THE RELIEF OF THE UNREAL LIFE: POEMS

by

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ABSTRACT
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This collection of poems takes as its subject desire in its various guises. Religious desire—the human need to find faith and to hope for an afterlife, and the doubt and skepticism in those very needs—is braided together with more earthly desires, as well as with ruminations on artistic ambition. These poems situate themselves within the rich tradition of the postconfessional, transmuting autobiographical elements to form a narrative of marriage, pregnancy, loss and birth that anchors the book. This narrative is juxtaposed with other lyric voices to explore the connections between hunger of all kinds.

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Sycamore Review: "The Cart of Thirst"

Tidal Basin Review: "Nausikaa's Sister"

West Branch: "On dreaming I throw all my poems into a lake"

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Defining the Postconfessional in Contemporary American Poetry

The first time another poet read a collection of my poetry, she told me, "You should have the word 'mirror' in the title of your book. Look at how many mirrors are in the poems!" She was right, and the sense of disappointment I felt was keen. If so many of my poems were about reflections, "I" speakers looking at themselves for enlightenment, how could I escape charges of narcissism? Did I mean for the poems themselves to reflect my own life? What, exactly, was the distinction between the rhetorical self on the page, and the consciousness that created it?

These are important questions for any young poet, but they are particularly germane to those young poets that write poetry that is grounded in their own life experiences. As it turns out, these are also essential critical questions at a time when ambiguity prevails in discussions about poetry of the self. What can we make of poets writing *after* the initial confessional movement of the 1950s and 60s, when poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman recounted the experiences of a first person speaker that appear to correlate with "a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem" (Middlebrook 636)? Critics deploy the term postconfessional, but the concept is woefully under-theorized: is it merely a temporal marker, or are there differences between those who are labeled confessional, and those who are post? I aim to argue that both the confessional and postconfessional are *contemporary* modes of understanding the poetic self—the rhetorical "I"—and suggest that what distinguishes the two modes is the role that postmodernism plays in the poet's conception of that self.

Little scholarship attempts to link postconfessionalism to postmodernism, and one reason the former is under-theorized may have to do with the fraught legacy of the confessionals. As Alan Williamson notes, "'confessional poetry'—almost from the moment that unfortunate term

was coined—has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools" (51). There are numerous reasons why this may be the case. One has to do with the (perceived) longstanding bifurcation in contemporary poetry between poets "of ideas" (such as John Ashbery or Susan Howe) whose work lends itself more obviously to examination through theoretical lenses, and poets "of emotion" (i.e. confessionals and postconfessionals) who are viewed, to use John Koethe's term, as "estranged" from theory and its proponents. Another, more pervasive, reason lies in the association of confessional poetry with indecorous levels of self-revelation. Readers associate—wrongly, but persistently—the confessional with artlessness, overearnestness, or narcissism. When critics use the term postconfessional, then, they are usually referring to a poem that displays continuity with the confessional's tendency toward self-disclosure.

Exactly how the postconfessional deviates from its originating movement, though, is less well defined. Gregory Orr's essay, "The Postconfessional Lyric," hints at postmodernism's influence in his distinction between confessionalism and postconfessionalism's use of "unproportionate" versus "proportionate ego," respectively. He notes, "In a poem where a proportionate ego is protagonist the competing claims of self, other, and world are all honored, and an important aspect of the poem is dramatizing how (and how powerfully) each asserts itself" (671). Jo Gill, in her introductory essay to *Modern Confessional Writing*, is more explicit; though she suggests that writing about the self should still be termed "confessional," rather than postconfessional, she points out that contemporary writing now understands that self "in the light of poststructuralist and/or postmodern challenges to our sense of the reliability of language, the coherence and authority of the subject and the accessibility or desirability of authentic truth" (3). Where Gill sees postmodernism's influence on "confessional" writing, I see it as representing a break between the confessional and postconfessional modes. It is precisely this postmodern

"challenge" that distinguishes the postconfessional epistemologically and not merely temporally or by degree (as Orr seems to suggest) from the confessional. Though the confessionals had more complicated notions of selfhood than they are often given credit for—one thinks of Plath's theatrical, self-mythologizing speakers or of Berryman's ventriloquizing, refracted Henry and Mr. Bones—they did not interrogate the authority and coherence of the created self. If confessional poets had an important stake in bringing selves roaring into being through language—asserting voice in the face of emotional trauma—then postconfessional poets consistently undercut that very idea.

Two seminal texts seem to be particularly useful for understanding postmodernism's effect on the poetic self: Roland Barthes' 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" and Ihab Hassan's 1987 essay "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." Roland Barthes' famous essay on the subject theorizes that the author can no longer be seen as a figure external to the text and rejects the traditional notion that "[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us." Instead of the author speaking to us, producing the text from the outside, the author "is born simultaneously with the text … in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing." When the author says "I," according to Barthes, there is nothing outside of that utterance; there is only the utterance itself. For the postmodern lyric poet, the consequences of this absence—of there being no authentic self that is struggling to be communicated through the text—mean any investigation of the personal is marked by instability, the impossibility of authority, and of diffraction and doubt. Barthes says, "[W]riting is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative

where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."

Hassan's essay focuses similarly on the notion of destruction of voice, or, as he terms it, unmaking. Postmodernism is characterized by "a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche" (Hassan 594). One can hardly think of a definition more oppositional to the confessional project, where trauma necessitated the construction of the psyche via poetic utterance. Building on the central feature of postmodernism as decreation, Hassan offers the following description of postmodern writing:

> [P]ostmodernism veers to-ward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a "white ideology" of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences. (593)

These features are often seen in contemporary poetry that is labeled as experimental or conceptual, focusing on the materiality of language as a subject, or on ironic treatments of traditional poetic material. However, they are also found, as I will show, in poetry written in more conventional guises and in poetry "of emotion."

Postmodern theorists must forgive me for the blasphemy of delineating a set of binaries here between the ways that the postconfessionals and the confessionals understand the poetic self; this would be a fine time to insert a caveat that the boundaries between the two—just as with modernism and postmodernism—are often permeable. Perhaps it would be most instructive to turn to two contemporary poets, one writing in what I would call the confessional mode, and one in the postconfessional, to examine the methodologies employed in the service of their differing paradigms.

Although I have already broadly defined confessional poetry, it may be useful to

delineate some of its major features. In addition to Middlebrook's definition—which focuses on the use of the first person and the ostensible use of autobiography in the poetic treatment of psychic pain—we have the characteristics delineated by Elizabeth Gregory. Confessionals make "reference to names and scenarios linked to the poet. The work dwells on experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts … traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's body are its frequent concerns" (34). The resulting poems are transgressive; their shock value plays "an important part in [their] operation" (34). I suggested earlier that critics do not always focus on the complex presentation of the "I" in confessional work, preferring instead to equate the poetic "I" with the poet. Gregory's essay usefully suggests that the confessionals were attempting to depart from traditional gender and sexual roles (coincident with American society at large at that time) by employing "a *reality trope*" in order to lay claim to a more authoritative presentation of transgressive material [emphasis in the original] (35). The artlessness that confessionalism is often accused of due to its direct use of autobiographical experience is actually, as Gregory notes, "an extremely artful manipulation of the materials of poetry, not a departure from them. But it has confused some readers" (34). And, I would add, some critics, as well.

Arguably, the most famous poet currently working in the confessional mode is Sharon Olds. Her most recent volume, *Stag's Leap*, is also her most successful, having won both the 2013 Pulitzer Prize, and becoming the first American-authored volume to win the UK's T.S. Eliot Prize. The book is structured much like a memoir: the book moves nearly linearly in time and constructs a narrative of the dissolution of a thirty-year marriage and the aftermath of that dissolution. The book uses no clear personae, but appears to be told in a single voice throughout, that of, to use a repeated phrase in the volume, "the left-wife." This lack of persona, in fact, is

one of Gregory's criteria for confessional poetry, which at first glance seems odd, especially given the ubiquity of personae in, say, Plath and Berryman. However, if we spin Gregory's claim slightly and suggest a consistency of voice in the confessionals as a defining characteristic, as opposed, strictly, to a use of persona, we may be closer to the truth. Even when Plath, for example, is speaking in the persona of a surgeon or a man on the gallows, the voice is the same.

In addition to the confessional marker of consistency of voice, the poems in *Stag's Leap* are the opposite, formally, of Hassan's description of postmodern writing. Their forms are not "open," "disjunctive" or "provisional." The poems are, each of them, lyric-narratives that set up a moment as the object of the poem's attention; they establish the scene, meditate, and end on epiphany. The line lengths, with perhaps two exceptions, do not change; the vast majority of the poems are about thirty lines long. Stylistic sameness (a charge which has dogged Olds throughout her career) need not necessarily mean that the work cannot be described in Hassan's terms, but these poems, for their frequent flashes of musical brilliance, are structured traditionally, both syntactically and rhetorically. The book's focus is not formal innovation: like all confessional projects it chronicles an imperiled psyche, constructing and creating a self on the page as a mechanism of regaining authority and transmuting the "apparently personal," to use an apt phrase from Olds, into art.

