

# *Crocus*

POEMS

KARIN GOTTSHALL

The background is a dark, textured grey-green with vertical brushstrokes. A bright white, branching, lightning-like pattern flows across the center. A single red dot is positioned in the upper right quadrant. There are several circular bokeh effects in shades of blue and white scattered throughout the scene.

CROCUS

POETS  
OUT LOUD  
PRIZE  
WINNERS

Jean Gallagher  
*This Minute*, 2004

Lee Robinson  
*Hearsay*, 2003

Janet Kaplan  
*The Glazier's Country*, 2002

Robert Thomas  
*Door to Door*, 2001

Julie Sheehan  
*Thaw*, 2000

Jennifer Clarvoe  
*Invisible Tender*, 1999

# CROCUS

Karin Gottshall

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*For my parents, and for Terry*



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*Cairn*: “The Lure of the Exotic”; “Unreliable Clock.”

*Connecticut Review*: “The Grassland.”

*The Gettysburg Review*: “The Alice Experiment.”

*Green Mountains Review*: “Describing the Bliss”; “Roanoke.”

*Greensboro Review*: “Mallards.”

*Hunger Mountain*: “The Otter.”

*Louisville Review*: “The Lost World.”

*Mid-American Review*: “The Ghost”; “Pot Washing at Le Lapin d’Or.”

*New England Review*: “The Revenant”; “Whether.”

*North American Review*: “The Current.”

*Poet Lore*: “The Ministry of Snow.”

*The Red Wheelbarrow*: “Blizzard.”

*Shenandoah*: “Insomnia.”

*The Southern Review*: “At the Window”; “Threshold”; “Our Lady of the Briars.”

*Spoon River Poetry Review*: “A Fable.”

*Tar River Poetry*: “The Ashes”; “Inheritance.”

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I



## The Exile's Tale

The country I come from is far to the north:  
our wedding dresses are lined with wolf's fur and the stars  
are fixed. We share the dwellings of white bears,  
who never wake from their winter sleep,

whose dreams, in the religion of my land, comprise  
the human soul. In my country the snow  
lies as deep as four men are tall, and the fish  
below the ice are the color of meteor-streaks—

it's said they embody a timeless grief. That place  
lies so far north that natural laws are sometimes reversed,  
and careless girls have been known to be released  
from gravity, to float away and be lost forever

among the waiting constellations. We call this  
The Union of Here and There, and though  
it brings sorrow to the mothers, the event is a lucky omen,  
and is celebrated with a feast lasting one hundred days.

The great art of my land is inscribed on ice; its epics  
are recited from the face of the deckle-edged moon.  
The sun appears for just one minute of one day  
each year—only the merest skin of it breaks

over the surface of our horizon, and the occasion  
is pointedly ignored. My land is so far to the north

that our radios pick up nothing but strange, ancient operas  
broadcast from the Pleiades, and our language

has no term for *cold*. For how can you name that which is all  
you've ever known, the substance from which your words  
are cut, in which your shadow resides and your breath  
goes wandering—that of which you are built entirely?

# Threshold

Awake at dawn, I'm looking out  
at a perfect row of tiny handprints  
coming up the walk, pressed

into the dusting of new snow.  
In the pale light I'm still shaking off  
last night's dream, and as I've hoped

for a child I am willing, now, to believe  
that during the night one walked on her hands  
from somewhere beyond

the woodpile, straight to my front door.  
I open it now. There's no sign of her.  
In the grainy spring snow the tracks

are etched precisely: five slim fingers,  
each tipped with a dash for a claw. Dear angel  
of wildness, it's not what I thought,

this evidence of arrival, though I know  
you're fierce and soft and brave.  
The conventions of breakfast await,

and the sun has already reached the pavement  
where your first tracks are lost  
against gray stone. Into the yard I throw

an apple, a corncob, a handful  
of raisins. The landlord wouldn't  
approve of your boldness, or this reward

for the straight, fading path of your paws—  
the way you came right to the threshold  
as if to astonish or entreat me.

## Echo

Now you're bird or sting-fish  
on the monitor, all shockwave and light.  
Heart, I've called you heavy, I've called you  
troubled and hard—oh,

broken. Heart of rain, heart of crushing  
weight and ruin, you bear all the steely  
reckonings of my history,  
mistaken and perilous. I thought

you'd grown weak, alone so long  
in an unlit cavern. How could I  
know your deep electric tunings,  
or the delicacy of your gills? Now I see

you're pure and whole as star-shine. I hear  
your furious strength. Hard-wired,  
by necessity, you sing  
to and through me the dark

and difficult passages of the song's  
complexity—revealed  
and clear-voiced, the purpled timbre  
of your music.

## The Ghost

How many times have I met her (a small,  
reasoning thing)—her face in the frost  
on the window or shrouded by birdsong

in a winter tree where cardinals flicker  
like lamps in the wind? How many times have I  
met her on dusty roads where katydids fret

in the catnip and vetch and the full moon drifts  
like an anchor in the blue sky? This is my ghost's  
sorrow: she says she would comfort me,

show me her wounds. She says the darkness  
is a soft bed. *But the soul.* . . . I say,  
and she smiles. *How to explain to you*

*the nature of the soul.* . . . *Think of a spoon,*  
she says, *an object for the most part utilitarian,*  
*though lovely, your initials engraved on the handle.*

*Who has given you this gift? On what occasion?*  
*For what have you used it? Most important—and let's*  
*say, for the sake of argument, that darkness*

*is all that endures—endures beyond this brief*  
*banquet at which we both partake—where then*  
*would you place such an object, to keep it safe?*

