

Catherine Young writes from the heart and from the land, with the keen eye of a geologist and the soul of a poet. These are poems in the tradition of Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Louise Glück, poems that honor rural life and the earth itself, poems concerned with the soil, with water, with the changing seasons, and with language. In short, they grapple with what it means to be human and one part of this fragile and natural world.

— Christopher Chambers, editor *Midwest Review*

*Geosmin* reveals the soil that roots us, the relationships that sustain us, the anger that improves us, the memories that make the future possible. In her compelling new book, poet Catherine Young refuses the solipsism of any language that detaches us from more than human things in order to make us more fully human. Each poem here moves away from complacency, sometimes with a nudge, sometimes a shove.

— Bruce Jennings, Editor of *Minding Nature*, a journal of the Center for Humans and Nature

Worlds within worlds unfold, ambered in words, as we follow her wanderings on the land. Linguistic sensuousity matches the touch of skin on bark, the rocks' dance, time and space openings from trilobite murmurings to the purple shimmer on Lake Superior's shore. We roam through a year of change, visit with dairy and goat farmers in the Driftless region, browse in antique shops, and explore the workings of memory. Young's *Geosmin* envelops us in the sense texture of a region, and distills its perfume.

— Petra Kuppers, author of *Gut Botany*

“In *Geosmin*, the poet, Catherine Young, narrates for readers what it means to unearth the subtle miracles of lichen, streambanks, fossils, and raspberry canes, and in so doing, what it means to be connected to our fragile and dazzling planet.”

—Heather Swan, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies lecturer and author of *A Kinship with Ash*



# Geosmin



Catherine Young



Water's Edge Press

This is a work of imagination. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

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Printed in the United States of America

Water's Edge Press LLC  
Sheboygan, WI  
watersedgepress.com

ISBN: 978-1-952526-09-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021949776

Credits:

Excerpt from *Landmarks* by Robert MacFarlane  
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Cover and Section Divider Design: DragonFire Design  
Cover image from Unsplash

A WATER'S EDGE PRESS FIRST EDITION

## **Geosmin**

(jee-OZ-min)

from Greek, "earth odor;" the scent of freshly-ploughed soil

Camels in a desert can detect geosmin released from wet ground miles away and track it to find an oasis.



*The crucial first step to survival in all organisms is habitat selection.*

*If you get the right place, everything else is likely to be easier.*

—Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia*, 1984

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# Elements





## Geosmin

fragrance of soil,  
slightly sweet, a kind of jasmine,  
with a hint of spice, musky enough  
to bring a lover to his knees  
and calls to mind

earth, crumbly black, at a warm enough time  
for the germination of bean seeds, and  
hummingbirds building their tiny nests  
while we lie beneath leafing-out trees.

Like the smell of beets, some say.  
But I say its essence is far more sweet—  
the earthy scent released when raindrops  
land on ground, carry the aromatic compounds  
of soil creatures and their spores.  
Geosmin, essential perfume, leads us to water  
when drought and famine are over,  
and makes us drink in the scent of rain,  
the odor of petrichor. Over millennia  
we have been led by our noses.

Geosmin:  
found in rock crevice domains,  
between mosses and molds,  
at the feet of lichen, in caves  
of brain folds, a marriage  
of rich, dark loam  
and love's eternal spark.

## Gathering Acorns, Hoarding Words

“...there had been a culling of words concerning nature. Under pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries it no longer felt to be relevant to a modern-day childhood. The deletions included *acorn*, *adder*, *ash*, *beech*, *bluebell*, *buttercup*, *catkin*, *conker*, *cowslip*, *cygnet*, *dandelion*, *fern*, *hazel*, *heather*, *heron*, *ivy*, *kingfisher*, *lark*, *mistletoe*, *nectar*, *newt*, *otter*, *pasture* and *willow*.

The words taking their places in the new edition included *attachment*, *block-graph*, *blog*, *broadband*, *bulletpoint*, *celebrity*, *chatroom*, *committee*, *cut-and-paste*, *MP3 player*, and *voicemail*... For *blackberry*, read *Blackberry*.”

from Robert MacFarlane's “The Word Hoard” in *Landmarks*

If children do not know *willow*,  
how will they know the scent  
of spearmint, or peppermint in cold spring streams,  
or how water flow is shaped  
by willow root? And if  
they do not hear the word *catkin*,  
how will they hear the bees  
as they forage for *nectar* in willow flowers,  
in *hazel* shrubs, birch trees. If children  
do not know *acorn*,  
how will they play in fall  
with the scaly cupule of nut on a finger for a hat,  
or plant oak trees  
that will outlive them?

How will they see *fern* in wood;  
*heron*, *lark*, *kingfisher*, in river, sky, sea;  
*otter* in stream and ocean; *cygnet* in reeds,  
and all that dwell beside and among us?  
Humankind over millennia has held the world together

with words, a continuous thread woven  
through hymns and sagas,  
echoed across fjords and geyser fields,  
*pastures* and yards.

And *dandelion*—how will their children,  
or their children's children know  
the yellow *Helianthus* mirrors of sun  
for weaving May crowns,  
or launch magnificently silken parachutes?

## Lichen

I regret the thought  
of burning this club of wood,  
this perfect piece  
of young maple chosen for our warmth,  
its transforming bark  
appliquéd frilly seafoam green with lichen,  
speckled and peppered with gold.

How many worlds dwell  
on one branch of maple?  
How many starry sphagnum heads  
carpet the stones, and  
boulders-not-even-rock, but all  
moss-mounded-as-boulder?

I cannot look at lichen on this limb  
without empathy. I place it  
tenderly back outdoors  
as I would a spider cradled in a cloth,  
or a moth drawn indoors by light  
perhaps seeking the moon,  
released, once again,  
into night.

## Dendrous

If I could not see the window-framed trees,  
shapes of leafless umber trunks and limbs  
in winter monochrome  
I might believe

it is simply an image of my arteries and veins.  
If I could not see the flash of sky,  
mirroring blue, now silver, I might be convinced

I am river, always calling  
from hill to sea, or imagine  
I am dendrous water, a creek branching,  
gathering liquid and light,  
seeking ocean, a deliverer. Or perhaps

I am fir, wood forever  
sheathed in resinous green, pulling at sky,  
drinking sun even in frozen season.

Rootless, warm-blooded, I lie  
beside creek and oak, toes  
against stems and stones. I  
apologize, I apologize.

## Color of Water

Be thou Waters, deep.

*cerulean, seafoam, steel gray*

Be thou Sky, clear.

*azuline, cyan, celeste*

Be thou Waters married to Sky.

*gridelin, pearl, perse*

Be thou Waters raining down.

*silver*

Be thou Stream, Creek, River.

*unknowable green; corbeau-shadowed  
in growing season; black against snow;  
alabaster in deep cold;  
ochre, sienna, terra-cotta, tawny, caramel in flood*

*transparent in hand*

Be thou self, Water, clear and at once, mirror

*mahogany, viridian*

reflecting all possible color: faces, grasses,

*gunmetal, gold, slate, amber*

towers, dandelions, mountains, cattails,  
seashells, plastic, blood.

*sanguine*

Be thou arched Veil of Water in sundrenched

*violet-indigo-blue-green-yellow-orange-red*

rain-filled sky.

Be thou Water running  
within  
and without. Carry away  
to the sea  
all molecules of earth  
made and unmade,

synthesized  
and fused from crude  
and carbon, and all ideas synaptic.

*iridescent*

Be thou Water within each being—  
blood-borne,

*incarnadine*

chlorophyll-laden—

*verdant*

Run through it all, Carrier of Souls and Sand:  
sing of life, of death;

Sing your song of Earth.

