

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TO WAKING

Jennifer L. Coleman, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

Thesis directed by: Professor Stanly Plumley  
Department of English

The major concept tying this collection together is a sense of waking, or an awareness about ordinary aspects of life. In the collection, this usually occurs in the realm of relationships, both familial and romantic. The first third of the poems are focused on family and the interchanging roles and subsequent acceptance, especially when death occurs. In the final third of the collection, the poems shift to romantic relationships. Bridging these two subjects are poems that focus on the gap between leaving “home” and creating a new one and the unexpected discontent with that seemingly lost time.

TO WAKING

by

Jennifer L. Coleman

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Stanly Plumley, Chair  
Professor Elizabeth Arnold  
Professor Michael Collier

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## To Waking

Waking, it's usually easiest for me to see you

in morning, without glasses or brushed teeth,  
but you look your best in fall with the sun  
slanting around you, much different

than in the interrupted grog of sleep,  
the broken low-pulsed nightmares you force

me to retell in the dark, wanting to know  
what it's like in places you haven't been.  
Sometimes, I can't let you leave me

abandoned even with darkness around.  
I know you actually hate the night.

You try to leave, but before you're gone  
something pulls and asks for one more favor.  
At times I think you must be tired of men

grabbing your tiny shape moments before  
you disappear. And at times I just wanted you

gone, to stop giving me things to put away  
or clean up, anything to keep a light on  
when I wanted it all shut. Still you stayed

in the open, on the corner of my bed  
as though I could be happy melding sidewalks

with power lines and the flashbacks  
of earlier drives and last night's dreams  
where I kept going straight but made it back.

You stay to see how much you can cross into,  
push to find how much I can keep separate;

you laugh when you catch me sleepwalking.  
Waking, I have lost you in daylight,  
misplaced you in comfortable chairs

or worse, in sickness and medicine,  
the things that you hate more than night.

I have lost you not in sleep, but in the midst  
of thought, on long stretches of pitted highway,  
forgetting the cracks in the concrete,

or when I turned onto this small road.  
I trust you're quiet in the back seat

until I slow down to see where I am,  
not knowing how I arrived at this place.  
You come then, just to show me I'm here. Sometimes,

it happens like this for hours, sometimes for years.

## The Flight

I was not built for air  
with silky layers of hollow bone.

With every slip I fall  
silent as a tourist asked for change

on a steamy city day.  
The elderly women surrounding me

smell of clay and lipstick,  
their mouths open, asleep before we left

the ground. They've been through  
this before. The rules of this height keep me

disinterested  
in the beginnings and the endings,

making a river a vein  
on the angry forehead of flesh-toned farmlands.

Size no longer matters.  
I feel smaller, as though I'm seeing my parents

fight through a crack  
in a doorway. I should be asleep,

but I too feel,  
quietly, the disturbance. My voice is a threat

that asks back the length  
of grass, strips the snow-capped valleys to fog

in early morning,  
and makes a child pick sides.

Somewhere  
in the back, a baby starts to cry.

## My Father's Scent

He may never have noticed,  
or maybe he didn't care,  
that with droplets dangling  
on the pointed tips of his eyelashes,  
his body dull from showering  
and toweling off the shine,  
his scent sifted through the house  
as powder clouded the bathroom  
and clung to the steamed walls.  
Younger, I imagined it  
sliding down in pockets of paste,  
but my father walked in soft  
skin, dry and soap-scented;  
a smell that seeped into the corner  
of the couch where he sat  
to watch the evening news.  
When he began to sweat  
from the efforts of standing,  
or sitting beyond the reach  
of the fan, wafting air through  
rooms and mixing scents  
from the kitchen with the bedrooms,  
the bathroom and the garage,  
my father used what my mother left  
lying on the counter or hanging  
from the stove handle, sometimes  
damp with dishwater. I never  
saw him searching for the towel,  
his hand just touched it, hovered  
above it, took it, used it,  
held it. It brushed grease  
from calluses, mopped juice  
and mistakes, wiped sauce  
from his fingers and dew  
from his forehead, his body,  
though, stayed shiny, the powder  
absorbed. Cooking became the way  
he told time, the balls  
of sweat were a balance