In addition to the idea of stability in the creation of voice and form, there are a few elements in *Stag's Leap* that seem to me to particularly exemplify the way that confessionals represent the self in their poetry. One of these is its use of, to use Gregory's term, "intimate feelings about one's body." In Olds' book, this manifests in two ways: a hyperspecific focus on parts of the body, and in details of sexual intimacy. Like Plath and Sexton before her, and like other poets writing out of second-wave feminism, such as Lucille Clifton, Olds' left-wife

lionizes her own body alongside the bodies of her beloveds. In the book's first poem, about the moment that the speaker is told her husband will be seeking a divorce, the speaker watches him undress for bed and focuses on "his deep navel, and the cindery lichen / skin between the male breasts" (6-7). This mention—precise, intimate, and somewhat scientific in its use of the more formal-sounding "male breasts"—sets the tone for Olds' treatment of the husband's body throughout. There are poems in which his body is figured as a locus for desire, but more often the body is an object of study. The poem "Once in a While I Gave Up" begins with a reverie on her husband's hips, the "head of the femur which / rode, not shallow, not deep, in the socket / of the pelvis, wrapped in the ilifemoral / and ischiofemoral ligaments" (3-6). Instead of the scientific terminology having a distancing effect, with the speaker employing it to possibly erase the humanity or individualism behind the anatomical reality, the gesture seems to have the opposite effect, especially since it is so frequently employed. This becomes clearer in a poem like "*Frontis Nulla Fides*" (which translates to "trust cannot be placed in appearance"). The speaker charts the rear of the husband's head, "the convex stonewall shapes of his skull" (4) and then goes on to rue, "He was as / mysterious to me as that phrenology-- / occiput, lamboid" (6-8). The technical vocabulary, then, can be seen as a method the speaker uses to illuminate her husband's mystery, to know him so deeply as to be able to name his skeleton and ligaments. The speaker is aware, though, of this method's futility; in the final lines, the speaker understands that she learned the lesson of the poem's title too late:

> But from within my illusion of him
> I could not see him, or know him. I did not
> have the art or there's no art
> to find the mind's construction in the face:

he was a gentleman on whom I built

an absolute trust. (36-41)

The speaker put her trust in the conflation of the body and the self (or soul, or "mind"), put her trust in the notion of embodiment. Although she recognizes this error—and, with the use of the word "art," it becomes a poetic error, too—nothing changes, poetically or emotionally. In other words, Olds sees the poetic potential, for a moment, in decentering, in viewing the physical as something other than a vessel for the self. She acknowledges that she has attempted, wrongly, to construct his identity and locate it within the physical body. At the poem's end she seems disappointed that she was unable to absorb the lesson of the fallacy of embodiment, but the speaker's stance on this never wavers after this initial moment of postmodern doubt.

Not only do more blazons for the husband follow, but the notion of embodiment is reflected in the speaker too. "Poem for the Breasts" is a rather standard endowment of physical features with sentience: "now they're forty, wise, generous. / I am inside them" (8). Later, in "Bruise Ghazal," she ruminates on a contusion: "I like it, my / flesh brooch—gold rim, envy-color / cameo within and violet mottle" (4-6). The bruise is equated with the speaker's emotional wound, and the speaker equated with the poet (in keeping with the requirements of the ghazal): "Sleep now, Sharon, / sleep. Even as we speak, the work is being / done, within. You were born to heal" (18-20).

It will not surprise a reader, given the embodiedness of Olds' poems, that the speaker's single consciousness is the source of all authority in the poem's emotional landscapes. Kin to the obsessive attention paid to the body, there is an occasionally overwhelming sense of self-consciousness. The self is that around which all other things orbit. We are reminded of Orr's term—unproportionate ego, and its tendency to ignore the "other" and the "world." Aside from

the general evidence for this that has already been discussed—the ubiquity of the "I" and the consistency of the poetic voice—there are also other ways this unproportionate ego manifests. Though critics have noted Olds' careful refusal to demonize the philandering husband (and some readers have expressed disappointment that she does not), the poems, in attempting not to excoriate the husband, instead reflect the speaker's almost neurotic inability to locate the husband's actions outside of herself. Again and again, the speaker ponders hypotheticals such as "I wonder if my husband left me / because I was not quiet enough / in our bed" (from "Not Quiet Enough," 3-5) or "When he left me, I thought, *If only I had read / the paper*" (from "On Reading a Newspaper for the First Time as an Adult," 20-22). One of the book's earliest poems is "Last Look," which sets the speaker's divorce against the events of September 11, 2001. This type of manifestation of egocentrism is often associated with Plath, who freely compared her own personal tragedies to the Holocaust. Olds tries to avoid, in this poem and in the book entire, the exaggerated victimization that Plath engages in. In this case, Olds attempts this by not comparing herself to one of the dead, but to the family members of the dead. She shares their desire to "*say good-bye to the actual*" (emphasis in original) by taking a "last look" at the beloved, something she understands herself to be "blessed" to have been able to do (though she only implicitly acknowledges that many 9/11 families could not).

When it comes to others and the world, these outside entities mostly serve as backdrop. There are few occasions, less than half a dozen, when the husband's voice enters for a single moment and we see a glimpse of the multivocality that might push Olds in the direction of a postmodern-style diffraction. These moments, though, are quickly shut down, perhaps out of Olds' desire to respect her husband's privacy or withhold judgment. In the second poem of the book, for example, the speaker wants to barrage the husband with questions that will reflect upon

her own ego: “I want to say to him, now, What / was it like, to love me—when you looked at me, / what did you see?” (21-22). When he refuses to answer her, she asks, “Is this about / her, and he says, No, it’s about / you, we do not speak of her” (33-35). Coming so early on, this poem seems to function as a kind of ars poetica for the volume: the single subjective stance of *Stag’s Leap* was the result of a tacit mutual agreement. However, if we return to Gregory’s idea that the use of ostensibly autobiographical material gives confessionals authority over their own emotional pain, we may understand why the book does not speak for others.

Olds, like many contemporary poets writing in the confessional mode, has distanced herself from the schools’ originators. In an interview with *The Independent* in 2006, she expressed measured admiration for Plath, but pointed to other (non-confessional) poets like Muriel Rukeyser as influences. Olds noted, “Although I felt, once I read her, that Plath was a great genius, with an IQ of at least double mine, and though I had great fellow feeling for Anne Sexton being the woman in that world, their steps were not steps I wanted to put my feet in.” This statement is curious; Olds utilizes just about all of the tools that the confessionals did, with the small exception of not mentioning specific names in her work. Olds makes much of this; the article notes, “Olds made a vow 25 years ago never to name people in the poems or to speak publicly about her family.” In the interview, Olds explains that she rejects the term “confessional” for own work, preferring, as I noted earlier, to call it “apparently personal.” Olds states, "I've never said that the poems don't draw on personal experience … but I've never said that they do. The dialogue that I'm comfortable having about them is one to the side of that actual subject. Art … is so different from life. It's just so different” (qtd. in Patterson). Two things interest me in this statement. The first is the idea that confessional poetry runs a parallel course to the actual which, I suggest, is true of all confessionals. This means that Middlebrook’s

definition of confessional poetry as revealing "a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem," is limiting. As astute a critic as Middlebrook was, this notion, as I have been trying to suggest, does not acknowledge the complicated ways that all of the confessionals created a poetic self that was particular to the page, parallel to life, to lend authority to utterances of transgressive emotional material. Olds' notion of her poetry as being "to the side" of the actual is a rather perfect description of confessional poetry, her own included, not evidence that she is *not* a part of that movement.

