

DREAMING IN LANDSCAPE

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A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of  
California State University, East Bay

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in English

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By  
Genevieve Lawrence

June 2018

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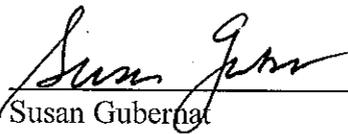
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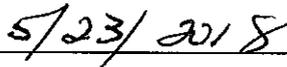
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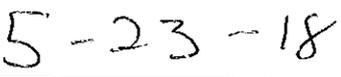
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5-23-18

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my professors at CSUEB, especially Professor Susan Gubernat and Professor Ryan Heryford, for encouraging my writing and going above and beyond to help me succeed. I would also like to thank my classmate, Katrina Wedding, for her guidance and encouragement throughout the thesis process.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iv
Preface .....	vii
Inspirations.....	1
Poetry.....	2
Cave Divers.....	3
North of Klamath Falls.....	4
Sonoma .....	5
The Topsfield Fair.....	6
Unit 601 .....	7
Alaska .....	8
Things My Mother Kept.....	9
One Word.....	11
Best Wishes.....	12
First Betrayal.....	13
In-between .....	14
Morning Person.....	15
Crickets at Dusk .....	16

The 30X - Marina Express .....	17
By the San Joaquin River .....	18
Something Resembling Me.....	19
In Phoenix.....	20
The Bachelorette Party .....	21
The Night I Told You I Didn't Love You Anymore.....	22
Hacked .....	23
Hurting by Helping.....	24
Childhood Friends .....	25
Dear Neighbor.....	26
Bad Luck.....	27
Room Temperature.....	28
The Cyborg's Last Words.....	29
Works Cited .....	31

## Preface

Until I walked into Professor Susan Gubernat's class as a twenty-nine year old English graduate student, I had largely avoided poetry because I was so intimidated by it. As I was studying to become an English teacher myself, I was even more afraid of entering the classroom unprepared to teach this entire genre of literature, so I got up the courage to walk in. During the first week of class, we studied Stephen Dobyns's "Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry" and when I read these words, poetry started to make more sense to me. He writes that poetry is really more about the reader than the writer because the entire purpose of poetry is to communicate with the reader:

[Poetry] gives testimony as to what it is to be a human being. It bears witness, it extracts meaning ... [it] is the clearest nonphysical way that emotion is communicated from one human being to another. The emotion isn't referred to; it is recreated. The emotion shows us that our most private feelings are in fact shared feelings. And this offers us some relief from our existential isolation. (10)

It seems obvious to me now that poetry is meant to communicate an aspect of the world to a reader, but I had always struggled to understand poetry and assumed that it was intentionally ambiguous because it was something private that only related to the writer's experiences. But as Dobyns puts it, "without this link to the reader, the poem is only a jumble of words" (2).

I learned that there are tools to help a reader understand and access poetry as well as write poetry, but it can be challenging, and it's *supposed* to be. It requires a higher level of openness and vulnerability than reading or critiquing a novel, with which I was far more familiar. Dobyns explains that, "A novel creates an alternative world; a poem

creates a metaphor for an aspect of the existing world ... a poem invites the reader into its room; with the novel the reader walks around the fence surrounding the house” (2). To connect with a poem, the reader must let go of boundaries and be willing to feel the same feelings that the writer is experiencing. This can be scary for students as well as teachers, especially at primary and secondary school levels. Looking back my teachers rarely, if ever, covered poetry, and I think this was due to a lack of experience with poetry as well as a fear of engaging in these conversations with students that require a high level of intimacy and emotional connection. It is much easier to critique a novel from a safe distance than to actually enter the feelings and experiences of another person in a poem.

The other work that greatly influenced my understanding and love of poetry is Anne Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet* because she explains that creating an authentic connection with a reader through poetry is an act of reaching—a difficult, lifelong pursuit that is never fully reached, but it’s the *process* of reaching, rather than the outcome, that matters. Carson explains that eros is the confluence of the many factors that keep individuals from finding a meaningful connection with their loved ones. It is often depicted as a triangle where two points are always separated by a third point, which symbolizes how two people are always separated by their own realities and perceptions, which can never really be shared. Carson points out that, in fact, lovers and readers have a lot in common because they have “very similar desires. And the desires of each is somewhat paradoxical. As lover you want ice to *be* ice and yet not melt in your hands. As reader you want knowledge to *be* knowledge and yet lie fixed on a written page” (145). Carson is commenting on the tendency of readers to want to boil down a work of

literature into one clean and easy message to guide their lives in the future. But as Carson points out, it's not that simple; when it comes to poetry, readers have to be willing to relinquish control and experience the emotions and feelings of the writer in hopes of making a true connection.