## Volute

When they walk ancient beaches, cliffs  
of layered sandstone, they never seem to understand  
that we are the shapes of waves,  
that the rhythms of the tides mold all that matters.  
They call us fossils without seeing the curl  
of the fiddlehead fern, the folds  
within each seed and vessel. All of it spirals—  
yet not fast enough for them.

They forget the Moon, that conjurer of light, ovum of stone  
that draws up the oceans, pulls helix through bone.  
They overlook snails as pictographs of waves while shells  
coil around the energy of the world. Oceans swell  
in all that swirls this volatile möbius path.

All is volute.

Let us watch the Moon rise,  
raise tides, turn them over.

Let us witness  
the whirling embrace between  
orb and ocean, the kiss  
as bubbles race upward to hatch.

## Stone Circle

You thought stones  
are inanimate. Like bones, we carry them  
from here to there. We set them  
in a ring, and they remain.  
But no. Take another look  
through your lenses fashioned of silica sand. Rocks  
dance when you turn your back to them,  
refract colors hummingbirds see  
and sing to. While your glass spectacles  
dissolve into puddles and reef corals fossilize,  
boulders dazzle sky and tree.  
They beckon. We haul,  
cobble cairns, believing  
we mark the passages of planets. All the while  
mountains sway and hurl  
their molten shimmer to the speed of light.  
It's all relative – you, me, the stones.  
Listen. Did you really believe  
these hills are silent? They are  
laughing at our mayfly tempo.  
Beauty is stone deep. At what point  
do we align our sight  
for unimagined changes in hue?

## Eloquence Engraved in Stone

“Out of sight in the wood, the creek trickles  
its ongoing sentence; from treble to baritone  
from dependent clause to interrogative”

from "Description" by Tony Hoagland

Out of sight in the wood, the creek trickles  
over broken beaches, fossil shells.  
Forgotten ocean, now golden limestone, ghostly swells in

its ongoing sentence; from treble to baritone.  
Ancient seas advance, sands heave  
against cliff. Trilobite, brachiopod speak

from dependent clause to interrogative;  
from certainty to shift. Seas recede, voices quelled,  
river bluffs, the layered Midwest hills, emerge carved; treed.



## At a Loss

There is no word  
for this waking wonder of day  
that never ends, even in dark  
where the creek lets out as endless line  
its liquid canon

a song that goes on  
through the facies  
whether rock  
or not.

If we take down these hills,  
crush and slam frac sand deep against shale  
there is no word to tell  
how these lands shone with corn,  
with bone of mastodon  
or crystalline stone,  
and once rolled as waves in ocean.

When I wake  
I have no word  
for the shifting soil  
singing beneath  
the soles of my feet—  
even Thanks seems so fleet.

I have only the words spoken  
before sunrise—  
before *migizi* has flown:

Good Morning.

## Shepherd of Trees

What would you trees have of me today? Can I provide you with heat or shelter? Can my limbs bring you sweet fruit in summer's golden time? When late winter comes, do you need songs sung to remember the waking mycorrhizae; of phloem filling with sap? Do you need a reminder of green, that you will have green again around you, held by you, that beneath the thick bark that wraps you, your living layer is green and sleeps in its own verdancy? If I give you a field, would you claim it a wood, filling squared-off space until you grow right through fences? Do you want my easily abraded skin to wrap around you, comfort you with its branching capillaries, warm your frozen bark? Be comforted. I move among you, my feet seeking tendrils.



# Almanac





## Firefly Nights

June,  
stay a while. Linger  
with me until the last  
bloom on the basswood tree  
withers, and the bees move on  
to bergamot. I'll see you  
in the jars of cherry jam,  
the memories of first potatoes  
and toes in cold lake waters.  
And later, in December, when it's hard  
to remember what is now or real,  
when I look to the night sky above  
the frosted field to seek  
Orion's steady guidance, I will hold  
the afterimage of sparks in the night  
above each creek and stream:  
arteries of fireflies, glittering rivers of light.

## Midsummer

Midsummer's morning musk  
permeates every atom, scented  
like birch-smoke and melted beeswax  
soaked into the wood of a restored cabin brought over  
from Norway, or honey-sweetened Swiss biscuits,  
*tierggel*, golden dough rolled and pressed  
in woodcarved forms, encrypted with raised messages,  
baked words of wisdom from other times.  
Today, the bee-scent draws me to see  
the basswood tree flowering at the creeks' edge,  
the clover in field calling the swarm in my bone  
to rise, to decipher  
the ancient code of nectar.

## July 4

Summer-baked, parade-ready we stand, hands  
in pockets or on cameras. We talk  
askance, neighbor-to-neighbor always  
about the weather  
and whether any of us will make that window of sunshine  
to dry our mown hay, and if the least of us  
will throw in the towel.

We are a ragged lineup, Midwest  
plump and unafraid to show ourselves  
in shorts and T-shirts. Propped up  
in thick-soled sneakers along our small town street  
we are all, or will be, or have been  
4-H moms and dads, 4-H  
everyone gathered who has ever lived here in this  
muddy little bottomland.

From the outside, our tableau  
looks like democracy à la Norman Rockwell, only  
more cornfed. Even our sheriff's deputy  
has equal footing as she waits at the blockade.

We hold two hopes to be self-evident:  
as soon as we can, to march from blazing sun  
toward picnic shade and cold beer,  
and, at next year's parade,  
to find one another still –  
against all odds – standing here.

## Sweet Land of Liberty

At Devil's Lake, the busiest state park in Wisconsin  
on the Fourth of July, a place I would never go,  
and never at this peak time but for a reunion with ex-pats,  
the long line of cars entering along Park Road  
is at a standstill, like the bathroom lines where  
we strangers chat as we stand waiting, part  
of a summer picnic tapestry. Clusters of families  
dot the beach lawn in shade and sun, grilling  
a million meals. Languages from every continent  
coo to babies in strollers, laugh as frisbees fly, and I  
am at home in my country, this America,  
the diverse place I cannot see  
from my farm kitchen window.  
High above the lake, I trudge the rocky trails.  
Hives of families climb, apologize  
in an array of accents when I step aside  
to let them pass. I am surprised  
by their humble politeness, as if I am not  
just another American born of immigrants.  
Back down at the bottom,  
the lines at the broken bathrooms wrap  
around the building while mothers merge to help  
each other's children take a drink of clean water,  
reassure them all that we're safe together.  
In our group around the picnic blanket, we are  
world travelers. I ask one who has been to Turkey,  
Iran, Turkmenistan, if she feels safe  
in those places. She assures me she does. She tells me

*People everywhere are so much alike  
and want the same thing: to have picnics together with their families.*

On this day of celebrating our nation  
I wonder where our elected officials  
have taken their picnics, and if  
they believe in the gatherings of families in public places.  
For one day, I am in the real America, a place  
where everyone can freely play together as everything crumbles.

## Shoreline Instructions for Lake Superior

1. Saunter Superior's shore. Contrast water against sky.  
In your mind's eye drop the perpendicular of balsam fir  
to basalt ledge as you listen to The Voice in the Lake.  
Draw sine waves of sound within.
2. Dig at the purple shimmer place where water meets sand.  
Reach for stones, smooth and white as turtle eggs.  
Pluck agates the colors of lake tankers, rust and black.  
Pick ones that call to you. Rub your fingers  
over their sleek surfaces. Pocket the ones which choose you.
3. Prepare to cross the liminal; give over to frigid.  
Slide your feet in the cold wet sand.
4. Without hesitation, before it's too late, immerse yourself.
5. Return to the sun-heated shore.  
Shake sand from towel and shoes, but not your heart.  
Keep a few grains until next summer.