between herbs and anxiety,  
pinches and sleep. Even filling  
a glass with ice made him pull  
the cloth slowly across  
his smooth head, his attempt  
to stay clean. The towel,  
softly soured from soaking  
up spills, was safe from my hands  
when he slung it over  
his shoulder, but sometimes  
he abandoned it to the table  
as thoughtlessly as he first  
picked it up. If I mistakenly  
grabbed the crumpled folds,  
my fingers found that scent  
and kept it, even if I left  
the towel, disgusted,  
upon touch. The smell  
lingered even after  
the initial washing,  
the way my father's breath  
clung for moments  
before he died; sweet, unclean,  
nothing like soap and powder.

## The Bracelet

She wants me to notice  
the glint of sunlight,  
the perfect curve  
of metal, the way  
they sound like little bells  
ringing her wrists  
as she raises them.  
In the cold,  
I shiver watching  
her arms, left bare  
because it's easier  
to dress her that way,  
with shirt sleeves  
short and wide  
at the mouth.  
Days are made  
into weeks, then  
into seasons without  
a clear view  
of her skin,  
without the shining  
circles snaking  
around her wrists.  
I have asked for covers  
in winter as though  
the cold is what  
made her ill,  
and I am only as protective  
as she was, demanding  
lollipops at banks  
and good Catholic  
schools. She fingers  
stones and knows  
each scarab  
has different cuts,  
some deeper, some  
longer and is proud.  
The bracelets are uneven,

bent from the weight  
her wrists once held  
when she worked  
to carry young children  
on her hips. The clasps  
have been replaced.  
The rough movement  
of her young arms rubbing  
against children's coats,  
dish towels and dog leashes  
was too strong to keep  
the circles clasped  
around her skin.  
Finally, she says  
she won't need  
to replace them,  
the thinned cotton  
of hospital sheets  
and short sleeves  
of the shirts she loves  
are not enough  
to pull the clasp,  
the finished shape  
of full uneven circles.

## Cleaning

When I tug the hats out of the hat bag  
hanging from the attic rafters  
the hairs on the feathers break against

the hard cloth, stiff with dried mold. I pull  
plastic bundles past my grandmother's  
rocker, each time, the rhythmic sway

interrupted by my footsteps.  
She stops to hear the weight of what  
I carry, like the puzzles stacked deep

into the corners of her guest rooms.  
They're ordered by picture; boat scenes  
separated from kittens, flowers in a stack

next to corn fields, next to cars, the way  
they were years ago when I'd find one  
to finish every week. We watched game shows,

picked sides, filled gaps in the landscapes  
stretching across the table. The same table  
rusting below piles of chipped dishes

and the tiny glass mouse figurines I loved  
to line up, never expecting to throw them out  
or be too ashamed to give them away.

She sits with me humming for the first time  
as I clean out her home. She tells me  
the history of her spoon collection,

gathered on trips to Crazy Horse,  
the Grand Canyon, some she found  
in Mexico. She shines them now

and again, though I've never seen them  
out of their glass case where they still  
look tarnished. She asks me if I remember

dressing up in the hats, the oily feathers  
and the fishnet veils, the one I wore  
on my birthday. Finally, she stops

talking, and cries, and quietly knows.  
I won't save her from losing what she has:  
skeins of yarn, postcards from early trips,

neatly bagged strands of broken Christmas lights.

## Balancing it Out

We had new carpet installed to balance out his disease. We quantified cancer and determined we needed ceramic tile. After our trip to the Gulf coast and the home of my mother's best friend, we bought blue wallpaper, its corresponding flower print and a border for adjacent rooms. We solved problems with light fixtures, kitchen hardware and crown molding, found answers in the measured expansion of the flower bed and its addition of a pond and ensuing aquatic life.

There was nothing beyond our revision. Even the air system managed an unfortunate upgrade to these vents that now rattle like a last breath—vents reminding me of my father waiting until I could move beyond the doorway to a place closer to his body, lower the bar next to the hospital bed the nurse placed in the dining room, look at the slant of mouth, slightly open, the stained white lips, listen to the cracked and gurgling breaths and tell him, okay, I'll be okay.

