

TIPTOE BERSERK

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Allison Barrett received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2004 from Otterbein College where she double-majored in English and Art. In 2010 she received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Cornell University. She grew up in Columbus, Ohio and Laguna Hills, California and currently lives in Ithaca, New York with her husband and daughter.

For Nadia

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Being Good

The sitting room is bound in sunlight shafts and shifts
of dust, a wrong side of the mirror stillness.

Company would perch here if we had company.
This room is formal, meant to strike

an impression—a room to dismiss salesmen from.
This isn't exactly my home. I'm sitting here, good,

bolted to the blue chair and a book,
waiting for time to split my waiting,

crack it open like a door. Mom couldn't afford
the apartment, so we live here with my grandma,

my la-di-da Ma-maws I adore and who would upholster me
in mauve damask if she could. My asthmatic spasms

give her a reason to coop me up, my brother too,
by default. In the basement he is all slack and glaze

before the television for the subterranean summer.
When old time cartoons black and white the atmosphere,

I fear getting pinned by their round lidless eyes
as they advance on boneless legs and bouncing torsos,

laughing their slowahas. Spend too much time
with the house breathing down your neck, and it will sic

its ghosts on you. They emanate from the face
of the grandfather clock and rock on its pendulum,

biding time. Feeling tracked, I track the whir
behind the clock's chimes, like the wheeze

under my breath. Days pass without the cure-all
of soaking in sun and clover or watching rain polka dot the deck,

days until Tuesday or Thursday when Dad is narrowly allowed to pick us up and then we try our legs and arms on playgrounds

throughout the city. In the background, Mom goes from her day job at the insurance office to her night job cleaning hotel rooms.

Maybe I'm waiting for her as I play Old Maid with Ma-maws, as herds of smoke animals mosey through her lips

to nuzzle and head-butt me. The Old Maid with her suitcase hunkers down in my hand. She is worse than any hot potato

because she is my secret, and she leers and puts a finger to her lips. She can be rejected only slyly.

From time to time Ma-maws fingers her diamond ring and recites what will be mine when she dies. Her death

sparkles in her jewelry box. Through the window I see Rachel from next door hanging on our swing set,

making the whole thing shake using just her thin arms.

Tiptoe Berserk

I am part gnarled girl—she had to attic
herself during all the divorcing, stoop
to calling new men Dad every couple years,
but couldn't sidle right, felt superior
to each doomed so-and-so Mom cozied
up to. Cost of living was Mom fucking crooks,
cooking food, cleaning messes, unglued.
I was at home in my head, tried
to keep a few rooms kind,
but the numb, gnomed girl went creaking
through me, knocking on the walls
in search of secret passageways.
She said, “Follow me, you mother’s
helper—better get lost.”

Fit

Exposed in the florescence of department stores,
my brother and I wrapped ourselves
up in the gathering of *clues*—little plastic clips
and notions scattered underfoot,

we sought them each time we were dragged
to the mall as fashion critics
who yessed every dress
that slipped up Mom's nyloned thighs,
baffled at how she twisted in the mirror—

Poison, we mused, consulting fists of clues.
Our eyes skirted her breasts emerging
from the blouses she flung away.
We tried to fathom a fitting mystery:

fingerprints coating jewelry cases suggested
an attempted heist, and the ladies working
the perfume counters could be femme fatales.

Sometimes we orchestrated a kidnapping,
falling into garment racks as through
swiveling bookcases when Mom turned
her back. Buried in solids and prints,
we became the clues to the case
of our mother's body,
her reasons nothing hung right.

Chelsea

I stared but could not absorb the bonfire shimmer of children at play,
could not dislodge limb from brain. I was no pigeon-toed dervish.
Why all the gung-ho and headlong? There was no one to charm—
adults dissolved out the daycare doors.

Windowless and pining, I did the perimeter slink,
mashed my cheek into the circus-colored rug. My eyes mined
for pinto beans shaken from the arts and crafts wall.
I picked off their speckled skin, beginning where it puckered
like my own left in the bath too long. Unless Chelsea came.

Never dropped off, always bestowed, her parents *parted* with her.
When she wasn't there she must have strolled wonderful
zoos, tongue-deep in cotton candy, commanding the animals
to emerge from their dens.