## The Lure of the Exotic

In the archipelago they tell of a boy  
who grew up in a tree—what is there  
to do in a tree, with only the companionship  
of the wind? He read each leaf,

line by line. He handled the surface  
of his every thought like a sharp-cut gem.  
It was almost visible—the crown  
he'd fashioned of them, where it rested

on his brow. And, it's said, in the right  
conditions you could see all the way  
through him—the wandering arteries,  
the sails of his lungs filling

and emptying. On the horizon the mist  
fell and lifted and fell over the currents, sliced  
by the fin of some creature out of legend.  
You can't *live* like that, the islanders

cried, the childless women, like knots,  
loosening at the sight of him. They were right—  
he'd disappeared by the following year.  
They wondered was it worth it: that adventure

of balance in four wide dimensions, the moonlight  
pouring through him, for the strange end  
he'd come to when he stepped down  
toward the cool white-veined blue of the sky.

## The Raspberry Room

It was solid hedge, loops of bramble and thorny as it had to be with its berries thick as bumblebees. It drew blood just to get there, but I was queen of that place, at ten, though the berries shook like fists in the wind, daring anyone to come in. I was trying so hard to love *this* world—real rooms too big and full of worry to comfortably inhabit—but believing I was born to live in that cloistered green bower: the raspberry patch in the back acre of my grandparents' orchard. I was cross-stitched and beaded by its fat, dollmaker's needles. The effort of sliding under the heavy, spiked tangles that tore my clothes and smeared me with juice was rewarded with space, wholly mine, a kind of room out of the crush of the bushes with a canopy of raspberry dagger-leaves and a syrup of sun and birdsong. Hours would pass in the loud buzz of it, blood made it mine—the adventure of that red sting singing down my calves, the place the scratches brought me to: just space enough for a girl to lie down.

## Our Lady of the Briars

At dusk a doe walks the broken-  
tiled hallway, skitters out across  
the kitchen garden's still-defined plot  
overwrought with chicory and wild

carrot. A shadow makes her flinch and bolt,  
while below the hill the far-flung Hudson carves  
its agenda into stone, grinds heavily on—to Bear  
Mountain, then Manhattan. The bats

are soft charcoal against the sky's palette  
of blue and silver and pink. Fruit  
still scents the rambling orchard, its antique  
pears and apples small and sour now,

for the animals alone. Grapevines  
dismantle the brick dormitory; it will take  
another hundred years to level, though the cloister's  
fallen to ruin already, its rubble

a complicated mosaic around the crumbled  
fountain. Its roof put off like a wimple.  
The hushed interior, burnished and storied,  
is held like a face to the darkening, creatured air.

## The Otter

In dreams you're like the otter I saw  
under the bridge one day—where the river is lined  
with shadow-dappled boulders, trees  
drawn up from the bank as if in alarm—or rather,  
you look at me like she did, and I'm looking back  
with the same surprise and sorrow (because I knew  
she would soon slip into the water and away); she looked  
at me for just a few heartbeats—not fear, it seemed, between us,  
so much as recognition, a memory—looked at me  
as you do in dreams: our brown eyes caught  
for a moment between softness and a kind  
of helpless, inevitable forgetting; and then I haven't  
seen you move, I don't hear a splash, but where you were  
there is no one, and the rest of the dream is me  
trying to voice something meaningless but of absolute  
importance (the way, walking back along the gravel track  
I chanted *water, otter, water, otter*, until the chant became  
a plea or prayer), trying to remember how I arrived at the spot  
where you were, and when I realized you were gone.

## I was in bed all day with the sun

and a heavy dictionary.  
I watched the cat fall asleep  
on the woven rug. Outside

a bird unspooled its song in wide,  
round loops: drifting off,  
coming back. Memory is like that—

words loosed like dust motes,  
a dream I slip into: this cat's  
green-eyed mother, her grave

under licorice root and money trees.  
Then come the angels of the afternoon  
with their wings of flame.

One day language will unbind itself  
from me—even to the barest  
particulars: the first time

I heard the word *crocus*, the new  
spring sun on my shoulder, smell  
of mud—quick freshet  
working itself free. At last  
to release this word *I*  
into the long blue currents of the sea.

## Insomnia

You say, *Come, loosen my thoughts  
like a braid undone.* You say, *Give me again  
my secret name.* Listen: the apples of wet snow  
are falling from the moonlit branches.  
You count them, soggy windfall, call them  
Hour Hand and Sour Dawn. Heart  
is beating the night song to the prickle  
of starlight, but there's a racket, far off:  
soldiers, perhaps, pitching their tents  
on the bank of the Canadian lake—  
the one where your grandmother warned you  
to be quiet; smooth water carries voices  
so clearly to the far shore. Once a girl wept all night  
at its sandy strand, and the villagers opposite  
dreamed of their first sorrows. You say,  
*Come, soothe her with your warm hands,  
slip the pine needles from her hair.* The foxes  
are hunting under the willow again—yes,  
they're restless, too, they have her hungry eyes—  
their strong red bodies shift bright  
as morning's banner lifted against the sky.

## Inheritance

During the snowiest winter on record  
my grandpa found that old dresser  
in the woods, in a snow bank, under a white

pine where a blue jay perched cursing  
all day into his kazoo. It was so cold  
the snow slid from the wood like layers of thin

cloth. Good cherry, the drawers still pulled  
smooth, stashed with a squirrel's full  
dowry of acorns. It was carted home

where Grandpa stripped it, stained  
it, stenciled a wild iris on top. All the years  
of my growing up the dresser held

strange treasure: rubber bands, antique  
hardtack, a daguerreotype of the moon. I knew  
one day it would belong to me, like the familial

bad temper, bad back, and unceasing love  
of the difficult. All its heavy burden  
would be mine. *Fine old dresser*, Grandpa

would say, *big, sturdy, that someone left out  
in the snow*. Hands spread, he said: *so sturdy you  
could hitch a horse to it, ride it around the world*.