## Getting There

This is my wilderness of rotting homes,  
moldy siding that hides under the boughs  
of trees, and tucked beneath them both, my mother  
struggling to sweep clean the sidewalk and rake  
blazing and brown leaves through the emerald grass.  
She cleans, fights elements, invites her children  
back to the failing buildings, the streets filled  
with strollers, single mothers pushing laundry,  
babies slung on each hip. Last night's beer cans  
are smashed in backyards and plastic porch furniture  
is melted from smoldering ash that fell from cigarettes  
giving use to idle hands trying to move time.  
Even the steady-paced cars slow-pulsing through town  
seem bored by the small streets boxed in  
by fields of wheat and corn. When I arrive,  
in the slanted morning light of late fall  
or the murky dusk of mid-summer, my mother  
stands on her porch watching my approach  
as though she predicted the exact hour I'd find  
my way to her shining moss-free siding against  
the unlined, tree-lined streets—the only place left  
where it feels natural to drive slow,  
where the speed limit always stays at twenty-five.

## Hunting a Father

My mother drove me through Tennessee searching for her father's grave  
and found it, tilted and simple in the dusty afternoon air,  
after too few lefts caused her to turn around again and again  
in untouched southern towns that she, finally, couldn't remember.  
She knelt, and for the first time since his funeral, let her fingers trace his name  
as I picked at the simmered earth surrounding the single plot  
and scratched at the pattern the grass had pushed into my legs.  
Her hands moved over the words as though she had never known them.  
Slow and smooth, she paced her way across the stone. She was quiet.  
I was hot and the dirt was clinging to the sweat on my palms  
the way it would later cover them as I knelt, lingering  
before the glossy square of granite, breathing in the smell  
of new-tilled earth, and read my own father's name.

## Killing the Heroine

Today, I'm going to watch her,  
a hospital bed indentation,  
grey against the stark of white sheets,  
dull against the cold silver bars  
that steam up when I wrap my wet fingers  
around them, waiting for something  
to happen—something more than this.  
I'm waiting for her hair to grow back  
and the green that has been creeping  
across her skin, bursting from her eyes,  
to recede and pool in her hazel iris,  
again. I am waiting for her to stop  
trying to cut her wrists just enough,  
to stop calling me with blade in hand  
and ask me to be there for all of it.  
It wasn't until her refusal to eat,  
to keep any, if she has eaten,  
that she landed a spot here, in this,  
a bright room with rounded edges  
that makes her skin look transparent,  
thin against her blood and tendons.  
She called me to tell me she fell in love  
here, with a boy who weighed ninety pounds,  
and refused to speak to anyone, but her.  
She called to tell me they threatened force,  
and would I mind being here if it happens.  
Today, I'm sitting on a vinyl stool  
the nurse retrieved from behind a locked door  
with quiet hinges, my legs falling asleep  
as I wait for her unceremonial first meal  
in months to meander through a tube.  
Her eyes are on the window, my eyes  
are on her arm, counting the purple lines,  
the thickest skin on her body. Scars  
wrapping up the limbs of the director,  
the organizer of neighborhood games,  
the girl who chose which friend she wanted  
to play the victim that she would save  
from created creatures and getting bored.

The rest of us, covered in playground dirt,  
had watched from the swing set, the jungle gym,  
waiting for our chance at a bit part.  
She wanted the demons provoked,  
imagined a leader she called Zeul,  
convinced us to do the same. Believing  
we could invoke them, we hung upside down,  
the blue bars of her swing set wedged  
in our kneepits, dusting our hair with dirt.  
When we misplaced endless grade school summers  
in the midst of making our film debut,  
she was the clever detective  
in a trench coat and her stepfather's shoes.  
The murder scene was filmed at her house,  
in her parent's bedroom, and she made us  
all try to play death's part, each dying in turn,  
though none of us could make death real.

