

Poems by Jael

Breathe

Life moved through me, liquid
movement, too big to breathe, merging
ethereal and corporeal, fused
at the axis, passing anguish,
breathe, focus, find your safe places,
time races, tightens and she's leaving,
contortions cleaving this soul from me,
. . . *breathe, breathe . . .*

severing existence from existence,
and she's thrashing, writhing
to her emancipation, *now*
exhale.

Momentary silence,
awed by this slippery handful of life. . . .

With the crack of the slap
she's sentenced to life and learning
to breathe for herself.

Howling
in startled breaths,
whole and round,
singularly real.

Turning in my hands,
working her way
away, each small breath
a separation.

I am my daughter's keeper,
she my anguish,
yearning to return her
to safe places, secure
her to my center. Re-tucking

her nightly, only to feel her
breathe, holding my own breath. Uneasy
over children in Oklahoma and Dunblane,
. . . *those mothers* . . .
repressing identification,
needing never draw heavy breaths
of severance, enduring
suffocation. Each mother willing her baby
breathe.

Life miraculous, pernicious,
mysterious, engulfs us, overwhelming
existence, and feather-lace wisps
of small souls seeking deliverance.
Frail hearts who must
slip into autonomy.
Tossing liberation over
their shoulders in exuberance
and backward running glances.
Growing away into sentences and shoelaces.
Growing away
from me. Determining herself
intense pangs of life,
that children leave,
and life is sometimes too big
to breathe.

Broken Lines

Broken lines pass and the van is warming
in small degrees. We move
toward sunlight. The roadside
is looking familiar. These interstate
highways watched from how many windows
We were always moving,

always
getting there.
After a while
homesickness works its way
and feels finally familiar. Passing homes
on frontage roads, trailers, road trash,
brown brick houses with split-rail fences
worn-wood barns and tractors rusted in fields.
Yellow stubble-fields fine frozen into velvet.
Long red brush the wind has laid down.
A creek cleaves a bank
among trees
deep enough to show layers
among cattails.
Broken lines
pass and we pass
a U-Haul moving
a family. I search out the small face
pressed to the window, counting license plates
and mile-markers, fogging the way
home. Eyes catch on birch trees
and farm ponds, the same grey sky, the same
broken lines.
Searching out the horizon
something familiar.

Conference

Two years separation and we know more
than a parting
of ways, more than grief.
Morning brings us into people
we would never be, exaggerating
what we once were: giants

in our own minds. Denying
the reality that digs hard
from a cold place,
pushing down
the well, tearing down
bridges, building
walls with the stones.

Day in Tempo

Warm into shade
face to day-cool whispers
that blow in
off pond, rustling
shadows of trees
at eighty-two degrees,
the familiar coo-hoo of
some nameless morning
bird fretting feathers in some far-off
tree stirs an impulse like down.
Does it, too, see
mate-hunt dances of fishes and water spiders
undulating still surfaces?
The uncultivated corner
where sedge sprouts dark
and sweet, burgeoning shadows,
covert flourishing into thicket?
Warm in dappled reflection of breeze,
face to the trees,
calling time to day,
liquid in cool lucid
sunshine, three feet from dusk,
dark realms of summer
(constant at eighty-two degrees)

cultivating continuance
in tempo.

Earthbound

Not far-blown clouds rolling off
the sea, cold and loud, weak sun or wind
rolling in the trees, skittering leaves falling
in the streets, nor earthbound
crickets that chirrup from ground.

But brave and tender hearts
day would fool
as march and band starts
and teacher knows this is school.

Not wind or whistle trill
that wings with those
that must fly,
sharp music sweet and shrill
that fools freest hearts
can make grown girls cry.

But the brown bird small
and falling, dropping
from cold that is sky.

The band is stopping and starts.
but teacher is whistling and calling
she knows this is school.

Leaves that skitter in streets, wind
tossed and ripped from sky,
crickets that chirrup and cry,
sweet music dwindles and dies.

Foolish hearts think they can fly.
This bird is small and brown with white
down and frightened
black eyes. I would touch him but

he flutters and starts.

