of day  
colors meld into gray.

Bare limbs sweep the sky.  
Deer forage ghost-like  
in fields around the house.  
A crescent moon rises  
with a Cheshire-cat smile.

I sip Merlot,  
and my mind melts  
like a candle, flickers from  
scattered thoughts to your face,  
your voice deep as this  
darkening night, finally to  
what I most want to feel  
against December's cold:  
your warm breath  
on my skin.

So I wait where  
there are no hard edges,  
my burning  
the only light in the window.

## **February 14**

White drifts, white sky, ice  
and silence. No one can hear  
my red heart beating.

## **Burn**

These shades of desire:  
garnets glowing warm around my neck.

Moon on the horizon, a crescent of fire.  
The sheen of my stockings as your hand slides up my thigh.  
I slip off my heels. You close the door.  
A glass of Cabernet left half-empty on the hearth.  
My parted lips stained crimson as Eve's apple.  
Heat mirage of red, eyelids closed against relentless sun.  
An ember under the deepening ash of days, you fanning it again and again.

## **Rise: A Charm Against Depression**

Imagine a radiance.  
Crystalline tones against a somber backdrop.  
A figure floating up  
from the deep.  
Palette of sky and sea.  
Billowing, boundless.  
Looking down, thinking back,  
I see you as an absence of color, nothing  
but grim negation, dead weight. Me,  
I've turned into turquoise sky and water lights.  
I feel no pull, no gravity. I've left  
your shadow behind, set myself free.  
These are incandescent days.  
At night, aquamarine dreams  
swim in the dark of sleep,  
iridescent flashes in a black opal.

## **II**

**By Fitful Campfire Light**

## Frontier Bride

First year of marriage  
in a one-room cabin on the prairie,  
and for weeks on end it blows –  
whirring at the windowsills,  
rattling the walls, bending the creek willows,  
billowing my skirts. Endless  
gusts of wind I hear with each whipstitch,  
with every broom sweep,  
constant as my own  
breath, whimpering around  
the doors of my dreams until I want  
to slam them shut. Only  
sometimes, late at night  
with him, a blessed hush,  
when – wedding quilt slipped to the floor,  
head thrown back, hair a silky tangle,  
orange sickle of moon curving  
through the window –  
I'm lost  
in love wild  
as an autumn field.

## FFA Jacket

My mother lifts  
the dusty jacket out of her  
cedar chest, hands it to me. I'm surprised  
it doesn't smell of liquor: the dark-blue  
corduroy jacket with the gold  
Future Farmers of America emblem across  
the back, his name in gold embroidery  
on the left chest, and the title –  
National President 1950-51.  
I think of the scrapbooks full  
of newspaper clippings, pictures of Dad  
in this jacket at nineteen, before  
college and Korea, poised  
behind podiums, posing on tractors,  
giving radio interviews, on TV, even tipping  
his Stetson on a hometown billboard  
that says *Welcome to Freedom*.  
A handsome Oklahoma farm boy, the future  
of America over fifty years ago. My father,  
who now lives far away,  
body and mind ruined by booze.  
I slip the jacket on  
and try to remember  
for him. Mom tells me he was always  
on his best behavior when  
he wore it – “like Ronald Reagan  
in the Oval Office,” she says, “always  
wore a suit and tie, out of respect, you know.”  
And I wish he'd never taken it off.  
I'll keep it, along with his gavel,  
all the eight-by-ten glossies,  
and the program with the photo  
of him presiding over the national convention  
in Kansas City – Municipal Auditorium packed  
with young men in blue jackets, some of  
340,000 members that year, big brass band,  
balconies draped with red-white-and-blue  
banners and American flags, Dad  
sitting in the middle of it all,  
looking, as he always has,  
so utterly alone.

## **Farm Wife**

In the farmhouse on long  
Oklahoma days  
she waits  
for peaches and tomatoes  
to ripen, words  
in her head.  
Plump love-apples  
line two kitchen windows  
while she skins peaches.  
Velvety curls drop  
into a pail, pelting tin  
one by one like rain  
on the chicken-house roof.