Chelsea eschewed the formal *let's pretend* before murmuring to the unicorns
that nuzzled the chain link. I went cross-eyed looking but could not detect
even a hoof print in the clover
or their stray silver hairs snagged on the fence.

When I tried to trade my chambermaid for her princess, she agreed,
was suddenly soubrette to my stodgy queen,
a-flounce and sing-songing: *fat and skin-ny*
sleepin in the bed,
fat rolled over and skinny was dead.

Alive, the joke was on me: too big for the world I'd slowed
and shrunk to one bean, clumsy smotherer of the small and loved.
Mom had told me I was born ten pounds big. They had to cut me out
of her. Love-gazing through the glass, she blubbered
when strangers pointed out my prize-winning pumpkin of a head,
“that’s *my baby!*”

Chelsea of the nimble dead, absent as parents most days,
the dead who forget themselves, the dead who laugh in circles.

Me the fat pocket watch jigging down the seconds.
I put my hands to my round round face. Was I thriving?

Askance

We didn't sit right on the seventies harvest-plaid couch.
Too much wriggle, too much darting of the eye.
We walked with too much traction. At bedtime we quirked
our faces, released lopsided I love yous at our third step-dad.

Our mother became a Ouija board he spoke to us through.
Threatened us with a good ghosting. The drift was
we should stay in our rooms while he learned the origami it took
to fold us out of his house. He hid the T.V. remote.
He hid the red vines and the cookies. We got sneaky, squeaked
open cupboards to find only what we weren't
looking for.

In phases my brother peeled
the paint from the bathroom door—
he thought if he did it slowly enough
we'd mistake him for termites or erosion.
It took restraint; he had a penchant for sunburns,
delighting in the largest piece of skin
he could pry from his body unbroken.
Years passed, and the door went from white
to green, a frozen kingdom thawing in our midst.

Fetus Missive: Blend

Secret as a potato, you are not such
an imposition yet. Loving you now would be
absurd as making a pet of my pancreas.
I've shed much bigger things than you—male,
mostly—fathers, brothers.

As a child I tried to root by holding still,
matching the wallpaper so people would forget
to move me. But I got moved. Houses couldn't
hold me, but I had my fill of being hugged and kissed
my men I didn't know, who smelled
like cigarettes and Stetson. I wanted to be alone
for a long, long time. I pushed colors around
on canvas. Nothing painted is a risk. If it embarrasses,
cover it with dumb fields of pink
like I did "The Miser Versus The Big Sloppy Heart."
The Miser had strangle fingers and sharp elbows
and the BSH was... big... with no neck to speak of.
In the end they were just slow dancing
and I had to look away. How will I love you?
When you are wrenched from my body, your privacy,
you'll wrench my privacy too. Ugly and open on the table,
we'll stare at each other. You'll screen yourself
with screams I can't paint over.

Apologia to Four Mermaids

In fourth grade I drew four mermaids
with arms held stiff at their sides,
suspects in a line-up of salty criminals.

I was ten with chubby
cheeks, a flat chest, treasureless,
but with a mermaid collection,
the brassy madam of an elegant brothel
sharing a secret wink
with the boys in my class.

Miss Arctic was pale,
her ice-blue tail pigeon-toed,
consumptive. My ethereal intentions were lost
on my classmates. They sensed my lack
of confidence in her,
the shaky limning of her silhouette.
She came in last but didn't notice,
her eyes full of polar distance.

Sun-spiced and husky, Miss Indian Ocean
was the clear winner with her cleavage,
her eyes half-curtained
by Jessica Rabbit hair.
Her assertive hips promised
I could teach you something, boys.

Lung and gill equipped, all-terrain,
mermaids seemed hearty, versatile though
Miss Atlantic turned asthmatic so
I had to throw her back.
They gurgled for the soggy comforts
of home: waterbeds, plankton snacks,
fish tanks for soaking fins. Scales soon
brittled to rusty armor, skin lost
its briny sheen. Their arms feebly shoved
bouquets and sashes aside,
reached to claw the eyes of ogling boys.

When I conjure you again, o mermaids!
it will be in watercolor, and how
your tails will thrash, and the deadly
green of your skin, your breasts
without the teasing shells. I will throw
the boys to you like anchovies, like debris
from your favorite shipwreck.