I would cup this small dream in my hand
and feel the fluttering beat of the sky.
But the teacher knows this is school
and her lesson is calling
me down.

Even as leaves take wind, pulling
for farthest blown bough, and clouds,
loud and rolling, sky-borne and bound
for sea, sun is ever falling,
chilled by the cold dream of the sky.
And when brown bird, brave, tender
heart, finds wings
and follows my eyes, ascending
to his home that is sky,
I will know the secret of sky as I know
the pull of ground.

Forgetting

We live in a blue house now, two
big trees, hedges in front of windows.
And the back yard is always
Autumn with leaves. We put up a swing.
I roast chickens and mash potatoes
in my kitchen. Everynight
I set the table after work. We must
remember to pray. (I pray
for remembrance).
In our house we ration affection
to morning and good bye and good night,
like piles of possessions:
his, hers and my
laundry. Wanting to give away

the putting away of it.

We have divided it all to this
here, now. Everything is in its right
place. Cinnamon-sugar in
a red shaker.

When I sleep it is to the wet grind
of the dishwasher churning soap
into my stoneware. The bump of the dryer
and the vaporizer breathing something
better into her air.

I can't remember the last time
I felt myself real. I can't remember
the last time I saw myself
in the mirror. And when I sleep,
he is still watching David Letterman.

In dreams I stand over them
while they sleep, making lists
of things to remember:

her lunch and my glasses
flour
turn off the coffee
blue pills for the headaches
green pills to keep the others unborn
not to be impatient, harsh or tired.

I wake when it is quiet
to put out the cat
and retuck my daughter. And again
to let in the cat, who cries
at my window like a lost child
" hey mama." I retuck my daughter.
When I pull out of bed again,
I add to my list to tell the doctor how
my shoulders ache and how my fingers hurt
from typing names and birthdates and salaries

eight hours to a day.
And I pray to remember the words.
And I pray that this day I will
push out of bed to yellow
trees and dusty sunshine.
And most of all, I pray
for the words.

How do you say 'Thank you'?

In our house we say Thank you, God
for Dr. Bennet, Dr. Bradley, and Dr. Chapman,
for Dr. Huffman and Dr. Chua.
Thank you for putting these exceptional people in our path.
In our house we say Thank you, God
for nurses and technicians.
For ventilators and heart monitors and isoletes
and the brilliant people who made them.
In our house we say Thank you, God
for the first whispered cry five days after he was born,
for each life-affirming wail that followed,
for first smiles, first birthdays, first steps,
for every first, every milestone, every reason to celebrate.
Thank you, God, for miracles.
In our house we say Thank you, God
for Dr. Seuss and chocolate cake,
for peek-a-boo and patty-cake,
for birds and blossoms on the dogwood.
Thank you for swings and slides
(and the people who made them).
Thank you, God, for the opportunity to share them.
In our house we get on our knees
and we say Thank you, God, for Jacob.

Leaves

All the way to your house I watched
Illinois receding in my mirror.
The trees are taller in Michigan
and your beach finally
three doors down.

I don't remember driving home.
Frost on the green this morning,
leaves fall like helicopters
from the Maple, spinning
in and out of sunlight. Keilyn and I
walk beside the creek afternoons.
She carries a paper sack
and pushes hands full of sun
burnt leaves and cicada and acorn
shells to the bottom. It's harvest
now the air smells like leaf
burning.

She wants to rake leaves together in piles
like shells on your beach, tide that shouldn't be
tide pushed onto the sand, treasure
pushed full into sacks,
shells and broken glass worn smooth
in your shallow lake. The tree
with its roots on top of the sand,
like thick branches snaking
across the shore. We could see whole
shells on the bottom
from the end of the pier and waves
broken over rocks in strange currents.
Still with me that windy afternoon
at the State Park, where the sand was
cold in the shadows of trees

and we went back
and forth across the beach, searching
for treasure in the sand. Me searching
for the perfect words, you to capture
the perfect picture, Keilyn turning
perfect cartwheels in the sand
gulls wheeling
above her as she ran
in and away from her shadow
arms out at her sides.