## Keeping House

For seven years my mother stood  
before a row of wood panels,  
lacquered shiny black, creating  
a Chinese palace scene with oil paint  
and gold leaf. I used to watch her work,  
the careful way she stepped back sometimes,  
her brush in her mouth, to better see

the place where the chrysanthemums  
would go in neat rows, the necessary  
gesture of the boy carrying buckets  
of water. It was an inspiration, to make  
that screen, and most of my childhood  
was spent in its rich presence, its courtiers  
in their silk gowns of rose and green

prominent in my dreams. How beautiful  
they were, how orderly their rooms  
and courtyards. Meanwhile dirty plates  
filled the sink, clothes overflowed  
the hamper, the crack in the kitchen  
window was never fixed,  
the garden went unweeded

and finally all to seed.  
Still my mother calmly painted  
the flute player entertaining the nobles,  
the distant mountains. I always expected

to be like her: to make my balance  
between the grubby leavings  
of the rummage-sale world

and the clean work of the heart. We used  
to laugh hard at the table cluttered  
with records and socks. I wonder  
which of those figures has become my godmother:  
the woman combing her hair on a blue cushion,  
maybe, or the one looking out at the horizon,  
folding her fan. It must have been from them

I learned the sweetness of a cupboard of clean  
bowls, to love folding the clothes  
while the wind blows snow  
against the windows. But it's because of my mother  
that I know why it's called *keeping* house  
—that the art of housework  
is also in knowing what *never*

to clean: the line of footprints in cerulean  
the cat described from the studio to the kitchen  
after he walked across her palette;  
those small, shimmering ovals my fingertips left  
on the banister after I found  
the balsawood box holding the thin,  
breath-blown sheets of gold leaf.

## The Older Man

White-on-white like tumbled  
sheets, the crumpled paper. It was autumn;  
I spent hours sketching the dancers  
in the Degas galleries. Five times  
a day I heard the docent say Degas portrayed  
his dancers, his bathers like unthinking  
animals—but I was in love  
with their arched backs, the blatant pleasures  
and fidgets of the body in use. Your apartment,  
dim and small, was in a neighborhood redolent  
of cinnamon. I was clunky in corduroy  
and wool as you tenderly unwound  
my scarf each night; it seemed your cat  
would never leave off worshipping  
my ankles. You unbuttoned  
my heavy coat, received my load of books,  
and set before me, once, a baked pear—rich  
with brown sugar, sweet  
butter, redundant with spice. I ate it  
ravenously, that exotic food.

## The Talaria

Lovelorn, I'm sketching the ancient marbles  
at the Met when I find that I am capable,  
at least in part, of flight—rising up from myself

and over the bronze armor, glass cases, girls  
in Catholic school uniforms stroking the stone  
calves of Apollo, thinking they're out

of the guard's sight. I am floating  
high above the grave stele of a child kissing  
her doves goodbye—a twenty-five-hundred-year

farewell—and through the columns of daylight  
slanting in from Fifth Avenue, toward the delicate,  
repetitive sculptures of egg-and-dart,

surprised that this domed expanse of limestone  
is broad enough to hold me. The students giggle  
behind their hands and there is an amplitude

in the great hall's echoing—its spaciousness—  
vast enough to inhabit. And that small scrap  
of blue below, still holding her pencil, is me.

I am considering Io: transformed  
by Zeus into a white cow, she scratched her name  
in the sand with a dainty hoof so her father

would know her. What announcement  
can I make to my earth-bound body, skeptical  
of metamorphosis? I must think of the trick,

fix the message to the white page—convince  
the figure ballasted by sadness that joy is a vaulted  
chamber: wide to rise into, musical with whispers.

## Pot Washing at Le Lapin d'Or

Not my first job, but the first time  
I felt the sweat from my hairline  
pool at my collarbone, felt my shoulders

harden to bandy muscle.  
I'd spent my junior year studying French,  
but all that summer my right arm practiced

its broad, native O, circling the rims  
of the tremendous, battered stock pots,  
fry pans, strainers, and double boilers.

First time I felt the steely pride  
of doing the work no one wanted—  
and first time, in all the slop and soreness

of the body's effort I felt beautiful: in cutoffs  
and stained apron, steam curling the wisps  
from my braid, flushing my arms

while I scoured the aluminum salad bowl  
so big I could have curled myself  
into it like the hare in the moon—

but instead set it shining on the drying rack,  
its silver mouth wide, as if surprised  
by our mutual accomplishment.