Bunny

I rubbed your fur away, grayed you ancient,
kept you genuflecting, sunken
chest to knees. I thrilled to the hungry
look you took on—it meant you'd come
to life. You crept closer to the surface,
finally let me follow
you back to your burrow.

Our world was blankets and beds,
but your feet always tore
as though you were sent before me
into rough territories. I went to school
without you; my hands
in my desk clutched objects
to keep me from falling
many stories, my landing deferred
till I returned to you. At home
you languished like a beached mermaid,
legs shoved into a knee sock to catch
your insides that fell like hourglass sand.

When Mom found lice in my hair, she took you
from me, sealed you in a Ziploc bag,
leaned you against garbage
cans at the side of the house,
poured chemicals on my head
till I burned and worried I'd be bald.
At night, I went to visit you while she boiled
sheets and shampooed carpets. I cracked
the plastic and held you against my cheek,
braving the stench, the insects' crawl.
How would I sleep? I knew where you were going,
though Mom brushed it off, like you'd pop
out a top hat some day if we didn't talk about it.
I wanted to go with you, get crushed into every rotten thing
if it meant being fused to you, my favorite, I'm sorry
for making you my favorite, I'm sorry I leaned
you back against the garbage cans and went inside.

House Advantage

For my brother

We should have stood back
to back, a single coin, joined
shoulder blades and circled to face
our three new brothers, those shin-kickers
bent on avenging by proxy
their blistered bottoms.

Flat beneath the windmill of their father's palms,
their bodies stored tornadoes—
blows burst from them, shamed past
the tempered smacks we'd always
traded in private transactions—
the aggressor coaxing
the wounded quiet, extending
a hand to hit in kind
then beginning our play anew,
rendered loyal and tender,
a pretzel knot. Not them.

The eldest of their lot snarled
his hands in my hair, slammed
my temple to the ground in staccato
time like a rubber ball strung to a paddle.

The rattle in my skull dulled the sound
of the pointers our step-father offered
his sons. His hand struck the floor ten times,
counting us out.

Sister Invocation

Come from my imaginary bathroom strewn with slack
nylons drying on every towel bar, yours and mine all tangled up.
I implore you to double
my wardrobe, to armor and hone me,
be my scratching post, my handfuls of yellow hair.
Come sluice my rage away from my tagalong
brother, whose buzz cut is only good for jocular noogies.
Whose olive complexion fails to shield an infant
transparency that gets under my skin. That blue vein
along his cheek, that silver scar where he cracked
his head against the wall imitating me imitating
a ghost, windbreakers over our heads and moaning.
I scrape at that sheen of trust until twin bullies loom
from the tears in his eyes. That's where you come in.
Slapping your cheek would feel so jolly, sister, like
barging into a saloon.

Godmother

Lemons, the usual dosage, heaped
in my canvas shoulder bag—
I look a bit crooked for it as I zigzag
the alleys to the sickroom
where quilts smother and faces
waver at the window. Birds pinch
the sky like clothespins, pumpkin shell
shards and limp
leaves slick the road.

I don't really know any spells to ward
off the next day and the next, the source
of your crimped posture, clogged desire.
But you've never gummed a finer placebo!
The zest we'll shave for confetti, the flesh
will sour us till we squeak
out of our skin. We need a fog
machine and one that brews bubbles—
then let neon nudge against it
like a cat, real familiar.

Fetus Missive: Keep Your Secrets and Tap Your Toes

“. . . it is necessary that women—at the hour of conception and when the child is not yet formed. . . —not be forced to look at or to imagine monstrous things; but once the formation of the child is complete, even though the woman should look at or imagine monstrous things with intensity, nevertheless the imagination will not then play any role. . .”

—Ambrose Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*

Even with closed eyes
I can't inhabit my hands or knees
the way I take place in my skull.

Brainstorms remain localized.

But if thoughts that knock about
the brain can hurry the heart, gurgle the stomach,
they can bear on you. Thoughts may swim
channels other than the one vein
and two arteries we trade nutrients and waste
across, but nothing's perfectly sealed.
I forget you're claustrophobed in my womb,
give you reign over my entire
interior: moonwalk and rockclimb,
tend the baobabs of my lungs. Borders of skull
and muscle part to reveal thought
stars for you to seize. I lovely up
my viscera, build fences out of fancies,
all to ward off the slippery,
unformed fact of you.