There is evidence in the poetry, too, that Olds does not quite believe the distinction she draws between herself and the confessionals. One of the most moving aspects of *Stag's Leap* is its awareness of the potential dangers of the confessional mode. In addition to the earlier-discussed hypothetical questions the speaker ponders about why her husband may have left her, a recurring worry has to do with the speaker's devotion to her art of the "apparently personal." We first see this in "The Healers," in which the speaker notes all the times her husband, a physician, was called upon to help a stranger in public when a doctor was requested: "*When they say, If there are any doctors aboard, / would they make themselves known* / I remember when my then / husband would rise" (1-4). The speaker imagines her ex-husband alongside his new wife, a fellow physician, both of them rising in tandem, in contrast to the differing paths the speaker and her husband had taken. The poem ends, "It was the way / it was, he did not feel happy when words / were called for, and I stood" (13-15). This moment, about a third of the way into the book, stands out for the richness of its suggestion, for being one of the first times the speaker has allowed some degree of negative emotion to be directed toward the husband. The tone is exceptionally careful, the phrase "he did not feel happy" deliberately understated. Halfway through the book, Olds includes a poem—one of many—that features her speaker coming upon

an object her spouse has left behind. In this case, it is an easel, and the speaker's earlier hint of angst blooms into full flower:

> What if someone had told me, thirty
> years ago: If you give up now,
> wanting to be an artist, he might
> love you all your life—what would I
> have said? I didn't even have an art,
> it would come out of our family's life—
> what could I have said: nothing will stop me. (17-22)

What distinguishes this moment from the ones in which the speaker wonders if she has been left because she was too noisy in bed, or because she wasn't interested in reading the newspaper is proportion. We don't believe for a moment that a divorce could be precipitated by such small offenses. "The Easel," though, strikes to the core. Its anxieties find a companion in the ending of the poem referenced earlier, "Not Quiet Enough." Though the poem begins by wondering if the husband has divorced her because of the sounds she made during sex, she concludes, "Or maybe / it was not my chirps // but this telling of them" which are described as:

> toll[ing] our private, wild bell
> from the public rooftop, I who had no other
> gift to give the world but to hold what I
> thought was love's mirror up to us—
> ah now, no puff of mist on it.
> After that life in the singing dream,
> I woke, and feared he felt he was the human

sleeper, and I the glittering panther

holding him down, and screaming. (32-40)

As in the last poem, the speaker insists on her artlessness. Her confessional impulse—that "mirror"—is the only "gift" she has to bestow. But this is a deliberate self-deprecation. In a poet more guileful than Olds, this might be read as an ironic nod to confessional poetry's reputation as artless, but here, it seems to be an utterly sincere acknowledgement of the perils of the confessional. In poem's final image, the poet is predator, or, at least, the poet imagines that her husband sees her this way. Whether she agrees is less important than the self-realization that she would change nothing about her artistic life, even if she could.

Ultimately, my goal in discussing *Stag's Leap* is only partly to disagree with Olds' distancing of herself from the confessionals. It may be the poet's self-awareness of the confessional peril in poems like "The Easel" or "Not Quiet Enough" is what she feels separates her from that group, but the original confessionals weren't, of course, working against fifty years of negative reputation the way that Olds is. If the confessionals were appreciated for the complexity with which they created poetic selves, perhaps Olds would not be so quick to deny the fact that she uses all of their same methodologies, for the same purposes.

My aim in looking at *Stag's Leap* is to create a distinction between the ways confessional poets and postconfessional ones conceive of the poetic self. For the latter, I will turn to Olds' contemporary, Louise Glück, and her volume about divorce, 1996's *Meadowlands*. Olds and Glück are exact contemporaries; Glück was born in 1943, Olds in 1942. Critically, Glück is often labeled a confessional, which Glück, like Olds, decries. Glück shares a fate with many other contemporary poets who write about the self, in that she is rarely read through a postmodern lens. The question is: why not?

The first feature most frequently noted about Glück is her use of spare, plain, straightforward diction, something that, though sometimes associated with postmodern fiction, is often not associated with postmodern poetry, which tends more frequently to radicalize syntax and disrupt linguistic coherence. In her essay "Coherent Decentering: Toward a New Model of the Poetic Self," Annie Finch writes, "A truism of today's avant-garde poetics is that … a fragmentary and disjointed style, defying the common mechanisms and necessities of language, is the only way to avoid positing a falsely unified self. This largely unexamined belief is one of the key dividing points between experimental and mainstream poetics" (141-2). Finch's observation goes some way toward explaining why Glück's work is unfailingly labeled mainstream, with "experimental" being aligned with postmodernism. Koethe, for example, insists that the poetry "of ideas" will employ "rhetorical devices and strategies that are, let us grant, textual and social constructions; and poems that fail to acknowledge this, and that deploy them in a completely unself-conscious manner, enact at best a limited and weak version of romantic contestation" (73). Like Finch, though, I would argue that destabilizing the lyric self can be achieved, *is* often achieved, through more traditional language; she notes that "the decentered, multiple point of view … can thrive in the 'mechanisms' of syntactic coherence" (142). In other words, Glück's famously direct, plain diction often obscures the postmodern bent to her poetry.

Perhaps the more serious contention among critics that prevents Glück from being read as a postmodernist (and thus, as a postconfessional) is that of narcissism, that old accusation lobbed at poets of the self. A review of the critical literature on Glück turns up the term consistently, and occasionally with vitriol, as in the case of a 2003 article for *Contemporary Poetry Review*, in which Brian Henry writes, "[S]he demonstrates a disconcerting inability to find her way out of

the cul-de-sac of subjectivity. She has forgotten how to imagine, or even re-imagine, her life." This navigational metaphor is echoed in a 2001 article by Ira Sadoff, who calls Glück's use of mythology in books like *Meadowlands* as a tool against narcissism a "dead end" (89). Glück's own take on the subject of narcissism can be found in a 1998 essay called "American Narcissism." In the essay she focuses heavily on defining factors that mitigate against narcissism. One of these, detachment, is a word that is ubiquitously applied to Glück's work, both by critics and by herself. At one point in "American Narcissism," she opines, "By the mid-Seventies, poets looking inward have begun, simultaneously, to watch themselves looking inward; the poet splits, regularly, into two figures (though not, as in true detachment, two perspectives)" (5). That Glück locates the definition of true detachment as having multiple perspectives is telling. It supports her own multi-perspectival methodology in *Meadowlands* and her other books. If the poet diffracts the lyric self across different, varying perspectives as a way of destabilizing and decentering, then, I contend, the detachment inherent in this process—and the very notion of a self that is not authoritative or fixed—refutes charges of narcissism.

This diffraction, perhaps more than anything else, distinguishes Glück's work from Olds' presentation of a single speaker, a single, authoritative consciousness. The methodology of Glück's disruption of a fixed self varies—most often in *Meadowlands* it takes the form of persona (the template of *The Odyssey* is overlaid against the fragmented narrative of a speaker's collapsing marriage) or dialogue that displays self-questioning or contradiction, sometimes through irony or humor, sometimes through formal choices. The opening of the book is a virtuosic introduction to these methods. The book's proem is a small, untitled lyric, and takes the form of a dialogue. Its type will appear again and again in *Meadowlands*. Only through accumulation does it become clear that the two speakers are husband and wife. The first speaker

begins, “Let’s play choosing music. Favorite form.” The second speaker replies, “Opera.” Stylistically, the only clue we have that the speaker is not the same is indentation; the first line is indented, and the second is not. The visual effect is that of undulation, a conversation moving smoothly back and forth. The first speaker continues the game: “Favorite work,” he or she says. The second speaker answers, “Figaro. No. Figaro and Tannhauser. Now / it’s your turn: sing one for me.” This gesture is an ancient one: an invocation of the muse, an invitation to song. But it wears strange clothing here—who is the muse? Who is invoking the song? And, most importantly, why does the second speaker violate the rules of the game? It should be the first speaker’s turn to choose the music, and instead she is ordered to perform, rather than be allowed to choose her preference. She complies on the following page, with a poem entitled “Penelope’s Song.” She begins with her own invocation, this time specifying her muse. She calls, “Little soul, little perpetually undressed one, / do now as I bid you, climb / the shelf-life branches // he will be home soon” (1-3, 5). We understand now, of course, that the “he” is Odysseus, but we know that the two speakers from the proem cannot strictly be these characters, since they discuss, anachronistically, Figaro and Tannhauser. They are strange hybrid selves, a husband character and a wife character over whom the narrative of Penelope and Odysseus is being laid. We are on shifting subjective ground, and not just because the traditional narrative of *The Odyssey* is being subverted when Penelope says acidly, “Soon / he will return from wherever he goes in the meantime, / suntanned from his time away, wanting / his grilled chicken” (16-19). The innovation here, the postmodern twist, does not come from a revisionist treatment of the mythology. Rather it comes from the uncertainty, the indeterminacy of the selves the book constructs, beginning even in the first two poems. The soul may be a Romantic notion, and it may be “undressed” here, confessionally, but the confessional self is elusive. Is this speaker,

whose soul sings "a dark … unnatural song—passionate, / like Maria Callas" the same from the poem before, commanded to sing by her opera-loving dialogue partner? No. And yes.

I have already suggested that merely focusing on the personal does not necessitate the presence of narcissism, but, rather that the presence of narcissism has to do with the degree to which the ego reveals itself in the poems. For example, using dialogue and persona in *Meadowlands* mitigates against the potential of a single ego controlling the narrative. Not only is the husband allowed to speak, but the couple's son is also given numerous poems. The book is nearly evenly divided in attention: all three of these voices have equal time and equal weight in the book, and other voices from the mythology are key, here, too; Circe speaks in several poems, and a siren is also given voice. The narrative, fractured though it is, encourages us to read these as stand-ins for women that the husband may have had dalliances with. In terms of unproportionate ego, Olds may have felt it unethical to speak for others in her poetry, but Glück's approach—though not precisely generous—is the one that has a mitigating effect on narcissism. In other words, even though Glück's choice paints presumably actual people in unflattering ways, her decision to include those other voices evens the poetic playing field by honoring other perspectives and revealing the consistently flawed nature of her poetic persona's perspective. These flaws are exposed by the ways the different speakers contradict each other, question each other, and introduce elements of doubt. Each has a slightly different style, creating a convincing polyphony. Although the poet may be speaking for others, even within those individuals' utterances we cannot locate one fixed perspective.