## A Fable

There was a girl who set out with a tiger  
on a long journey. She'd never before left her home

but he came to her with his startled eyes  
and she left the dishes drying on the wooden rack,

the linens folded in the closet, left her flowered  
dresses and the complicated song of fear

to travel with him among rocks, in meadows of wild iris.  
They walked through the deep pastures and slept

in the wind, on soft grasses. They walked  
and walked, and in the end that's all they had—

they weren't magical beings, they couldn't know  
each others' hearts. Through the loops and arteries

of their clean bodies slid their secret sorrows,  
and in no place in this world could they lay them down—

they loved the sight too much: the snow  
and clear streams, the leaping birds.

||



## The Revenant

The shore road hems a thousand, thousand  
acres of orchards, honey stands and curio shops  
quaint as cross-stitch, and curves past the house

where my grandmother was born—its tumble  
of roses, sturdy square columns, shattered dormers.  
At the headland, Lake Ontario mulls its secrets:

the millennial grit-minerals cast up as smooth  
black stones. Steel gray, the breakers. A resident ghost  
haunts the lighthouse grounds, a widow forever

regarding her inheritance of loss—the shifting waters—  
a myth built on phosphoric night-sightings and sobbing  
winds, the tired, insistent percussion

of this promontory. I will admit I believe in her: a spirit  
culled from the interplay of human grief and weather.  
Standing dizzy and shivering at the pierhead's tip

I won't say this place remembers me, nor  
that I've been here before, even in dreams.  
But I know the specter's ancestral lace, this ornate

veiling of freshwater foam; I understand her dormancies  
and nocturnal visitations. I recognize the pitch  
and plungings—the keening treble of her cry.

## The Bog Body

Cherry-tinted slurry, freshwater snails, mother-of-pearl—for my first kiss I was hip-deep in a slow-running river laced with tannic acid; I took in

the river's lesson of concealment. I thought of the woman from the Danish bog, whose taut remains stretched across a page of my ecology text,

an Iron Age sacrifice given over to the preserving gods of reed and peat. Did I even know I had a body before that kiss broke its boundaries? How vulnerable

we are to passion, to the mud-body's aspirations toward some notion of eternity. And the fens and sphagnum bogs in collusion, keeping their secrets

like mouthed coins. Afterwards I felt heavy, a mail-coat on my skin as if I'd taken up that steel-shot river to wear. Another day

our teacher took us far into the wetlands and we walked a mile or so, tentative, on spongy moss, and then he had us wade a stream—

only an inch deep, he teased, and so it looked, but we sank into the bog's kiss of sediment muck. Laboring in that thick, gritty element I came eye-to-eye

with a squirrel's skull, blasted hollow, clean white  
and spirit-like, resting on the porous ground.

I lifted it, expecting to find the whole structure

of ribs and spinal column, pelvis and leg-bones  
intact, but it was just that floating head,  
a miniature Yorick's comic grin. Watery places

were mystical to the ancients—my vision  
was of myself as mineral puzzle. The bog  
promised a lightless but durable afterlife.

My death began when pleasure announced itself  
and burdened me with weight: ambitions  
built on bone and breath—so tenuously preserved.

## Mallards

The river in our town ran brown as dark coffee,  
but nothing could keep me from its water  
when I snuck through the scrub brush, shattered  
glass and burdock to wade. Same as the ducks, I was  
unmindful of muck water, foam cups in their slime coats  
cached in the space between tree roots, concrete slabs  
upended and sprouting ridged steel rods like feelers.  
I thought they were “my lords”; costumed bridegrooms,  
that flash of emerald, shiver of green and metallic  
shimmer. Princely though common—the townies  
called them beggars, trash birds, threw them junk  
food. To me they embodied *handsome*—that crisp  
neck band a noble distinction. Their noise: raucous  
with rage-calls and mating, clamor, and contagion.  
I was nine and thought myself queenly, ankle-deep  
in the chemical runoff, the suck water draining  
off the agricollege, a ring of those suitors around me  
for my stale crumbs. It was the heartland—  
everything big—the sky phosphoric blue, the bridges  
arching their backs high over the sluiceway,  
the slurry, the unclaimed river of what nobody wanted.

# Whether

Aligned with the mechanism  
whereby the spirit is borne aloft  
through song comes again

the question: whether. And not soothed  
so much as opened by the boy  
soprano's *Sanctus*, what moves

in the mind as the throat constricts  
in sympathy, one note peeled  
from the last, fine as paper slipped

from a garlic bulb, veined,  
translucent, is *whether*—as if  
wound through the spiraling

amplitude, purpled, fretted,  
one voice suspended  
in concentration of prayer or terror

wills itself above faltering,  
more perfect since time must  
soon break it. And made it.

Whether and by whatever impossible  
arrangement of stars, harmonies,  
correspondences through which

the music finds the spirit and like  
a blade slits and releases,  
circulates the question

through the phrase, the delicate  
engine—as if it matters: the song  
rises, everything goes with it.

## Roanoke

Where did I start, to end here—  
this grave of moss and brown beetles,  
my English rose strewn across the curved  
Atlantic? The ark I had built inside my body  
turned out with the tide  
and the sweet voice of Raleigh,  
a whisper from the far coast.

I was not seduced. I sought  
a harbor more brackish,  
a blacker berry, something to stain  
the hands with sacrifice.  
I tell you: all dreams begin with leaving,  
and death is the only arrival.  
It's the island barely visible, stretching itself  
like a fog over the pines of America,  
the shadows of its birds passing slowly over our skins.

My mother's garden  
is blooming across the sea. Tiny sloops  
line the channel, the fishermen  
haul in their loaded nets. The black mud  
of Virginia will take me apart, mineral  
by mineral; what is left is the hard  
journey of our skeletons, the emptied dish  
of my eye pressed firmly to the ground.

