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
For my parents, and for Terry
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Greensboro Review: “Mallards.”
Hunger Mountain: “The Otter.”
Louisville Review: “The Lost World.”
Mid-American Review: “The Ghost”; “Pot Washing at Le Lapin d’Or.”
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Shenandoah: “Insomnia.”
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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 agricole, 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, fitting 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, sweatered 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,
brontosaurs 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.