It's not that I fear you'll wriggle forth frog-faced
or taloned, but that steeped in me
you've been sweetening my cells,
grafting a bovine mask to my face
so I can't scowl at you or anyone, so I go moo
when I talk politics or flirt.

That you'll wake me in the night wearing
a face I once wore and you'll struggle
to tell me what you're scared of.

Let's Synchronize Our Blinking

I could flip a switch and the dark would retreat,
but I let it stretch.

If the floor would surrender my feet,
I could filter stars, suspend myself.

I got lost in my own hallway once
when I was a teenager. Lost in twelve feet of darkness.
It felt stupid and good, like bouncing
in a bounce house I was too old for.
I have to induce confusion now—
there's no backstage, no hidden album track
or tract of body I haven't mapped.

In girl-scout circuits we squeezed hands like blinking Christmas lights.
Gold and silver friends slipped through my fingers. Girls,
we made glitter doodads and sang songs about
mutilated monkey meat. Little birdies' dirty feet!
We have no survival skills. Where have you taken yourselves?
I want to plant violets at the hospital and wear
elastic waist corduroy pants again.

Since giving up heaven,
I envy the single balloon rising like a human
being received. It sways like Stevie
Wonder and for a moment I can feel it
all over, but when it's out of sight
the music fades. Shriveled in underbrush
miles away, the balloon is pocketed in the same second with me.

The dead in our minds, Frankensteined
by our electric thoughts, are the same dead
underground where moles nudge through dirt
close as sound through ear canals.

Every night my husband sleeps beside me
miles of bone and brain away. He doesn't know
I am touching his hair—he thinks he's in the sky.

The Mouth Can't Eat Itself

The hand over hand
rope climb of soul music
unhinges my ribs,
but, open, I don't know where
to strike my hunger.

Your love I said keeps lifting me high—
er, install a ceiling, stall
desire. Let it anchor recognizably
there, say, a chandelier
wrought by human hands. Illuminate

the dance hall where lips work
even after they've swallowed
the bodies they were lipsticked to,
lips that twist more than it takes
to shape the lyrics.

My brain is nautilus-shaped,
chambers sealing behind me as I grow.
I'd have to be a contortionist
with bracelets of skeleton keys.
It's like when I dreamt I was dying
to go to India, but I was already in India.
I just couldn't see past all the cruise ship hairdos.

One day in autumn, I am nearly satisfied.
I watch the men's rowing teams
on the inlet, men's bodies squeezing as one
snake digesting. I'd like my heart to keep
such perfect time.

Who Gets to Be the Ocean

One thing I never say to him is
Collect your toe ticklers,
suck in your breath and summon that tsunami!
Unleash your creatures! Nor do I demand
he address my oceans, net my mysteries.
My ferocity's not so elemental, more ornamental.
Maybe just ornery—it opens wide
its slavering mouth and says
shucks. I rile it because it's my very own,
my only own, the daydream I indulge in:
that when I'm an old woman I'll scuttle landward,
go back to the earth through the jaws
of a black bear, let it devour my patience first,
my polite, my gentle, my sweet, let me leave
an animal who only wants what it wants,
who wants only what it wants. And will ask
with its body with all its heart.

For now, I curl on the hand-me-down couch
while he rocks in the lazyboy
and I number the shadows
thrashing in his skin.
He thinks he's watching T.V.
Shark fins glide along my spine. I cringe
as I sympathize with the sitcom nag
who unloads the gloom I lodge
like hermit crabs in ever roomier shells.
A wife's desire beating against her chummy lump
of husband—timeless! Mostly I marry myself.
But when we sign on for stints aboard separate fishing
vessels, we catch only each other, glistening.

Translation

The king of his own island kept
a natural history of himself written
in wet sand with a stick.

He drafted convoluted maps
on the backs of pages torn
from some minor pirate's

discarded copy of Don Quixote.
He peppered these with skulls
and slipped them into bottles

buried in the sand like phone calls
to a disconnected number.

He was a self-contained man, a stone,

but then she picked him up and slid
him into her pocket, contours right
for her fingers to worry over. He studied

the language of her nervous
fumblings and became fluent.
They spoke in hushed tones

and plangent touches, echoes
muffled in fabric like coins
dropped down a well.