## Back Home

It used to be the smell  
of too much  
lime reminded me  
of her. The way  
we sprayed it

into her car seats  
after we drove  
around smoking  
pot, or how it  
would fall off

her as she walked  
into class a little  
later each day.  
We were looking  
for new roads, places

that broke  
between corn and  
cut a strip wide  
enough. We didn't  
talk, she banged

on the steering wheel,  
her thumbs becoming  
her conduit.  
In the front seat  
I found myself

above the heads  
of friends, sitting  
straight and watching  
the windshield,  
the sides blurred

with road salt kicked  
up by passing trucks.  
The music was  
never loud, and  
made me feel

I was part  
of someone's  
game, laughing at  
reasoning a right  
turn, then forgetting

it was ever made.  
And the headlights  
cut holes with  
shadows and  
underbrush crept closer

to the steel ribs  
of the car, pushing  
us through its  
cleft as though  
we were its children,

offering us the chance  
to stay in homes  
built square, black  
eyes, broken jaws,  
longing to leave

the folds of the  
mountain where it never  
seemed to matter  
if we went to the right  
or we went to the left.

## On the Pier at Santa Rosa

As I sit on the edge  
of the sun-scorched  
wooden planks, below  
the seagull specked sky,  
the crests of waves move  
in sweeping arcs, stretching  
as they get below my feet,  
as if in their thinning  
they want to take  
me in, bring me back  
in their retreat. In semi-circles  
the sea seems spilling  
over. The glittering  
water, forward pressing  
on the empty shore  
is earth expanding  
in its edgeless reach,  
and I am always still  
when they slide past me,  
pooling in ponds behind me,  
surrounding me, daring  
me to plunge, not to drown.  
Become single, solid,  
a rock, a duck that dives  
for secrets that can't be caught,  
be too loud and swim alone,  
know only my noise, the muffled  
sounds of the sea, take  
cotton from my ears, beyond  
the breaking waves heartbeating  
the beaches to where  
even the seagulls stay  
silent, their glassy eyes  
having lost the shores,  
having lost their boundaries.

## Finding Gauguin in Texas

The rooms are tall and windowless,  
broken only by bowls of apples,  
violins with cases, and things  
decidedly finished. I don't know  
if this needs such quiet. The distant  
click of heels on concrete is the only sound  
circling through, but outside the gate  
there are six lanes slowed to a throb-  
like hum by lights timed to change.  
A grey man asks for money or food,  
his pale palm open. People pass him  
with heads down, trying to get somewhere  
quicker, but everything is still inside these  
rooms, with their centers unlit. Here, women  
wear ruffled skirts, hold woven baskets  
of harvested fruits in the purple sun,  
with cold trees far off. Their hair is dark  
and their bodies thickly outlined, layered  
against each other. They look as though  
they've finally been able to finish  
something. And every time I see orange  
used a new way, I forget the ordinary  
things I wanted to do with that color,  
knowing I can't make this—the earth  
here flatter than in a painting.

## Cultivating

Even with my attention, the select  
sunlight in early morning, the quiet  
and missing mid-day tucked away  
on the awninged porch, the calculated  
return in the early afternoon, water-filled,  
but not to saturation, the hibiscus blooms

fall when night comes. The crumpled, damp patches  
are fresh enough to fill to their almost-full  
shape as I squeeze the bulbous centers  
searching for a forming pod. My fingers,  
dusted golden by pollen, move smoothly  
in the dark as I pick the blossoms

from the frayed rug, the styles limp,  
the fertile dust unused, touched only  
as a dead thing. Above the floor, the edges  
of leaves are yellowed from the stress of being  
maintained, the spray of light liquid detergent  
to smother bugs on shiny leaves, the mixture

of fertilizers, organic combinations  
in small movable pots. In the late hours  
I shift through details by adding more,  
readjusting the amount my fingertips will dip  
into the soil to judge if the next blooms will fall  
on the dark floor, seedless, paper-thin and torn.