It was with Anne Carson's words in mind that I first discovered the work of Sharon Olds, one of my favorite poets. While many critics have focused on the shocking and graphic nature of Olds's work, few have looked at her poetry as a more nuanced and complex study of eros, which comments on the ways in which writing and reading are erotic. The job of the writer is to reach out and attempt to connect with readers, which is an overwhelmingly challenging task, but Olds finds a way. The critic, Calvin Bedient, says it best in his article "Sentencing Eros." He writes, "Abruptness is Olds's poetic stock and trade. Its relentless and exciting guise is the impression she gives of improvising at white heat, of translating impulse into narrative and image on the spot, at a ferocious clip" (173). In a way, her poetry depends "on an air almost of amateurishness—roughness and awkwardness are essential to her success. There she is, in the thick of life, running hard to stay in place: can she make it?" (173). While Bedient admires her power with words, he believes that Olds's abrupt and wild style implies a lack of awareness or intent, but I would argue that it's really the exact opposite. Olds deliberately transports readers by placing them in the middle of the grit and the chaos of a moment, so they can experience the emotions of the writer. Readers are placed on a runaway train, and they can't get off until they finish the poem.

Facing the ultimate challenge of reaching across time and space to truly connect

with her reader, Olds uses language that simulates the complete madness and lack of control of the erotic. In the poem “Monarchs,” Olds describes how thousands of monarch butterflies are migrating past her house as she sits and obsesses over her memories of her lover:

their wings the dark red of  
your hands like butchers’ hands, the raised  
veins of their wings like your scars.  
I could scarcely feel your massive rough  
palms on me, your touch was so light,  
the delicate chapped scrape of an insect’s leg  
across my breast. (4-7)

For a poem about love, there is a strikingly violent aspect to the work as she compares her lover’s hands to butcher’s hands, stained red from handling bloody meat all day. This shows that his love is damaging or cutting her with every touch since she knows his attention is fleeting. She also alludes to her lover’s scars, comparing them to the veins in the wings of a butterfly. By comparing her lover to an animal, she is showing how the act of sex is a very carnal and instinctual act that is impossible to control. Choosing to compare her lover to a monarch is a telling one; butterflies have an ephemeral quality because they have a short lifespan that is entirely dedicated to the act of reproducing before they die. In addition, butterflies can’t be captured because the second they are snatched out of the air, they are simultaneously crushed, and this is a vivid depiction of the nature of eros as fleeting and impossible to attain.

There is also an element of disgust and horror in the poem when she describes the way a butterfly’s “insect legs” “scrape” across her breast as it crawls on her skin. She goes on to describe how her lover opened her legs like a:

pair of wings.  
The hinged print of my blood on your thighs—  
a winged creature pinned there—  
and then you left, as you were to leave  
over and over, the butterflies moving  
in masses past my window, floating  
south. (17-23)

The image of the dead butterfly that has been squished between her thighs is both revolting and visually brings to life the vulnerability of the narrator, as she feels similarly destroyed by her lover. She knows that, like the butterflies migrating south, he will leave her, but she can't help but fall for him each time. She recognizes that there is a masochistic tendency in this behavior, which is vividly depicted in the many violent images in the poem, but she cannot stop seeing him. Olds is a master of creating images that force their way into the minds of the readers to burn a picture in their memory. Her poems assault the reader, in a way, with shocking and often repulsive descriptions. Her immense popularity proves that after finishing a poem, readers are compelled to turn the page and read another poem that is sure to cause more feelings of confusion, powerlessness and delight.

Olds's work has made such an impact on my life because she showed me that poetry is about reaching to connect with readers to show them that even their most private feelings are, in fact, shared feelings. Olds's poetry is sometimes ugly, awkward, inappropriate, violent, or shocking, but so is real life, and as Dobyns says "this offers us some relief from our existential isolation" (10) to know that we are not alone. I have learned to resist the tendency to try to boil down poetry into one takeaway, and instead to revel in the experience of trying to connect with the text on an emotional level, no matter

how uncomfortable or scary it may feel.

