

Washington University in St. Louis  
**Washington University Open Scholarship**

---

Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Arts & Sciences

---

Spring 5-18-2017

# GOD BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD NO EXCEPTIONS

Claire Askew

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds](http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds)



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Askew, Claire, "GOD BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD NO EXCEPTIONS" (2017). *Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1050.

[http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds/1050](http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1050)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Sciences at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS  
Department of English  
Writing Program

GOD BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD NO EXCEPTIONS

by Claire Askew

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2017

St. Louis, Missouri

© 2017, Claire Askew

## Table of Contents

*Acknowledgments... iv*

Sunglass ... 2

Witness ... 3

Requited ... 4

Other Tongue ... 5

Faith ... 6

Territorial Orbit ... 7

The Atoms of It ... 8

Which Mountains and Dissolves ... 9

Same Neighborhood ... 12

Alice ... 13

Surely ... 14

Descent ... 15

Fun for the Shut-in ... 16

The Novitiate Begins ... 17

Economy of Perception ... 18

How to Fill the Blank ... 19

Absence and Outline ... 21

Nameless ... 26

Another Standoff with the Thalamus ... 27

The Input ... 28

Guardenia ... 29

GOD BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD NO EXCEPTIONS ... 30

At that age even pronouns belonged to Eros ... 31

The Partygoers ... 32

Salt Float ...	35
Paper Cutter ...	36
Empathogenic ...	37
Postcards from Strasbourg ...	38
Back to Ongoing ...	39
Five Quadrant City ...	40
Sonar ...	41
Endemic ...	43
Intertext ...	44
Blind Date with the Anointed ...	45
Taizé ...	46

## **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to thank Washington University in St. Louis for its generous financial support. I'd also like to thank my family, all my families. I wish especially to thank Sarah and Jim Askew, Alex Selby, Margaret and Camden Hanzlick-Burton, Kit Lascher, Theta Waves, Alea Shurmantine, Laura Houlberg, Miriam Karraker, Seth Blum, Hannah and Opal Kesling, Melina Gandara, Kayla Aronson, Travis Gatewood, Matridarshana Lamb, Jerry Harp, and Mary Szybist.

Thank you to everyone at Washington University in St. Louis and in the surrounding community. I wish especially to thank Emily Pittinos, Eric Stiefel, Caroline Kessler, Bailey Spencer, Mary Jo Bang, Carl Phillips, and francine j. harris.

*Claire Askew*

*Washington University*

*May 2017*

“[I]t is not sustainable, for the soul is not piecemeal. We are left with this paradox: only by hearing the farthest call of consciousness can we hear the call of ordinary life, but only by claiming the most mundane and jangling details of our lives can that rare and ulterior music of the soul merge with what Seamus Heaney calls 'the music of what happens.'”  
– Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

“A goose, alone, I suppose, can know the loneliness of geese”  
– Joanna Newsom, “Goose Eggs”

## Sunglass

It all started with the materials available – plastic of a giddy pink, faux chrome nodules, screws so small they're installed magnetically. The mention of happiness. The tantalizing asymmetry a perfect double would necessarily set off. Nero's Rome in a landfill even long after. If these things could combine, what would that mean for the fog that a kind of complacent apathy calls up? Exposed bones will bleach and all particularities will erase. So if you could cast this back intact, what couldn't you do? Ninety three million miles of heat minus one's individual eyesight. I thought about how the argument could be extended. Hang a block of wood in your house and all the peace of deciduous specificity will settle even under your couch and its dusty whatevers. Pay so much for that showerhead you're ashamed until with closed eyes you wash in a geyser. Anything elemental can be composed of particular substitutes. The trouble is how the real thing gets stomped out of you, comes razoring back. In little things and big: hum of a strange machine measuring presence or frequency or just looking for wires; cave-webbed country where he stretches me out. In all of these the water or salt, the fruit. The light not to turn from. My obsession with reclaimed blood became a kind of visual anemia. Everything's outline throbbed. I didn't have to squint. I looked directly at it.

## Witness

Trust is already a negative space  
not to mention what is meant vs. said  
held assumed and I bonemarrow know  
long under any word itself or sense of it –  
day, want, God –  
there's both me and the with-me  
in the most stupid futile things  
preening and filth still some blindbright good  
of being seen alone and fully –  
every move was and goes towards that  
place of no observation but a singular audience,  
audient the one and only who hears the all of all

I can stretch the fact of a sound to that,  
make it echo and thicken, cut off or go on long after it stops  
in my ears. I can take the sunburnt flowers splayed on the parking lot fence  
whose names I don't know, make them signify in the same direction  
as the times on earth I thought effort was glory enough.  
Belief in belief. A territory marked by depth of want alone.  
I can pry the name off and the bare sacredness stands.  
There is a sum total that is regardless of its place  
in a book, on a gold record,  
in an intention one lets rot on the vine.  
I don't care for cosmogenesis. The world is. Below idea I know that  
lantern-jawed witness, the masterless nasty adorer of the whole  
drop of life anywhere. What I name it points me  
out beyond it, breath by inborn burn for breath

## Required

Chest up and curled shoulders back under a snowgambling pink night that makes all under it sharper, cold trees in the ground around asphalt, dull boots that carry me towards them through clean bitter air that isolates, holds the sound of the space-clearing night I walk through, as if the almost-silence were what brought blood to skin's surface, as if the whole expanse from ground to sky were a small room, dream-familiar and still bound by laws in the way that theories are theories, January anywhere not indefinitely safe but the lip-colored clouds quiet over me allowing an openness: belief that any belief can be hollow and yet fly, a long marriage, a God, a way of admiring the frost blooming in the corners as a broad winter motion touches the land entirely

## Other Tongue

The pre-encoded answer is the set body aloft on waves not unlike an unhabituated high: shoulder blades, a hammock suspended from the rhythmic skull. The beast kept some green terror, settled the remainder over either side of the sweet foot-to-crown echo of its burrows. Any, all. The years after the lake, the date of assault, the sleep arced over the day of the vertical thrill rides. Even bacteria remember. Even the sleep-familiar long-beloved sets it off. What was lived over builds nerves just to conceal and strum them. How naturally the body makes strange motion in response to these recurrent aberrations. Inner ear or essential self. All keeps the pulse through its own fluid border. The reflex is deep as pleasure or refusal of toxins for a machine that flings a body through the air, safely, a freefall gentled at the end. The perfect circle of abandonment. Hum of a trap. The beat carries out past its measure.