Countless wedges  
of angel-food cake  
are cut for her husband,  
neighbors when they visit,  
and the sunburned strangers  
who help with the wheat harvest.

Each Saturday,  
wearing a dress, dark lipstick,  
she drives red-dirt roads  
into town to sell  
her cardboard cartons  
of fresh eggs.

And twice a week  
she waters her multitude  
of houseplants— African  
violets, begonias, wandering  
Jew, the tall rubber plants,  
and grape ivy—while  
poems lie in her  
bureau drawer  
and jars with handwritten labels  
collect dust  
in the dark fruit cellar.



## Grandad Scott

To this day  
his name conjures a scene  
I replay as if it's an old black-and-white film:  
in the clearing where chickens feed  
the air is still, sultry-warm.  
Suddenly, out of nowhere,  
an immense bird whirls down at me  
from sky dark with thunderheads.  
It swoops close.  
Wings rasp like grain shaking into a silo.  
Dirt and gravel scatter  
as I run to clutch his striped overalls,  
eyes aimed at his work boots.  
I'm afraid to look up.  
When I turn loose  
there's only a far-off speck wheeling away  
in sullen sky,  
my grandfather roaring with laughter  
because I'm a city kid afraid  
of a chicken hawk.

When my brother was still a toddler,  
Grandad sat him on top of his tallest tractor.  
Even above the engine's deafening rumble  
he could hear the two-year-old's  
terrified screams. That  
was Grandad's idea of fun.

That, and naming cows after  
his daughters-in-law.

One afternoon  
on the front porch of the farmhouse,  
he told us grandkids how surprised he was  
that Uncle Franklin had grown up  
to be a policeman. He'd always thought Franklin  
was the biggest sissy of all his four sons.

Back in 1949,  
when their small town held a banquet  
for my father, who was elected  
national president of FFA, Grandad waited

until Grandma finished getting dressed,  
then refused to go with her.  
I imagine her at the bureau mirror,  
silent, unclipping an earring.

Years later  
he chased his youngest son Virgil  
around the house,  
holding a butcher knife in one hand  
and a kitchen chair in the other,  
lion-tamer style.  
He was babbling about  
Indians again, babbling fast  
as a flooding creek breaking and foaming  
over sharp rocks.

After that  
his sons had him committed  
to the state hospital. From there  
it was just that Thorazine shuffle  
in his baggy Big Smiths and slippers,  
lips still white from windburn,  
forehead still white and a shock  
of white hair straight up  
from decades of wearing  
a stiff-billed farmer cap out in the fields.

They tell me his mother was cold-hearted.  
In the flu epidemic of 1918,  
his father died young.

I don't doubt Grandad lived a hard life,  
trying to raise wheat and cattle  
and four sons  
on a Cherokee Outlet homestead  
all the way through Dust Bowl days  
into the era of family-farm foreclosures.

On my wall I keep a picture  
so I won't remember him just as a cruel man:  
in a white dress and turned-up cap,  
he is a blue-eyed baby  
grinning  
on his daddy's lap.

## Wedding Photo of My Parents, circa 1952

Not quite centered  
between two tall sprays  
of gladioli:  
a young man, skin tanned  
to a copper sheen, black hair,  
striped tie, a slight pout of a smile,  
carnation pinned  
to the broad lapel  
of his baggy suit, half-closed  
eyes, spit-shined shoes,  
on his left hand the glint  
of a gold band.

By his side: a girl  
glowing moonlike  
in satin pumps,  
ankle-length white lace.  
With one hand she clutches  
a small Bible streaming  
ribbons, with the other,  
her new husband.  
Filmy layers of tulle  
in her skirt and veil  
blur her image  
as if she's been frozen  
in a double exposure.  
Her smile opens wide.  
Her eyes know  
no questions. She has found  
an answer, she believes.