## Superior

It is the rare summer day of a northern Great Lake.  
Two moms and three kids sit rocking in waves  
on the far shore of Madeleine Island. Lake Superior calls  
a blue horizon against salmon sands, chants  
a song of slap and shush against children's joyous shrieks.  
Barefoot gray-haired elders – who elsewhere  
would be strangers –  
immerse in lawn chairs, soak their toes,  
sit in as relatives for the day, presiding  
over an afternoon of sand mirrors, slapping feet,  
drip-castle villages and whisperings  
of other summers' children  
while one mother, toweling her daughter tells her  
*You will travel the world someday, yet this day,  
this place, is right at the top.*

## Waters, Silvered

Waters silvered by cirrus sky and summer's high sun  
drive rollers shoreward to us on rust-colored sand. Our hands

plow cold waters, our feet sweep the line between sky  
and land. For a while we imagine that summer

goes on forever, that unyielding water, firm beaches  
in frozen season, are mirage. Instead, water

envelops us always, and always a breeze arrives  
at midday, when rising waves rock and lap

our deepest core and gulls suspend, wings spread  
timeless, as if painted there, above ocean shore.

## Rime

We met long ago at the inland sea—  
lazed and swam Superior's copper shore,  
rode island ferries shouting poetry,  
singing above the massive engines' roar.  
We packed raspberries into cordial wines,  
ruby gems bright against boreal land,  
saving colored jewels for harder times:  
autumn, farewells, and snow on frozen sand.

How could we imagine years passing, when  
sailing the broad curving spiral of time,  
that we might emerge as gray-haired women?  
But we meet again, surprised. All the rime  
crystallizes, magnifies who we've been:  
the girls on summer's shore when young and prime.

## Elderberries

Black Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*, spp. *canadensis*) known for its culinary and medicinal uses throughout the world, is known by many different names: Elder, Fläder, Sureau, Sambucus, Sambuci, Sauco, Hollunder, Ellhorn...

Collect them, my elders told me.  
When they are ripe, cook them into preserves  
or syrup. Do not eat them uncooked.  
They are medicine to keep you safe, to keep you  
from illness and coughs, to keep you breathing  
through the worst times. You can eat them,  
but you must prepare them first. For some, raw,  
straight from the stems, elderberries are poison.

I plucked and tasted them anyway,  
surviving their dark seedy bitterness,  
worth the effort and stains on the hands,  
because they held the flavor of wild  
and were available for the taking.

But now, late August, elderberries ripening  
are the taste of my daughter leaving home for college,  
of darkness on the tongue ripped vivid pink from the inside,  
the color of a wound, bull's-eyed by Mercurochrome—  
the color of danger. The tongue wants to shout,  
*Watch out!*

These are words unspoken. I find no way  
to separate from the rawness of this time,  
nor the seed from flesh in the ripening.

## Stippled Passing

You could see the gilding beneath  
those stippling waters, the speckles  
of a trout's back, sleek  
and slipping along golden gravel,  
shadowed streambanks; among  
grassy striations of summer's heat  
passing.

You may have wanted eternal summer—  
that moment so perfect with mint-lined streams, trees  
unwilling to give up their green.  
But if time stood still, sun in brassy sky  
steadily beaming, you would turn, seek the shift  
to bronze, to that time of deciduous rain.  
You would seek crimson's run, fill baskets  
with round, sweet apples,  
and let the pigments of the roseate world drain.

Let be. Release your hold on the season.  
You may no longer see the gold  
purling beneath the rippled stream. Gold in water  
is fleeting flash: memory's afterimage. Creek waters  
and sun roll on. Hidden along the stream's ledge,  
trout sleep, dream.

## As We Wait for Winter

On our farm,  
last fresh apples and red cabbages  
fill the fridge in pails.  
Brussels sprouts and reptilian Nero kale,  
dark green against golden hay mulch,  
holding on so long against deep-freeze,  
offer themselves up.  
Within days, fried butternut squash  
replaces apple on the daily menu.  
Two randy goat bucks penned  
beside the does  
plead for mercy.  
We dress two turkeys.  
November's light  
bids us to stash sweets.  
Woodpile grows,  
box elder beetles creep  
indoors, and for three consecutive nights  
we usher a small brown bat from our house,  
open the door to the sepiaed world,  
and release her.  
Then, snow drifts in,  
covers field now glowing  
beneath a waxing gibbous moon.  
Against the bluing cold,  
farmhouse windows shine gold  
from light within.

## The Ripening Abecedarian

And every good thing comes to an end:  
butterflies seal up the chrysalis and sigh while  
cherries await sun's heart to release their  
dark fragrance to the sky, call orioles to take and  
eat each berry, carry each across field to shadowed  
fencerows, deposit spoils in sheltered  
ground. Yet, ripening is not an end. Fruits carried to  
hidden places conspire—they plot and scheme to  
invest their reach. Peaches, pears, raspberries'  
juiciness invites the same—a game of sorts, in parched July,  
kindling avian desire, the flash of jeweled color  
    hitches a ride in beauty's beak.

Look to the ripening.  
Make promises to an unknown. Move deeper in time. Send  
notes to dreamers and orchard growers to pluck each  
offering; to sort and toss, sowing windfalls,  
proffering nectar's possibility. New generations spark  
quietly in Earth's electric heart. Quickened by ferment,  
ripened to rot, sweet flesh vanishes. Caterpillars dissolve.  
Softened presences merge in  
time's fertile womb. Pits and kernels disrobe. Decomposed,  
undone, they lodge in soil, and like pupae, re-form; reveal  
verdancy. Cotyledons unfurl. Rhizomes spread; affix.  
    Stems and roots reach;  
wet, veined wings emerge from the clear-shelled chrysalis.  
X-ing spirals of down and up, stalk, blossom, and insect  
yield to sun's exquisite kiss. Butterfly tongues  
    sip new season while summer's memory ripens in  
zymurgy's elixirs.

## Winter-Laced Lovesong

Like a snowshoe's golden ash heartwood  
lashed and woven with hart sinew  
I will bear you through the fiercest storms,  
carve a path through  
many winter's histories. Let me  
bend my shape to yours,  
flexible in long journeys.  
Survival's net is laced with stars  
and framed by honeycombed portals,  
hexagonal, echoing  
snow's ephemeral crystals,  
that, like my love, grow  
endlessly anew.

## Minus Forty

In extreme cold  
thermometer becomes icon  
at dawn, dusk, and times in-between.  
Water becomes a source  
of amazement. How, in the house, it flows, mellow  
until mercury drops, then bursts pipes forged in foundries.  
Pale needles grow beneath dead grasses,  
frost ferns and trees flourish on windows  
unleashed like some tropical forest.  
But this is not the equator, nor the tropics:  
it is a place of glass—that slow liquid  
our eyes cannot trace, and while we seek clarity  
crystals grow all around us.

Stoke the wood stove. Turn up the thermostat.  
While creaks and crackings begin, huddle.  
All you need  
is to keep alive  
one  
fluid  
green  
thought.

## January Brink

Strange how, standing in my thickest winter parka  
in our snow-covered field, I have no insulation  
from January sadness—not the longing for summer's green  
growing, water free-flowing, late nights of light,  
elegant foods, of languid gathering. Instead,  
I mourn winter's passing. Fallen flakes will aggregate  
to corn snow (who knows why it's called that)  
and in mere weeks, amber grass blades will re-inflate  
with green. If my life traverses the path of lemniscate—  
the figure-eight pattern of daylength  
on a mathematician's graph—  
solstice extremes of light and dark are the year's  
outer reaches, and January  
is where cliffs meet sea on the far banks  
of some Scottish island, where all we can do  
is turn back, cross the middle of deep  
and fling ourselves to the other side  
not knowing, or remembering,  
if the fullness of June is so much better than this:  
midday January,  
clear sky,  
sun-drenched snow  
where my tracks  
across the new year's field  
pool blue.