## A Graveside Performance

Sweat slips from my hairline and collects  
between my breasts and on my lower back,  
making my shirt skin, my movements  
a slow ripening as I sink down in this open  
space, trees tall at the perimeter, roots  
resurfacing from under the grass. The edge  
of the stone's base cuts into my knees  
and the pain draws my focus from sliding  
the stick into the chiseled curves  
of my grandmother's headstone, to the car  
where my boyfriend sits in the shade  
reading photocopies he carried home  
from work. It's how he seems interested  
and used. I know even with his head down,  
he watches, his eyelashes blurring  
his angle, curtaining the seduction  
of my arms as they grip the weeds  
around the granite square, the gentleness  
of my fingers. Behind the windows  
he believes I softly mourn the woman  
I once hid from in the china closet,  
afraid of her pointy fingers, her hard voice,  
the venom of her eyes. As I narrow  
my eyes in the sun, silent and by her,  
he will think I'm distinctly feminine,  
putting away the nights spent crying  
from the top of the stairs while she stood  
quiet and strait at the bottom, blaming  
my child's mistake. Sitting in the heat,  
with my hair down, my cleaning paced  
and my look distant, I know how it seems  
I only remember she loved my friends  
and sang while she cooked; a child in love  
with her own story of smooth relations  
cradled in the crook of an arm. Pushed  
through years of backseats and birthday cards,  
I know how to curtsey, and when to cover  
my eyes. And these years later, I should forget  
the feel of lying in cold water hating

her tall figure and finding how to ignore  
the chill of the fan on my skin as he throws  
single answers, offering only the jagged circle  
of his back and certain pieces of what lie below.

## Positions

It takes great effort to stand  
my spine up straight, create  
the stiff line from shoulder  
to shoulder, like a presketch  
of an early drawing class  
where the women stretch  
shamelessly nude. In comfort  
I curl forward, the way  
I once held lightning bugs,  
shielding them in the curve  
of my body as I stood  
on the back porch of midsummer,  
coated in dusk and heat.

This was before I learned  
that bugs weren't beautiful,  
especially those with light  
that breaks up the smooth-draped  
dark in search of pleasure,  
instinctive and thoughtless  
in their nightly hunger hunts—  
before I learned to spend  
my evenings moving slowly  
through dinner and streets  
with men I could make love me  
by the time they woke up.  
I sleep on my side  
curling around the lost  
gathering of speckled lights,  
the thick skin of my back  
arcing into the pocket  
of my pelvis, barring  
my breasts from their hands, keeping  
fingers from touching the folds  
of my skin, containing  
the glow of my own instinct,  
secretly searching, hidden  
and unforgivably thoughtless.

## Love Poem

*It just amazes me that no one had thought of this before,  
the relationship between the violins, the trees that they  
were made from, the climate that existed when the tree  
grew and how it affected the wood density to create a  
superior tonal quality.*

*-Dr. Henri Grirsino-Meyer, U of TN tree dating expert*

I never managed a conversation.  
Growing up, I never spoke.  
In daylight, I stayed outside  
walking through underbrush  
or rows of wheat that wrapped  
around me like the rings  
on a cross section of tree trunk.  
In the long winters and cooler summers  
of being young I stretched  
these rings and went deeper,  
farther from the streets  
and the steel of playgrounds,  
not yet knowing that years  
gave violins their width  
of music. On quiet nights,  
behind the clinched curtains  
of my house, my breath smelled  
of earth and decaying wood  
while I learned the shape  
of my body before I passed it on.  
The first time I fell in love  
I felt pressed to keep speaking.  
I told him about willow trees  
in the yard; the thick bases  
and curled branches. The thin leaves  
on the grass, like fingertips  
to the hair of his nipples.  
The sounds of moaning  
in the wind, trunks close  
to falling, deep in sway  
like slow dancing alone  
or fighting. He couldn't answer  
with more than new subjects,  
and we began our relationship

as a series of observations;  
only single lines piled  
together, never touching.  
The precision followed me  
through a pattern of men,  
and I then found out  
I didn't love speaking  
in only statements anymore.  
The next time I fell in love  
was in a tiny room near Broadway,  
deep in concrete and square.  
My head was on his chest  
and his voice was muffled  
by his lungs, by his bones  
and flesh, the body wrapped  
around him, so I never had to listen.  
And when I knew, I never  
forced my breaths even.  
It was not the claims I'd expected  
from love. My hands  
were never too clammy  
to touch his skin. So I stayed.  
And was silent. It was easier  
to just be satisfied knowing,  
than to get to the center  
and figure out why.