## The Riddle

The answer is not an egg, though egg-like  
it has no door. She imagines a church  
from the outside—the windows' stories seamed

with lead—or the little chapel she used to make  
with her fingers. She guesses speckled shell,  
silk lining, a vaulted white hall. Thinks of eggs

gathered in a wire basket—though basket is closer,  
or even wire. A containing vacancy, like the holes  
in the wire weave, something like a weir—

perhaps a net? She's been searching so long,  
the snow falling, each flake lathed and polished;  
she has been primed for precision by ice

and hunger. She thinks of the spaces  
between the flakes, and then of the spaces  
in the flakes themselves—like thresholds

for only the tiniest notion to pass through.  
Surely there is gold. So like an egg. . . .  
And there can be no question it's smooth—

she thinks of brushing lightly the honey-hued  
glass, stroking the glowing robes and crowns,  
the empty, distorting ovals: bubbles

in the cooled and sanctified glaze. Inside  
the secret shines, coalescing in ceremony,  
armored, entire and still. Like an egg: waiting.

## Through and Through Me

Slender—my means that cold  
November when, coming home to Brooklyn  
late from my job, the wind off the bay  
clapped my hands. And tender—almost—  
my recollection of that slight young woman,  
baking a yam to share with the gray cat.  
But it trips me up every time—memory—  
to think she was *me*, and mesmerizing:  
that scene of who I was, refracted down  
through forgotten days. The dry, early snow slants  
perpetually at the glass of those broad  
windows. As it darkens the lamplight shows  
the room reflected in them, and the snow  
seems to be falling in that other room which  
is also full of the ghosts of trees, the lit  
candles of other kitchens. The room warms  
as the radiators bang and the cat waits,  
shifting on his chair. She seems almost  
graceful, the memory-creature.  
She sets down the plates and eats,  
her image in collage with the cat, the trees,  
the snow—glazed in light against black windows.

## Cold Front

Last night  
the weather shifted;  
the winds  
swept the compass  
and the body responded,

like the billowing  
sheers—the loose weave  
of the capillaries  
filling and released.  
When the gale  
entered the tree  
the leaves took it  
entirely, nothing

was held back or denied;  
the body turned  
on its bed,  
sobbing, saying,  
*Life, why won't you hold me . . .*

## Unborn

I've seen the shape  
    of your longing  
by the stone wall,  
    popping with nimble  
  
fingers the packed seedpods  
    of jewelweed. Again  
in the maple, sailing  
    the wind in that tall-masted  
  
vessel. You seek  
    my heat and untried body's  
guesswork; you could  
    come forth from me complete.

At night I lay myself down  
    smooth as water, but I have  
astonishing dreams:  
    you paint scene after scene

of your desire—my long,  
    empty arms—  
and waking I see you  
    in the frightened animals

crossing the road, hear you  
    in the rising insistence  
of the cicada—small  
    sailor of the wheat field,

sailor of air.

## Summer

Overwrought and scented—the woods blare  
like a big pipe organ. Impractical song  
and sun—flamboyant poppies and irises peopling  
the fragrant garden. Impractical indigo  
bunting, flitting on the branch of the scrabbly pine  
like a piece of bright jewelry. Yes, there is a home  
underground—dark enough and we'll indeed  
lie down with the bones of little foxes  
and it will seep through like black ink  
on a butterfly's wing. How conservative, the breaking  
down, the loaming and weaving together of the buried—  
how ornate, the resurrection! Does  
the firm ground appear like heaven, then, to what  
emerges? The shiny bugs are walking the stalks  
as if they were the fabled byways; the long day  
spins out in reckless radiance.

## The Stone

Central Park in autumn, a festival with tents  
and merchants' booths—I walk the wet, curving pavements  
to find the psychic's, cross his palm

with silver. He cups my fingers and closes them  
around a milky stone he says will give me flight—it's cold  
but his skin is soft, he holds my hand and his warmth

travels—his touch a new heat through me. Already, though,  
I've gasped and begun to rise. I feel myself  
lifting from my body like a glove peeled off. Fog

snakes below me through the park; the city's misty exhalation  
recedes with the glint of the ring sellers' stalls. I search  
the miniature crowds for my abandoned form as the bare wind

whips around the banners, the vapor-ribbons of white,  
and I gain altitude over the parti-colored tents, the reservoir,  
distant skyscrapers I always feared to mount,

the Hudson like a long jade arm—all seen through frayed rags  
of the clouds' understory. I've longed for this: solitude, remove,  
but the air chills and I'm breathless and distracted—

that contact before separation, the seer's hand on mine, the heat  
and intimacy, his granite eyes. What's more, I'm worried  
for my body, sweated and childlike, left propped

among the swirling leaves on a wire chair. My descent  
is like a wish withdrawn; the wind an orchestra  
tuning—I drop through the trees, see the psychic still bent

over my hand as I approach my rigid body and press  
against my own blood-filled chest. I dissolve and am restored  
to flesh. One moment more of the clairvoyant's clasp

and I'm released—he's moved on to the next seeker  
and I'm left with only the heat of my own biology  
for comfort, the long gray scarf around my neck.

## Tender

In his shyness my grandfather, awkward  
at child-talk, sent me searching each Sunday for treasure  
among the jewel-bright jars of quince jelly,  
stacks of rim-chipped saucers, and the giant coins

of pie tins in his kitchen cupboards. By means  
of animal crackers, coloring books, and candy bracelets  
his love was silently and incrementally revealed, and I  
became so cunning at the hunt that the hiding places

had to be shifted and rethought: a finger puppet  
cradled in an egg cup, fruit leather between the pages  
of my grandmother's cookbook. Once I found  
a child's ceramic tea set, Blue Willow, nestled

in the napkin drawer, a richness beyond dreaming.  
In my five-year-old heart I cringed at the fragility—hoped  
only to get it home before I broke it. But under the sugar  
bowl's lid was something more: a two-dollar bill,

folded small as a fingertip. The fleur-de-lis of its green  
within the vanilla-white of cheap porcelain, the billowing  
boughs of Chinese trees, doves kissing mid-air,  
was my first cash—it smelled of apples from his orchard

and the cracking leather of his wallet. Money-hungry,  
I thought of blackbirds in singing flight from an opened pie—  
but it was not to be spoken of, the secret currency  
of a reclusive nation: his trust declared, unspendable.