A Letter Home

I never liked this town, I haven't
liked any in fourteen years,
gravel-narrow streets, small-people
towns. Everybody knows everybody
knows you moved away again. And I never
liked this house, not a flat stretch
in the backyard, uneven
clumps of grass. Across the overgrown
park under the watertower, rusty
swings and cigarette butts, glass
on the tennis court. The chain always bangs
empty on the flagpole. Neighbors never complained
about the dog barking.
I cleaned the house
on Saturday. And the realtor never came,
Mom. I could have
brought a radio, hummed aloud, it was beyond me.
The silence was overwhelming and the footsteps
I kept not hearing. I
left the door open, everybody does.
I kept returning

to the front room, checking the door-yard for cars.
It was only me and the lists I was making of what
you left behind. You know you forgot
to empty that drawer? It was odd finding it,
the house was so empty of you
and there it was, full
to not opening.

We dragged Dad's airplane engine
with us for fourteen years, from New Hampshire
to South Dakota and here. It's sitting
in the garage, his ten-speed bike is
hanging from the rafters
and that white book-shelf headboard he and I built
propped against the wall.

I looked for that yellowed picture of us
kids when we were all small where
he kept it over his workbench.

He left two
pipe-racks in the closet, and a needle-point
buck hanging
on the wall of his office.

I spent nine and a half hours
cleaning you out of that house.

A full bottle of Tilex in the boys bathroom,
three and a half cans of powdered Clorox.

I love the soft sound it makes shaking
in the metal can. I love the smell
of Mountain Fresh Lysol. I couldn't remove
the smell of you

from that house. From the window,
I could see your raspberry bush
wild-growing the backyard where
you planted a sapling. I could almost see
berries from there without my glasses.

In that room which was mine before the baby
and which one of the boys painted
green, I found pictures in a pile
on the top-shelf of the closet. Those pictures
from high-school art classes. Water-damaged
from the flood, or from the mildew dampness
of the basement. One dated 1985, a faded
pencil-sketch I drew from memory.
Our house, New Hampshire. My
perspective, before I understood perspective,
was precise or close and the proportions
might be wrong, but how I remember it.
That yellow/white house, I missed
for fourteen years. I thought home was a house
then. How relieved you must have been
that I married and moved into my own before
you left. I still see you leaving
as if standing and shaking us all
from your skirts. We never were ready.
I wanted to be angry
when I rubbed the stains of you away
with my sponge and Mountain Fresh Lysol. I thought
I might have cried aloud; it was beyond me.
I made lists of what you left
behind and thought poems to write you
because you asked. And when
I left, I turned
off the lights
and I turned
off the air conditioning,
I left
my key on the refrigerator and I
locked the door behind me.

Lindsay Beach

You want to be an island,
sway-rocking on this dock under
sun, over water, pushed-
back against me on my lap.
For the first time in your life, quiet
enough to hear gulls call
to flip-splashing fishes,
enough to hear wake wash against
the strand and its trickle-
pull on colored pebbles and spiral
shells you push into pockets
to count at home, disremembering exact
days and origins. Every memory
one childhood lake.

My grandmother's cabin was green
and white lattice, surrounded by peeling
Birch and water.

I would sprawl
belly-down, small and lake-chilled, pushing
for warmth against the worn-wood dock,
staring down the tea-colored lake
at the yellow bb, dropped
off the end years ago, lake clams
hard and heavy, halves stuck tight
against water, fingers, rocks and knives
pike that hover in my shadow,
hours, disappear, slicing through water,
water-spiders dancing across my reflection,
over water to the other shore
someone's grandsons shout and splash,
smelling distinctively of pine-tar, fish,
wood-smoke from pot-bellied stoves,

and Ivory pushed into small hands by
grandmothers with instructions
to wash in the lake.

Out at the island,
thick with trees, brush and blueberries.
We would fill empty ice-cream pails
in the yellow canoe (*see how the paddles
slice the water sideways--only
on the surface water is
something to push against*).