## Father's Day

*O human race born to fly upward,  
wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall?*  
Dante, *Purgatorio*

"Humpty Dumpty fell near here"—  
the weird words I woke with  
this morning, the middle of June,  
Father's Day. And the last time  
I talked to my dad was  
a Christmas Eve phone call,  
when his syllables, like the tree lights,  
were vibrant, yet each flashing a separate  
color, because he finally can't even  
form words. Still, he tries  
and tries, a string of sounds that say  
nothing. And this, after losing  
his sight years ago.  
Drink by drink, piece by piece,  
I've lost him all my life.  
But I have old photos  
taken when he was still  
whole. In the one on my wall —  
the Freedom State Bank calendar shot  
from 1941-- he poses  
with his three little brothers:  
a row of proud cowboys on the weathered slats  
of the cattle-pasture gate.  
Western hat, boots, a loosely-held  
lariat ready at his bent, blue-jeaned knee.  
Open sky and Oklahoma fields  
roll out for miles behind them —  
short-grass prairie ragged with mesquite,  
sagebrush, sunflowers.  
And I realize that the line from my dream  
has something to do with  
this picture, that even in sleep I cannot  
rest, but must forever watch  
him falling off that fence,  
falling to pieces.

**Freedom, Oklahoma Rodeo**  
*for Debra Gay Garland*

What went on inside  
the arena, I'll never know.

As moonlight rolled  
across the hoods of rusty pickups  
and shiny horse trailers,  
my cousin Deb and I,  
both thirteen, walked  
the red-dirt perimeter, drinking Pepsi  
from paper cups, stepping over  
manure piles.

Way up in the black sky,  
stars shone like pearl snaps  
as we skirted stands  
full of uncles and aunts, passed  
vendors where pink  
cotton candy sugared the air, noticing,  
with sidelong gazes,  
slim-hipped boys in stiff new jeans,  
their rhythmic swaggering  
in dusty boots.

As we made our giggling rounds,  
the announcer's voice bantered  
with the clowns,  
and every now and then  
clomping hooves drew up close behind.

At the level of our blue-shadowed eyes:  
muscular thighs in leather chaps  
floating past on horseback,  
wheat-colored cowboy hats cocked  
just right  
over eyes that would almost  
light on one of us,  
then glance off.

All night long  
our hearts waited, ready  
to explode  
like bulls and broncs from their chutes,

the close August air holding us  
as if it would never  
let go.

## Tornado Warning

Around front porches,  
neighbors pace.  
Women with arms crossed  
cautiously press  
bare feet to cool cement.  
Their husbands  
brave out  
a few steps  
into weed-gnarled lawns.

Chilled  
by the sudden stillness,  
a young mother  
shoos her children  
back into the house,  
ready herself  
to scramble  
under a bed,  
cheek to unswept dust.

Gray clouds loom  
overhead.  
Trees stand  
motionless.  
Telephone wires hang  
expectant.

The whole town  
is still  
as a sketch of a town  
done in charcoals.  
In a moment  
leaves will begin  
to stir,  
screen doors will slam.

## Camp Houston

Midsummer and hot as hell in the farmhouse,  
though the water cooler rattled its noisy air  
across my grandmother's kitchen, sending  
the aroma of fried chicken through all the rooms

and on out the lace-curtained windows.  
Even hotter in the pickup, but we'd take any excuse  
to go to Camp Houston for chocolate bars, or beef jerky,  
or a bag of Fritos, while Grandad fueled the truck.

The Coca-Cola cooler waited, a gleaming red  
treasure chest against the back wall. A wave of cold  
met your face as you lifted the lid. Slick bottles  
of Dr. Pepper, RC Cola, orange and grape soda nested

in a glistening bed of ice. God, that first swig tasted  
good. So cold you wanted to hold the bottle against  
your flushed cheek, then your sweating forehead.  
Next to the cooler, a tall wooden box topped with glass.

A sign above it read *Baby Rattlers*. On tiptoes we cousins  
peered in to see the pink and blue plastic baby rattles.  
We knew the joke but had to look every time.  
Twenty-five years later I bring my husband, two children,

back to see the family farm – acres of canyons  
and wheat fields, barbed wire and rattlesnakes.  
In the car I silently count years –twenty-two since  
my grandfather was committed to the state hospital,

twenty since Grandmother's fatal heart attack,  
ten that Dad has lived blind and brain-damaged by booze,  
just three since my cousin was found hanging from a necktie  
in his city apartment. On Highway 64, just west of Freedom,

we pass White Horse Creek, then Red Horse Creek.  
From the highway I see the farm's red-dirt road rolling off  
into pastureland and up and over hills like a piece  
of Christmas ribbon candy. We drive on.