# The Ministry of Snow

The snow having begun, you know  
it will fall all night, stroking  
the house so softly you will

accept the ministry  
of animals: the deep heart  
beats and dreams of cats asleep

beside you. In the kitchen  
the stack of plates, composed  
in the dark cupboard, winks

with a rim of gold. It's the watchfulness  
of grandmothers, that glimmer.  
Loneliness is the price you pay

for loving the snow, just now, more  
than you love the chatter and crises  
of your hungry life. Loneliness

curls around the house like the settling  
of noiseless snow; believe  
in the counsel of drifting, of cold.

## The Ashes

You were carried here by hands  
and now the wind has you: gritty  
as incense, dark sparkles borne

in the shape of blowing,  
this great atmospheric bloom  
spinning under the bridge and expanding—

shape of wind and its pattern  
of shattering. Having sloughed off  
the urn's temporary shape,

there is another of you now—  
tell me which to speak to:  
the one you were, or are, the one who waited

in the ashes for this scattering, or the one  
now added to the already haunted woods,  
the woods that sigh and shift their leaves—

where your mystery billows, then breathes.

## A Walking Tour

The horse barn's been knocked down; the cottage  
I rented on Painted Turtle Pond for two years is abandoned,  
a haven this August day for damselflies, the shrill mosquito.

I used to walk here, my boots crunching through rime frost  
in October, the far-wandering village dogs so gentle they must  
have grown up reading Dickens. The landlady

filled the old manor with antiques, tiles  
from France painted with birds so lovely my eyes  
stung; she made honey and goat's

cheese, but the house is empty now. For how  
long? In the graveyard the crickets assert themselves; it's time  
someone set the stones right, though they're worn

smooth, illegible. Shaker Hill Road  
was almost impassable by December, its haunted houses  
entrusted to their caretaker-ghosts and the quiet,

resourceful deer. Difficult even by late November—the path  
to the creek—but the Catskills  
were laid out on the horizon like the folded hands

of a kind grandfather, and the horse farm was covered  
with white, where the horses *lived*—paced  
their long and weather-rich days on the sloping acres.

## The Lost World

The state-of-the-art animatronic T-Rex  
hits the harbor like a typhoon,  
takes out warehouse walls,  
city buses, bites a man in half

like I would eat a Vlasic pickle. Later,  
in grainy black and white, my recurring dream  
of apocalypse: dark, heavy snow falls for days  
and when it melts the ground

goes right ahead and melts, too, and there is not  
an island, not a speck  
of land for refuge—and then  
we all go down. She went down, once,

the small girl I was, to the rim of the hot  
tide beside the sea's countless gas-  
lit ballrooms. The Aztecs believed butterflies  
were the returned spirits of warriors

killed in battle; if I could  
believe it, if I could believe anything  
so much as *remains*. How do I break  
it to the small girl, still ankle-wet

at the edge, that the sun, the sea itself  
is not beyond extinction, the resources  
of her skinny body stacked inside her?  
Shall I say goodbye

now? Because it's lost for good:  
the feast of flowers,  
brontosaurus moving like ships  
through the morning mist. Not to mention

my beginning: those days before I knew how much,  
how keenly, I could miss.







## The Current

Lake Superior wash me smooth  
as the frosted lozenge of beach glass  
I found on the sandspit—worry bead,

charm for luck, bearing the letter A  
in low relief. Wash me clean  
as that origin, whole as the note

rising from the Russian freighter,  
the wind's long vowel.  
Scour me with your ice waves.

As a girl I learned your metals  
by heart: copper from Isle Royale, iron ore  
staining the harbor red. I studied your giant

wolf's head and chanted the puzzle words  
of Keweenaw, Ishpeming, Sault St. Marie.  
I was raised on cold cash and water

heavy with minerals; our tap  
crusted green and faceted as a geode.  
I grew with a weird blood-hunger

for stone-food, déjà vu among horses,  
and the need, irresistible, to enter  
perilous currents. Accept my return.

City on the hill, smokestacks  
of Duluth, bear witness—water wear  
me back to my beginning.

## The Alice Experiment

Alice Liddell, seven, is costumed  
as “The Beggar Maid,” posed  
in the Deanery garden’s mossy corner  
at Christ Church, rags slipping

from her slim shoulder, eyes fixing  
the camera assuredly. Her right hand’s  
cupped, not quite in supplication, close  
to her waist. The left’s balled,

a tight fist at her hip. Facing page: Alice  
in her best gown, same wall, its ivy  
a living frame for the girl in her flounced  
and spotted dress, head tilted down—demurely,

you might think, except her eyes,  
in soft focus, regard the photographer  
with a certain shrewdness. She’s Carroll’s favorite  
model—she knows what she looks like.

\*

At seven I jumped with the neighbor girl  
on her parents’ bed. We chanted

*My Name is Alice and Six Drunken Sailors*  
wearing fringed skirts and flip-flops, the tiny mirrors

on my halter top throwing shimmers  
across the textured ceiling. The forbidden

patch of trees out back was *The Forest*—thick  
with used condoms and beer cans, evidence

and artifacts. The sprawling apartment complex  
where we lived we called *The Castle*.