Against reason, you remember
large berries, warm and sweet,
how we would roll them round our tongues,
eating half before Grandmother covered them
in sugar and milk, small green stems
floating to the top, how we would
balance them on large spoons, scraping
sugar from the bottom of the bowl.

You weren't born yet and you frown,
wishing alive your great-grandmother
and chocolate donuts fried for breakfast,
wishing back her cabin, sold to strangers
in her passing. You never stood
in Maine, pushing up from lake shores
through the soles of your feet, balanced
like a Birch in the shadow of the cabin.

So instead you'll be an island,
off these shores in Illinois, pushing
up from the bottom of the mud-colored lake,
surrounded by someone's grandchildren,
seagulls, shells, me.

But I tell you, as we sway-rock
on this dock over water, pushing
up with my arms against you

where you lean, sun-warm in my lap:
water is nothing to push against.

Meanings

I knew something about my beginning,
rocking around peeling Birch,
digging into the moss,
juice-purple berries on the road,
pine-tar stuck to my sole.
I knew every stones' place in the lake,
every memory placed in my life
meant something to my place, somehow,
as words now place my meaning . . .
Far and away from the lake,
searching some part of my breath
and death in shadow-blue snow.

Morning Absorbs Sound

Morning absorbs sound
in hushed fog.
Passers-by go
back and forth
muted in step
but mostly don't go at all.
Wet-winged birds
wearing grey canvas cloaks
over deep-hooded eyes.
And the sun doesn't rise or fall at all.

My Life

We pass fields gold and red
and the cornstalks are the color of her hair.
Beside me, her face has taken on the softness of dreams
and she is unaware. I have dressed her in careful clothes,
braided ribbons into her golden-red hair,
my childhood I have wrapped around her
and in dreams' death I have tightly bound her.
Her freckles are those displaced sands
from some beach-side castle I'd made.
And though she missed the shores and badlands,
she roots for lake-washed shells
and pebbles the gentle waves have laid.
Her voice rises with the cries of the gulls.
She must know the beach through her hands.
She doesn't realize
her hair is the shade of fields
and far-away trees
in October when the land is the most
before it dies
and I will be older and she'll still be four.
Me, that much farther from sea-blown skies.
For her the corn will ever be corn, and leaves
that have grown too much
for the trees and scrape
the ground--just leaves.
In this state I once scorned
she is now tightly bound
and her heart will not pound
with the surf or the wind
that in empty spaces flies.
But when she wakes in her life
and in places that she knows,
it will all be enough until she turns
to me with those eyes

with their memory of my life
and little-girl expectations
and disappointments and lies.

Morning(dedicated)

Offer me truth, glassy hurt
on soft cheeks, against my fingers
and heart, aches I can't brush away
waiting in dark roaring spaces.
Dedicate me nights against your heart
pressed together, breath and dream,
waiting for the light,
listening for the hush.
I offer you morning
pressed against my heart
to replace the passing light
against the roaring dark.
I dedicate you dawn rising
in clouds, quiet pond,
colors of the morning,
waiting to fill the spaces,
listening to the hush.

Persephone's Daughter

Where I was born into fall,
know harsher products of love, she,
product of possession and pomegranate
seeds, opens blossoms with fingers' breath,
closes scattered stones into fists,
needs know day's
descent into darker places, must

replace me my fate.

Perhaps she was born to relive eternity's
escape from my sins. Hell's hostage
with pomegranate hair:

suffering begets wisdom. Be grateful
to dead poets for torching the stair
with blue gentians.

And yet, I must know an eternity
of nights pressed into her berth
fingering softer products of her heart,
turning the stones, counting the turn
of winters until she returns to my weary arms.