Anne Carson ends her study of eros by discussing the way Socrates defined his purpose in life: “A power to see the difference between what is known and what is unknown constitutes Socrates’ wisdom and motivated his search in life. The activity of reaching out for that difference is one with which he admits he is in love.” Socrates realized this is a risky and difficult undertaking, but “he thought the risk worthwhile, because he was in love with the wooing itself. And who is not?” (173). Sharon Olds is certainly in love with the wooing itself. Her work is a study of the space between writer and reader in pursuit of true understanding and connection. Olds understands that fully transcending these boundaries is futile but coming close is a great achievement. Olds is in love with wooing and therefore can’t help but submit to the agony of eros, and I will do my best to continue to follow her example in my own writing and as a teacher, so my future students will learn to enjoy the art of reaching out for authentic connection through reading and writing poetry.

## Inspirations

When faced with the enormous challenge of truly connecting with a reader, every writer must find her own techniques, and my favorite, I've found, is landscape. By landscape, I'm not just talking about the sweeping meadows of a Jane Austen novel; I'm also interested in the inside of a bus taken daily, for instance, or a dark underwater cave.

Landscapes, the way they are described and perceived, can often say more about a moment or an emotion than any action or dialogue. I believe that human beings are fascinated with landscapes because we stow important memories and feelings within them thinking that, even if we change and the people around us change, the places that we covet the most will always be there as we left them. However, there comes a time when we discover that these landscapes are never the same as we *remember* them; our perspective is always changing. What's more surprising is that there are places we have never actually visited, terrains completely invented in our imaginations and in our dreams, that can wield even more power over us than the places we have actually seen. Landscapes can give physical form to emotions that are often impossible to describe with words directly; poetry gives life to these imagined landscapes (seen and unseen), so we can hold them in our hand like treasured jewels and watch them sparkle, as we both celebrate and mourn them.

Poetry

## Cave Divers

I notice you didn't kiss me, bodies chilled to bone  
as we dive, letting out the rope behind us. Their  
beauty ensnared me, fields of sparkling limestone  
stalagmites, like underwater columns of fire.  
The turquoise glow from the opening now dim,  
I kick hard but you won't let me catch you.  
Blind cave fish, evolved from darkness, swim  
past my light, then vanish. A glitter of blue  
flashes, and I see them, born drop-by-drop,  
a relentless accumulation, just as your touch seems  
to harden each year, grow over my skin, senseless. I stop,  
suddenly realizing I can't see your light beam  
ahead. I grab the rope but find it limp, floating — you  
left me here and cut the rope in two.

## North of Klamath Falls

Every morning, wobbling, arms outstretched for balance,  
like inebriated tightrope walkers many feet in the air,  
we walked, single file, on top of giant irrigation pipes  
that brought water to the cows grazing in the far meadows.

Hours spent hunched by the river, an ancient campsite,  
tiny hands sifting through volcanic red dirt, like grave robbers  
working desperately to finish their search before the sunrise,  
seeking that unearthly black flash of chiseled obsidian.

I dreaded the moment when father yelled “lights out!”  
and shut off the generator. I couldn’t tell if my eyes were open  
or closed in the absolute darkness. I feared I wouldn’t make it into bed  
before the lights died, and I was trapped blind, in the cold.

My sister almost fell through the ice that Christmas,  
on the marshland. I’ll never forget, his name was Ed Mitchell.  
He lived at the Klamath Reservation close by. A giant man,  
he moved across the ice, so slowly, and brought her back.

## Sonoma

I need you like that dry California heat,  
the relentless pulse from a cloudless sky.  
Hair hot to the touch, bare feet  
hop from shade to shade as we fly  
toward the pool, ripping off our clothes.  
You grab my hand and we plunge, the rush  
of cool water on burned skin flows  
over me as we surface. You brush  
against me, I feel the warmth of  
your chest. My eyes trace the dark shapes  
of solitary oaks against the blonde hills above,  
gnarled branches reaching to escape  
the sun. I know that you'll be leaving but I  
can't help craving that heat, to feel that high.