## Faith

Thin threads still adhere. Even a light hold lasts  
and returns. Fixes, even in the sense of vision only.  
Any tenacious afterimage turned aftertaste turning space  
around an absence is still a direct result. There are cells  
in the brain that persisted through time solely to mirror  
the others of one's own kind, the experiences that the neurons try  
to extract from the idea, the sight, the word on the mind's alert tongue.  
A reflection affixed to some real no matter how  
many times it gets thrown back and back between.  
An encounter that occurred in the world as long as the thought  
of it did. A name spoken from the same mouth with which one drinks and sings,  
gives adoration, chews to a frayed border.  
Any heldness creates its enfolder. Any burn its source.  
One was right all along. Nothing's only one. Nothing's ever stopped  
singing itself bloody for the smallest trace of the whole.  
Anything that flows has the properties of liquid  
and goes towards its common level.

## Territorial Orbit

it was like trees seen from a fast distance  
with a few gasps of light between them  
flickering green to gold

what colors you draw out in me  
froth up from raw pigment  
slick of clear oil knifed through

bolts of honey in the air the distance  
made more miraculous, how little it gave of them  
whether miser or guard, a rarification

now a parallel, a direct look at the center  
I arch up to you closer root-met  
ache for a constellation where none had been

the expanse it told of and only darted  
the sun through the few thin spaces able to hold  
it and pull it through into flash of fire

I have met you out on that field where  
I have met so few full and even  
at its edges, further than the looking in  
the same direction toward the godfaced light

whatever there is on this earth I want with you

higher up than the tapering branches bending  
in towards the core

all is all, you, this only, fit and make full the way  
a holy thing holds its own origin

The Atoms of It

fine cirrus caught in copper light that burns all it touches  
and all that touches it even through individual sight

dailiness functions similarly to the superficial cut on the fingertip  
that one tries to brush off, believing it a stray hair

still a deep lung draw makes its own space, any sit-bones litany sings  
no dumb and day-frayed pettiness stops it happening

*I don't \_\_\_\_\_ but I \_\_\_\_\_ [in  
among] what makes me want to*

rock salt left on the walkway, the light scraped clean  
on the first warm day of the year, the thought of no abandonment

to reject an old way can feel safer and certain but the sound forces out regardless  
to recheck is worn but keeps one contained and uncoiling both

a cloud expands to take up the space it's given  
and certain days this includes the mouth and lungs

## Which Mountains and Dissolves

Empty light of moving day  
and how the blank walls grow it  
all possessives put in boxes, sealed  
we miss the last moment the sun hits  
the street sign outside at the exact angle of time  
to color a line from bed to table  
that daily green bolt a never-again now  
this place had two skies  
and cheap carpet that scratched underbody  
in light of the first joined home  
we began and left together, we agreed  
the one window with one angle of only clouds  
or otherwise the parking lot and the three red- green- blue-shingled houses  
and the other with a view of pure oak or one  
of the church spire and the concrete it's set into  
today they are both open with the last fresh air  
we scour this space clean of our years  
trade back and forth the leaving-forever  
internal hurricane while the other takes up the list, the items,  
bitter joy of just pushing through and filling need  
the car gets packed and we had hoped  
to leave at noon but the weight of the move sends spores out  
in the already damp warm top floor air we are trying to leave  
at four the sun betrays us and we close the door,  
drive out of the complex not ours, the city not home  
dazed and the land begins to roil, unsubtle beauty  
that mountains and dissolves into flat forest  
steep trees turning metallic as we try to safely rush  
through the first leg away from this life, no stalling  
to make it to the ocean by nightfall

\*

*The sun had not yet set. Everything was a damp red over the coastal forest and cut-through highway as the light dropped away from its efforts here. Somewhere in the Pacific distance the sun had touched coral, had taken its color and breathed it back into each salt particle aloft in the air's bright circle over the end of the water. The fire had lost. The red that layered each persistent cliffedge evergreen's every needle began to dissolve. Over the road and the broad rocks, the sky it spread itself out into haze, abandoned itself to night. For an instant everything was a pink that had known a sour gold. Individual hue-grains fell apart and away and the air swelled with hot dark. The cliffs split the last light, bled it out over their grass. Slowly all the borders began to unline themselves, to form one blur of being in the dark, one pulse of presence through empty space. Two lights.*

\*

The sense of tide uptakes us even before we know  
how close we've gotten – the way the road defers  
ebbs around existent trees  
we are afterthought and trespass  
in the thick dark, the slow curve  
scarred out between redwoods  
the way we have to speed and slow, wind and bend  
and even the air in our sealed-up entirety  
is green-wet, older than our country  
we have to keep throwing the moon back  
into the hills as we go from home to home  
in the california moonlit forest I feel our last in oregon  
the way I throb with it days after sometimes  
we dig into existence wholebodied each here  
so much smaller than these ancients  
the path they draw for us, the way I know  
the look of you after, damp and gentling, every gradient even clothed  
quiet and only physically delirious I, driving, trite, still revel  
the feeling of a pit that had wanted to come away  
of nectar exposed to air at longest last  
of all the fissures between body and holy  
glow eyes catch us out from the fog  
and the world pulses us through it