One day we happened on the hatch  
of its winding crawlspace—the labyrinth

below the brick buildings which we claimed  
as ours, bringing pilfered flashlights and sugar

cigarettes. Once we knew of it, how could we not want  
to travel in the underground spaces

where the super had to stoop and grunt but we  
could run quick as rabbits among the pipes and wiring?

I remember the crypt-smell of earth, the cobwebs  
like ghost fingers against my cheeks. I remember

being hauled up by the collar, spitting curses.

\*

Of course we never  
adventured alone:  
there were stray cats  
who followed for bits

of meat or kindness,  
and our imaginary friends,  
half-animal too.

We could see them,

trailing us in the dim light,  
royal and bejeweled,  
but murderous pirates  
nonetheless—blades

between their teeth.  
And once I found  
the skeleton of a mouse,  
paper-white and curled

as if in sleep, delicate.  
Its spirit, I feared, slipped,  
on little mouse feet, into  
the dark hollow of my ear.

\*

Julia Margaret Cameron photographed  
her child-subjects as tousle-haired cherubs, angels  
of the Annunciation, in nativity scenes,  
allegories: “Goodness” and “Grief.” She posed  
Alice, twenty and ever the Greek scholar’s daughter,  
as Ceres. The young woman stares intensely  
from a shower of greenery; she’s long since  
fallen out with Carroll. In another picture  
she’s Agnes, patron saint of girls,  
who, at 13, was ridiculed for her faith  
and made to strip in a brothel. Accounts vary  
on the manner of her death—she may  
have been burnt at the stake, beheaded,  
or stabbed through the throat. On her feast day,  
the folk wisdom goes, *say a Paternoster, stick a pin  
in your sleeve and you will dream of the one you will marry.*

\*

My mother said if I tried very hard  
I might remember my previous life,  
having so recently left it. It was easier  
to recall what had come between;  
when I closed my eyes I could still hear  
the pulsing hum of the Bardo,  
where I'd seen the possibilities, and chosen.  
I was taken to Disney's "Alice."  
Afterward I dreamed in cartoon—I liked  
to be solid like that, to have no  
inside. The neighbor girl had a jack-in-the-box  
from which the Caterpillar popped with his hookah,  
asking the question "*Who are you?*"  
I had a doll of the Cheshire Cat—his teeth  
glowed in the dark. In my dreams  
I heard his gravelly voice, between a growl  
and a purr, whispering "*we're all mad here . . .*"

\*

The neighbors I remember: the girl of course,  
and her mother, a sculptor of marble. Piece by piece  
  
her women emerged from stone. There was the cop  
who showed me his gun, which I coveted  
  
until I learned he'd tried to shoot  
the stray cat Dad rescued for our pet. Pregnant  
  
and not yet full-grown she'd wandered the hallways,  
howling for food and love. College kids  
  
offered me sips of beer and tokes of weed—I felt  
welcome anywhere I didn't get thrown out of.

The white-haired lady who saw me by the swimming  
pool pretending to be Dorothy, dragging a stuffed dog

on a piece of yarn, thought I was someone else—  
“Mary Ann, Mary Ann,” she kept calling, “get over here,

Mary Ann.” And there was the guy downstairs  
who gave out spider rings at Halloween and took

my photograph as Peter Pan next to his color TV. The picture  
scared me—my eyes sparked red malice in the flash.

\*

Xie Kitchin stands erect in the page’s costume—Viola  
disguised as Cesario—her hand at her waist,  
mouth and eyes set, serious. Who told her  
that’s the look a boy wears? In “Penitence”  
Carroll has cornered her like Alice in the garden,  
her nightgown trailing and her fingers laced, not quite in  
prayer.

It wasn’t unusual for Victorian children to be photographed  
kissing chastely, but Cameron pressed her tiny subjects  
together,

open mouthed, and titled the albumen print “Turtle Doves.”

Of her peculiar gaze and focus she said, *when I saw  
something that to my eye was very beautiful I stopped there.*

Carroll himself recalled that he sent Alice straight off  
down the rabbit hole, *without the least idea  
what was to happen afterwards.*

\*

I had a Red Riding Hood doll whose skirt  
could be flipped to get the grandmother;  
pull Granny’s bonnet over her face

and the wolf appeared. There's no comfort  
or repose in a thing so violently divided,  
but it exerts a kind of reckless magic.

Hadn't the neighbor girl said she could see my heart  
through the skin of my chest? Hadn't I grown a foot  
and didn't my body ache with a life so forceful

it was practically immortality? I had  
long rambles underground with the cat,  
whose habit was to lure me deep

into the tunnels, then wink and disappear.  
All the spirits of small things drew near,  
whispering their dry, insistent warnings,

but I was Defiance herself—going all the way in.

## Blizzard

This is the snow you've read about in stories,  
where the magic bear emerges from the wood  
to carry the girl on his broad back. Gossamer,

you might call the blizzard, hung in air like a rack  
of gowns, only gossamer means "goose of summer,"  
and this is midwinter and the only thing stitching

its way through these clouds-come-to-ground is a trio  
of crows—the wind pushing them higher  
than their course. Tulle, then, in bolts and bolts, veils

in tight arrangement upon the crocuses  
that needled up during last week's thaw,  
against the foreheads of the peaked Victorians

across the street; think of the dresses they wore,  
stiff white satin tight at the bodice,  
the circle of pearls—the trees wear that now.

Better to be indoors, where it just glazes  
the window-glass, and simply imagine the slow  
embroidery of lace and beadwork across the lake's

breast. Nothing tames a person more completely  
than magic—isn't that what the folktales  
teach? Watch, then: the stubborn birds

are dressing themselves in the light, cold fabric  
of the storm and the bear rambles the city,  
white as this draped shawl of whitest snow.