## Coming Back to You in NYC

I always forget what it's like here,  
but still feel something close to wanting;  
the quiet pull of flesh on fingertips,  
every time I'm away, because things  
can still go on. In the crossroads, the squares  
where avenues and streets share space,  
are the overlooked wind tunnels,  
like the angry combination of the hot  
and cold air converging on the weather map  
I studied in my parent's dining room,  
food cold on the table. Garbage is blowing,  
swirling in the streets, grey and grotesque.  
Within days it will seem the color of average  
and early daylight where you and I drink  
coffee in silence to forget the day before;  
the man yelling *fuck* in the subway corner,  
losing you in the record store as you searched  
for something new, the line where you clenched  
your teeth and stopped speaking. (The line grew  
when you had to take the time to find me.)  
Within seconds a freshly poured square  
of cement can be covered in half-shaped  
circles of grease, fallen food, newspapers  
in their prerin transient state, waiting  
to be plucked up or grabbed by a needy  
finger. In pictures, the tall towers curtain  
the ground, so the neighborhood gossips  
can't see each of us in our own rooms,  
arranging books, changing the tv, getting ready  
to walk outside with scissor-like strides  
even though it's not cold and the trash  
was picked up this morning. It's easier  
with buildings blocking the light, no one  
needs to know about the cross winds,  
the avenues and streets stay famous  
for staging elaborate plays, and you and I  
can pretend we believe the tourists

and leave and then come back for the beauty,  
flashing images of thin-boned lives,  
and not because we know that without this place  
things will still go on and we need somewhere  
to come back to.

## How to Taste Napa

Each time he leaves  
the tasting bar to come back  
to where I stand, a thin-lipped  
smile touches on his mouth  
as though he's hiding  
his excitement at tasting,  
and the rush of new things.  
He stays at the bartender's side  
to hear the year of each wine  
and the how the weather  
affected growing. Each time  
it takes longer. He rests  
the rounded bulb  
in the palm of his hand  
as if he might move  
with it, absorb the shock  
each step could send up  
the frail stem, afraid  
his half glass of wine  
will spill over and leave  
a stain of uneven  
apple-red. Before he sips,  
a slight nod of head  
almost seems an invitation  
to share in the deep-colored  
taste but he moves quickly  
and leans into the swirl of thick  
warm liquid, watches it stick  
to the sculpted curves  
of the glass. He buries  
his nose in the scent  
as though it were his mother's  
perfume, his first love,  
blessed with wide hips.  
With the smell of oak,  
it seems solid; heavy, opaque,  
as though it could only  
serpentine leisurely around  
the rim of the glass,

a sticky film that lingers  
on the edges. It feels  
that way in my throat, rich  
and spicy, hot against  
my insides, a sleepy-paced  
burning. But the bartender,  
who knows the intimate  
details, can pour it fast.  
She tips her bottle  
gently as though it were a silk-skinned  
extension of her lean arm,  
leaving behind a rich  
center that thins smoothly  
against the sides, wrapped  
in the shine of a well-suited  
glass shaped to his body.  
Each time he circles back  
he balances the wine  
between savoring and speeding  
through, the dark-colored taste  
and the bright-hued spill,  
making the decision to buy here  
before going to the next vineyard  
only miles down the road.