For miles I think it must be over this hill or the next,  
until I finally spot Camp Houston, and we stop for gas.  
I urge my children to come in and see the baby rattlers.  
They are still there. The kids look, to humor me,

but are not amused. The woman behind the counter  
is not that good-hearted-but-rough-around-the-edges one  
who used to call my dad Junior when we stopped by back then.  
This woman smiles weakly, says there are snakes

in a pit out back if we want to see them.  
We walk behind the building, through sun-scorched weeds  
crawling with red ants, to a rectangular cement pit.  
That familiar dry ticking sound as we step closer.

And deep down in the dark, in heavy coils around  
each other, a dozen diamondbacks hiss up at us  
from shady corners, flicking their forked tongues,  
rattles straight up, fangs ready to strike.



## To My First Lover, a Young Auto Mechanic

This morning I woke with  
the taste of you  
in my mouth,  
the familiar smell of motor oil,  
Camel cigarettes, and musk cologne  
from nights in your Camaro  
many years ago.

I've slipped you into  
my bed again.

I've watched us  
on my parents' icy porch  
in the snow-flecked light  
of a yard lamp, where we  
said goodnight, wrapped around  
each other while  
the neighborhood slept:  
your mouth wet on  
my neck, the chill racing  
down my back, your articulate  
hands beneath  
my sweater, mine pleased  
at your crotch, the rise  
straining against denim,

my body charged  
as a souped-up Chevy engine,  
your tender blue eyes.

I still dream of us,  
a mad tangle of warmth  
in the cold, before  
it all stopped

like a smashed new car,  
still shiny, still tuned for power.

## End of August

Tonight, while the half-moon hides  
its dark side,  
the Siamese tom stretches  
black velvet paws,  
claws splayed toward a dream:  
he hunts, sapphire eyes  
focused to sharp points,  
all twilight  
concentrated in his gaze.  
Stealthy as a shadow, he curves  
through a creek-bank jungle  
of giant ragweed, candelaria,  
sunflower stalks.  
Yellow mulberry leaves litter the lawn.  
From low branches,  
bluebirds dive for insects.  
Goldfinches search for seeds  
in black-eyed Susans.  
Baby cottontails munch in tall grass.  
Quick eyes everywhere.

## To the Pilgrim Bard, in Gratitude

*In honor of my great-great grandfather,  
the poet Orange Scott Cummins (1846-1928)*

I often see you wandering past buffalo wallows, across  
black-willow swales, camped under cottonwoods on creek banks,

your mule cart full of bleached bison bones, the air alive  
with whippoorwill calls, the ticking whir of rattlesnakes,

wings of wild turkeys rustling in river thickets. I imagine you  
writing verse on stripped tree bark, crystallized gypsum,

and flat stones by fitful campfire light. In canyons, on hilltops,  
or huddled in your dugout as a Kansas blizzard howls over,

you grip pen and paper with weathered hands under the pale wavering  
of a kerosene lamp. In 1871, the Civil War still rattling in your ears,

a photographer's magnesium flare caught that westward slant  
in your eye, wide hat-brim circling above long, scout-style curls. Still,

your writing captured more. Poems about ghosts, buffalo herds, Indians,  
cowboys, Scots-Irish ancestors, and sodbusters lie buried deep

in your descendants, colorful as the buttes and mesas of the Red Hills  
where you settled at last. Fires, floods, family feuds – so much

gets lost. But because we have your words, the wonder holds.  
Nothing, not even prairie cyclones, can whisk it all away.

## **September Moon**

Round and yellow as  
the eye of that great horned owl  
whose call haunts my dreams.