The figure of the son is a particularly illuminating example. He is referred to in the book both by the names Noah (the name of Glück's actual son) and Telemachus. The triangulation of mother, father and son is important: Noah / Telemachus represents, in some ways, the reader's

outsider perspective, and helps diffuse the claustrophobia of the tense dialogues between the husband and wife. He also represents Glück's prized value of detachment: the first of the Telemachus poems, in fact, is called "Telemachus' Detachment." The poem reads in its entirety:

> When I was a child looking
> at my parents' lives, you know
> what I thought? I thought
> heartbreaking. Now I think
> heartbreaking, but also
> insane. Also
> very funny.

The speech here is his own: direct, unadorned. But there is often an awareness of the slippage of identity in the Telemachus poems, as there is elsewhere. In a poem called "Telemachus' Confession," the son reveals that the departure of his philandering father was a relief. His parents' break-up meant he no longer needed to "fabricate the being / each required in any / given moment" and allowed him an epiphany: "I *was* / actually a person; I had / my own voice, my own perceptions, though / I came to them late." The irony here is evident: who is the person recounting his own coming into being? Is it Glück writing as herself, as Noah, or as Telemachus? Barthes, of course, would remind us that there is no one behind the utterance, only a rhetorical figure fabricated differently for different occasions. The poems are aware of this construction, and occasionally, as in "Telemachus' Confession," take that as its tacit subject. And the kind of slippage Telemachus enacts occurs throughout the book. At one point, in the poem "Quiet Evening" the husband and wife walk together, figured as both themselves and as Penelope and Odysseus, with a son called Noah. Any semblance of the actual has disappeared, and a shifting

mixture of selves, all born on the page, has replaced it.

The humor that Telemachus displays in "Telemachus' Detachment" is another distinction from Olds' volume. Though the presence of humor itself does not automatically indicate the influence of postmodernism, it works to undercut sincerity, and can function as a byproduct of the awareness of the limitations of language to express emotion. For example, in the poem "Anniversary," the first speaker (by now the reader has noticed a consistency in the formatting of these dialogues—the husband's dialogue is always flush left) complains, "I said you could snuggle. That doesn't mean / your cold feet all over my dick. // Someone should teach you how to act in bed" (1-3). The poem ends with the wife's words: "You should pay attention to my feet. / You should picture them / the next time you see a hot fifteen year old. / Because there's a lot more where those feet came from." This retort is funny, and also deeply otherwise. The poem's title creates friction against the poem's circumstances—the wife has had to request physical affection and is begrudgingly, conditionally, granted it. By this point in the book, about a third of the way in, we have had implications that the husband has been unfaithful, which makes the humor at the poem's end deeply complicated, as it is everywhere in *Meadowlands*.

The same sort of barbed humor is present in "Purple Bathing Suit," one of Glück's most famous poems from this volume. The poems from the series that "Purple Bathing Suit" belongs to are perhaps the closest the book comes to an "apparently personal" authorial voice. Like the others in this series, "Purple Bathing Suit" is an apostrophe; it is also a blazon, of sorts, of the kind we might see in Olds' book, but the emotion is undermined by the vitriol that accompanies it, the absurdity of the imagery, and what Tony Hoagland refers to as its "dialectical tone," or a tone that consists of a "fraction," in which two opposing elements are in balance (87). The poem begins with a false tenderness: "I like watching you garden / with your back to me in your purple

bathing suit: / your back is my favorite part of you, / the part furthest away from your mouth" (1-4). Where it seemed the speaker would elucidate her attraction to her gardening half-naked partner, she immediately undercuts it. The poem goes on in this condescending manner, as the speaker also criticizes the beloved's gardening technique: "How many times do I have to tell you / how the grass spreads, your little / pile notwithstanding … ?" (9-11). Symbolism, of course, roils beneath this statement. The further we get into the poem, the more it feels that the opening three lines were set up merely as a kind of trick, against which to put the speaker's true anger. But the tone completes its pendulum swing at its close: "you are a small irritating purple thing / and I would like to see you walk off the face of the earth / because you are all that's wrong with my life / and I need you and I claim you" (18-21). Gone here is Glück's coolness, her detachment, her spare and precise language. The syntax here sprawls in a gush of "and" and "I" and "you." I don't mean to claim that Glück's ability to capture mixed emotions is a postconfessional characteristic, but the dialectical tone here is emblematic of Glück's ability throughout her work, as Hoagland puts it, to enact "the most fundamental fractures of human nature " (59).

One more illuminating comparison to make between *Meadowlands* and *Stag's Leap* involves their treatment of art's role in the collapsing marriages. Both of the books are metapoetic—a kind of awareness I would describe as postmodern, though hardly born from recent times. But where Olds book contains moments of earnest soul-searching about the role that poetry played in speaker's divorce, Glück's treatment is much harder to pin down. Many of the poems in the form of parables, or that deal with *The Odyssey* myth, make reference to song and singing, an obvious stand-in for poetic art. In "Parable of the Dove," the authorial speaker narrates a story of a dove who wanted to become human "to experience the violence of human

feeling, / in part for its song's sake" (13-14). The dove becomes human—Glück describes it as "a mutant"—who finds that human emotion, chiefly "passion" and "violence" cannot be "contained by music." The human-dove hybrid is unable to sing convincingly, and the world rejects it. The poem closes, "So it is true after all, not merely / a rule of art: / change your form and you change your nature. / And time does this to us" (29-32). All of the personae of the volume are implicated in this final lesson. The poems, like prisms, have altered the poet, whomever she may actually be; the marriage has altered the love—and the selves—of its participants.

But Glück's take on art and marriage is not always so coded. "Rainy Morning" beautifully illustrates the power of the postconfessional impulse. The poem begins with the speaker addressing herself in the second person, a fracturing of perspective that is all the more disorientating within the context of the book, where the "I" and the "you" referents are in constant flux. She chastises herself: "You don't love the world. / If you loved the world you'd have / images in your poems. // John loves the world" (1-4). We know, then, with the mention of John, that this is the poet's voice—as much of one as there ever is in a volume that constantly eludes being moored inside one consciousness. We also know that the speaker's self-criticism is exaggerated. The poems are full of the world: neighbors, flora, food, music, sports, animals, and all the elements of a finely rendered environment are present in the volume. The true melancholy surfaces in the poem's second half:

> Look at John, out in the world,
> running even on a miserable day
> like today. Your
> staying dry is like the cat's pathetic
> preference for hunting dead birds: completely

consistent with your tame spiritual themes,
autumn, loss, darkness, etc.

We can all write about suffering
with our eyes closed. You should show people
more of yourself; show them your clandestine
passion for red meat. (13-23)

The image here is surprisingly reminiscent of Olds' panther, the artist figured as predator. But in Olds' poem, that metaphor was conjured out of fear, the speaker worrying that her husband saw her as preying upon their privacy in her art. Glück's metaphor is self-mocking, and scornful: the artist is not predator enough. Her husband, though she has earlier in the poem scoffed at his philosophy of "judge not / lest ye be judged," is the vital figure of the poem, "out in the world." The speaker's art withholds too much—it does not have enough of the violence of the actual. We could see this as laying a claim to a confessional impulse, but, again, Glück's dialectical tone puts us on shifting ground. Is John to be valorized for his simplicity or derided? Is the speaker the poet who wants to lay bare the true brute within, or the dove of several poems later, a tragic figure "stained with the bloody / fruit of the tree" it fell from, in a nod to the fall of man? In true postmodern fashion, Glück raises the questions, but never answers them.

Glück, like most poets who write about the self, is often labeled confessional, as is Olds. Though they enjoy prestige and wide readership, critical affection has not always been easy to come by. Neither has critical clarity; when I began to wrestle with the labels "confessional" and "postconfessional"—what they meant and how they might apply to my own work—I felt

increasingly that criticism equating the two schools' methodologies was inaccurate. My conception of the distinction between the two has helped me understand the evolution of my creative work, as I blended early influences like Plath and Sexton with exposure to poets who seemed to be able to write about the self while departing from the confessionals in important ways that I only dimly understood when I began the earliest poems in my collection *The Relief of the Unreal Life*.

My MFA thesis, *Instructions for the Nereids*, was a confessional volume. Structured linearly, with sections on childhood, adolescence and adulthood, it could be read as a kind of memoir-in-poems, like *Stag's Leap*. Although it contained some persona poems, it was not multi-perspectival in the true sense, not, to use Glück's definition, detached. My work then, as now, was interested in psychology, the friction between the private self and the self fabricated, to recall Telemachus' confession, for the sake of others. Unlike the original confessionals, I was not aiming to create an authoritative self in the face of emotionally transgressive subject matter: in the worst cases, my use of the "I" was lazily diaristic. In the best cases, I used other characters as a kind of metaphor for my own experiences. When I began to understand the possibilities of the postconfessional, my work changed.