## Agenda

I take a long look at my fingers,  
soft and pink-palmed with the wrinkles  
of an old woman's eyes, clean,  
except my nails are distracting,  
short and dirty, the edges bleeding  
from working or worrying, I've lost which.  
I hide them in my pockets  
the way you hide your movies,  
stacks of porn, behind the thick  
wooden doors and want to believe  
I can't see them. Even on business trips,  
you've found ways to keep them  
unseen, as though the hotel maid  
will be searching for reasons to leave  
your dirty towels in the corner, afraid  
of what she might see in the garbage can.  
Slipped behind a sleeve of plastic,  
zipped in a case and placed in your bag,  
buckled shut, you worry who will know  
you didn't get to change your suit this morning,  
like the way I touch only your back  
this time. I keep my fingers hidden  
behind shoulders and hair, rubbing  
the smooth tips along biceps and chin.  
For now, I want only for you to notice  
the slope of my breasts, the tiny hairs  
on my stomach, the crease along  
my thigh, moments to take the next  
woman who finds you kiss plainly.

## History's Lover

Lying beneath him, feeling the flex  
of his back, I wonder if this time  
when it's over, I will feel like the woman  
in the only picture in his room; dark,

secret and sensual, searched for.  
Their bodies are framed by a doorway  
somewhere in Italy, cradled by an arch,  
with the sun filtering through narrow rooftops,

only days after they met. His arms  
wrap around her the way I fall asleep  
in them at night. Everything is beige  
and dirty, the color of my skin

in dull light, but their lips are ripe  
and she is round and smooth, shining.  
He fucked her once, he said, years ago  
while deciding on where to go next,

what monument to history could he see  
beyond the books? As his hands travel  
my body, I feel him looking for her  
in the curve of my inner thigh

and the hollow of my pelvis, the way  
he must have wanted her the next day  
in Venice. He followed her through city streets,  
over the brick bridges of graceful arcs,

the corners crumbling from decades  
of rain and wandering feet, over water  
that seemed to lull between deep and grotesque.  
He talked of art and America, complained

of his continent's shortened history,  
and tried not to seem a foreigner,  
but lost her. He says the picture reminds him  
of the dark places of Italy; the feeling

of being somewhere ancient; for a moment,  
knowing something unknown. Different  
from the way I feel when it really is over,  
when looking in the mirror I find the same

as last night and the night before;  
nothing hidden, no ancient scars. My bare skin  
is still unflushed, my body angular  
and shifting, my soft lips barely pale.

## Animal Instinct

Sometime after I left,  
my legs began to feel  
smooth against the sheets,  
clean for the first time  
in months, the odor  
of lemon and white  
powder in the air,  
colder than the bodiless  
corners of the bed,  
the places I thought  
sharp-teethed rabbits  
hid when I was young.  
It sounds like birds  
pulled from the blink  
of morning before being  
fed have landed  
in the air conditioner  
I've left on all winter,  
air humming through  
the frozen pipes  
thick with sheeted ice.  
After cold nights,  
there's more noise  
than usual. In Manhattan  
we fought over going home  
because I was coatless  
and coughing outside  
the Armory. The cab  
driver took us for tourists  
and we jerked our way  
through the streets  
with your window down.  
You yelled. Above  
the hollow of the wind  
I didn't hear you.  
The driver, though, brought  
us home, but not before  
you fell asleep, full  
of the day. In early dawn

my toes touched the bottom  
of the bed, found  
the flat of your foot,  
froze from the morning air  
walking up the bedside,  
your body beside me  
like a stone in sunlight,  
hot flesh ready  
for the snake to coil  
on your skin, muscles  
warming for the full  
stretch to swallow me whole.

## Sundays

When I've been asleep too long,  
I feel taller, as though there's more  
length to my legs, more skin  
for my eyes, more movement  
to notice; the way my feet turn

slightly in when I'm done stretching,  
the shape of my fingers scratching  
my stomach, the curve of my hip,  
bare beneath blankets, against  
your body on Sunday mornings,

borne in the heavy silence  
of not mentioning. With my breasts  
feeling the unlabored breaths  
in your lungs and my body wanting  
the touch of your hands, lying softly at your sides,

we will talk of food, as you think  
of some reason to wake beyond  
feeding the animals. My legs  
draw closer to the trunk of my body  
as you mention dry cleaning;

my chest closes at the mumbled  
reasons. As you think with unfocused  
eyes, my skin grows gritty and ashen  
and I can make out the unevenness  
of my freckles, the veins crawling

below the surface as if figuring  
some way out to this broken  
early afternoon where you pull  
yourself up to grab the lights  
and darks that, we agree,

dully smell too much like us.