## The Topsfield Fair

She had been coming since she was a little girl. Nothing had changed down to the placement of the fried dough stand blaring the same recording of the token mammy's cheery voice yelling, "Come an' get it!" She liked to think that the fair never really left; it just curled up, heartbeat slowing to a crawl, to hibernate for the winter—waiting for the snow to melt to unfurl the big top and extend the marquees, anticipating her return. Her husband was a clone of her father: a large man, would never leave New England, felt he had a firm grasp on how the world worked—except late at night when he thought about the timing of their rough patch five years ago and their unplanned pregnancy that occurred soon after. Their daughter pulled so hard on her husband's hand that she lifted herself off the ground. They bought a turkey leg to share as they walked over to watch the baby chicks hatching inside the incubator. Vibrating with excitement, the girl asked her father what they did with all of the chicks after the fair, so he lied, and distracted her with the promise of pink cotton candy.

## Unit 601

I live in a box in the sky,  
twelve hundred square feet,  
boxes below and above me stacked high  
in layers, like a cake baked with concrete.

We share the same plot,  
on which our pillar rests, in unity.  
I wonder if we're all synced up, our lot,  
like women living in close proximity.

At night, I know your bedroom glows pink  
from the neon sign across the street,  
and I know you're awake too, trying to think,  
how to stop that car alarm, that incessant beat.

## Alaska

I fear the cold, surprisingly light like a French gateau with a thin fall  
of powdered sugar, it waits for breath then lands heavy and burns, as snow falls.

My feet follow the furrows, dots and dashes like Morse Code, carved in powder.  
I imagine they're yours, and I can see your figure ahead, blurred as snow falls.

On cold nights, I watch the frost bloom across my bedroom wall,  
then drip down my wallpaper of sprigs and ferns, as snow falls.

In this permanent twilight, the sun clings to the horizon  
like heavy eyelids of children up past bedtime until parents return, as snow falls.

I am drawn to the lake, partially frozen, if I took a step, would it hold?  
If I fell, would my body become water then ice, in turn, as snow falls?

## Things My Mother Kept

Dust migrates  
across the tilting columns  
of light beaming through her closet window.

Swatches of mismatched  
yellowing lace  
salvaged but disintegrating.

A small mason jar with four, semi-translucent  
baby teeth.

An old mint tin holds a lock  
of coarse hair, black and white, and  
a piece of torn notebook paper  
with “black beauty the pony” scribbled in wobbly letters.

Nearby a box full of letters that are not  
in my father’s handwriting. I find a  
photo album without labels  
corners sagging, full of  
people I don’t know who seem to have  
my high cheekbones and long forehead.

The glue has lost its  
grip on some images leaving  
a dark square behind.

I think I’ve seen one of the women before,  
but older, in the

green framed photo in the den.

I turn to ask my mother who she is

forgetting

she's not there.

## One Word

This morning, I told my cat that I loved him  
and at lunch, I declared my love to an old candy bar  
I discovered at the bottom of my purse, cracked and discolored  
from melting then solidifying again.

When I stand in front of everyone we know  
to tell them I've chosen you,  
I will regret that I didn't hold one back,  
keep it hidden away in a tiny wooden box,  
that I didn't save, one word, just for you.

## Best Wishes

Words fall out of my mouth  
released into the atmosphere.  
They disperse like seed pods  
shaken loose from their stem—  
did you know they can travel vast distances?  
Surfing the currents of the ocean, traversing continents  
lying in wait.

It's like a bottle of lotion  
that explodes in a suitcase  
coating every surface  
when the cabin pressure changes  
on the way to a wedding.  
Nothing is the same.

I assured you I didn't mean it;  
you really are so good together.  
I was supposed to be there,  
holding you steady  
as you stepped into your white silk and lace.

My words mutate and multiply,  
but I am not there to defend them  
or, at least, to say I'm sorry.

## First Betrayal

You were two, their only child,  
on the floor mixing a concoction of spices  
into a soup pot, both arms wrapped around the perimeter.  
Your entire body smiling and bouncing.  
Our parents both behind the camera  
admiring your culinary talent.

Five years later, the grass was wet;  
I kept slipping in my black party shoes  
with a giant basket at my side.  
You sprinted across my path;  
knocked me down.  
You reached the colored egg first.  
I melted into the grass, screaming.  
Mother scooped me up. She paused to look at you  
then walked away—  
the look you never forgot.

## In-between

I love that time of evening  
when you look up, suddenly startled,  
to find the landscape has vanished  
since you last looked,  
leaving only an outline  
where it once rested.

It's in that absence, so dark  
you can barely look right at it,  
where the edges glow against  
deep indigo, and you can really  
see the trees, the mountains,  
the sky.