## Late Winter in Dieter Hollow

Like wool strands drawn by hand  
from roving readied for the drop spindle,  
wind pulls steam from the spring creek  
as the stream's relative cold meets  
frigid air.

On the ground, snow is lithic,  
blizzard followed by rain, then

more cold in extreme.

Deer become bold, browse  
every last raspberry cane and apple branch  
within reach. Skunks rouse,  
leave tracks in snow like cat feet.

In our farmhouse we drowse,  
consume pies and Dutch oven beans.  
And though bitter cold stretches as far  
as we can see, and laundry  
still freezes into thin boards, light begins  
its opening march. I am willing now

to concede the release  
of the frozen world to melt,  
and, being practical, to wish it  
to melt  
without speed.

## In February It Begins

All it takes  
is the drop that slips  
along the glassy slope  
of icicle. Maples on the hillside  
nod, imperceptibly. Robins  
descend upon hackberry fruit  
while snow searches its crystalline memory—  
remembers something about melt:  
beaded water, strung  
and running down—  
hillside woods and duff  
let go of ice,  
snow.

Echoing the downy woodpecker's tap,  
my child's hands, surrounded by his father's,  
place the spile for maple sap.

## Verdancy

1

Amid bare umber trunks and branches  
the eternal moss and verdigris-covered cliff crouches,  
a beacon.

2

Emerald – the color best for our eyes – rises, re-inflates  
each grass blade, animates  
while we wake, eat, sleep.

3

Fields convert viridian.  
Woodlands hold back.

4

Trees become rivers channeling sky to earth, wet  
to verdant unfurling.

5

Buds burst, cast off sheathes, reveal prasine.

6

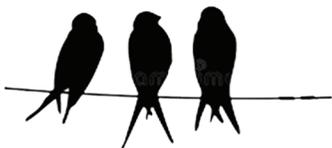
Willows flare gold to green while  
trilling, trilling April stirs.

## Hymenoptera I: Wasps

My sisters of tiny waists  
and hooked wing;  
of crane-like legs trailing thoughtlessly  
behind, you cling to eaves,  
mandibles able to deconstruct  
my house while you build anew each year.  
I wonder what drives you to tear  
and vibrate, plaster a paper lantern nest  
so perfectly placed to shed bitter weathers; your cone  
is shaped with spiraled intentions  
for your brood. So much  
work in a season, fierce  
purpose. I fear you, your sting, your hum,  
that ferocious roar of sisterhood.

Let me not harm you, sisters. My heart's  
desire for sanctuary is like yours: encircled  
by this humming, this  
home building, layer by layer  
from the grit and spit  
of the world.

# Heartbreak and Beauty





## Aubade for the Never-Ending Flow of Milk

There were the days of goats, and goats,  
and milking our Nubian goats, holding them in place  
to help their kids latch, *Come on latch!* while we  
praised them, stroked their noses  
and long, lovely ears.

There were the sleepless nights  
of rising to the call of a kid caught in a fence  
or the pleading calls of our does  
frightened by predators, sounding for all the world  
like abandoned elders in a nursing home,  
or the murmured call of the buck professing his love  
throughout the neighborhood  
from his separate pasture across the road.

There were nights our children dozed deep,  
dreaming the sleep of the milk-sated  
while we, in freezing February waited and waited  
for another kid to drop, needing our help—  
and the next milking at dawn.

## Invocation: Call It Home

To this place,  
Wisconsin, *the gathering of waters*,  
we bind ourselves, call it home.

Through seasons droughty and wild we marvel  
at our inability to tame weathers  
or waters. We cannot leave the river. When she roars  
we call her fickle, follow her trail of flotsam  
just the same as stumping behind  
a maladjusted baler flinging hay  
beyond the rick: we pick up what's tossed  
only to come back and try again.

Like caddis fly larvae in spring creeks, cobbling homes  
of gravel and spit, hunkering in cold and wet, we wait  
for that ripe glorious May afternoon  
to soar.

We are does listening for danger, watching  
for the swing of the antlers that lift  
and set us in flight.

Coyotes howl at the edges, hungry  
for spoils we won't share:  
our caches of dried morels, flagons of maple syrup.  
Ours is a king's lair.

We call this land home because we are here.

We wish for nothing more  
than pie in summer,  
peenting woodcocks in spring, soaring  
over fields where turkeys fan,  
gravy in fall,  
wood-fired winters.

We too, smell the changes seasons bring and still, we stay.

Therefore,  
let us bless these streams with rod and creel;  
these fields with trowel and seed. Fill  
our bellies with berry and cream and brim  
our hearts full.

## What I Love About Where I Live, Driftless Region

The missing glacial remains, making its name sound  
as if it is unshackled; unanchored; unconstrained.

Rounded hills with their straight-lined limestone hearts.  
I pretend they are mountains.

Waters seeping from every crevice—clean, constant,  
comforting as it sings, threading its way  
to the Mississippi River.

All of the bright-green growing world rich in wild foods  
to feed a pemmican heart with blackcaps and hickory nuts,  
and wild apples from trees planted by deer.

Alphabet-lettered county highways passing  
former dairy farms and the crossroads where  
cheese factories once stood.

Golden gravel township roads that sing to my child-heart  
of Yellow Brick Road; handcrafted houses nestled  
against hills with their dreams, so innocent.

The librarian in Solar Town whose two-story palace  
contains a coffee maker and glass elevator,  
and she'll take you on a ride to the second floor.

The mail carrier, who still tethers each of us  
to one another, weaving a township  
from which most of the people have departed.

The snows, when they come, deep and thick to receive  
my wooden skis; maple sap in buckets shining blue,  
and on a clear winter day, the blue flames  
from each step in snow; redwings and peepers in March;  
snap peas in June straight from the vine; barn swallows  
swerving in July; sandhill cranes passing through;  
goldfinch and chickadee song all year, but especially

the way the light angles between these creek-carved hills,  
each day of each year of all the decades I have lived here.

## Art Goes Unbidden

Art goes unbidden  
among my rural neighbors, the ones  
who have always been  
here. Strange ideas come  
from those who've never left  
their home place,  
who wish to make their mark—  
the man who tries  
to arrange his woodpile  
so the logs of dark  
red elms spell out his name  
amid lighter splits  
of ash and oak.

Uncalled for, art shows up.

## Each In Their Own Time

“Each in their own time settled deeper”

from "Almanac" by Lois Parker Edstrom

On the farm,  
we settle deeper each year  
into debt  
and soil. What binds us here  
but gravity and endless  
circling seasons  
that wind  
tighter  
like a watch spring being wound  
or  
like the turns taken round each  
labyrinth bend when walking the path  
to its petaled center,  
this knowing each year:  
the first honeybee's flight,  
the swallows' return and departure;  
breaking ice on the livestock tank, waiting  
for rivulets beneath the road's frozen skin.

We forgot long ago  
how it all begins, this ride  
so caught in troubled  
love of land. We cycle  
like sun-drawn waters' rise  
to a humid August sky,  
and fall surprised, hard,  
like December's frozen rain  
covering what remains undone.

## When Freshly Painted

In the canvas of my memory  
it is May, the bulb-sprung flowers  
full in bloom—  
the rain-washed air, soft. I hear  
the breeze, the rooster's scratching feet,  
the red hens' startled squawks  
as they race away from each egg laid hidden.  
And I see you there, husband,  
lean, lifting yourself to the seat of the tractor,  
your hair still gold, its waves catching spring's  
showering light, mirroring sun and shadow  
on furrows spread before you, prescience  
of light's sparks on corn rows in mid-July.  
No dark glaze lies concealed beneath this scene. Instead,

like porcelain figurines, the red hens are perfectly placed,  
tipped, tails in air as they peck grit, as we ready  
the fields of our lives, straight-lined with every hope  
to the vanishing point, that time for us when  
all was new,  
no distance too great,  
and our hearts: cottage doors  
freshly painted.