Sundown

You drag your shadow down the street
like something kidnapped,
past winks of neon,
past people inside coffee shops
making teddy bears of themselves.

You want to be accompanied by a gypsy band
on every walk you take, you want a map
and spyglass and sturdy boots. You want every tree
to writhe with significance and for all the bricks
to be ancient bricks. Instead, you are married.

Gorge yourself on fortune cookies until those slips
stuck inside repeat the same kitschy futures.

You look at people, and your looking is like water
swirling down a drain.

You are still married. Circle the block again.

Down this alley are all your favorite fire escapes,
but no one resting elbows on the railings,
no one reciting to the moon or stringing up laundry.

If you want to kiss men behind newspapers or under umbrellas,
you have to walk a little farther. If you want to sing,
keep walking. Keep walking until the dogs
in the city go stiff, prick their ears up,
thousands of wet noses jitterbugging.

From inside the locked record store, bass beats
fists against the door, a woman's voice wriggles free,
and she runs hell-for-leather,
a papoose strapped to her back..

At home there are lights and someone
worrying about you, and this is what many people want. It is good.
It is good.

Linger

Storm hunches close as I pluck wild berries and my sleeves grow thorns. Hurrying, I'm stuck with purple on my thumb and forefinger. I need daintier ways through the world.

It's true my house spit me up this morning. My limbs wouldn't drape properly against the synthetic furnishings.

Roaming nature, stomping its softnesses, scraping against bark, no texture suits me, sun won't scrub me down. To no avail am I spun from organic material. Summer clouds shift their bulk and I catch pollution's rainbow glancing off my face in a ditchful of puddles. I can't shake the request to turn and turn for that right angle and be luxurious about it!

I could just stand here not belonging or longing as long as I like. I could just stop under this tree that tree eat my berries now, smear tantrum and have my hands scissor the weeds.

I don't want to touch anything. I want to hover in the breeze like gossamer until it snags and looks like a sigh. Once it nourished spiders; now it catches itself on every twig, detritus forever.

Leftovers

After Cezanne's *Large Bathers*

We slump against
the trees, piled idle
and naked, the supply
of breasts and rumps.
Our bodies blend
in with the dirt.

But we know the artists will come
to choose us one at a time,
press our flesh
with brocades bright
as Easter eggs, and our skin
will glow.

We've arranged ourselves
here, the base of a pyramid,
and we bend at the elbows,
bend at the knees,
to mimic the triangles of sex
at our center,

those wedges that hold
and hold the composition
together. A circus strongman
can lift elephants,
but he cannot balance them
on his nose, cannot collapse
the sides of the smallest
triangle, no matter how hard
he strains.

Girl Conspiracy

He examines the foundation of her, the shadows,
stains and blushes, declares
he likes her this way, natural,
just back from riding horses.

The wilderness sucks in its breath
when he passes, every luscious
apple puckers up or offers a shy cheek. Roots surge.

According to his guidebook, women gather
in this clearing to air their grimaces
and brandish their antlers.
All he sees is snow.

He's afraid to blink, for when he does,
the girls who sit in miniature
on each of his eyelids
high-five across the bridge of his nose.
It reminds him of the kick-me signs
he once shed like pine needles.

He'd like to arrest someone. He'd like to
witness the toadstools wiggle onto the lawn.

Pets won't creep toward him unless
his pockets are stashed with morsels.
Even then his hand barely glances
their fur before they dash away.

He fights the urge to scrape the sheen
from his girlfriend's skin with a penny's
edge. He suspects he's won something.

Hierarchy of Needs, North Market

We grit our teeth and press
our pastels to the page. The dust
collects; we blow it over the balcony
with our hot breath,
puffing chalk clouds onto the crowd
below. It is easy to disappear
this way, moving in time
to the slam of the till, the snap
of paper bags opening
to admit an apple's thump.

Becky's sketch features melons
heaped like sleeping puppies
in their baskets, green onions bunched
in cozy gossip. My produce stand
is flashy bait for buyers,
blobs of tempting color.
I crave the greed of their grasp,
hands that clutch what
will rot in the fridge before teeth
can break the skin. There is haste
in the chase of my charcoal,
a chaste substitution for touch.