## Morning Person

With drool pooling  
out of my mouth,  
alarm blaring, in vain,  
you walk over to my bedside  
and peel off the covers slowly,  
as if a surgeon  
delicately separating conjoined twins.  
You lift my legs  
like a crane sweeping across a city skyline,  
and drape them over the edge.  
Hands wrapped around my wrists  
you lift me, my eyes still closed,  
until my cheek rests  
on your stomach, and you wait there  
holding me, until my dreams  
release me back to you.

## Crickets at Dusk

Against your window, the rhythmic pulse of wind and rain drown  
out the greedy breaths we could not subdue, one last time.

You avoid my eyes from across the room, and it feels  
as though I've misplaced something in plain view, one last time.

Your beard needles my cheek as we fall on the bed like two  
dead birds plummeting from a sky so blue, one last time.

I still feel your arms around me like gnarled roots winding  
their way around my spine, severing sinew, one last time.

Whenever I hear crickets at dusk, it feels as if my body parts  
detach then reattach, but slightly askew, one last time.

The 30X - Marina Express

You were always first to offer your seat  
to the elderly woman with the pink cane.  
I watched your body sway, keeping your feet  
grounded as the bus swerved from lane to lane.  
You brushed past me; I felt you on my skin  
like the summer tan I wanted to keep all winter.  
Afraid to get too close, I put myself in  
your way, so I mattered to you even  
for a moment, as just an obstacle.  
One morning you sat next to me. My thumb  
nudged my wedding ring off without feeling responsible  
for my hand or my blood pulsing like a drum.  
I thought about asking your name, but I knew  
it would ruin everything, it wouldn't be *you*.

By the San Joaquin River  
 after Mary Oliver's "Beside the Waterfall"

Delicate morning light  
     seeped through  
         the slivers  
     between the trees—

the Catahoula Hounds yelped and took off;  
     dead leaves  
     now floating  
         where the dogs previously stood.

A product of colonization,  
     Spanish Mastiffs mixed  
     with the native population;  
         bred for one purpose:  
 they ran the boar down  
         until it collapsed.  
         Jaws clamped,  
     the dogs rose and fell on its heaving chest as

the mist  
     began to burn off—  
     the dog, with eyes the color of sea glass,  
         didn't let go until the hunter cut the hog's throat.

## Something Resembling Me

You dropped my hand as the ceremony started,  
worried we might fall into marriage by proximity, five rows away.

When I wake up, I piece myself back together,  
stitching memories to flesh into something resembling me, halfway.

I remember his figure like the shadow of a desert cactus stretched thin  
at dusk—he never could fit into a room—all leg and knee in a way.

Even as a child, I hated to be alone, sneaking into  
my sister's bed, always around three, couldn't stay away.

You used to run your finger over my skin, carving messages  
into my back only you could see, like paper cutaways.

In Phoenix

The stale breeze of hotel air conditioning  
fills the ballroom, chilled from wandering  
through rows of empty corridors.

You notice my shivering and ask if I want to warm up outside.

The clinking glasses of the wedding party recede  
behind the rotating door.

Hot, dry wind sweeps the desert floor  
and fills my dress, warms my thighs,  
blows the gown up around my knees.

Two rows of palm trees stretch out into the darkness.

The lofted fronds are illuminated by spotlight,  
like giant nests perched precariously on top of stilts.

“I heard a man died here yesterday” you say.

“Right here, under the trees.

Oh but hey—it’s not like we knew him or anything.”

We turn back and I brace myself again for the cold.

## The Bachelorette Party

Ten women step out of a limo,  
their perfect breasts lofted into the air  
with lacey push-up bras showing through  
hot pink tank tops—each with a unique label:  
'Mrs. In Training' and 'Basic Bitch' lead the way as  
they gather into formation like a flock of geese.  
Rows of old vines, lush green against blackened stalks,  
expand behind them,  
straining under the weight of the grapes.  
'Rosé All Day' steps forward—"will you take our picture?"  
she asks a woman walking by,  
shoulders rolled, swimming in a faded cardigan,  
bangs covering the left side of her face.  
She struggles to get them all in frame;  
'Mrs. in Training' whispers that she looks like a man.  
They all laugh.  
The woman takes the picture and,  
with her hand shaking and eyes cast down  
to hide the tears pooling,  
she hands back the phone and walks away.

## The Night I Told You I Didn't Love You Anymore

I took you out to dinner first.

A place too fancy for us, so you would know.

You looked at me across the table, without feeling.