Poetry

we've gone back to the tower again
and we talk of voice and imagery
we can't get past our own
selves to see what we do
you create her out of her own ruins and
she is beautiful to look at
pretty and pretentious
no one writes like that for me
your skin looks smooth and warm
I want to touch it when you read
push my fingers into the hair at your temples
where its finer paler and your skin shines
your voice will sound louder in the dark, lower
I can feel the way your breath shapes around
your lips and teeth, your soft tongue
I see what you do and my eyes water in my hot face
I take open-mouth breaths to feel my self move
try not to see you looking at me from behind
glasses and show you what I know you mean

until we get it

Precious Little Comfort

They don't grow beside the road anymore
and the house has been repainted
yellow white wash over golden rod
as if we didn't spend that summer on ladders.
We've lost trees between home and where
we retread steps, lost ourselves
that precious pussy willow comfort
milk weed silk and cattails
shedding brown velvet into our hands.
They don't grow beside the road anymore
where we crouched in dappled dark
over lilac roots, a hard packed garden
cemetery for precious little
trembling, breath of comfort and prayer
for cupped velvet.

Quiet at Four

It's winter in Illinois and Hardees is quiet at four.
The clock is wound tight in the wrong direction,
and the wind is blowing hard at the door.
She clutches her blanket, a toddler of four,
and I press my face to her cheek in affection.
The clock revolves in rapid rotation.
Time's unsprung in some hurried progression.
Small swinging feet are brushing the floor,
and the wind is rushing at the door.
A ribbon-tied braid hangs over her shoulder;
her head is bent in dreamy attention.

A lifetime unwinds in small generations.
Blue eyes flash clear some secret distraction,
her fingers work some small-toy chore.
The wind is storming the door.
Pendulum mittens swing in erratic childhood rhythm.
It's winter in Illinois and she's quiet at four.
The clock is wound in deceptive directions,
And the wind is hard blowing the door.

Quietly with Grace

I never knew her and she sits around the edges
in pastel cardigans, hard bound
books in her lap. We splashed at her feet, disturbing
her fishes, clouding her pond.
We dripped on her steps, waiting
for towels. Always with her
ankles delicately crossed, something intricate
in her lap. She worked her needle with still hands,
and we played battleship
at the foot of her recliner. I tripped around her
in sorry awkward etiquette. She died
while we were peeling apples days away
and a week before graduation. Spring sunshine danced
in dust sparkles above the table. I watched
Mother press a hand to her mouth and cry
into the phone. I didn't feel
the bite of the knife as I sliced the skin
of my index finger. I locked myself in my bedroom
and cried against the door.
They went back to her without me and returned
to watch me graduate.

Rhodora

*Most blessed among women is Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite;
blessed is she among women in tents.* Judges 4:24

In this dry foreign acre, might I find
Deborah dreaming under her tree,
some feminist visionary
upon whose lips this name
discovered its origin.
Would she shackle this fate
to my foot and this mountain,
to repeat the legendary sins of a woman
with the supple strength and quiet
beauty of a wild goat?
Gather the judges to consider my destiny,
obedient and acting on prophecy,
heroine, puppet, woman or wife,
doing the unexpected, what's expected of me.
Hammer my soul to the ground in shackles,
kneeling in puddle and stiff flow of duty, or life.
In the oath of God, weak victory.
God has promised me
this name sing his people,
the dying word seals a legacy.
I am not her. She is
not me, who must deny her ways
and will for a name
murmured on desert winds which carry
the salt and sweat off her longings
. . . to own a soul
as gentle as clouds against sun or plum horizons,
to bloom unnoticed in damp woods and deserts by sea,
as quiet as dusk or dawn,
for a heart as wild and calm as wind

and whisper of water slipping over stones . . .
Who must know an eternity of days
waiting out the ghost, for judgement
and release unforgiving
ache bleeding up from the ground,
shackled to places she would not go.
Whose eyes question a secretive sky
that overcomes clouds to brush her where she waits
searching some part of her
breath and death in destiny.
Weak and faithless and shackled by fate
to unmovable mountains that much farther from sea,
limited to hoof and heart
beat of a goat, by oath and legacy
leaping rocks among mountains,
bleating to the sky for a different name.

Roadside

This distance I know from my markers.
This my meaning, peace
comes aching, a pain
I know below my left breast,
not digging deep a course to my fingertips.
(That is not peace.)
This peace I know from skyless afternoons.
Grey-haze over turned stubble fields,
blue-dusted with snow,
worn-wood fences, worn-wood
barns with rusted tin roofs,
the still windmill and hawk
hanging over his perch, windless
that haze, I know it
carries the sea-salt off my longings.