The Relief of the Unreal Life, first and foremost, is polyphonic. There is a central narrative to the book—a young couple attempting to start a family—that is fractured by the intrusion of other voices in other circumstances. Unlike Glück, I don't attempt to create other perspectives within that narrative; in other words, neither the husband nor the child speak to undermine fixity of the consciousness in control of the central narrative. However, the multivocality of the book, I believe, diffracts the "I" across perspectives that are analogous, but often tangentially so. For example, the book's opening poem is spoken in the voice of Hypatia,

the first documented female mathematician, who is figured in legends as being uninterested in romantic or sexual love, due to her preference of the life of the mind. Thus, the opening words of the book are "There is nothing beautiful about bodies, / their moaning, their blood" (1-2). This is a rejection of the physical, meant to resonate with the book's title, which suggests that a life lived outside of one's "real" self is preferable—something to be grateful for. Hypatia is punished for her rejection of traditional female experience; she is "skinned / … to ribbons with a thousand shards of oyster shell" (9-10). She remains posthumously resolute; the poem ends, "You have tried. / You will never unpearl me" (11-12). As an ars poetica, this suggests, I hope, a certain ferocity of commitment. It also creates friction with the rest of the book, which often celebrates love and bodily experience.

This friction can perhaps be chalked up to dialectical tone, one of the tools I share with Glück in abundance. Like *Meadowlands*, *The Relief of the Unreal Life* professes (as in "Hypatia") and then works to undo itself. The book's anchor poem "Remake" is one of many examples of dialectical tone in the book, and it may perhaps be the most illuminating poem in the volume in terms of my understanding of how postconfessionalism could complicate my work. All of the hallmarks of confessional poetry are present—feelings about the body, the use of "apparently personal" subject matter—but postconfessional tools, like irony and diffraction, are applied. The poem, in six sections, has six speakers, and its form and style shift considerably from speaker to speaker. The poem is structured by six famous works of art, and begins with a section titled "The Death of Marat." In the poem, the speaker establishes herself as a Marat-like figure; as in Glück's Penelope poems, this is clearly not Marat himself speaking, but rather a kind of hybrid of speaker and poet and persona. The images invoke David's painting, with ironic twists: "I will pretend / to be dead, sink down / in the bath to flood my ears" (2-4). The speaker

wants to ignore the child crying outside the door that the father cannot soothe and by the poem's end, she says, "These are the politics: / the hush dagger-pierced / and I draw myself up, / irreplaceable" (17-20). The politics behind David's original portrait of the murdered revolutionary have been transmuted to domestic politics. The speaker's book becomes water-logged, her chance for intellectual stimulation disappearing as she returns to comfort her child.

If this were the entire poem, the gender and political reversals might be interesting, but not necessarily a departure from confessional modes. As "Remake" continues, though, the prismatic effects are more evident. In Section Two, a strict sonnet that uses the context of Goya's painting "Cronos Devouring His Children," the context functions slightly differently. Rather than overlay the image of the painting onto a domestic scene, here the speaker explicitly uses the context of the painting as metaphor, addressing her infant son: "Unlike Cronos it's not due to power / That I raven like a beast / At the fruit of my own loins" (10-12). The speaker is not attempting to assume a guise here, as she will in the next poem, "Judith Slaying Holofernes," where she assumes Judith's voice, her "best dress: starch blue" and her "sword, tongue-sharp." These three first sections show the way that the speaker's relationship to the visual art contexts is constantly shifting; she speaks sometimes from within the painting, sometimes from without, and often from a place that is both here and there, as in "Judith Slaying Holofernes," where the poem could be a straight persona, were it not for the references to contemporary items like baby toys and children's books.

Section Three is also a useful moment to examine dialectical tone in "Remake." In it, the speaker aims her vitriolic resentment at her husband who leaves her all day with their child, "the same squawking toy // over and over, the same / book" (4-6), only to channel her resentment into a hunger for physical affection, exhibiting an almost violent urgency: "I will do anything to turn

your eyes toward me. Beware" (23-24). However, by the end of "Remake" when the speaker of the final section figures herself as a God in a contemporary setting, deliberately posing her husband and son to mirror Raphael's "Madonna and Child," she uses her art to figure her family as a trinity, with the speaker "Framing what is most loved / Against the bright / To cast out shadows" (26-28). This last section reverberates back through the rest of the book, where the role of wife and mother is often fraught with resentment or ambivalence. The speaker here is as "apparently personal" as the book gets, but has the weight of many contradictory selves accumulated by this point. Real and mythological persona, women and men from ancient and contemporary times, and an authorial voice that cannot be nailed down to one stance or form comprise the book's multitudinous "I."

Poets have written about the self, the psyche, the trauma and triumph of being, since the ancient Greeks, and they will continue to, as long as there is poetry. As Glück and Olds show, and as my own work shows, the confessional / postconfessional distinction is just as important now as it has ever been. Critics are beginning to focus on neo-confessionalism, and queer poets, especially, like Alex Dimitrov and Angelo Nikolopoulos have embraced poetic ancestors like Anne Sexton in their charting of a new paradigm of poetic authority within sexually "transgressive" material. Postconfessional poets like Dana Levin and Cynthia Cruz are mining new ways of fracturing autobiographical narratives. What is most important is that critics refuse to engage in dismissal of poetry of the self; as novelist Sheila Heti argues, "The artist … looks at her self in order to talk about other selves. She then creates something and gives it to the world … It is, and has always been, what people who make art do, and must do. You cannot do it blind. You cannot do it by looking at a toaster."

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The Relief of the Unreal Life

HYPATIA

There is nothing beautiful about bodies,
their moaning, their blood. Now those, there:
the ringed planet, the moon's sunken mouths,
that is a different story. Someday, you'll come
to know the equation's precision, the circle's arc,
the perfection of immutable numbers.
Someday, you'll turn your eyes away
from the place you've laid me, martyr
of the closed mouth, from where you've skinned
me to ribbons with a thousand shards of oyster shell,
urged on by some kind of god. You have tried.
You will never unpearl me.

I

LOVING SKINNER

(B.F. Skinner, 1904-1990)

You might think it wasn't easy.
Husband who refused to say *I love you*
to his wife, thanking her, dear, instead
for positively reinforcing me today.
Father who caught his child in a box
he called the *heir conditioner*, his toddler's
fat hands pressed in photos to the Plexiglas,
ignorant of hot, or sharp, or damp.
You might even think the rats
if they could hate, would hate him,
God of the cages, God of the food, which came
at bewildering intervals rattling through
its metal chute if they could learn
to nudge a lever with their paws,
five times, or ten, or fifty.

But look at yourself, fool-daughter,
fool-wife, the way you love
those who protect you from the world,
the way you love those who take
the glass shard of your will
from your clenched hand.
You know what Skinner sought for years
to find: those rats that stopped receiving
unlearned asking, knowing requests
pushed with their pink feet would go
unanswered. But those who were

rewarded even one time in a thousand
never quit, hard-wired for the luckless lottery,
loving the God of the cages who, next time, surely,
would send the benevolent crumbs clattering down.

HOUSEWIFERY

1.
Mornings are your departure,
some days before dawn. Light lies
across me for hours. At ten, the cat
kisses me awake.

2.
In today's Agatha Christie,
Miss Marple solves a murder
at Gossington Hall. In today's
paper, I do the crossword, read
of three murders, a car wreck,
a bank theft. In today's mail,
four bills and two letters
addressed to you.

3.
Our courtyard is a three-ring circus.
From the kitchen I see
into the dentist's office windows
and watch teeth cleanings while I eat my lunch.
Above that is another housewife
who cleans all day in her nightie.
And behind the restaurant at midday,
the cook comes out and spreads
his flattened cardboard box and, bowing,
prays toward Mecca via me.

4.
I tell my fortune in soapsuds.
In the vestiges of the morning dishes
was the shape of—vaguely—
Australia. I'll take this
as a good omen.

5.
Nights are your breathing,
the measurement of hours in the dense dark.
My wakefulness staves off sunrise.
Tomorrow,
I'll swallow your keys.

THE ROOSTER IS PERFECT

with his little fat feathered breeches
mohawk, muttonchops
hollering the sunlight down the whole hillside
his beak, his stone-chip eyes are perfect
he wakes at dawn drinking wine
all day he plays *scopa* and talks politics
keeps one hard eye on the hens
hanging laundry from the balconies
perfect the way he solves polygamy's
minor inconveniences, climbing the perch
to guard all the nests at once
he lets the hen eat first
of the food she's made him
especially the way he mates
hackled and cockless, cloaca to cloaca
like two surprised mouths
after the hen has been chased
pinned in the dust by the dust-
sharpened beak
especially the half second of touch
before the flight away
is perfect

ROLEPLAY

I'll be the scullery maid
You be the spitjack:
Shirtless, insouciant,
Roasting the suckling
Degree by degree

I'll be the miss
You be the gentleman
We'll quadrille by the light
Of the girandoles
You can kiss me behind the door

I'll be the schoolboy
You be the schoolboy
Offer me a back
I'll leapfrog it
We'll fumble our buttons

I'll be the widow
You be the golddigger:
Glib, insinuating
Hire us a post-chaise
I'll leave no note

Let's be anyone other than us
Let's be any time other than now

Where you are the sire

And I am your bride
Where I am the slave
And you are the slave

Monogamy

I am not interested in biology

I am not interested in the white albatross

Who mates for life, who will refuse

The wings of any other even

If his other half is lost

I am interested in where your eyes go in the dark

In the dopamine gleam of your wolfish grin

In the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing

MARRIAGE (1)

I am standing
in the warm bath,
clean as a new coin.