It felt as if my body, loosening from the bone,  
became unhinged,

as if I might lose a finger reaching into the bread basket  
or my teeth might fall out, clattering down on my plate.

Hacked

Sent five minutes ago.

To my former college English professor:

“Wanna be a big sized guy?”

“Click link to bring her to the seventh sky.”

To my mother and brother:

“Have we met?”

“Click here to drive her hot and wet.”

To my ex-boyfriend:

“The truth about her”

“Give her a taste of your giant.”

Somewhere, there's a hacker

sitting in front of a screen like mine.

The same background, of smooth river rocks,  
cold blues and grays.

She feels close, as if I could reach through my screen  
and touch her cheek on the other side.

She knows my mother calls me Kumquat  
and is worried

my dress alterations won't be done in time  
for my wedding.

I wonder what her mother calls her,  
and if she worries about her daughter too.

Hurting by Helping  
after James Galvin's "Promises Are for Liars"

It's worst  
When you're  
Most certain  
Of your value.  
Need is slippery  
Like a river rock  
Scraped smooth:  
Does it guide  
The water, lost?  
Or only impede  
Its momentum,  
Chosen?  
Good intentions  
Don't always have  
Good intent, see?  
I seek purpose  
To defend it  
Only to find  
A shell  
Crushed into pieces  
When I open  
My fisted hand.

## Childhood Friends

I wish I knew when we were young  
how much I would miss  
eating sweets until they colored our tongues,  
rolling and laughing in bliss.

I used to think you were my twin  
until we “acted our age.”  
I heard you say I was spoiled within  
A war I couldn’t wage.

Now you’re sitting across the table  
How do I explain?  
I’m not sure I will be able  
Remember playing in the rain?

Dear Neighbor

I'm almost certain you stole my package.

My brand new vacuum - I felt betrayed.

An apartment so wretched - you couldn't manage?

An act of revenge for some remark made  
in passing? Maybe you thought it was yours?

Just an honest mistake.

When I found the box, discarded outdoors,  
my name in bold, for goodness' sake,

I tried to forget,

got it replaced,

but in the elevator we always met

and in my mouth, that same foul taste.

While days have passed in the usual blur,

sometimes I listen for that incriminating whir.

## Bad Luck

You can learn a lot about a person when you're trapped in a car together for a few hours. My father used to force us kids to come on errands we knew were somewhat fabricated—to pick up just one more onion for dinner, to buy an obscure sprinkler part from Home Depot—for this very reason. My coworker, Andrew, asked me to carpool on our first day of the school year, and I couldn't think of a reason not to. In the first week, I found out his father's in jail, his mother's dead, and his sister's the kind of person who goes to graveyards to steal copper urns, so she can sell them as scrap metal. He had an odd way about him, like he was always looking for a good spot to stash something illicit he had hiding under his coat. Weeks later he told me that he had a mild case of Tourette's, and I guessed that had something to do with it. One day, he snapped at a kid who scared him from behind, and he got fired. On my drive home, the passenger seat empty, I kept thinking, he had made it this far; shouldn't that count for something? But it didn't.

## Room Temperature

We crank the heat  
then pump the air  
to maintain that perfect 70 degrees,  
winter or summer,  
while entire islands  
disappear into the Pacific.

They say we need to protect our planet,  
fragile like an old sweater, crocheted:  
sever one strand and the entire thing  
unravels.

But really it's us;  
we will come undone in the hot  
and the cold, extremes of our own creation.  
And the earth will go on as it did before,  
without even noticing  
we're gone.

The Cyborg's Last Words

Nothing is born anymore

everything is recycled  
even my body  
parts—parts—parts  
will be scavenged  
like the stolen automobiles  
that remain from another  
time

*VITALS 37 breaths remaining*

nothing remains  
of Thoreau's friendly neighbor  
waiting patiently outside the city limits  
to give us the inspiration  
to persevere

at what point does something  
flesh spliced, splintered  
become something—become something—become something  
else

*WARNING nervous system shutdown in effect*

I used to have visions of an alien  
landscape unlike this hard, blackened  
terrain sucked dry by hot wind and dust;  
I knew it wasn't mine,  
echoes of unfinished  
latent energy from my extremities  
borrowed

paddling down a river in the dark  
something forgotten on the tip  
of my tongue,  
I stop at the base of a mammoth tree swarming  
with fireflies  
warm pulses flashing  
effortless, weightless  
synchronized with knowing.

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