## In the Time of Climate Change

When the rains came down  
we sighed with relief for the parched soil  
and shriveled corn, a belief in water's return:  
the creek again full of song.

When the rains came down  
we slipped on muddied roads  
and farmyard muck,  
crossed trenches, overflowed  
as we looked for sun—

But drenching rains came until  
everywhere puddles shone.  
Water pounded windows and walls.  
Hillside slopes sprouted waterfalls.  
Creeks filled, yards slickened.

Waters rose; roads submerged.  
In cornfields, floated fence posts emerged  
while livestock, bathed in flood's silt,  
struggled to stand: sinking, stinking, sickened

when the rains came down.

## Farmer / Janus

Never thought I'd see the day  
when I could let it all go, cows  
in their stanchions, hay  
in the mow, swallows'  
cupped-mud nests clinging fast.

Empty at last  
the barn sings of wind, ghosts, horses,  
curses. I find my way  
home from a factory at night,  
my barn dark. Now?  
No regret:  
no livestock to feed,  
no manure to haul, no need  
to worry, and yet

I am unnerved. I cannot  
repay my debt  
to this beautiful dirt.

## The Shots Came Quick

From the creek brush at the bottom of the hillside field,  
the shots came quick.

One dropped, then the other—  
doe, then buck, both yearling deer  
from the many sets of twin fawns last summer,  
both from the herd that plagued our orchard and crops.  
The hunter caught them swift, mid-leap;  
shots true and clear in intention.  
One full-grown doe I have seen before  
descended the far end of the field alert; on edge;  
and catching the scent of wrong,  
she vanished.

So many years I have watched  
the fawns, the yearlings, the heavy-shouldered bucks  
parade field and yard. I have watched their increase  
following the death of farms here; seen their young born  
in the woodlot edge graze where dairy cows once stood.  
I cannot begrudge them their due from this land  
so altered and confused; neither wild nor tame. Mostly,  
I cannot blame my neighbor, the hunter—once a farmer—  
who, with his child, needs the food.

I pull forelegs; the hunter hind.  
We slide the bodies along November grasses  
satisfied. The deer lived a good life.  
Like us, they ate of wild  
and tame, and as I would wish,  
dropped with the beauty  
in their eyes of trees and sky—  
and sky.

## Barn Elegiac

Ninety years of squab in the cupola,  
mud fonts fashioned by swallows line the beams.  
Halters, tines of hand-set rakes  
hold the dust of decades.  
Scattered straw carries the memories  
of long-dead horses buried with the calves.

In brighter days, gambrels and glory adorned oaken boards  
coated with red oxide and rye paint. This barn  
withstood storms, tethered strength and shelter  
with pulse of heifers, Percherons' muscle and mind,  
meadow-sweet breath of Golden Guernseys,  
filled milk cans, felines prancing along rafters,  
all the unnamable creatures of the ever composting.  
The beings of this barn warmed its walls; their breaths  
infused each beam and board,  
and like invisible integument, kept it upright

until,  
one snowy night, freed of the living warmth  
of even one dung beetle,  
down, it comes—  
chestnut timbers prostrate beneath  
corrugated roof, cedar shakes.

In the end, after the fall,  
the scavenged red-painted boards, aged and faded,  
are gathered, cut, and hammered  
to a vacationer's bedroom wall.

## Compost

We buried our Nubian goat buck  
at the base of the compost pile,  
beneath soiled hay from the barn  
containing last spring's stillborns  
now decayed.

He was beautiful, that buck, at ease  
with his pasture. Each September  
we listened as he declared *love*  
in the night air. It rolled across the bottomland,  
a gentled trumpeting, softened, for does' ears.  
Now his offspring,  
wethers and one young buck,  
walk around the compost pile, graze on  
what weeds they find above snows  
until a new season brings  
green pastures' return in spring.

## For Those Who Thought They Could Buy a Farm

Listen:

Did you know that next to your renovated dairy barn residence, your *Better Homes and Gardens* mansion stands out just a little bit from the rest of this run-down neighborhood? I mean, your SUVs don't even carry the local dust from our lonely roads. You must wash them pretty often. Did you know that there are those of us who roam the road in September for puffball mushrooms, bigger than a round loaf of your favorite artisan bread?

Listen:

There are those of us who belong here in this place scribed by contoured corn, hay strips, and curving woodlots. We are a little different from someone who never knew a corn picker from a baler. Oh, we swagger as we twang our yeah-no responses to each other's stories, shootin' the breeze, standing along rusted barbed wire still strung between our eighty-acre rectangles. The breeze now mostly wafts above fields overgrown with weeds, over woods that used to be pastured when the air was dairy, scented with cow and cheddar.

Staying where we belong means we sink into  
an impossible mortgage, settle  
in a farmhouse mostly unchanged over fifty years  
while barns degrade or go down;  
we raise feeder calves  
and go to work at a factory far away  
in some town.

Your words, though kind,  
have no meaning here.  
We belong, because we tried  
to make it work once,  
in rural America. We farmed.



# Of Origins and Aging





## In Dark Times We Gather Light

In my childhood I breathed the work of bees.

The holy fragrance of burning beeswax scented the air of the chapel where nuns knelt. Smoky essence of honey embraced their clustered forms. Habit-clad in black gown and veil, they raised their faces in prayer. Their white wimples caught and reflected veils of jeweled light from stained glass.

I remember the nuns

and weep at the sight  
of the statue beside the empty one-room school—  
a Franciscan sister sculpted in bronze; a young nun,  
ringing the school bell, calling ghost children together,  
her wind-swept garments frozen in time.

*Sisters, striped black and white, cloistered  
and clustered and kind, Where have you gone?*

Thinking of sisters  
in the deepening dark of November  
I melt beeswax in my kitchen, remembering  
our honeybees, our *apis* sisters who create comb,  
shape their cellular cathedrals from veils  
of gathered sunlight. Hexagonal chambers of glory,  
of gold, dissolve before me in my kettle.

When I last saw our bees alive,  
they chewed open the wax portal of the hive—  
a sudden shift from warm spring day, to sub-zero.  
Too early for their first forage (dandelion, willow)  
honeybees rose. Too early in March light

they took flight. Deep cold returned; I saw them  
no more. Inside the opened hive in May, they lay  
strewn, all dead.

Brushing dead bees from honey-filled combs,  
mourning bees, I watch their cathedrals dissolve;  
I skim wax; pour molten gold; send gratitude  
for light gathered and transformed. I save wax  
to melt into healing balm.

We dress in white for St. Lucia Day,  
the Swedish celebration of light at winter solstice,  
place beeswax candles on Lucia's golden crown  
and into the hand of each child as we process  
through school halls. We bring breath of song  
to darkened classrooms; light from candles recast  
from beeswax gathered in churches,  
beeswax bearing prayers; holding sweetness;  
offering hope.

*Oh Sisters All, still in dark times  
we light candles made and remade, like  
stone reshaped into sand; water to snow.  
From your work, Sisters, we make  
and remake possibility  
gathered from luminescence.*

Spring unfolds again. Draperies of birdsong  
flutter down, from robins  
to cardinals

to doves.  
From daffodils  
to tulips  
to lilac,  
color and fragrance will blossom, partnering  
with early flowers of tree and field, calling bees,  
scarce in our farmyard now,  
but on this day, errant honeybees,  
bumblebees, come to me

as I sit in my bright yellow coat. They ask,  
are you a dandelion in bloom? Or perhaps  
a willow inflorescence?