This pain I know from my distance.
To stop still beside windmill
and haze, for I know
corn-stubble would be ungiving
under my boots, soil hard-frozen,
snow grey with road dust,
Finger-chilled with an ache
from deeper places (I don't go),
I would taste only ash.

Scattered Seed Morning

Spring-quiet winter morning,
steam-hot ceramic cup,
clean white shelves,
fresh laundry smell.
Window-view of winter-ugly
gackles scattered over seed,
just quiet birds like any birds.
Dream of eggshells and delicate things,
eyes like crushed velvet,
breath thick like pillow feathers,
soul falling warm like
blank-paper sunlight
across the kitchen table,
tangible,
breathable,
ephemeral. Just another scattered-seed
winter morning dream of capture
sunlight soul on paper.

Shape

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. John 1:1*

I want to be a word, without
time but shape in the secret
darkness like the rush
of a pulse, so real
it vibrates the air electric.
Shape like fire,
hot pavement burning up through
both bare soles and every bone
in one body at one
time. Thick as that catch of breath
at one given moment
smokey and damp and
heavy in the chest as joy.
Deceptive to the casual eye
that scans the point and fine blue surface
for sails and seagulls and brindled sky.
Real as the murky depths of her jewel,
warm and thick and scattered
with bloated fish that die
on her shore, softening in the sun.
As much to what this body draws nearer
in vain seduction of reality. Never
to peer through these blue eyes
some illusory cliché
life, this face I don't recognize.
Crawling under this skin, again
following around this dull woman,
her rages and uncertainties,
pushing to realer existence
than the mirror, pushing
against the limits.

I want to be a word
as whole and round
and real on the page
as the shape and taste
on your tongue.

She

In mirrors it is
the mist that rounds her
smooth cardboard skin
and her hands know
this is not her.
She would burn
away the paper, imagines herself
rain, chases light.
In mists overcast
she is the air around her
and her coat unfurls
and her hair unfurls
a flag for her country
self. This is not her.
But in a close coffin she twitches
her lips, kisses the glass. Her own
blind reflection pressed against light
which burns, makes her that which she is
not. She imagines herself cremated,
leaves it behind.
Behind closed eyes,
wonders if dead, he
would know her, would recognize
the mole east of her navel, twin white scars
on her right wrist. If it were all
burned away, would he lie

prone, pressed against stone
listening for the damp
murmurings of mist, taste the salt,
would he say this is the body which weighted
the soul that whelmed, would
trace the fossil ruins and say these
marks are the poems her soul etched
into her bones or would he, missing the dead
sea blue eyes, missing the light
altogether, say he never knew
her?

Snow

The snow melts as it falls, heavy
dropping to muddy leaves. Under the dark
light of the window,
I serve dinner and no one notices
the sauce is melted to
the skinless chicken breast and each rice
is fat and heavy with cream. Breaking easy
conversation with hush to better hear the breaking
news on channel 20. Nothing reaches us
under the heavy eaves, insulated against the cold
with our own quiet layer of snow. Nothing worth remembering.
Moving through schedule, unwinding
in careful sync. Under another layer
of quilts, sprawled heavily across fat feather pillows,
body warmed, we drift in and out of conversation,
wisps of news breaking through sleep. Two blocks away
a man was dying while we were sitting down to dinner.
Ripped open and bleeding onto frozen concrete.
Two blocks away, we murmur how close,
cold beating its way into our chests

as we check the locks.
There is no snow in the morning
and the parking lot has been swept clean.
When I slow, melted
snow traces rivulets down the windshield
and I wonder if his eyes whelmed
heavy with fat stars that puddled
and traced his cheeks as his warm body
melted broken into the concrete.