\*

*At its deepest point no sound carries. The full volume, all rushes frantically in place, churn of stasis, frenzy of inherited territory. The sound limits, bubbles, proves. Each tree has one who claims it without naming. Has many. Has different laws of motion, of bodies going on their pace through the cedar air. The continuous twigsnap leafbrush rhythm forms both a silence and an electrified grid to catch out intruders, sussures. The ones who belong can alter. Can appear to withdraw entirely. Can layer and layer and layer their living without, if needed, noise. There are two oceans on the edges. One brings air and salt, the other, roar and shock. A visceral wrongness this land's all bodies take up. All takes its root, looks up at the humaning light suspicious.*



## Same Neighborhood

A night walk like any other in cool air, slow loops  
around the streets you know and have lived within long.  
It's like that, like passing a clean house sated with its own good fortune –  
bright paint, the broad lawn mown, the family dog in the driveway  
without its skin. The space is real as salt  
and as bound up in the actual body. Nothing happens.  
Nothing happens so long. Blood, concrete, dark until the flood lights catch you  
out of dream's green syntax. This is real even with the edges shaking  
and the air suddenly staring hard. Real even as the fulcrum of held order breaks  
experience off the logic it had been tied to. Its pieces may be in this dark, or past it,  
or wherever this common is again familiar and not roaring its strange hunger.  
The fear of all of your context falling away as literally as any liquid would, as tied to the slope  
of the earth around. How much more a thing darkens when it's seen.  
Every corner and angle of the dark street sinister and empty of intention.  
Every dead bulb the dull tooth of a purpose abandoned and watching.

Alice

Lately I'm a master cartographer of places I don't want to be. I knew it'd be better to break on my terms than wait on theirs, so all it took was enough nights up to my elbows in gritty technicolor ice cream to buy some good boots & a fake & I got out. Everyone who speaks such frantic hunger & fullbelly thanks recognizes each other no matter how poorly it's spoken, so at first it was easy, & everything was all Kerouac for a while, getting high in the wonderful dirt of the world, wearing all I owned at once, forgetting whatever words I wanted. Thanksgiving at a Popeye's in Vegas & God's birthday burning my fingertips on a hot can in Appalachia. Then one night I was sleeping in a barn with my friends & a kid they knew & woke up to the kid they knew's hand down my pants & I screamed & my friends didn't do anything, so I heard cartilage breaking & then I was running under a new moon with my jeans falling down grimy & the grass slashing at my thighs & I didn't stop running til I met her. She asked me where I was going & I couldn't say, so she did, & it was McDonald's for a bag of fries & a joint in the fluorescent beige bathroom. She got out a palmful of honey from the soap dispenser & washed my hair in the sink. Eyes closed soapsharp & I still saw her, her fingers pale as grassroots after, & that was it. A month or two later she's tilting her head back against my leg, attending to her cigarette with her regal eyes & switchblade smile between inhales. She says she's not getting wrinkles around her lips, not getting marked forever by a bad habit she had young, so she exhales stretching all the muscles of her mouth taut & round as the rings she's teaching me to blow, balancing it with the pinch of her lips as she inhales everything. Everything has its balance & its opposite you need to keep close. Every clean thing the dirt that's waiting for it, every dim hazebox of a rest stop its new white paper towels & lost coins waiting to become fritos & cans of apple juice. Every wonderland its underbelly & bottomless way out.

Surely

You have your wipers on too fast for how much it's actually raining  
the other drivers are judging you and your inability to gauge your surroundings  
because you can't estimate rainfall accurately they'll all know  
you have an addictive personality and no job

If you say the wrong thing once that's all anyone will remember  
you can't feel anything strongly enough to make it so

It won't matter how solid the foundation  
seemed your heart is an idiot  
this house will collapse around you

The other drivers don't realize that crying while driving is a great American pastime  
the bolt of silence when you pass under a bridge in a storm isn't holy

You can't just throw holy around like that and go collecting what you like

No one has ever gotten over losing anything they had

When you're woken up too early because everything is vibrating blue dawn traffic  
every driver of every rumbling tire is trying to destroy your sleep specifically

Everything has been named already

This is the only brain that will ever fit you

## Descent

To keep the pressure from breaking you  
say an incantation against the weight  
of one earth atmosphere for every thirty feet of ocean

*bathymetric, abyssopelagic, luciferin*  
imagine this protects you, pulls you down

say an incantation against the cold salt  
where there's never sun nothing grows  
and every creature who lives this low is a demon

*dragonfish, viperfish, bristlemouth, rat-trap*  
and like a demon will consume whatever it finds

where there's never sun nothing grows  
but the wallless mouths and expanding guts  
of predators floating still in the dark you drift through

you too have adapted no scales, scant border,  
and go instinctively towards light

but the wallless mouths of the earthlings here  
open around prey twice their size  
drops of light in the fangtooth dark

cells open around each other under the skin here  
bacteria writhing to a glow  
as if remembering this is where living began

## Fun for the Shut-In

In my house with no walls  
only picture windows and a screen door  
even inside I am always out running  
through the forest, past the lake

Only picture windows and the screen door  
know how to make the wind sing my other name  
through the forest, past the lake  
rippling with my footfalls

Knowing how to make the wind sing my other name  
the long hallway only gets longer  
rippling with my footfalls  
and the leaf-rustle sound of my breath

The long hallway only gets longer  
enamored of me, armor for me  
with the leaf-rustle sound of my breath  
I fall back into myself

Enamored of me, armor for me  
that door will only open once  
I fall back into myself  
and build another room

That door will only open once  
even inside I am always out running  
and building another room  
in my house with no walls