## Dust Bowl Diary, 1935

Silt on the dishes.  
Rags under the doors.  
Horizon coppered by clouds of dirt.  
The sun, a dim smear.  
No stars, no moon for weeks.  
No shadows.

Our farm is sifting away –  
only a bit of cornfield stubble  
poking up through shifting dunes,  
cedars chalked with fine dust,  
half-buried fence posts.

Cattle are dying,  
their lungs caked with mud.  
Others, blinded by blowing grit,  
stumble in brown blizzards.

Once my hair shone like corn silk  
under the sun. Now it's dull, dry,  
wrapped tight in a bun.

After a while, everything  
seems the color of vermin,  
the color of moths –  
dirty wash pinned to  
the clothesline,  
damp dishcloths  
stretched along windowsills.

This spring, no lilacs;  
no luster left in Mother's eyes.

I've forgotten the true  
colors of things. Even the sky  
turns eerie shades I've never seen.

Tonight, before sleep,  
I'll lie still  
on dusty sheets,  
close my swollen eyelids,  
and pray for vivid dreams.

### **III**

### **Searching for a Spark**

## Duende

Lorca knew these gusts as spirit,  
invisible as wind searching for a spark.  
Don't we all want to be set on fire  
by a mysterious breath in the dark?  
Some call it selling your soul  
to the devil: mere mortal one minute,  
force of nature the next. We've all  
seen it before: van Gogh burning  
alive with his wheat fields and starry nights;  
Plath pouring out poems in a brilliant fury;  
Joplin's voice inhabited by hot, hungry gods;  
Hendrix's long, lovely fingers igniting flames.  
Hard to know when that breeze might  
blow through, the exact fugitive moment  
when someone gets lit, turns to gold.

## Another October Night with Van Morrison

1

Notes range and fluctuate: shadows  
of geese over cold fields of milo,  
a tomcat yowling and gold-eyed under the moon.

2

It isn't so much the darkness, but the light –  
nocturnes of gilt and garnet, ruddy Mars regal as Hecate  
in sky so clear you notice the colors of stars.

3

These nights I'm awake to the wild:  
coyotes yelping in chase, mating calls  
of owls, my own lupine dreams.

4

The guttural fire of his song wavers and warms  
like candles lit by some young girl pleading with the moon  
for a boy with eyes blue as the underside of flame.

5

I'm listening to the thin, curving edge  
of something intensely sweet – all the honey  
of amber, and all the inclusions.

6

Once more, the season of maple woods, smoked meats,  
distilled spirits, and I'm reminded that sometimes  
you must open your heart just to discover what comes out.

7

See that one hot star arcing across night,  
red sumac firing the hillsides?  
Desire remains the final hope, the flame.



## **Disillusion**

Lately I've been channeling dead poets.  
I've wrestled angels with Rilke,  
mused on moon phases with Yeats,  
and this morning – it's Sunday, after all –  
I'm visited by my dear Wallace. He brings  
news of you. Is it any wonder?  
Each day around ten we feel the same  
dark encroachment: I dream  
of tigers in red weather, you strum  
your blue guitar, both of us half asleep  
in houses haunted by white gowns and rings.

## Santana at Sunset

All day, this December light:  
cold to the soul,  
mercurial gray, numbing.

Then fading sun  
low on the horizon  
starts to burn through

as "Oye Como Va" begins,  
blazes high and higher.  
Clouds shift and glow,

music shimmers. And, finally,  
the slow slide –  
Carlos fingering "Samba Pa 'Ti."

Oh, everything  
softens, echoing  
sweet, moaning strings.

Notes held long  
on evening breeze  
bleed into sky – heartbreaking

blues, smoldering reds –  
until I'm in a place  
warm enough to imagine

how time's fierce  
rhythms could melt  
into eternity

while night settles in, black  
as thick smoke  
from a raging fire.

## Sunday

Neighbors drive past piously,  
returning home from church,  
tires slowly churning snow  
to mud.

They find me odd:  
every morning I run  
through fields of blinding white  
while my two huskies romp  
in wild circles around me,  
their blue eyes full of God.