*No, I tell them. I am not what you seek.*

Or maybe I am.

Maybe I wish  
to be nectar droplets  
consecrated by canticle of mourning dove;  
collected and carried in bee belly;  
disgorged in hive; fanned over; concentrated  
into powerful salve of sunshine—  
the honeyed smear of blooming life  
prepared to seal out darkness; ready  
to heal.

## Baptism

Beyond the placards of words  
that cover the first grade varnished desk,

this that  
he she it  
is are  
was were

two syllables float into view:

*ri ver*

You speak them.

Teacher smiles and nods and all at once  
you can see, *yes!*  
the stream of words  
as it joins another  
and another

and the waters rise—  
they rise, *yes!*  
and you hear rapids  
while your lips  
push out words  
cascading  
sweeping you  
down one torrent  
to another  
surging  
as current  
courses through you

words pour,  
propel you forward :

you shiver as the spray hits—

sweeps you away

Your desk becomes a gleaming wood canoe  
and just as you wonder how you'll  
steer this craft

Teacher holds out your paddle

you plunge it in  
dip and pull  
S stroke  
J stroke  
feather forward  
dip and pull

for a moment  
you turn

back, raise your paddle  
in salute to

Teacher  
as she waves  
from the  
far  
far  
shore.

## Purple Lines

I loved those times in elementary school  
when the teacher handed out mimeographed papers, designs  
fragrant with ink, lilac-colored outlines, images  
for the school year's iconic calendar.  
There was something sweet about the scent  
and how the world fell neatly within  
ropes of spring-crocus lavender, shaped  
just enough to suggest form,  
not too constraining, or demanding, but kind. I imagine  
a microscope looking into my heart could still find  
the outlines etched for each month's celebration:  
September's autumn leaves; maple, beech, oak leading  
to October's jack-o'-lanterns; November's cornucopia,  
a plenty we never had, but loved to fill in;  
December's candy canes on conical evergreens;  
February's cardioid drawings for cut-out valentines.

In my childhood, in the land of coal mines, colors beyond  
black, ash, and rust only existed for us  
in the palette of wax crayons, hues  
found in an eight-piece box. The world  
was sketched simpler then, in those times—  
as it always has been for children. We learned our shapes,  
our primary colors, our timeline of seasons. We knew  
what was proper as we sat with mimeographed reasons  
for art. But we dreamed; pushed our colors  
to the edges, when our part was simply  
to stay within purple lines.

## Poems Appear Like Light

like sunlight sifting through trees,  
a shimmer on forest duff—

and all at once, you see the opening,  
an invitation to follow  
like Alice chasing after her rabbit—

Run

to the shine you've sought all your life: the trail left off  
when your mother called you home for chicken soup;  
when your children call you back to them—

Slip away, try again

to climb the holy slant of light thrown from a rift  
in overcast sky, or ascend twilight's frothy pink frills,  
the alpine mirage shining above hills,  
clouds mounded on horizon—

Reach again

for coral rays, a distant vision, the edge  
between imagined mountain and heaven, but  
tumble, feel the thud of your arms and knees  
on grass as you land.

One more time make a pass

for light,  
sweep your hands through the aria  
of descending night  
as fireflies glimmer, and rise.

## Letter to the Fifteen-Year-Old Artist: On Wishing

Oh dear one,

As you look out the classroom window on your decaying city, you try to do what your high school English teacher has asked. In this thinning light of fall, leaves drop, expose naked branches, framing your city's skyline. You try to imagine other lives though you do not know what the light looks like through branches on streets in a city that is not yours.

At fifteen, you wish for love,  
and it's around the bend, seeking you—  
a sweet one whose nearness will make you tingle.  
You will know love, loss, and your wishes

will fill like an expanding sponge  
in a glass bowl of water, though you  
believe, as your elders tell you—  
these things you dream are not possible.

At age five, your greatest wish  
was to be able to read; at six, to write a book.  
And in sixth grade, when the New York author  
visited your class, showed a film of his book,  
you asked how you, too, could do this.  
From the answers he gave, clearly, only he,  
anointed and from elsewhere, could. Later,  
shamefacedly trying to read his work,  
you didn't enjoy it, and found it all bewildering.  
(Someday you will see this book again and realize  
it is poorly written – but) You were left then  
believing that wishes

are like soap bubbles which lose their rainbow shine,  
thin, show a gunmetal patch before they pop,  
that when soap bubbles rise,  
the crowd *oobs* and *aahs*—but when they disappear,  
they mean nothing.

Out in the big world you will march for rights  
of people you were taught to despise. You will fight  
for your own intelligence. Your choices, though  
you do not see a clear and immediate outcome,  
are good ones. What has always called you  
will call you onward. The time will come

when you find time gone, evaporated  
like fog that rises above a creek. The way  
will never be clear. The ones you love  
and who will leave, will always  
pull at your wishes.

But wishes, dear one,

are actually seeds of dandelions. They float  
on wind like opportunists and bloom  
wherever they land, an endless  
annual procession of generations until  
they arrive at your door. Extravagant,  
they eventually colonize.

Remember this:  
Wishes come true. Within a long life, all dreams  
coalesce, and manifest as you imagine.

## Women Tending

“Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time, the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.”

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

She remembers all the women who have sat indoors tending  
fires and women who walked, carrying water jugs  
on their heads; waters in placental sacs within their bodies.  
Women who scooped clay and breathed life into vessels,  
into stories, into songs, into the material of sustenance.  
They, like she, planted seeds, harvested blossoms, fruits,  
roots, and seasoned meals at their tables with stories  
of women through generations—the walls  
permeated by the creative forces of women, the bricks  
charged with dreams, suffused with memories of sunlight, rivers,  
clay.

The brick maker scoops clay from the bed of river.  
Its coolness coats her hands as she smoothes clay  
into form, evens exposed surfaces with trowel.  
At her kiln altar she kindles flame, bakes  
away water, crystals. Basalts of ocean floor  
and granites of land comingle, sing,  
and in the final flash of inferno, fuse.

For days the bricks breathe out heat.  
They inhale sunshine, desert  
night air. The brick maker sweeps away ash.  
She lifts her bricks. One by one,  
she carries them to her secret place

by the river. One by one she massages them  
with mortar, humming a Mixolydian memory  
as she works. Brick by brick  
she builds her place, a base as ancient  
as sea floor and continent whose crystals  
give rise to light and life.

Memories of mineral pulse  
a scintillating song.

The brick maker sings  
as worlds burn within her,

The tender of the hearth  
hums as her hands push into dough,  
as she pushes another stick  
into the cooking fire

as worlds effervesce

she hums—orients toward  
door, toward sun, leans out,  
tending toward light. She

rises, crosses threshold  
to seek her place  
among rocks,  
at a shore,  
in a cave, beside  
a stream, within  
a light-filled room—

to set cadence to page.  
She must raise herself to this task  
even if no one  
ever reads her words because  
the great machinery of the world  
depends upon  
the highly-tuned listener:  
the woman  
who sets down her  
bricks

and begins

the rendering.

## Smock

Beneath the red smock she wore like a gown  
two hearts beat. Hidden. Only she could say  
what secret she carried to that far town.

Eighteen, alone, she moved toward the unknown,  
her child, concealed, growing in her each day  
beneath the red smock she wore like a gown.

Sapphire eyes blazed, she wore love like a crown;  
danced with abandon at the prom in May.  
Then away she slipped to the college town.