## The Novitiate Begins

Air in the summer Ozarks is gaseous sap that somehow became a layer of clean sweat that bound one in, that one carried from the lake to worship and then at last to a two-minute shower and dark cabin, the single dusty lightbulb and nine other girls each so much more full of physical grace or more wholly filled with the ease of long salvation I needed to show I felt. Every year they gave us each a notecard on the first night apart, said on a scale of one to ten how sure am I if I died tonight that Jesus would know and welcome me and I knew God hated my nine more each year, that I had betrayed the universe in just one degree of not-enough. The unscrubbable glow of what-if. They were kids, too, college, but demigods then. We all want our way to be the one, or the least distant from a reason for everything, intentioned or not. What matter your own mind if God did not ever stop his judgment, if the structure never stopped its assertion? Even alone in my thin night bunk there was nothing I could overhear in me that hadn't been already heard and put into its one of two camps. Prayer and thought just a matter of address. I was eight, I was fourteen, I was so quick to pretend to ask questions whose answers I had already learned and really wanted to show I knew – *so it's okay to hate Satan, right, just not anyone else? That's right.* The polished display of the filth. Then each summer they corralled us and a young man in a thorn crown came up the gravel hill. The blonde counselors spat on him, pretended to hammer through his veins, his hardbreathing body fixed to the cross. The first longhair I thought I belonged to without my knowing it, getting up from my folded seat to sob upright into the arms of Xenia the friend I lost to time, *we're so bad we're so bad and he did that anyway* and years later what I keep is the constant scan for pre-destruction and to never be lacking in  
zeal

## Economy of Perception

A binary is unideal but can help one demarcate  
a territory and haggle a way through it

I thought I saw a new idea fallen on the sidewalk –  
upon inspection, only some shiny candy wrapper discarded

a means is no end without its symbols, the quality of their graft into meaning  
as lasting as the metallic smell on the fingertips which implicates you in the business

there are no limitations to the pleasures which can be wound up  
tightly, used to get the good meaning to inhabit more fully quickly more all

call the young evening light liquid assets as it burns a hole through  
cumulus and an outline of repeated motion on the same rods and cones

the strange coins left in the street that, small as they are, trip up  
perception going on its own steady splayed-out feet

that currency exists, that idea of a mint one could break into since  
what could be built of only the unknowingly-dropped?

would give anything, bind any amount of value  
to command it otherwise

## How to Fill the Blank

1. Even when the moon is down to an edge  
the whole of it is visible. Walk under it, or with a cutout sun  
or just a bluewhite wash where nimbostratus and absence  
trade places. Walk heel to toe away from the back door  
used as a front, as all the bones balance the weight between them.  
No music, no plan. Go forward in the direction forward seems to be.

2. Be able to magnify the smallest interaction  
*I made you echinacea and the lung blend both  
for the maximum, you know, the source and system*  
to permanence. Still wander down alternatives.  
Any possible branch goes down with its wet core to the roots  
the dirt and dead leaves only nourish.  
Count up every green offshoot. The act of seeking  
draws them out closer to air.

3. A bird flies out of the candle stub on the kitchen table,  
the wax-green presence holds and the dark unnamed reflection  
cuts across the glass. See how it all appears to happen  
on the same plane. The tree in the yard in the glass on the knees.  
Learn to peel apart and collapse the layers until it's play,  
until prayer, until a foot on the ground is a part of singular history.

4. When it comes up that there's an extent of happiness  
that sets the blood to jingling its light metals,  
believe it without turning hound for the source.  
Believe the crazy origins, the multiple universes,  
the world where the letter is intercepted, where the words are kept throat,  
the world where a particular needle of joy goes unthreaded  
*I think it's a glorious middle finger that absolute love  
throws to all the bitter workings that want to think they matter*  
where there is no burst of wild laughter years after the fact  
but in this actual visceral present-tense there is.

5. Imagine the salt dress dragged out of the distant water —  
the fabric once stems in the wind, the crystals with their sheets  
of angled grainwise curve. Start to see anything worn  
as having required years and the moon. Every bond made  
persists in the fact of existence. Every howling is one less,  
one closer to the end of noise. One shred of good faith  
tossed into the dark cavern goes unseen and accumulates.



## Absence and Outline

The sound it makes when a child stops believing in God, or a loving God, or whatever else they held to first. Wind over the abandoned field. Cry of the first thread breaking. Sound of roots. Staircase friendship of half-plotted conversations. Polluted sun. The tremor into quake of good reclaiming its own. The grainy spark for the first cigarette after a long faith let down or let go. Every yes and good no simultaneously. Thrum of the needed book meeting hands at last. Resonant vindication. Forest breath. The tone struck from eye contact when both come at once. Night drive of the road throat. Gender song. Creak of the jerry-rigged care. An entity who sings I don't exist, and I adore you, and you wouldn't need me if I did.

Raw tentative wonder. Lonely piano. The absence establishes itself, then becomes space as the tone pulses in through it. Just enough to give a thin thread to be reached toward. The first second the sound seems abandoned in being, the instant it falls, it's taken up again, washed over, left gently unto itself. The distance grows until anything in it is large in its occupying largeness. It breathes and holds. The space swells until two instruments are three and one and zero and every kind of music flees the cold white noise of a human core.

One instant you're on a bus, you look outward and want to rest your head on the window but think of the vibrations, or you grip a wheel exhausted under ignorant stars. On the next beat you are there and gone and all. The wire you didn't know had been installed in you goes slowly taut and lifts you out of your particular space, out of the permanent vector of time. It is a way to float without yet leaving the body. To feel yourself a sovereign blank, hollow self all-bound, an absolutely nothing scrap of a mind and too great to begin to know. One switch flipped. One life let out. Specificity comes back to claim you but that wire pierces and pulls you free. The sound of it never stops singing.

It seems some low horn takes it up, gives back the breath, moans its way to honor. Piano strings resplendent, a conscious symphony. Grand processions and fanfares, deep red drums, a canyon of bells. But no. There are none of these. There are just the unidentifiable woodwinds that sweep over the same thin rhythm and turn it out into tender distance. Space to sound out. To break. To say go away, I need more room for you not to be in.

Call it smallmindedness or wrong focus, cotton wool of dailiness stretched over the pin-light source, lack of faith, lack-of. What matters is a sudden flood fills the blank completely. Nothing sacred needs perception. One is regal and worthless at once. Not porous, the opposite. Filled with emptiness itself. The situation is irrelevant and is the exact catalyst for what carries that glory, what stings as it cleaves one open. No, you are given music. Given the sense that, god or not, you are pitied and savored and seen wholly, trusted enough to be turned away to your own.