Beyond the door someone waits for my skin.

Once there was a street,
a railway station
in which a million

words were tossed into the air at once.

I held out
my hand,
had faith in its filling.

At last I caught one:

its tiny letters
wrinkling
in my palm.

And then someone calling me back

before I could even read it.

TRYING TO CONCEIVE (1)

In among her things
the hospice nurse brings in—
a fresh gown, bedding—
a cotton shirt
no bigger than a hand.

Must be a stray
from the maternity ward
someone says, as if it were
a cat that had wandered over.

Later I'll fold it
and take it home. My daughter, my son
will someday wear it, though their bodies now
are mere cells somewhere, buried
in the bodyscape.
For now I keep the shirt
clutched in the hand that does not hold hers
and its presence makes it seem
that a whole life arcs this room: what has entered,
what has rested, what is leaving.

In each hand, I hold a question: which
is harder: to finish, or begin?

MARRIAGE (2)

(National Geographic, December 2006)

Picture the young, legless man
smiling to his wife, turning to her
as she pirouettes before him
on the beach path. I thought at first
there it is, there's a real marriage: the one
leaning toward the thing gnawingly absent
in himself, the wheelchair angled
to the sun, to the lithe wife, laughing.
But sometimes the world jerks away
from metaphor, and the surf, you can see,
is hard, the rocks sharp, the scrub sparse,
the flowers sterile in black and white.
The man is grinning, though
shut behind sunglasses and his wife's
arm reaches away, and the real marriage
is not the one they're bound in,
but that of his flesh to the sand,
his blood to the dirt of the far-away country.

THE PARABLE OF THE WOMAN WITH A JAR

Upon arriving home, she finds it empty.
Nothing but a rim of dust,

the flour having spilt
a snaking line down the long path:

the weight of a full week's
bread unkneading from her hands.

She had noticed nothing.
The emptying had been soundless,

and the day had been full
of sound: the wake of buzzards,

the donkeys snorting.
She could trace

the line back to the first break:
the white mound in the dirt

like a new, small grave,
and like a grave, too,

the lesson--

THE CART OF THIRST

"The womb that refuses will be tied
eternally to the cart of thirst."
-Alfonsina Storni

The horse is so slow.
Stiffly ambling
the rocky outcrop.
I was exiled
for the greed of wanting.
For the want,
I was refused.
The sky so red.
The horse so slow.
There was stone
where I wanted flesh.
Blood, where I wanted water.

THE SLEEP SUITE

1. The Insomniac

Tonight's recipe:
Trazodone and the *Moonlight Sonata*.

Like the old alchemists,
I'll try anything
to procure the gold of sleep—
strips of tape to gag
the clock, stacks
of pillows. The left
side, the right. The bed, then
the floor. Television.
Novels: trashy or classic.

Invoke the Sandman, the Lord,
the patron saint
of sleeplessness. Say,
please. I am beggared
to desperate.
I'll ask it of anyone:
yoke the dawn, cleave
this day from the next
and from the last,
a candle snuffed
to preserve
the wick for flame.

2. The Somnambulist

Still chained to sleep, I go walking.
My nightgown scrolls like Greek
statues' garments; like theirs, my eyes
are sightless. It is not what most
believe: I am not dreaming.
When I pick up the cloth to clean
or the fork to eat the air, there is nothing
that corresponds in some inverted world.
Instead, I am walking to get there,
to the relief of the unreal life,
of action without consequence, to step
across, away, until you steer
my shoulders like a ship's wheel
back to the barren bed.

3. The Dyssomniac

what will it be this time
the date they'll flip the switch
on the Hadron Collider
and the infinitesimal chance
of ensuing vaporization
or the two teenagers today
at the post office mailing four
boxes marked LIVE BIRDS
or maybe the shocked
waking from the dream
of electrocution
or the wolves loping after
or the tornado prying the tiles
from the shabby roof
even the sight replayed
of some animal ground to nubs
of fur along the highway
each night there is something
buried in me, gasping
to the surface
a hundred hands tearing
the seam of sleep
that now I must stitch
restitch--

4. The Hypersomniac

O mellow O halo
O hollow dark inside of yellow
Day O dream O dream-
Less shallow
O knot of limbs O furrow
Of sheet and hill of pillow
Speechless, O, breath's
Soft billow
O drug O thick mud-
Wallow Make field
of wakefulness fallow
Make farther the sorrow

II

Puluga Sends the Flood

There are three ways to earn the gift
of storytelling. I myself was raised from the dead
by a slap in the face and a splash of cold water.
Long before you ever talked of your God,
I told of when Puluga sent the flood.
You see, we were luckier: our creator
lived among us. He taught us to hunt
and build fires, although the drilling of eyes
and mouths and ears into the animals was our idea.
It scared him how clever we could be.
Like any child, we grew to no longer need him,
so he made the bay rise and swallow all of us but four.
He insisted on recreating everything himself,
from jungle to turtle to bird. He refused us fire.
Petulant, he returned to the sky and no longer spoke.
These things taught us to be careful. Now we keep
a yam leaf always burning.
Perhaps your people know why we must always
disappoint the one who made us.
Every god who loves us one day flees
to a place too far to reach, leaving us
to pray to his great closed mouth.

EPISTEMOLOGY

1.
One says: *a long trip down a bright tunnel.*
Another: *I will see my mother. My father*.
Some tell in secret: *I suspect there's nothing.*
A limitless darkness, an eternity
behind closed eyes.
Science books claim rot, bloat,
the shock-white bone.

2.
I suppose it's unfair to complain
that all those years of Catholic school
taught me nothing. I learned that the nature
of revelation is really the history
of defeat—rarely the burning bush,
the resplendent angel; more often
the haphazard apple.

3.
The family mythology was intricate
as a tapestry: the warp, the weft of story
told of reunion with all that was lost.
Fish, birds, the family dog:
the miniscule stitches.
I could recite with certainty
all the earthly feelings that would fall away:
sadness, weariness, anger.
But it was not long

before death unpicked the threads.

4.
But once,
a trip at dusk down a flat prairie highway,
summer fields, scraps
of sharp columbines browning
their August skins--the sudden flash
of the redwing blackbird, and with it
the knowing, palpable as sound,
of dying: the eyes newly catching
at the common, the thing at once noticed
and gone.

I WAS BORN ANGRY, LIKE MY FATHER,

lip curled into snarl at the doctor's first slap.
Bitter ran in the blood. Toys I played with
rammed into faces. The nuns suffered
me. I was the spitting
image. Took after. Took from.
Confirmed in combat
boots, I chased the angry boys, bathed
in fury's tin tub. The better to savor
murder and tears, I read
plays back to front. I bruised the one I loved.
I bloodied the one I married.
Now look at me--daughter, twin:
mid-seethe we sit serious
at the holiday table. Dark mirror, I am happy
to be what I am, my face a little replica
of your first furrowed brow.

NAUSIKAA'S SISTER

About beauty, girls
learn many lessons. Once

my father said, *not every sister*
to princess is princess herself

With some women
beauty is like birdsong

so pure and constant
you forget to hear it

but some women
are the burners of ships

She is the burner of ships

Once a man crawled from the sea
wearing only salt and belts of kelp

I was afraid. I dropped
my washing and hid

Her gaze was as level and cool
as the wild horses'

For months after, I went
to the shore alone

where only the terns
beheld me. Noon sun

banished all shadows but one.

We Disagree About Eurydice

I say
she teaches us nothing--

cipher, aperture
through which you see

only the man:
grief-stricken & reckless

vignetted in your field
of vision.

Better to place
a shard of mirror in your eye--

THE ARTIST'S MISTRESS (1)

"I love you dearly, mademoiselle, but I shall always love painting more."
-Henri Matisse

The fisherman's bride
is the sea. Like any woman
she is restless, sighing and sighing.
Like any woman there is dark
anger, a tongue full of salt.
The businessman's bride
is the bank, pregnant and swelling.
Others envy her chilly beauty.
When asked, the priest
says that the church is his bride:
vessel where his own voice echoes.
Who is the painter's bride?
Surely not me, who married you
those years ago as a girl with skin
pale as a bare canvas. I think
you are wedded to color, dazzled
by crimson and azure;
hands that lie quiet each night in bed,
teeming with another life.

Allegory of the Throne

Here are my hands,
divested of wedding ring. Scrub them

rough along asphalt, make knuckles
callous by scraping the gravel.