Thanksgiving, home, brothers teased how she'd grown!  
What had she eaten? How much did she weigh  
in the big red smock she wore like a gown?

She knew that we reap whatever we've sown.  
To Mary she genuflected and prayed  
for her secret in the faraway town.

She kissed her baby, then gave her away—  
a story her children never have known:  
Two hearts beneath a red smock like a gown;  
she left one behind in that far town.

## Tightrope

If you saw that squirrel in the road,  
you'd swerve. For the dog trotting on the road's shoulder,  
you would pull the car over and go to the farmhouse  
to let them know. You would shriek to a stop—  
race to the other side of the highway ahead  
of the semi to scoop up the Amish toddler  
and bring her back to her plain house,  
her aproned mother at the door, awakened  
to catastrophe, clutching her knuckles to her mouth  
before taking her child back into her arms.

One breath before the world ends,  
the tears fall this side of disaster  
as we each place one foot in front of the other,  
heels to toe, feeling the wire, its sway so high  
above the crowd on the streets so far below,  
holding its breath.

You weep for the father, who, beneath  
the overturned canoe on the placid river moments  
after paddling over the unseen dam, loses control, dives,  
pulls his teenage daughter from the waterfalls'  
drowning cycle. The father lifts his daughter up before  
letting go. She lives; he goes under.

You mourn the mother who threw herself  
over her two-year-old child  
beneath the approaching wheels  
of the school bus on your city's streets,  
and you walk along those streets each day  
as we each put one foot in front of the other,  
feel the wire, but plod with a measure of grace, try  
to find a way around—

*swerve*—

turn aside disaster.

## A Parallelogram

consists of two lines equidistant.  
We are spectator and observed, reflected  
in each other's eyes. When you wake, I sleep beneath  
skies charted in an ever-expanding universe  
on a globe of lines and crossings,  
and I wonder what grid I must cross to reach you  
in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria—or at which degree of longing  
your heart beats. The world is divided,  
the sky, a satellite net of impulses. But stars  
still shine like diamonds. I could tell you that winter here  
is cold and gray, and you could say  
that sand is brown—but it's not.  
In each crystal of silica  
or frozen drop of water: prisms lie within.  
We are composed of rainbows  
arching across horizons, reaching  
beyond rectangles and maps.

Come to my desert. We could wait for melt,  
share cups of mint tea, and recall:  
all lines are imaginary—all geometry, all plans,  
just ideas. Look instead

to the trees. Like rivers, like our capillaries,  
they root and branch, knitting the heart  
of light and dark into curves  
of longing.

## Restoration

A silver earring, impressed with panic grass,  
crafted by the prairie conservationist's granddaughter,  
one half of a bookmatched pair,  
its mirrored self a celebration  
of miraculous—seed multiplied  
from the restored tallgrass prairie:

lost—  
like so many things in our lives, but it left my heart  
broken for years, until, like a lantern in a distant, dark field,  
illumination appears—all those things lost;  
gone but not forgotten:

my childhood friend, a lumpy stuffed cat, pink and limp  
(for whom I was not allowed to speak my love) I last saw  
carted to the curb in an ash can;

the names of childhood friends;  
bullies and their power over me;  
failed grades and tests with all the facts they held;

the dialect of my German relatives,  
their letters sent between two world wars;  
their address in the old country.

Intangible losses come into view, rise  
like successive blooms in a wide prairie  
releasing their sun-hungry hearts to seed, wind, time:

fears of surviving another year  
in an Appalachian coal valley wracked  
by depression, unemployment, cancer;  
the uncertain newness of going forth in the world;  
the solitary, desperate mornings;  
the longing to find a home and make a family.  
Ah, but when the strangely lovely family blossomed,  
there was shattering. So simple a thing.  
A holiday tree ornament, green,  
lantern-shaped, that my mama gave to me for keeping,  
the one she loved best, dropped  
from the hands of my over-curious seven-year-old.

And though years later the ornament was not forgotten  
by either of us, when the finely-wrought glass lay  
in silver fragments on the tile floor  
releasing its emptiness, it took away all brokenness  
and jagged fear. The clarity

of that which was lost was reflected  
in remembered silver:  
the earring impressed with prairie grass,  
its remaining lonely mate given away as I claimed  
the power of memory and story to see each season  
rise from ash, then bloom again.

## Mapping the Empty Lot

where my grandmother's house stood  
is like tonguing a lost tooth. I cannot  
find my bearings. Only broken boulevard flagstones say  
there was a home here once.

Gravel replaces grassy yard.

I am at a loss

to restore the snapdragon-lined passage  
from hedge in front  
to where apple trees blossomed in back; the place  
along the fence where we children scavenged  
pears and plums from the old lady next door  
who yelled whenever we got near.

I pace the ghost house  
where barrels of apple wine once  
convened in the basement and jam jars dribbled  
sweetness along wooden shelves, while upstairs  
at the dining room table, we gathered  
for Thanksgiving.

I strip veneer

from memory and try to measure  
the gap in years, all that happened  
in this place: the fears for sons  
gone to war, the path worn from mailbox to door.  
Their mother prayed over photos of them in uniform  
on the living room wall while she waited  
to caress their faces. The sons  
returned from their hidden hells  
emptied, their souls scattered, shattered  
by mortars. Time moved on  
without them, as the shells of their lives filled the halls.

My grandmother sat  
in the rocking chair, swaying  
back and forth  
on her crumbling front porch floor  
where she still hovers.  
And I, on empty gravel, still search  
for the door.

## What Remains

The mother in her aproned plissé dress on linoleum,  
the father, asleep on the couch after another shift  
at the fire station, the Lionel trains buzzing  
and clicking on their three-rail track, the brother  
at the lever watching it all run, run, run  
in endless loops of lemiscate.

The lone surviving spruce tree planted for Arbor Day,  
this one from kindergarten, still grows fluffy and low,  
and the orange tabby still places his paws across  
the gray-painted porch with heavy precision.

The swingset painted a weary barn-red waits for you  
to fly, the tiny cherry tree planted by your hands  
from a pit along with the peach seedling reaches for the sky.  
All of it remains: the vivid aqua blue pool  
at the city playground down the street and all of the feet  
splashing through its slapping, draining waters  
each ending of a summer day.

This, too, stays and does not melt away:  
wet snow in heaps over ash cans, piles  
of neighbor kids flying on sleds downhill  
on a never-ending snow day away from school,  
the way navy blue wool hats and scarves  
and knitted red mittens cook on silver radiators  
when face-cold and satisfied,  
we arrive in time to go indoors for soup and bed.

All of it still lives: grandmas with crumpled tissues stuffed  
at their bosoms, their hugs, warm and papery-crinkled,  
and tea at the enamel kitchen table with them  
and their wispy gray-haired old lady friends,  
the beers at taverns with the men  
and shot-glass colas through needlelike cocktail straws  
while the jukebox belts out blues.

Coal trains still chug,  
smoke rises in the mining valley,  
cinders on snow turn it a sad yellow,  
wispy blue flames cover mountains  
of burning coal waste at night,  
while in daylight the many-colored sparks  
flash on burning culm mountains as raindrops strike.

Still there rests  
the grace of June in deep green mountain woods  
and the startling joy of holiday tree lights  
red-green-ocher-blue at year's end reflected  
from each strand of tinsel, each fluted indent  
of each silvery moment.

All of it, all here. All time remains.

## Recollection

It's the same route each time I visit the antique shop:  
round the Depression glass ruby and rose,  
the lace-edged doilies draped over  
oak-veneered dressers and veer  
to white enamel kettles rimmed in black,  
complete with balers. I don't know how  
I would use them, but wish to rescue them  
from mishandling. I pass linens,  
piles of square tablecloths meant for unblemished  
porcelain-topped family kitchen tables.  
I saunter to aprons and search  
for McCoy pottery, the real thing, striped pink and blue,  
hoping for the spouted mixing bowl I gave up  
at a hardware store thirty years ago  
and still regret. I move on to empty canning jars,  
sold at antique store prices.