Symmetry

Separate, we fall into sleep,
flailing against the repeat
that hounds our dreams, punching holes
in walls where sleep lives, sharding night
around which we must tread carefully.
We find solace in our union,
shielding each other from roaring spaces.
In our symmetry we fit tight,
draped together, unassailable,
our joined shape
ward against breach of night.
A comfort to rest my head
in the hollow of your breast,
counting the measure, your pulse
lulling my course into sleep,
to taste your breath and the salt
of your skin, feel the press
of your lips in my hair.
In the break, I recognize your face,
sweet with shadows as if tears
darkened your eyes serious
and stained your cheeks sad.

I know sleep a stage
where dreams' substance rises
to my lips, and yours a face
I trust with murmured secrets.
Turning together in moments of hush,
knowing the tossed weight of your arm,
over, and around, pulling together,
the press of your heart to my back.
Counting the lull, your pulse,
measuring our course into sleep,
letting the slip of night pull me down
into your dreams, enwombed
in blankets and bodies and breath.

sometimes nothing

and sometimes a small Jamaican ocean
can span ten years abstinence
sugar cane and dusky skin
on the surface, we'd wade through dawn
to see a moon--how many days
unrising--the setting
sun brilliant flashbacks after midnight
barefoot in rock pools half-expecting
the depth to rock the surface, space
or ten years time tamed wild out of the wind
and they come to me tentatively
sometimes I have to dig for shells
into your ocean, you scatter
shards, unceremonious scraps of colored glass
off the end of the pier and wait
for the sun, and sometimes nothing,
in how many ways unrising
five of us with the dog running

the length of how many beaches
counting the same wave slapping
down the length of the retaining wall
spray rising respectively to fly
small explosions over eroding concrete
wind so heavy we lift our arms
as if we could become gulls across the sand
our last day in Jamaica
the bottom crashed the surface
and I crouched in the sand, staring
hard with my heart as if I could pound
into memory the coarse drain
between my fingers, the sun over water
uprooting shells from another age
ancient crustacean harbored under glass
as if shelving ruins brings them closer
landlocked today
like another age of being away and
parking lot seagulls that aren't
even that much
wheel and cry over this concrete ocean
I'm as much
out of place as rooted as these lost gulls
and sometimes wonder if my ocean
cries as clearly from there as it does from here
and sometimes ladybirds
migrate and die frozen, scattered
and glistening in the sand
and frozen at the end of the pier
you with your arms lifted, scattering
glass the color of blood
faith promises your ocean
and the friction of time
rub smooth sharp edges

Two Jims

Night-shattered and wandered away,
He was drunk and into darkness
I could not name. He willed me to stay
but I moved into days with my accidental
scars. He set the first fire
to the bridge between childhood
and the rest of my life. Followed me
across two days, but I turned him
away. I knew my own darkness
when he died out of my arms,
out of my life and by his own will.
I have wanted that pain, remembered
cat-green eyes, forgotten his name.

Another Jim

With brown eyes, withered away.
Tennessee-gravel voice, sleep-soft
lips, he had rhythms
I couldn't follow, but he caught me up
in his arms, suffered my accidental
ways. He taught me how
to lose him. I lost him
two times and finally, to his father
who willed me to stay and died
never knowing, to his kid-brother who knew
darker days and brought himself home
with a shot-gun. I remember
incense at one mass and Jim
at the grave. I would have married him
but he sent me away and I've forgotten
how I loved him.

Unlikely Gifts

She carries with her
beaches, the slip and trickle
behind her voice. It comes down
to water with her, and gathering
unlikely gifts.

That windy January
something swam the lake,
and a parallel something smaller, ever slow
swimming the rough. What,
besides seal, survives this cold.

Perhaps her lawn chair.
Winter brings her new
beaches, the strand ever
evolving in the lens
moving full
circle, like the moon
that draws her. Perhaps she
will have changed
how she remembers.

Dunes of shells returned
to the lake, unlikely shards
of wine swept away to the gathering
place of such gifts. She shelves
another smashed glass waiting
for ceremony to soften indiscretion.

Today's gift: bloated fish,
lake bottom silt, rain. Hoarding
red glass, turning
edges at the bottom, blood
water pearls for her
children.