## Unbending

The purple hyacinths are a darker shade  
than I expect and spent these winter weeks  
watching. The heat from office vents have made  
the thick smooth stalks begin to shift and creep  
up straight, no longer pushed down with the weight  
of smelling clean or open petals. The sweetened scent  
of dying flowers floats through the air and stays.  
It seems that longer days, the touch, the stretch  
of hour pushed to hour under the sun  
has made the stem unburdened by blooms,  
the thick-leaved living. The bending is done.  
The stock can stand without the beauty. You  
and I can smell the heavy scent of our love  
and know the pretty things we must give up.

## The Beauty of Water

I am interrupted by a phone call  
Just to hear you say  
A glass of water reminds you of me.

Water is smooth to swallow like my skin,  
Kills your burning thirst,  
Later, finds you begging more.

I mumble a response resembling one  
That quiets your need;  
Agrees: *You too remind me of water,*

But means: *as the master of erosion.*

## Reunion

I didn't know why people were always  
reuniting years later in a shower of new shirts

suited to their professions, the upswept hair  
of women, smooth pearls in so many ears,

and the effort to make it all seem effortless.  
You, wearing something old, but equally chosen,

just brought me, and didn't seem alone. In the dim,  
distant from the emerging faces you tried

to think of a different reason so I would laugh  
without coughing. To help, you told me to think

in the abstract. It's compelling. It could be  
my poetry. People yelling across rooms

and hallways, embracing, bracing for ten years  
slipped into a single glass of wine.

And, yes, I was struck, by the shape  
of your body hunched in the metal chair

and your mouth close enough to move  
my hair, by the delivery and the way

you believed this place had mystery,  
by the way you later talked

about your life, openly, to a stranger,  
and didn't know what to say

about mine. Because then, I saw it all  
as down comforters and drowning, the flicking

cat tails of my writing. It was only pretty,  
the opening sequence to a movie.

So many start in airports, the coming,  
the going, the black and white where it is so easy

to pick one or the other, but the story  
never works. I wanted color and left you

there because it was strange  
how much I thought you didn't know.

And years later, I still dream of the tall necks  
of those women, the broad, sweeping handshakes

of the men, their shirts untucked, and you  
in the corner, looking like you, the arc of your back

curling in towards me, your breath against  
my cheek as you work to find me some reason

to stay. And I'm moved to want everything  
as the revision I found to reuniting.

To Anxiety

Anxiety, I can't remember what it was like  
without you, when going to bed meant sleeping,  
not listening to the reasons you've come.

You're the loudest of anyone I've slept with,  
and were there with them all. The first time,  
in the hours leading up, you tried

to make me stop, made me feel sick  
to be in my bare skin. When it was over,  
you were the one holding my hand

as I wondered if it was always going to be  
like this; him asleep, me awake  
with you, talking about whether he knew

the smell weighing in the air was the scent  
of his own sweat spread across my chest.  
I can't remember much about that time

beyond the smell and you making me  
scrub the blood before there was a stain,  
before he could see. Do you remember

when you moved in? I had just decided to live  
with a man and you showed up, *a vacation  
without luggage*, I think you said.

And you stayed away, worked in other rooms,  
making pictures, a montage of beautiful women,  
lying naked in my bed, my love's hands

touching everything that seemed soft.  
You never cleaned up and left your art  
uncovered. Eventually, the only clean space

was my bedroom, and I had to let you in.  
I watched you work and spent more time with you  
after the man in our bed fell asleep without

a mention of want, without a graze  
of hip, or brush of thigh. You said  
it was my fault, but I'm not sure

we ever discussed the reasons. He hated us  
together, couldn't figure out why  
we wouldn't let each other go

and left us. *We're better without him,*  
you said, then, you left me too, stopped  
painting, stopped gluing the pieces together,

stopped talking about how grotesque  
it all was and just disappeared.  
Anxiety, I thought it was over

for a few days, but then discovered  
you always come back the moment I notice  
I have nothing else in my bed.