Nameless

Even if only carpet pressing my knees  
and nothing but air against my back  
no hand, no presence, barely any idea

as if to kneel and thank  
whatever its own word is, god

(nothing but the air against my back)  
or not, in any case feels so richly unbordered  
concept in a head unbounded by self

as to feel right here  
even if it's otherwise

or not, in any case holds me so  
even if it's only my desire and idea  
call that space whatever, un- ur- other

I kneel there sometimes  
and only my body is good

even if it's a story, half-remembered mood of a dream  
I forage for lowered there with my breath  
seemingly attached to my mouth, to the skin that senses it

lowered there with my breath  
for once almost quiet  
resistant and at rest

## Another Standoff with the Thalamus

Morning comes hollowed out to burrow in or else set  
the day's coin spinning. I believe in tactile perpetuity.  
I can let the delicious being-in-the-world sluice over me  
but bound to it I walk out into its streets a wrong magnet.  
There is so brutally often some murmur, mechanical growl  
that follows, leaves off, and then goes for blood. Anything can seize –  
a truck backs up, unparsable conversation swells, the necessary  
technology sings the air I breathe with the sound of its function.  
Look how little I can make stop just above my skin no matter  
how I steel it, arrange my workarounds. Look how many edges  
catch the center. I have two calm joys who live with me,  
a room all mine. On earth as it is at home. But the deal requires this constancy —  
the one where I go out and see things and meet people and buy and do and keep  
out at it and speak words in an order and process instantly and react coherently and  
respond correctly and socially triangulate and rightly call formal email strangers *Dear* and  
detect sarcasm and catch the scent of intention and the logic too and intuit properly and  
ignore any exterior TAP TAP TAP but hone in on the interior noise I would sever  
if it weren't so frenzied with sweetness. It doesn't roll off me. I don't want  
it to, not all of it. I want to do the work I love in the space I have  
and not a single factor more. The bargain so hard I build  
a well of it. Comes down to the tangible jettison  
of the non-moment. I stake my day's arc  
on lavender oil on pulse points,  
a marble sewn into fleece  
and worried thumb to fingers.  
Too few words. Not spectrum, scopophobe, recluse,  
but they orbit me. Even gravity's theoretical.

## The Input

In another year to be made alive in, there's a machine that measures range  
of temperature as facts pass through the body, the peal of demand  
in numeric frequency, the one renegade gene that tries to unchain order.  
In this one it's less exact. The teeth decide to grind response out at times.  
Skin can grow a seafoam pattern. Other visceral edges manifest ill attention.  
The system gives its own orders to seize and leak, to steal images from the provided  
zoetrope and build a night around them. Dreams seem of another's input.  
One blue premorning it's that the friends try to sort out the Paris métro  
from a cathedral back to the American west. There is a large funeral near,  
the wire knot of a map posted near the dark unisentient crowd, the stone ceilings  
high enough to blur out past perception. The friends must duck out  
and not be seen. There is some shame but only some. Then separation  
once they get under the street level. A bolt of quick gray fear waking  
unlocated. This soft low bed. This sweet ache that could be body or the join –  
one awake and one still asleep beside. I want a view that's floodlit.  
A happy doubt. An exact setting. Directions more accurate than words.

## Guardenia

On the way to Cape Kiwanda that May we passed Guardenia Street  
and how dare the world! What inattention, what personal slight!  
But being as it was between Iris and Hyacinth it stayed with me in the car –

Is the one who names the streets the one who draws them out to sand's edge  
or the one who funded them, or neither? Is the extra u a chance to stretch it out,  
the branch off the branch off the state highway, full of salt light and abbreviated

round sound of the unnecessary letter? But then why have letters. I call you sweet friend  
and your name with the last the long I know the way to pronounce and the first one letter  
off from my love's, I make these sounds at you that mean !far dear same! and we drive

out to the chill grit of north coast air, the loud wind and gray. Anemones in the crags,  
pale green, purple urchins, speckled attenae and limbs in the wet sea dirt, we dart apart  
and climb around, call each other over to look at what we found. The entire Pacific curls

up here, between scabbed or teetering rocks. We sit. This is all we can ever do, observe and  
try to say it, creature or care, the response to the ocean. And why not Guardenia  
on one tiny flag of location, why not the idea of Guard-een-ya, why not every strange certain  
gerund protective in its constancy and clipped end?

White swirls of the actual flower, of its mental image, of the waves on striated rocks,  
of the ability to say anything, to find anyone else at all.

GOD BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD NO EXCEPTIONS

blares a bumper sticker on a sedan in Kansas  
midway through the journey, or almost done, time's gone

and we from the country's edge to live in its center  
speed through drone of wheat and grass, the tan green blue

ooze dotted with too-bright silver, the gray jaws emitting  
rows of pesticide cloud over the fields, and between them one small clear

message some stranger put up, public tattoo, a nod of permanence and claim to reach  
all corners. We pass them too fast to see what they are or say more but

I like that they seem forever and dissolve away with a slick of citrus.

On my first one I was allowed two, and not, under-roof, READ A FUCKING BOOK

like I wanted. Only ever some distant radio, quick snaps, the billboards with words a relief  
after just images of Jesus rising patient-stern from the prairie, Mary and a topheavy fetus.

Little units of abstraction with concrete dust in the air around, pollen or something organic,  
the exhaust petaling up over the letters decided, or the images, or the generic

frame of the vehicle. It feels we live like this always, with the sky too large  
and the space too small and slow. Hours away from days away from the manifest choice.

The pace melts the mind. Instead of caffeine we both narrate the little sigils  
directly at first – COEXIST LAFAYETTE FOOTBALL I Y MY GRANDOG - then

in highway haze interpretation -*I wish my family were robots, then we would be a family of robots,  
even the dog. I'm a serpent, you can't tell me what to do.* One of mine has melted red to white, now's

just CATAN. Once back in the old home I drove for miles behind someone with it too. It's  
included with the game. I didn't see, ask wood for sheep but it was a vague good click

of sameness in the void, however tiny. The fact adheres and turns around such flimsy things.  
Who knows who on earth believes in what or why. Who changes. The messages go out in  
their ways.