I want to tell you there, behind the counter  
with your dangly earrings and chic apparel,  
you, with your clever auction bids: I seek  
blue Ball jars I'll fill with produce and preserve  
a generation's dignity. Shouldn't there be special prices  
for those of us who hold traditions,  
having used these tools continuously  
for half a century? We are keepers  
of memory. We sift our flour, ream  
our lemons on green glass, mash potatoes  
with wooden-handled deftness.  
We saw the Depression through  
our parents, who filled jars  
with Victory Garden fervor  
and sealed them in steaming kettles  
against the onslaught of time.

## Revolution

When I'm gone  
all that I tried to control  
will run wild, and with it,  
all that I tried not to control.  
At each doorstep, orange lilies.  
Tulips will cavort with the garlic,  
which, cloning itself many times over,  
will overspread the yard.  
Fruit trees and shrubs will succor bees;  
dangle shriveled apples and berries.  
Flocks will feast then rise  
as foxes prowl beneath  
sprawling brambles.  
I know this  
even as I plant yet more bulbs,  
set trees into a compost-filled trench;  
deer will browse these at leisure.  
I will roll over  
in my crypt of soil and ash.  
My wild Eden once regained,  
will evolve; I will turn over  
endlessly to blossom.

## Matter

Matter, I've been told, cannot be created or destroyed—

and still I wonder what comes after this life of breakage  
and strain. If I could send an emissary to an afterlife,  
would she return saying:

*It's grand! Full of swan boats and magnificent music,*

or

*It's simply too dark to describe—less light comes through  
than in a mile-deep mine. For me*

annihilation would be fine. No need for worry if matter  
transforms from molecule to galaxy,  
or particles change partners to the atom's pulse.  
The tiniest specks that comprise each stone and being  
once swirled in ancient seas,  
drifted downward,  
made their bed in sediment on ocean floor.  
The flesh and bone of which we are made,  
compressed into stone:  
uplifted;  
eroded;  
dissolved;  
floated;  
coalesced, to plunge again,  
amphibious this time, through placental waters—  
only momentarily breaking free—  
from ocean.

## Panoramic

From the view of this precious age,  
as landscape seen from an eagle's lair,  
the lay of life is good, fulfilled.

Every heartbeat,  
each purr the ears have known, every  
day whose light is scattered  
by clouds of every color  
is a goblet brim-full  
of rainbow, complemented  
with sparks and darkness both.

In the course of eons  
black coal transforms, hardens  
to diamond reflecting each hue,  
tint and tone; the palette brings  
multifaceted vision.

Beyond this moment,  
this life, I wish to see

how bees follow ley lines  
to the center, ovary deep,  
then out again winging,  
warmed by solar rays  
to follow paths scented  
with others' passings  
in the buzz-filled air.

## Passerine

When my time is over, if I were to choose,  
(I've told my children,)  
in the next life I would be

a swallow,  
swoop from sky to ground,  
scoop mud up in my beak  
to place on the barn rafter. I'd build  
a shallow shelf, a dish nest of dry adobe,  
a token of loyalty to my family—  
not to last forever after, but to hold on only  
as long as the life will last in the barn:  
shelter for so very unseen many.

And on the shelf, I would keep my nestlings, sweep  
the air for food to feed my beak-open young,  
show them, when fledging, how to leap  
and trust air to hold their future—

and leave at the golden fat-blooming season  
of sunflower, fly far, find adventure,  
sail home in spring on waves of apple blossom  
and first sweet clover—

—I'd choose swallow when my time is over.



## Geosmin Notes

### “Stone Circle”

Inspired by a painted image of Castlerigg Stone Circle in Cumbria U.K. by Catherine Edmund.

“While your glass spectacles / dissolve into puddles” refers to glass as a slow liquid that pools over time.

### “Eloquence Engraved in Stone”

Tony Hoagland’s poem “Description” prompted an ekphrastic response describing the limestone and sandstone bluffs that line the Upper Mississippi River which geologists interpret as deposits from ancient seas and beaches.

### “Color of Water”

“blood-borne / *incarnadine* / chlorophyll-laden / *verdant*”

But for the central element in the molecular structure of chlorophyll and blood (magnesium and iron, respectively) the waters that run through all living beings are very much the same.

### “At A Loss”

*Migizi* is the Anishinaabemowin word for bald eagle. *Migizi* flies at dawn to see if humans remember to greet the day so that the world may continue.

### “Stippled Passing”

Responds to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, “Pied Beauty” with its line: “For rose-moles all stipple upon trout that swim.”

### “The Ripening Abcedarian”

“zymurgy” here refers to fermentation.

“Invocation: Call It Home”

This poem was first published as a poster designed by artist Stephanie Motz.

“What I Love about Where I Live, Driftless Region”

Driftless refers to the rugged, unglaciated bioregion in the upper Midwest encasing the Mississippi River. An anomaly in the North American continent, it is a fragile, biodiverse environment of sandstone and limestone-layered hills and hollows carved by numerous springwater creeks. It is a rich agricultural land threatened of depopulation, thoughtless construction, and frack sand mining.

“When Freshly Painted”

The poem is an ekphrastic response to Marion Clarke’s bucolic painting *Chickens!* depicting a flock of hens and a rooster in front of thatched-roofed, whitewashed cottage with doors painted bright red.

“A Parallelogram”

A response to the photograph “Met” by Dave Thewlis in which echoes and reflections of window panels frame a snowy landscape.

“Passerine”

A passerine is a perching songbird in the avian order Passeriformes, which includes swallows.

## Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the periodicals in which these poems first appeared:

*Ascent*: “Firefly Nights”

*About Place*: “Women Tending”

*Aqueous*: “Minus Forty”, “Shoreline Instructions for Lake Superior”

*Camas*: “Lost at Sea”

*Cold Mountain Review*: “Gathering Acorns, Hoarding Words”

*Common Ground Review*: “Superior”, “Waters Silvered”

*Flyway*: “July 4”, “Farmer / Janus”

*Fourth River*: “Stone Circle”

*Freshwater*: “Mapping the Empty Lot”

*Literary Mama*: “Smock”

*Minding Nature*: “At a Loss”

*Passager*: “Panoramic”

*Reliquiae*: “Hymenoptera I: Wasps”, “Verdancy”

*River Heron*: “A Parallelogram”, “Stippled Passing”

*Tiny Seed Journal*: “In Dark Times We Gather Light”

*Wisconsin Review*: “Volute”

## Additional Acknowledgements

“Art Goes Unbidden” and “Barn Elegiac” were published in the anthology *Contours: A Literary Landscape*, by Driftless Writing Center.

“Gathering Acorns, Hoarding Words” received Reader’s Choice Award from *Cold Mountain Review*.

“A Parallelogram” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

I am grateful for the support of Write On Door County in offering time and space for the writing and revision of these poems, and for their workshops.

Thank you to the generous people in my writing groups for their deep consideration of my work; for Linda Lieb, my cohort in creativity; for my family members who patiently listen to each iteration of everything I write.



Catherine Young is a writer and performing artist whose work is infused with a keen sense of place. She worked as a national park ranger, educator, farmer, and mother before putting her heart into her writing. Her prose and eco-poetry is published internationally and nationally, and her writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays. Catherine holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia. Rooted in farm life, Catherine lives with her family in Wisconsin's Driftless bioregion where she is totally in love with meandering streams.

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Photography by Celeste Thalhammer