A pair of paunchy men approach,
eager to rip into their Styrofoam boxes,
expose the glimmering innards
of their lunch. They don't see
the luxurious spread of our tools
across the table top, our bags lumped
on our chairs, our forearms shiny
with graphite. "Are you using this table,"
one demands. It's nothing to him,
my last coin, my toothbrush,
my firstborn, whatever.
His nose can't smell
in three-dimensions, his tongue's got no

imagination. “Tables are for eating,” he mutters as we refuse him our place. This man has never had sex or conversation at a table. Poker games are prohibited, children must not pretend to be dogs beneath them. He won’t strut down our makeshift catwalk, won’t dive into this human stew, where our eyes feast in sharkular circles, so we’ll render him from memory, the dullest crayon.

Cursive Deer

Jammed into the grooves
and notches of sleep, I turn fit-
fully. In my liminal hunkering
everything I overhear
is as true as the clink
of glass in the kitchen.
This time the oracle,
matter-of-fact as calico,
intoned, “cursive deer”
and I made a chapel of my hands,
cupped it there for safekeeping
while I fell all the way back
to sleep. I instructed myself to remember
“deer bound in cursive through the fields.”

I woke up for good
two hours later, ate a pop tart, made some tea
and scribbled the line. It sat there on the paper,
no lodestar at all. But I wanted deer in my poems,
especially cursive deer that stumbled beautiful
and ready-made from my subconscious.
The air should shudder with visitation
and their lovely necks, their hesitance
as they step from the trees.
They should be hidden behind my words
and if you are good they will sense it
and come out, and you’ll feel you’ve conjured them.

Nah, really, my words stumbleclunk, more typewriter
than inkwell flourish of deer in the leaves. They startle
across highways, their hooves incongruent on the asphalt.
On the internet one bolts through Walmart’s automatic doors,
crashes panicked into cardboard displays of *Shrek* DVDs
and you think what a bitch it must be to help it back outside.

Hoard

At the farmer's market I approach heaps of nightshade vegetables marked "Fairy-Tale Eggplants," fuchsia shot with scumbled cream. I palm navy-blue potatoes snug in their veils of earth, and heirloom tomatoes named "Early Girl" and "Mortgage Lifter," the murk of their mutated origins swirling under glazes of color. No use boiling, baking, frying. I'd stack them on my kitchen counter, let the light slice across them. Not even that—I just want to be here, running my hands over everything. I move on empty-handed. Greed halts me. If I have to choose, I take nothing. I want more than I can carry or pay for. More than beauties, I want catalogues of beauties, fabric swatches and paint samples. If I'd been Sleeping Beauty's prince, I'd have held back the kiss, leaned into the hush. Milking possibility, she'd never wake up.

Devotion

Amber preserves anything it touches. I'm not so nonchalant with this ultramarine ground from lapis lazuli; instead I spread time,

collecting myself before the page the way I stretch the pause before pressing a doorbell, wanting not to jar that stillness.

To mark this parchment, no matter how precious my pigment, is to mar it, to rub out possibilities the way my faithful patrons erase the face of Jesus with their constant kissing.

Fetus Missive: Nyctinasty

Dosed with light, these morning glories would grow alert,
the lost day would trumpet from their throats,
speakeasies coated with pollen and shaking with bees.

Inside me, lightless, your eyelids still fused
and I your zeitgeber.

A glass of juice incites somersaults,
a walk to town rocks you dreamward.

Until the earth swaddles you
in circadian rhythms, we're on
opposite shifts at the same factory,
nodding as we punch the clock.

How often I have kept drowsy
and furled when the sun nudged.
But I'll drain the sky down my eyes
when you're in my arms and time begins
to run out.

The Catch

When the moon falls, it will not be slow
like a penny in syrup. No one will gentle
its descent, there will be no giant net, no birds
with pulleys in their beaks.

It won't fit your eye like a monocle then.
As it hurtles like a semi
to Earth, we'll have to acknowledge its true
heft, round as a dimpled rump. Remember
when your body began its bulge and shift?
How you tried to get away from yourself?

Pity the citizens gathered on dewy lawns
with arms outstretched—tender, stupid
gestures that will recommend them
to no one when even the oceans
have stopped reaching.