Here is my voice.
Make it primitive, inarticulate;

slur it to blurred.
And here, unhinge my skull

and take this crown,
ringed with slimy jewels,

and let me crawl on all fours down
from this throne, thorny with velvet.

TRYING TO CONCEIVE (2)
(after Lookingglass Theater's Hephaestus*)*

Every night Hephaestus
plummets from Olympus.
His body travels the shaft of red
stage light as he wheels the air downward.
In this version, the mother
who did not want him
is a Russian circus siren, writhing
her coil of rope from the ceiling,
clinging with one bent leg
in the audience's single held breath.
I'm wondering why parents come off
so poorly in any religion, someone's face
always turned upward pleading
why have you forsaken me?
Tonight all the gods tumble over,
tightroped, trapezed, their sinuous bodies
capable of anything.
But all night I watch the one
nymph who danced through
a grotto of bubbles in the first act
and who bows hours later
with one still placed like a pearl
in the part of her hair:
the lasting and fragile miraculous.

THE BROKEN BED

There was something of the stone
In your face
So cool and grey and smooth

The French say *une fausse couche*
As if a bed has broken

There are some moments in life
That are not the same as living

When I touched the screen
That held your eyes closed
In the dark of my body

And I ran my fingers down
The sheen like a pebble's sheen
Filled with the stone's impossible stillness

Until it broke
And back the true words flooded

Why I Will Never Write a Poem About Fishing

because of their filaments of bone
shards of karma pricking the throat
because their eyes are fragile glass
because I know what it is to be
that vulnerable: mouth gaping
toward a hanging fruit
because I love soulless things
with the irrational loyalty of a small child
because they will never again trust the sky
because my hands are not agile
because I do not like silence
because when I swam in the ocean
and plundered their sand like a clumsy ox
they opened around me like blown seeds
and touched me
because I dream I too breathe water

Sea Burial

Look at that sun: piratical,
pillaging sky of color, clouds
the bleached bone-white of coral.

Feel that lack: voice parched,
skin cracked. Land-locked,
I miss the smell of water,

salt and cool. Even the odor
of alewives' spring sand-rot.
I feel the sailor's fear of dying here:

the inarticulate earth, particulate,
plundering. Better
the deathbed by water,

the ocean's rock and chatter,
vastness so unland—and ungrave,
carving deeper, and wider.

ON DREAMING I THROW ALL MY POEMS INTO A LAKE

1.
First there was the swimming of witches:
King James decreed the water would refuse
the wicked, and the woman
who spurned baptism's holy rites
would float at the surface like a sheen of oil.

2.
Woolf put rocks in the mouth of her angel.
Plath burnt the letters. She said: *a dream*
of clear water that grinned like a getaway car.
She said: *stone, stone, ferry me down there.*

3.
The lake was dark, periphery reeded and rocky.
It was nowhere I recognized.
The papers held together like a clay tablet,
sinking to disappearance: kittens in a sack,
murdered things.

4.
Ophelia went singing, laurelled with nettles.
Prospero drowned his book.
I have hidden in words for so long there is nothing
to do but scatter these after:
bread swollen with water, crumbs
for the pecking tongue.

III

THE EXPECTANT

Two hundred years ago the pregnant women
were wheeled to the Louvre to gaze
at portraits of beautiful nobles,
thinking the lovely features
would travel through their sight
to form their babies' faces.

I always trained my eyes
to the ground. It wasn't
that I didn't love the world.
It was that I was not worthy of it.

Now it is dusk, the branches bulbed
with raindrops, the marigolds flaring.
Your father's mouth is tight with concentration,
making dinner, his beard flecked
with three new silver whiskers.
For you, I'm looking.

BLUR

You mustn't tell anyone this
but sometimes on the long distance
night highway I take off my glasses
without which the world turns
to pure light—circles of headlight
and taillight and stoplight
dilating to ten times their size
to fireworks stilled mid-burst
to a psychedelia of dandelion heads
to an oncoming stream of white orbs
like a string of pearls being pulled
from a thief's pocket
to the stained glass' smear
on the rain-sheened Rue D'Arcole
where I stand with the blue umbrella
and watch feet trample the colors
to dozens of pure wide eyes
that turn reproachful as I weave or swerve
and put my glasses back on
and return to ruinous clarity

THE ARTIST'S MISTRESS (2)

(Leonora Carrington, 1917-2011)

That which makes the lover makes
the artist: each offers
a reflection like antique
glass, shining back the blurred face
to be recognized, vaguely
as one's own, vaguely as human.

Is this what I have done for you?
Do you see your eyes, indistinct and dark?
Is that your mouth, turning into some expression?
I urge you: do not try to sheen the surface.
Do not polish, spit-shine, rag-clean.
No sharper lines are coming.

HALLUCINOGEN

Morphine, Demerol
for the bones broken
in the long fall down the back stairs
bring your whole world
swimming back to you
through the looking glass,

bring men to your hospital room,
passing in and out
all night. One uses
your shower. One has come
to take you home
(the heavenly kind)

with choir in tow. One
leads you to the home
you've left behind.
There is your garden, sprouting screwdrivers.
You thought your sons were grown,
but here they are in overalls, hiding

in the azaleas.
And instead of windows
on the walls, there are maps
of every country
you have never seen: Italy
kicking its way toward sea,

the little scattered grains
of Hawaii—places
you were sure you were born
to visit and which you never will now.
To see them better,
you open wider

your one blind eye.

GRAVIDA

the moon is a vacuum
windless soundless

tonight she looks
five months pregnant
dark crater inside
just now pushing
her shape aslant

but that billow
is trompe-l'oeil
luminous belly lit
by my own
imagining

here I am helpless
in the waxing the tidal
pull of you

there nothing changes
there is relief in stasis

the breathless flag
still planted
footprint in the regolith

The You Alphabet

Ask me why all my poems
begin somehow with you. The little bulb
covered in soil that is mystery
down to its roots will not unfurl to
either orchid or daisy or sun-
flower, but to a broad face like your own-
generous, open,
half-smile like a petal curling.
I have no answer,
just a feeling before the blooming,
knot in the belly, a bullet,
leaden and hot. Writing you becomes
medicine, morphine, becomes bloodletting,
needle drawing you, crimson, out of me.
Once there was not you. Before you
poems wandered after beauty asking
question after question, fingering
rock, shell, stalk, bone of bird,
seeing shapes as in Plato's cave,
transmuted to shadow.
Unimportant, ultimately, what
variables I calculated
with, the
X of metaphor, the musical curve of
Y. The answer didn't matter, but the blooming:
zinnia, violet, aster, circling back to you.

THE CHAPEL OF WANT

What was your heart like?
Dropped crumbs in a wide forest
Slow drip slow chant
In the chapel of want
One said *he will not live*
Long like this
Your body sounding a bell
To my body

*

In Ascea your father and I
Fed a stray we named him
Sirio the dog star tied
A cloth around his neck printed
With constellations
When he stopped coming
We called *Sirio* through the town
In a hide of olive trees
We heard barking *mio cane*
The man there said darkly
The constellations in a puddle
In the road the noise in the olives
Mi scusi we said *mi scusi*

*

Choir of machines

In the operating room
My will untethered
They called it twilight
Because beyond one
Darkness there is another
The way one
Doll will cup another
Until it unfills to hollow

*

We took the map
Of fabric stars back home
Dried it on the balcony rails
Before the sea before
The bright hills
Your father wears it still
Around his neck sometimes
Something can be read there

*

There was a sound coming through
There was that rope hauling me up
One said *he is alive*
As if I didn't know that
As if I didn't hear you echoing

BED

"There is no such thing
as a bed without affliction"
-Lucille Clifton

1. Fever

In our bed tonight a little circus:
calliope music, hot rush
of wild animals, the floor of straw.
Our sheets are damp and jungle-green.
Strange colors streak my eyelids.
Even to brush against you, my skin
protests. But across the crowd you reach
over the fiery ring
to tame the lion,
pull the single strand of sodden hair
from my burning brow.

2. Child

My body doesn't end
at my skin. The way
the ocean doesn't end
at shoreline, but seeps a stretch
of middle ground
where my footprints splay
wide like parentheses
with yours in between,
tiny, uncertain in their practice.

At night, you thieve my breath.
At night, you are the crush
of milk smell and fruit.
At night, you reach without
opening your eyes, starfish,
basket star, brittle star,
find what you need
with touch, until I blanche,
acres of skeletal coral
smooth beneath your fingers.

3.

of nails of roses
a narrow a fruitful
to go to to take to to keep to
of eels
stream-
river-
of the cart of the rails of state
take me to
lay me in

me

4. Garden

As a girl I knew a bed
of earth. I played at Chinese
handcuffs with the snapdragons

and staked the tomatoes
to sentinel postures, guarding
blackberries beyond.