## Song of the Snake Goddess

*I just happen to like apples  
and I am not afraid of snakes*

Ani DiFranco, "Adam and Eve"

The knot of love has come undone  
and I have turned you loose.  
I've won this game. There you go,  
slithering away, silent. Here I stand,  
Hecate holding serpents in both hands,  
a Minoan snake goddess,  
Eve on a good day, strong from eating apples.  
Sigmund knew nothing  
of women, snakes, and desire.  
No woman ever really wants  
a snake. They are hardly the stuff of our dreams.  
Still, we attract them like charmers.  
These reptiles come around, hissing  
about bliss, tempting us with forked tongues.  
They slide right in  
to our lives when we least expect it,  
telling sinuous lies, shedding old skins.  
I'll never forget the night I found you  
in my bed, the chilling venom  
of your kiss.

## Psychobilly Blues

Right now  
we're all white-trash wannabes  
as he twirls on a tall, undershot boot heel,  
lanky in faded Levi's tight as a drunk's fist  
around a frosty bottle of beer.  
A nasal twang mellows down to an Elvis drawl,  
narrowed eyes hidden in shadow  
under the curled felt brim of a sweat-stained,  
fifties-style custom cowboy hat.  
At a corner table, you're the smoky-eyed woman  
who slowly peels the label  
from her longneck as he announces  
*a kinduva psychobilly thang*  
*that goes sumpin' like kis . . .*  
The honky-tonk piano starts in, and he's off  
on a solitary journey, his life-long affair  
with the seductress of performing –  
all raw talent and stubborn style,  
two-day stubble and an overbite  
born to sing long and lonesome about  
love-gone-wrong, betrayal, and retribution.  
Agile fingers play lean, hungry –  
foreplay prolonged to near  
climax – notes coaxed out of night air, out of  
a body bred from Kentucky coal mines  
and California dreams. Broken strings flail  
as guitar music rages like fire  
licked into a frenzy of out-of-control flame.  
He chases the dark  
with song, pulls sound from far-away  
winds and empty rooms until  
you are caught  
right where you never knew  
you wanted to be –  
serenaded straight to the pure, primitive place  
where your soul just might settle  
to divine dust.

## Muse

*Poetry will always be  
a wild animal.*

—William Stafford, *You Must Revise Your Life*

I've seen a wolf  
in the woods of a dream.

Her canine contours run  
ravenous with color:  
sage, pine, sun-yellow,  
and canyon-brown, the rich  
carnelian of a Mexican sunset.

Lean, leggy,  
pink tongue wet and lolling,  
she stares me straight in the eye.

Silver moonlight on her back,  
wildfire burning in her eyes,  
she circles close in the night  
daring me.

## Janis

She learned to sing in Texas.  
That raw fire in her voice came from  
there, in gusts and waves,  
in Great Plains gales,  
gulf heat and stickiness. Listen  
to the way some notes seem lifted  
by breeze, carried on coastal wind.

Everything's big in Texas –  
those bruises she got  
in Port Arthur and Austin,  
her soul, her song.

She swigged down  
Southern Comfort, poured  
herself into music,  
sang vivid as blood simmering  
through a wronged woman's veins.  
Finally, she had to go,  
and headed for San Francisco,  
eating the red sun of rage and sorrow  
for breakfast every morning.

She wasn't plain anymore.  
Now a wildfire flared  
and could be seen for miles –  
the kind of prairie blaze  
too big to be stopped  
that must be allowed  
to burn itself out.

**Giorgio de Chirico, *The Delights of a Poet***

Witness this lost  
hour in autumn:  
light swallowed hard,  
deep in shadowed portals.

On the horizon, a train leaves  
a trail of pale smoke  
in cloudless skies.  
The searing clock fixes  
its stare on a man who walks  
away, his long shadow,  
a fountain.

The cool noise of water  
dances in afternoon air.

Others have seen, under dark  
arches, changeless stone,  
this exact slant of sun, carried it away.

They too are ruled by time.