Every dull repeated mile is one closer. Every particle of kindness or passion, claim or care,  
released into the world forms a haze as thick as the sudden and actual clouds that roil over  
us in thunder.

At that age even pronouns belonged to Eros

and I wanted each of them, burned to be a nameless agent  
of holy sabotage in the way I first understood it –  
a full adult's *you* I could carry with me alone  
close or habitual enough to a man to claim *him*,  
being the evident *she*. Most often from miles away.  
All the stories too long and specific, but they found me, or I them,  
in that era after cell phones in high school but before the handheld  
moving body. Just the red or green pulse of the small bulb that meant his text  
in my AP Calc. O immediately-deleted jpegs. In those years still at the origin,  
the irrelevant first point of contact, I would have sold my servitude to be seen  
as a person and not a teenage girl, to be taken in by someone who had read  
books I hadn't and who had those lines on the hips whose names I didn't know,  
Adonis belt or, I later learned, cum gutters— in any case  
I didn't have to know what called me to go towards whatever form I found it taking.  
If a grown man from the mountains had bathed in the Ganges, all body  
and wanted to taste me, if some grad student in Jesus sandals traced the outline  
of his hand onto paper and mailed it to me in his old ethics textbook  
(it is not lost on me from here) it meant something corroborative  
to the certain prophet I knew lived in my body. Condemned to the hometown  
they let me practice dissolve, try my hands at striking another life's sparks.  
I had earned a plane to Cambridge and an unencumbered presence,  
had hungered for any jargon I could find. I thought they invented it.  
I thought I could invent only through them, could bend  
my body into emissary not exile, the first and fearless defector.  
It seemed the only difference between *kidnap* and *rescue*  
was whether one had thought of it before, and I had burned myself nearly through.

The Partygoers

gold glow from the kitchen to the fire escape  
the party winds down, stragglers smoke and sever  
back to individual threads. Polite I defer inside

*Oh you must stay, let me finish this cigarette*

low back to brick, invisible seat of gravity  
and balanced weight, transient clouds, just chat  
about who and where we are, why and you  
blow out that mouth a throwaway comment  
about Scorpios — it becomes the air and I say I am, energy  
now the stars and your forearm shudder  
with tendons, burnished skin in the dim light

*Can't think of anything more beautifully human  
than ascribing stories to the arbitrary positions of stars*

only conversation, talk and glance  
at the shape, the cloth, the idea of hips  
unparsable noise two rooms away and us two  
placement, accident, timing and orbital pull  
I don't dare move or look too long  
you seated on steps slightly below, proud neck up  
pulsing with what you tell me lowlit  
such spiraling layers I don't feel until across from me  
your calf extends slightly touches and stays  
we say about the current visible planets  
and go up, the tremor in the metal stairs  
firm curve of you ahead of me  
lean to low brick border  
breath, upward skin, breath

*So why are we up here*

You hold my eye for a beat too long to do anything but

mouth to (of) mine rush

red fact of actuality

real tongue soft you

under and over inward hot breath

hand hip pull pushing tongue

hard center low my center  
of gravity presses towards





## Salt Float

I wash in the corner and don't think of anything  
but my effort not to think anything.  
Not asceticism or prison or other sources of separation.

Just an effort to subtract the senses  
but still amp them up without suffering after.  
White noise and its every equivalent. In the dim warm

anteroom I clean my skin and grease my cuts  
and plug my ears with foam.  
The tank door's already open.

I step in, take the metal handle, pull towards me.  
Closing it above me its weight surprises,  
pushes me back through the water and dark.

The motion opens my hand for me, lets me go.  
I make a wet wave noise that dissolves into quiet.  
The air feels like hands an inch from my skin.

Oh system. Undo. Need nothing, give nothing,  
be silent absent whole not a barking brain track  
in a fit of fear noise, stimuli prowl that must have

kept us safe from sabertooth, from drowning  
in this water so salt-thick it lifts me in my full  
adult weight to nothing, or the idea of nothing

which is almost as good. Almost unbarriered  
and like the first land creature who walked back  
into the ocean until it wasn't walking, wasn't thinking,  
almost remembered being in it, unicellular.

## Paper Cutter

Some not-quite-scimitar hinged onto a grid of plastic centimeters makes a clean bite whether the paper is aligned or mislaid. The microscopically scored edge of its blade tapers to a cut which can tear all into its idea of structure. Handle comes off. I'd be awful in any apocalyptic situation. Assume a generous warning, a quick way to make a medicated brain and a long-herbivorous gut irrelevant. Assume supplies. To tear someone's throat with a knife if I had to, or keep watch alone against the dark, to thank a desperate god for the tendons of vermin raised on acid rain. Think how often a human's died from a small stumble and cut, from a germ and two weeks' time. An intruder, I'd throw this paper cutter open at them and cower. Would lock the door and cut pressed fibers into perfect squares until the moment I needed to leave, or else tear something vital on the way out the window. Even now it stretches past my own doing. All cut as willed, strips or wide berths of color and swirl. I suppose that's part of what made it good out there, the individual needles on gaping miles of dark green trees where there wasn't some sudden mineral-bright mountain. People there knew how to get by after society more, or at least I knew they knew more. Though a devastating earthquake was actually, scientifically due in the next fifty years to cut the continent like this steel and plastic paper cutter, just the western edge off and the end green, though bright, maybe shock. They say it is so close it's *like an eight-and-a-half-month pregnancy*. Though out here I am separated too. Think exile and vacation. Think a dark blue on a far lighter orange. Occasionally it permeates but mostly the divide is sharp and less pleasant than the sound of the fibers cut in a row.