This city affords me only
two little windowboxes: one
crazed with mint and chive,
one bursting with nasturtiums.
Sometimes I read my son
the fairy tale of the emperor

who replaces the nightingale
with a clockwork bird. *Listen,*
I tell the baby, though he is too young
to understand. When the emperor
is dying, he remembers:
That is my garden you speak of.
I am filled with such longing for it.

Capernaum

Mother, you must open
your hand.
Unclench the fist
that holds me. I was ensouled
with the shrill of trumpet,
that moment your body shut
around me like a stone. Mother,
I was not yours. The apples,
after all, are plucked
by human fingers, though
it is the branches that permit
the letting go.

REMAKE

1. The Death of Marat

The child's wail troubles the quiet.
I will pretend
to be dead, sink down
in the bath to flood my ears.
Water makes a noise
like a drawn breath. Still,
I hear his father pace the floor.
Flake-white, my skin refuses
to submerge entirely: dunes
of breasts blued with the lacework
of veins, the ruched
soft pouch of belly.
The book I've brought in
wisps the surface and drinks.
It will swell, unread,
another victim of interruption.
These are the politics:
the hush dagger-pierced
and I draw myself up,
irreplaceable.

2. Cronos Devouring His Children

It isn't a figure of speech: I want
To consume you. To drink the milk that spills
In pearlescent rivers from the font
Of your upturned mouth. It's literal,
The urge to take one doughmound of your cheek
And bite: the taste of cream and skin and soap,
The feel of your flesh tearing by my teeth.
Zeus staved his father's hunger with a stone.
I won't be fooled by any substitute.
Unlike Cronos, it's not due to power
That I raven like a beast at the fruit
Of my own loins. The reason I devour
Is that I'm powerless: the terror of
Desire, the appetite disguised by love.

3. Judith Slaying Holofernes

It isn't that you wanted me.
It's that you didn't.

All day, the baby:
the same squawking toy

over and over, the same
book: *red bird, red bird*

what do you see?

But you come home, bounce
the baby once or twice

then sprawl on the couch,
your boy blinking up at you.

Do I exaggerate? You know
the words by heart

as well as I do: *I see*
a black sheep looking at me.

But when dark falls
something in me cracks open:

a bruised self, greedy
born like a new snake

from the day's molted scales.
I will talk you awake, I will wear

my best dress: starch blue.
I will do anything to turn

your eyes toward me. Beware
my sword, tongue-sharp.

4. The Kiss

Again, we fuck
to a soundtrack:
Baby Einstein's Classic

Lullabies. The plink
and wretched plonk
of toy piano,

tinny synthed cello
buzzing *Die Moldau*
or Pachelbel's syrupy

trill. The baby
won't sleep deeply
without it, wakes

in the silence
at the slightest
sound: a moan

or gasp, inane
words we murmur
to each other.

So we go
soundless. After, we
exhaust, the blear

of not-quite-
Mozart casting us
toward sleep, bodies

fused in this:
something close, though
not-quite-bliss.

5. Pieta

The first time, you died.

I carried your body for weeks.

Eventually it came to weigh
nothing. Surgeons
rolled the stone
from the mouth of the cave.

All that empty.

Then you returned,
your features gathering
themselves as if from
the blank of uncarved marble.

It was then
that I held you and wept.

6. Madonna and Child

Your beard is blasphemy.
Dressed as Mary,
Your hoodie as veil,
Blue as the great lake
Behind you.

The baby calls *ma ma ma*
But he says that to everyone.
We're laughing to remake
Ourselves: you pose
Raphaelite, serene

Bending over our son
Whose face tilts
Toward you: open and clear
As a sundial.

We switch the Bible
With Vasari, our own
Reverence. Disrobe
The homunculus,
Who squeals, unkingly,

At the chill. I lift
The camera, noon light
Suffusing you.
The final shot won't show
A trinity: the god

Behind the lens
Framing what is most loved
    Against the bright
    To cast out shadows.

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EDUCATION

Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, May 2005
MA: English Literature

Program for Writers, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, NC, July 2004
MFA: Creative Writing-Poetry
Thesis (Critical): "'To See What It Was I Was': Psychic Fusion and Psychic Distance in Plath and Bishop."
Advisor: Alan Williamson
Thesis (Creative): "Instructions for the Nereids" (poetry collection).
Advisor: Steve Orlen

Carthage College, Kenosha, WI, May 2002
BA: English, Creative Writing *, summa cum laude,* All-College Honors, Honors in the Major
Thesis: "'More Than Myself': Mythology in the Poems of Plath, Sexton and Lowell."
Advisor: Dr. Daniel Tobin

AWARDS and FELLOWSHIPS

Residency, Ragdale	2013
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Award	2013
Finalist, New Issues Poetry Prize	2013
Finalist, Benjamin Saltman Award, Red Hen Press	2012
Finalist, Sow's Ear Poetry Chapbook Contest	2012
Academy of American Poets Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	2010, 2012
William Harrold Memorial Poetry Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	2010, 2012
Finalist, Autumn House Poetry Contest	2009
Residency, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts	2009
Nominee, Pushcart Prize (nominated by *The Southern Review*)	2009
Finalist, Black Warrior Review Poetry Contest	2009
Residency, Wassard Elea	2008
Finalist, Tupelo Press Open Submission Period	2006
Finalist, Four Way Books Intro Prize	2006
Finalist, New Issues Poetry Prize	2006
Artist-in-Residence, University of Central Oklahoma	2006
Residency, Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts	2006
Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow, University of Wisconsin-Madison	2005-2006
Finalist, Eleventh Annual Juried Reading, Poetry Center of Chicago	2005
Partial Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center	2005
Writer's Grant, Program for Writers, Warren Wilson College	2002
Chapin-Tague Award for Poetry, Carthage College	1999, 2000, 2001
Lincoln Scholarship, full-ride merit scholarship, Carthage College	1998

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"Imagetexts and Collaborative Poetries." Woodland Pattern Book Center, Milwaukee, WI, Fall 2012.
"United We Read." University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Faculty / Student Readings. Foxglove Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, Spring 2012.
UniVerse of Poetry's "FUTUREPERFECT + New Media Series." Chicago Public Radio. WBEZ 91.5, Chicago, IL, Summer 2010
Verse Wisconsin Launch, Avol's Bookstore, Madison, WI, Spring 2010
Featured Reader, *The Edmond Sun* Poetry Series, Edmond, OK, Fall 2006
"Spotlight on the Arts" KCSC 90.1, Edmond, OK, Fall 2006
Artist-in-Residence reading, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK, Fall 2005
Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing Fellows, UW-Madison, Spring 2006
"Four Chicago Poets." ACME Artworks, Chicago, IL, Summer 2005
Vermont Studio Center, Summer 2005
Eleventh Annual Juried Reading Finalists, Poetry Center of Chicago, Spring 2005
"Anti-Inaugural Ball." ACME Artworks, Chicago, IL, Winter 2004
MFA Graduate Reading, Warren Wilson College, Summer 2004

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, Fall 2010-Spring 2013
- Instructor, English 101: Intro to College Writing
- Instructor, English 102: College Writing and Research (online and face-to-face)
- Instructor, English 233: Intro to Creative Writing (online and face-to-face)
- Instructor, English 236: Introductory Topics in Creative Writing: Playwriting
- Instructor, English 269: Literary Genres and Forms: Speculative Fiction

Concordia University, St. Paul, MN, Spring 2007-present
- Instructor, English 120: Fundamentals of College Writing (online and face-to-face)
- Instructor, English 155: Introduction to Literature (online and face-to-face)

University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN, Fall 2007-Fall 2008
- Instructor, English 111: Critical Reading and Writing I: Fiction and Non-Fiction Prose
- Instructor, English 112: Critical Reading and Writing II: Poetry and Drama

Inver Hills Community College, Inver Grove Heights, MN, Fall 2007-Fall 2008
- Instructor, English 1108: Writing and Research Skills

University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK, Fall 2006
- Artist-in-residence, Instructor, Creative Writing

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, Fall 2005-Spring 2006
- Instructor, English 300: Fiction and Poetry Workshop

College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL, Fall 2004-Summer 2005; Fall 2009-Summer 2010
- Instructor, English 121: English Composition I
- Instructor, English 122: English Composition II

Warren Wilson College, Asheville, NC, Summer 2004
- Instructor, Graduate Class, "The Art of Travel: Negotiating Shifts in Lyric and Narrative Poetry"

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"'Inhabited By a Cry': Interior and Exterior Landscape in the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath." *Sylvia Plath Symposium 2012*, Indiana University. Bloomington, Indiana, October 2012.

"Using Imitation in the Composition Classroom." *First-Year Composition Professional Development Conference*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 2011.

RELATED EXPERIENCE/PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Poetry Editor, *cream city review*, Fall 2011-present

Judge: University of Wisconsin-Madison, George B. Hill and Therese Muller contests, undergraduate writing prize, Spring 2006

Selection Committee: Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, Writing Fellowships, Spring 2006

Preliminary Judge: University of Wisconsin Press, Brittingham/Pollak Book Prizes, Fall 2005

Memberships: AWP