## Art History Class

By bus,  
the older ladies come  
to an evening class at the university.  
Rows of silver-blue heads  
and sweated shoulders fill  
twelve center-most seats.  
As they listen to a lecturer  
talk of tombs excavated beneath  
the floor of St. Peter's in Rome,  
stagnant perfume settles  
in the room. After slides  
and scholarly descriptions of  
sarcophagi, ash chests, bodies  
placed in shrines and under  
slabs, cremations, inhumations,  
and urns, thin whispers  
speak of bridge and canasta,  
how many tables there were,  
will be.

**Arnold Böcklin, *The Island of the Dead***

Where are we?

Almost dark, the last  
amethyst light of evening turns  
its back on the colors

we depend on. We are left  
in a murky place, floating

toward shadows of cypresses.  
Huge rocks rise  
shoulder-like from the sea.

We coast in.

The oars turn slow circles –  
the only sound –  
as we glide  
into deep black

where no one waits for us.

**Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*  
in the Louvre**

One calm eye  
gazes in disdain  
at passing visitors  
as she leans  
on a pale elbow,  
lounges on  
plump pillows  
and sheets of  
Persian silk –  
blue-green, liquid  
as the Mediterranean.  
The full moon  
of a breast peeks  
from beneath  
an outstretched arm.  
Near one bare  
foot: a slender  
brass pipe. She pulls  
a bed curtain  
to her opaline thigh.  
Her S-curved  
body reclines long,  
naked  
as a lover's stare.

## Georgia O'Keeffe Muses While Painting a Red Canna: A Rhapsody

In the deep center, red and glowing, a slow burn  
spreading, an undercurrent running strong,  
the loud ring of a hammer striking  
something hard. So alive I could crack  
at any moment. So much like reaching to all  
creation. What lies beyond the flame, beyond  
my grasp? The world seems to be on wheels, going  
so fast I can't see the spokes. Something wonderful  
about the bigness, and the loneliness, and the windiness  
of it all, the beauty of that wild world. I want live people  
to take hold of, music that makes holes  
in the sky, to love as hard as I can. I want  
to go deeper and deeper into my own unknown.  
Nobody else has the energy I have. No one else  
can keep up. A thing I don't want to hurry is growing  
in my brain, my heart, all of me. That spark, that fire  
makes life worthwhile, makes me want to go after  
everything in the world, want everything  
in the world— good and bad, bitter and sweet. I want  
it all. And a lot of it too. Yes, I am living.  
How could I help it? Balancing on the edge  
of loving like I imagine we never love but once.

## Halloween

A constellation of porch lights  
mirrored the stars  
that small-town night

I cried door to door  
after the older kids left  
to go trick-or-treating without me.

Then Loretta Lynn and Norma Jean  
warbled and whined  
on the neighbors' turntable;

salt from a sip of  
the salty dogs the adults mixed  
stung my lips.

And later – my dad passed out  
across the backseat,  
mother sobbing at the wheel,

the road a blur  
as a storm pelted windows.  
When I had to go back

and ask for the belt  
my father left on her bedroom floor,  
a witch cackled at the door.

## Alabaster Caverns

*What will we become?  
cool shadows in the red  
mineral belly of the earth?*

Anita Endrezze, "The Language of Fossils"

For twenty years up north, I've tried to remember  
what the Oklahoma light was like. I've come back  
to see prairies of sage and mesquite,  
home to my ancestors, land where I was born.

After miles of cedar-dotted canyons,  
past the steep bluffs of the Cimarron,  
I stop at the area's most famous landmark.  
It is early afternoon, July, as I step

from brutal sunshine into dark.  
My teenaged guide, a farm boy from Freedom,  
leads me more than half a mile underground  
on a private tour of the largest gypsum cave

in the world. We pass massive boulders  
of alabaster, all cold to the touch.  
Walls are wet, the narrow path, slick.  
Seepage from the roof feeds a small stream

that meanders through the cavern.  
My guide tells me the brook was once  
a roaring river, two hundred million years ago  
this site was covered by an inland sea.