## Empathogenic

I start to play Plague Inc. When I have to wait overlong, I destroy humanity, and after dinner while digesting. My counterpart gets hooked, too, and we sit on the couch and murmur about adaptation, humidity, the benefits of beginning the end in Iceland where there's the greatest concentration of plague-carrying country-leavers, or in India where you've time to evolve before you take on fourteen billion or so lungs, eyes, sets of passageways, here two numbers and a blue pie graph that means disease. You can name it anything. The world's scientists struggle against boogie fever. A sense of communion is spreading rapidly. Anxiety, but you get a jetpack, is killing faster than it's infecting new hosts. Perfect silence dominates all inhabited continents. Implications breed and spiral, spread out in strategized warmth. Early on I got the sense we'd catastrophize well, would meet apocalypse if time declared it so and not sever. We met in a city on a faultline and schedule. It's another ash history year, again. The bloviators reign nominally and beyond, the powers swirl their acrid particles around us, and we laugh, play annihilation, get up to feed the housebeast.

Postcards from Strasbourg

*What misses you* once could still come  
back for you later. Whether you mean  
to wait or track it down is less important  
than how deeply you do whatever it is you do,  
how much juice you let run down your skin.

*I spend a lot of time attuned to:*  
how unlike myself I feel and when,  
whether the day belongs to me or I to it,  
qualities of light, his stories, my lungs,  
the morels and murmuring hens  
in my neighbors' American yards.

*I'm trying to take* what bodily peace I can.  
My veins murmur their favorite chemicals  
like incantations to keep me going up and out.  
A twitch in my eyelid shakes the whole horizon.  
The hair on my legs seeks out as much wind as it can.

*Switching between languages is* habit, now:  
the one I only call back from narrow streets  
where I swallowed butter and laughed out smoke,  
the one I only speak directly to him,  
the one I only speak to people who never  
once touch me or fill me with anything.

*During my time here* I've figured out  
the punchline is *either/or*.  
I'm waiting on the joke.

*Most evenings I can* remember that if  
the only person who seems whole,  
even where I know he's not, holds me,  
if the cat claims me, if I can keep  
choosing one word over all the rest, I can sleep  
and still have things to dream.

*The cathedral* ceiling of low clouds scattered  
still seems to know me better. Alleluia  
for what the grey sky has in common with me.  
Alleluia for what it doesn't.

## Back To Ongoing

What I want and want is a contained space with an absence  
of light and sound. Still touch and consciousness.  
No dream or drug. Just selection. The power to cast

aside, to forbid input. In simplest terms it seems absurd –  
velvet by the yard, industrially-enriched soundproof foam,  
ink on the thumbs scouring for a bunker in some unhighwayed woods.

Priorities. Reveries. The idea's not worth approaching on foot.  
Either the day seems skinned alive to anyone in it or else my blood  
is too alert, too primed for iron. The horrible fluid of an hour

exposed, bleeding out over the needed tasks, and no one else seems to revolt.  
It's just a constant vibration. It's just a too-bright light. It's just the need  
to build an exoskeleton with one hand so with the other I can participate

in my life. I make all motion cloaked, I go assassinate traffic, I am  
a citizen who arrests motorcycles and reverses voices. Let the city fall  
apart, let abandoned pipes and wires distend with seasons, let the growl

of systems stop. This almost happens. Focus and the good  
noise-cancellers, and I can see the emptied calm superimposed  
on frenzy. No, the day has its needs and I the wet mouth  
stuttering to define sweetness without sugar, without want.

## Five Quadrant City

We take Powell east until we get to the extinct volcano park.  
The lot's under construction, so we leave the car at the gaping field  
of the bowling alley lot across the street. A volcano in city limits.  
It's early in the life of our first apartment further in southeast,  
this a first jaunt out, or what feels really out. The sidewalk turns into gravel  
into dirt and the midsummer quiet that's too hot for distinct sound.  
The land slowly warms our calves as it tilts up back.  
No crater. A flat top. We see Mount Hood first, then Scott and St. Helens.  
For a mountain it feels like the prairie. The tall grass around the trail pulsates  
with collected heat, sighs seeds at us. A butterfly made of pale gray dirt  
cuts across. To look at snow on one volcano while we sweat up a slow climb  
through the hot dust of another. Oregon. We find shade to eat our pluots  
and fake turkey sandwiches, read our Murakami and Cohen.  
Someone speeds down the trail in front of us on a single fatly rugged wheel.  
Of course on a place named for the god who married Aphrodite  
would someone attempt a mountain unicycle. Let alone succeed. We walk.

## Sonar

At the very bottom of the ocean most creatures are red and silent  
because at this depth red light and its longest weakest wavelengths

can't reach. To be invisible to predator and prey alike, be red  
or else be eaten. If you live in the thin dry dusting of light on the earth's edge

you have to learn to hide yourself in other ways.

When I was a girl creature I sat at the bottom of the ocean

in the small soundproof testing room at the ear doctor's.

After the little burst of air pushed out by the door's closing tight as a submarine's,

only silence rushed down from all the little holes in the acoustical tile  
and I sank through it.

For a moment, nothing,  
then my heartbeat echolocating

nothing. Then the technician's breath in my ears-

*Okay, Claire, say the word*

dog	dog
cowboy	cowboy
birthday	birthday
ou i	outside?
as a	baseball?

There was something I was meant  
to understand and repeat through that water

some word that glided red away from me even  
as I sensed it underneath the sonar beeps

and artificial wind of measured feedback in my headphones.  
There are so many reasons I prefer silence, days now where I fit

into some idea as tight as the long scar looped behind my left  
ear. Most days there is some element that outpaces another  
something I don't say when I should or hear when I could.  
So antimuch of the ocean has ever known a humankind.

A few things I know I say back at once.

The soft dark hair in an hourglass shape on his chest.

Speeding down I-5 with twilight on all but the very tips of the evergreens.

A cherry stone shot out of my mouth chiming into a porcelain cup.

I am not red. Everything I see sees me and calls my name.