## Let's hold it again to the light:

the memory of the glow and fire  
of the glassblower's studio  
where we stood during the full scumble  
of a winter storm, watched him gather  
the molten glass to the blowpipe  
and work it while the heat of that furnace  
flushed our faces, so happy  
in our new love. Since memory's heavy  
detritus is so much slush and slag, the old  
unfulfilled joys we wake  
clutching after, let's claim it completely—  
the vase we watched formed  
from the dry, hot air and red,  
as later you traced the line from wrist  
to shoulder to crown, chasing that  
heat and contact, held and gathered,  
saying yes—we can make something finally  
out of emptiness and breath.

## The Creation of Rain

There is something in rain that drives me  
to weep as well. One could  
say the weather is a woman, combing  
long hair, or weather is the trying on  
of fabrics: silks and velvet, rough wool,  
today's thick canvas. All one long winter

I watched from my window: the same  
street, grubby houses, the same man  
on a bike towing a shopping cart full  
of heavy parts—gears and pulleys—  
that daily rattling. Under the flyaway  
sky his scraps could have been the props

of weather: levers to hitch the cloud-  
cover, tip the sleet's canisters. There is that  
in weeping which cannot help but make  
us think of weather. Shadows  
of clouds against the mountain's brow,  
those grays and umbers and under

the colors the making of color,  
the light of this rain and its making, the metal  
of thunder, the split and steaming clouds.  
I did not see before how well it fit me here,  
how much I loved it: the weather slipping  
me on like a costume, shrugging me off.

## Despite Myself

In high school I wore  
the standard uniform: sadness.  
I remember the woods stretching  
on and on, deer

walking the grounds like wise,  
sensitive students. I remember  
the gray light of a winter dawn,  
my first love's arms—the body

with its hungers and vulnerability,  
the clearing misted  
with dragon's breath. That boy  
played the same three records

over and over. I remember  
his betrayals, the way I thought  
his brilliance and beauty justified  
any cruelty. I told him

I was afraid I'd die of wanting him,  
and I remember the scent  
of March rain on his wool jacket, the smoke  
stubbed out at his foot. I remember

waking up, one night, from laughing  
in my sleep, despite myself,

despite *the burden of terrible sorrow*,  
as I took to calling it: what I thought

I would carry away  
through those trees and bear forever.

## Unreliable Clock

What if I opened you up, held  
your wheels and hands, applied  
balm or tinctures? You must be  
a relation of mine—so maddening,  
yet strangely loveable—and you make  
a kind of sense to me. If I could see  
your quirks and workings,  
maybe I could even tell the time by you. Once  
people lived without clocks; monks  
told the length of an earthquake  
by the number of *Ave Marias* said  
during it. You are like that, only with you  
it's hours that are disasters. You tick them  
very slowly, trying to stay calm. Sometimes  
they are so bad you tick them fast to be done  
with them. Even the dog knows you're  
unreliable (he's heard me cursing you, he  
presses his nose hard against your face)—  
but I could argue that you're lovely, and merely  
unsettled—jumbled, like wind chimes: tolling  
as best you can the complicated hours.

## The Grassland

I keep returning  
to where I am not remembered:

into the wind, among the long  
cells of timothy and the thousand,

thousand grasses. The river doesn't  
recall me, forgets my baptisms and slow

crossings against the hard current.  
Sleep remembers me

no better, but convinces me  
I can float from my skin

like a thought released.  
Thoughts don't remember me—

they hang content as bats  
under the eaves of the barn.

The bees keep no record of me,  
nor do books—though from the time

I was small it comforted me to hold  
my two hands in the shape of an opened book,

as if I could catch the world there  
and read it from my own pages. The world

has no recollection of me—its indifference is plain  
and holy. I've watched sorrow pass

through me and on like torrential rain;  
I've seen the wind carry away smoke, and seeds,

and long strands of silver from my hair.

## At the Window

From here, the slender birch  
beside the pond looks like a young girl  
in white, contemplating the water.  
The morning sun, shadows

and silver across the surface seem  
to be white swans, drifting.  
Something about the angle and intensity  
of light in this valley

makes them so convincing—every morning  
I go to the window with my cup,  
still groggy, believe my eyes before  
I remember it's just the tree and light-sparkled

pond muck. And there's something of surrender  
in that repeated mistake, the welcome play  
of the senses before awareness—is it possible  
I've been wrong about everything?

On the surface there still floats  
an image at once beautiful and clear, as the tree  
bends before the breeze, throws white-sleeved arms  
out to the weightless and gleaming birds.

## Describing the Bliss

It's not like peace, it's wilder, because my friend  
had to take me in his arms and rock a long time  
when he felt it, sounding some low, whole tone

in his throat, fully knowing we'd be sad again  
and not caring; bliss is reckless that way. It's when  
I dropped a whole handful of silverware

and the sharp spines of forks, knives clattered  
with the simple significance of calcium—  
silver minnows, their heads pointing in all directions.

It's the face of Christ on the back of a baking pan  
and holy, holy, all my dreams have come true  
and something low and large chimes around my ears

when I sleep. The living Buddhas of Tibet  
are collecting white cloth for a flying machine  
and the strange music of the stock market goes on

in its secret language. Our singular lives,  
our singular deaths board the ark like animals,  
two by two and we belong there—when we feel

the bliss it is because the world  
has taken us inside its planed  
and star-flanked hull, and we belong there.