He points out salamander and raccoon tracks  
in the mud as we hike past Mirror Lake,  
Devil's Bathtub, Echo dome. Strong  
smell of bat guano everywhere from bats hanging

high above our heads. Mid-tour in the deep heart  
of the cave, he flips a switch, turns off every light.  
A dark I have never known before. A sudden  
buzz of terror in the blood, a glimmer

of premonition: I will know this black again.  
Lights back on, my fingers touch  
the handrail with every step.  
My guide relates with a chuckle

how just yesterday his coworkers turned off  
all the lights, unaware he was still in the cave.  
He had to feel his way out, crawling  
on the damp floor. Now he carries a flashlight.

We continue in a corridor of smooth stone.  
In dim light: white gypsum, pink alabaster, pale  
crystals of selenite. At the end of the path,  
finally, a wide mouth of sunlight. Then

meadowlark song, wild bursts  
of Indian blanket, shimmering cottonwoods  
against turquoise sky. And I walk out, dazzled  
by familiar brilliance, into open arms of red earth.

## **Subterranean Red**

(Rothko's *Yellow, Red, Red, 1954*)

the burning bush pauses before entering November maroon cusp  
between love and death any heart's saturation point  
desire advancing retreating nearing  
disappearing three caskets side by side  
I try not to see resolution's silent wait at the end  
of the mind inside and outside of an apple combined  
in one cinnabar bite the day's repeating dream night forever  
coming on late love ardent as maple leaves  
before they detach and fall  
autumn relaying a scarlet message in restless wind in a tumult  
of reckoning all these bittersweet secrets  
there's a red world I've glimpsed it  
but it won't let me in  
foggy memories of terra-cotta hills steep canyons rugged buttes  
how we once sensed outside light through walls of the womb  
faded russet of sorghum fields in early September  
cabernet and chrysanthemums muted ends of endless days  
when I look into the blood-deep river of language  
and all I see there is you



## Ten Seconds After the Gun

A sudden booming of hoof beats  
on bone-dry ground.  
In the Prettyman photo  
shot just past noon, September 16, 1893,  
choking dust flies, kicked up by settlers  
with Eden in their eyes.  
Hell-bent for Oklahoma Territory,  
one-hundred-thousand rush the border  
in buggies, prairie schooners,  
surreys, ox carts,  
on nags, mules, race horses.  
The camera stills  
a fury of horse flesh and heat,  
wild-hearted hope,  
straw hats, sunbonnets, and Stetsons,  
pioneers strewn across  
the Cherokee Outlet,  
eager to scratch the soil,  
for the red-dirt towns to sprout:  
Fairview, Buffalo, Freedom, Lookout.

## Rock Wall

You follow the ghost-worn trail  
through autumn leaves --  
lake waves lapping, low November sun --  
to an old stacked-rock wall.

You are no longer here  
or there. This is another fall.

In the spot where they would meet,  
you reach out  
to touch rough limestone.

Even rocks hold the memory of heat.

## Following the Red Hills Home

The Kansas guide book says turning south here is like entering another world. And it is. Land empties of people. Wind-sculpted hills rise up from the plains. At dusk, Herefords graze beneath an indigo sky. Wild turkeys roam the red canyons. Deer step out from the dark shapes of cedar trees. I've come looking for Flowerpot Mountain, a mesa near Medicine Lodge made legendary by my great-great grandfather, the Pilgrim Bard, who wrote a story about a ghost named Lenora Day he saw one night spent sleepless under the stars here. He believed, as I do, that the imagined is as real as the rest of it. Now I'm chasing ghosts on lonesome roads, looking for that mythical mound. This July night there is a rare blue moon—the second moon in one month. It rises early, glows large and copper in the east. To the west: wild sky—a twilight dance of cloudscape and landscape lit by seething sun. This magical place feels more like home than any place I've ever known. The Bard's spirit haunts these hills where he wrote verse and stories more than a hundred years ago, a buffalo bone picker and poet, alone on the open prairie. But just when I see a mound shaped like an inverted flowerpot, another one comes along, then another. No cars or houses anywhere, darkness moves in, and the red dirt road keeps circling back on itself. I realize I have no idea where I am, who I am, how to get home. I am lost in the Red Hills with only a blue moon to light my way.

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