Endemic

for once body forgets its separation

holds

allows excess

salt circle prayer circle circle without need

for definition

saltcut bloodgone stolen out again

rope strain to snap to double

hot skin edge pulse

the lord and all are with

and all all with

hand dig nails gone claws to the beating heart of the world and sweet

all along, all pushes towards and now free

from body and border and embodied laws

claim it all otherwise and all muscle agrees

## Intertext

All of us two is small and cavernous, precise fog and exponential e.g.  
long hours alone in the library basement dazed like degreaser spilled on the plastic overlay.  
Even my headphones die. The words only describe the horrible light caged overhead and  
the Xerox machine pulse. Too much. Then hand to shoulder neck head tilt back to belly,  
low hum about me and how I am, my brain and what am I hungry for, dear lack of  
conditions.

Now even the shelves expand and your hand stays on me, light lignin-scented air, all  
knowledge differentiated by the attempt alone. There's a story where not one of us finds  
another, where any efforts to sort by kindred go number-dull down into some decimals of  
difference. Instead this reality has a word for it. A location. I know this language, I long for  
even the worst parts, I

say you broaden, I claim as absolute good all the books I have not read.  
Even in your context I find the word for illiteracy and plan to sing it all  
my life. I can't know you. I can't make myself known. The letters stay  
lowercase but I read them as if each claims its own authority, builds any  
sense it needs. Your text's pleasure, your great distance from me, let me  
not abridge it.

Blind Date with the Anointed

He beams *Josh*, extends a pitted hand.  
Of course I don't ask, but I do other questions  
like fingers sifting seeds for a way to begin.

He smells like stone fruit on hot wind.  
The point of connection has told me only what he hates  
*me? no that wasn't* but still, seems fairly intuitive

and dissonant as impulse. We go up limestone steps  
to look at art – I hate to feel observed, that immediate  
opposition across a table – and marbled space.

For the whole first knowing, the only words  
are porous thoughts, how good and strange  
these created things, a sense of wandering built-in.

He seems to like everything in a way  
where repulsion and confusion are part of the pull.  
There were years when I wouldn't've disagreed

or else worried each silence to death. I'm too old for that.  
Perhaps it takes a renegade to know one. Still,  
I question the difference between marked by holy oil and merely slick.

Later he treats the server like a human, eats salad  
and a heap of fried variety, offers all shine-lipped. Somehow  
the talk goes *I Spy*. What lonely books. The intricate system

built marble by miniature and abandoned, the whole  
scene stalled at action's precipice until one can find  
the tiny key, which might be so large it disappears

even as one looks straight at it. How emptying to be in search  
with untrusted knowledge the sought-after was even included.  
You can voyage to false stars with sundry implements but  
nowhere, he almost smiles, *can you get figs from thistles*

Taizé

The monastery's half the town. The rest farms,  
limestone farmhouses leaning back from mustard flowers  
rioting on the grassy slope.

Here you can say you don't know  
and they'll feed you just for admitting it.  
One day in the free hour between church and lunch  
I walk not realizing I'm leaving town until  
the road is uphill both ways  
and there are no more cows, just oak trees  
scattered out to the horizon and quiet.

It's calming sometimes to just accept how you are read,  
without trying to write it different –  
as a believer or native or together in a way you aren't.  
I wake up to bells when everyone else wakes up to bells,  
I eat the one square of chocolate I am given with coffee slowly,  
I close my eyes when I am supposed to close my eyes.  
You can be here believing

in not quite knowing and go up to the varnished cross anyway,  
just to say you did while you were only once here  
in the middle of this music, just to say only to yourself  
that you always saw what was offered you and took it, even if  
it was strange, naming yourself in small rituals like that  
and in going out beyond yourself sometimes, singing

things that weren't true for you spoken but sounded so sung  
under red and gold windows first thing in the morning  
in a foreign country blazing with voices.  
One can do this any way one wants here, can just sit unsinging,  
or sing about solace and then go out for a cigarette unjudged.

The way I do this is mostly walking circles around the lake.  
When I come to its footbridge, I lie down across it.  
The wood beneath me is warm and the sky is slow.  
Not one cloud contradicts another.

Notes:

“The Atoms of It”: “But there is great joy in this ongoing apocalypse as well ('apocalypse' meaning to uncover, to reveal), joy in reality's abundance and prodigality, in its atomic detail and essential indestructibility, and in the deep, implicit peace whose surest promise of reality is the miraculous capacity we have...to imagine it....To have faith in the meaning and final fruition of this impulse in us, but not to anxiously attempt to fill out that faith with content.”

– Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

“Which Mountains and Dissolves”: this is a 'ghost book' poem (Maggie Nelson via Danielle Dutton) after Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

“How to Fill the Blank”: this poem is after “Salt Bride” by Sigalit Landau.

“Absence and Outline”: this poem is after the movie *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi) and its soundtrack, particularly the song “Va t'en!” by Olivier Bernet.

“The Partygoers”: “Is this just vulgar electricity? Is this the edifying fire?” – Joni Mitchell (Scorpio)

“god: it's me god

Scorpio: ya I'm down to fuck” - @poetastrologers (Dorothea Lasky & Alex Dimitrov)

“Empathogenic”: this poem is after the mobile game *Plague, Inc.* by Ndemic Creations.

“Blind Date with the Anointed”: “The word *Christ* is derived from the Greek *Χριστός* (*Christos*), which is a translation of the Hebrew *משיח* (*Mesiah*), meaning the "anointed". The name *Jesus* is derived from the Latin *Iesus*, a transliteration of the Greek *Ἰησοῦς* (*Iesous*). The Greek form is a rendering of the Hebrew *ישוע* (*Yeshua*), a variant of the earlier name *יהושע* (*Yehoshua*), in English "Joshua".”

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit....Which of you, if your child asks for bread, will give them a stone?”

Matthew 7:15-19; 9

“Intertext”: “You're the only person I've ever met who seems to have the faintest conception of what I mean when I say a thing.” Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*