TOY & SPARK

A Thesis
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by
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephanie Gehring was born in Giessen, Germany, in 1980. She lived in Germany (speaking English at home and German everywhere else) until age 16, then moved with her family to Oregon. She graduated from St. Olaf College in Minnesota in 2002 with a double major in studio art and English. She finished her MFA at Cornell in January 2008 and was the recipient of the Corson-Browning Prize in 2007. While here, she spent her time walking all over Ithaca, grading student essays on mystery stories, and forgetting to check her e-mail.
for my parents, Roger and Claudia Gehring
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I

Antiphonies
drips, thick,
rustles dry in the ivy like many small animals foraging.
Behind a doorway,
piano music starts, a song I know;
then stops one note before the crest
of the arpeggio. Why does it feel
as though someone I love is dying?
Nothing has happened here beyond the strangeness
of another night on earth, sunset swallowed
by this opaque sky, and from somewhere above,
the questioning assurances
of geese—you there? you there? I’m here—
you there—
they scraped holes in you sometimes that tore  
as you stretched: they never threw you away

just wrote around the holes because it costs money

feeding the creature you came from, killing it
soaking its skin in watered lime to rot the hairs off

on one side you are cream or gray, the other chalky

you were heavy and stank, slipped
  through the parchmenters’ fingers

the part that covered the tender insides
  of legs, the thin skin on bellies: this they looped

tight with cords connected to short pegs
  set in a frame so they could pull you taut

and use a flat sharp arc of metal
  to pare down your layers, past the sheen

of waterproof to where the pores don’t show

  then you were matte and smooth
as anything so tough the scribes could not

  forget you were alive
Smoke

One. You wiped a table
on which I’d spilled a tall glass
of water.

Two. It had never happened before.
The green beans were lurid,
the corn alive.

Three. I misunderstood your eyes.
There were carp. Where did the carp
come from?

Four. You were afraid of talking
to the Franciscan: one touch
and you’d be off, committed
to monasticism.

Five. There was a girl in pink. She said she got
so nervous her heart nearly banged
out through her shoulder blade.

Six. I woke delirious as the blue
of sunrise on the white walls, quiet as dust
in linoleum cracks.

Seven. When you could not follow
“Pied Beauty,” I said, Of course, you’re
tired, I’m sorry. Was I? Right now I’d have you
try again.
Smoke does not hang
   in graceful coils. The exhaust
of cars has settled
   into the stucco houses,
oily double-tracks in the street.
   Walking this air gives me
headaches; it is twenty minutes
to the Omnibusbahnhof
to catch the eternal city bus
   home. A stone’s throw
behind me, F., whom I had taken
   for kind based on his long dark lashes,
starts hooting *Why do you sway
   your hips like that?* His voice
is cruel, says I’m pretending
   to what I don’t have, when I am only
walking the way my mother taught me,
one foot in front of the other.
The mornings are not so bad;
   whenever I don’t miss the bus,
gratitude mellows the first half of the ride
   and people’s voices sparkle. We jostle
for seats by the heaters, plan intrigues
   to prevent A. from stealing
the show again, act like we can’t
   stand the boys. Play tic-tac-toe
on the steamed-up windows, chill
   our fingertips, stamp baby footprints
with the sides of our fists and squabble
   over whose toes are best. When it is
very cold I sit alone in my window
   seat and exhale slow and wide-mouthed
at the frozen condensation.
   A circle melts out to the velvet
before dawn, swallows noise.
   If I make my breath
stop just before the drops begin
   to run, I can watch ice,
returning, eat its crystal counterpoint
   into the black.
Gun Hill, Sunset

Who are You? Catch
in the cardinal’s calling,

corner of building
I can see through: layered

lattices, smashed glass:
bright as silica

melting in my eyes. They made
rifles in this defunct concrete once.

Fixed birthplace
of deerslayer, turkeyslayer:

the company has moved
production elsewhere.

In brochures, white-haired
kind-eyed men crack

rifles open gently, bite
cigars. They were to blame

for death by bullets everywhere,
until they had faces. Now

even their factory
has wounds.

An iron grid holds little panes
in the long windows,

frames rusting into lines that move
like melodies plucked on a harp.

Jagged holes
from squirrels and weather

and from objects hurled by hands
that decorated stucco
near ground level (Young? Arriving at dusk. Flashlights and aerosol). Homer Simpson’s face is crumbling

off plaster: spray-paint lines break at my fingertips.

*The face of the moose is as sad as the face of Jesus.*

Often sadder. Face of Jesus: people say

the shroud of Turin’s marks came from the sweat

and blood of God. The earliest known

Pantocrator icon, preserved at St. Catherine’s in Sinai,

was made in the Sixth Century by an iconographer who ought

globally never to have seen the gravecloth:

still his icon is narrow, high-cheekboned, matching eerily the shroud-print Christ.

Hand raised: gesture of *speak, teach.* Face divided: One side God judges, the other mercy

but in the amberbrown eyes I get lost. Left

nearly weeping blood, dull, agonized—or is that
fury?—sunken, exhausted.
The right: clear, looking straight

at me. Or you.
So clear I can’t say

whether it has an expression.
Not accusing, not

apologizing—is this
God’s welcome?—waiting

for me to speak, but I need
a tongue of fire to begin.

There is a residue in my voice
when I say my God:

I-know-who-you-are,
I-do-not-know-you-at-all.

Call: Maybe speech
is not what your shrouded gaze

is asking. Call.
Respond.

There are rules
for making icons: Fast.

Pray. Build up layers
slowly. Colors are meaning:

good is beautiful, and true.
Don’t measure light

in angles; here the bodies
shine. Do not cast shadows.

Far away St. Catherine’s
overlooks desert. Rocks break:

day-burn, night-crush. Each sunrise the hill
where I stand throws darkness
down the valley and across the lake.
Now sunlessness

climbs smoothly toward bright
broken windows. Standing

I see water beyond treetops. Lakes:
how sound carries,

foghorn call of moose. When I look
at arteries in leaves, whose hands

don’t I see? What does it mean
that trees will clap? On TV

people weep, getting
bigger diamond rings.

So much dirt
everywhere except

under their fingernails. I want out
over the lake where the moose

bawl for mates. I want hands
like leaves on trees stretched over water

holy, effortless,
facing the sun

that passes through
each morning.
Boston Commons

He said he’d given his last five dollars to a homeless lady once, so she could do laundry. He said his brothers called him Session, because of rap sessions. And weed sessions.

I told him, There’s a story in the Bible about that. Except it was a widow and her five bucks were two copper coins. But Jesus saw and turned to his disciples saying, Did you see the rich guy just before her? With the fat handful of heavy coins? What she gave matters more. We talked about the Bible some. He said, How come—if God came down and gave it to them on stone tablets, how come we ain’t got those around today no more?

Well, it wasn’t, I told him, the whole Bible. Just the ten commandments, on stone tablets. And he said, Still. When they find those, that’s the day I’ll consider religion. Later, he told me always to keep smiling: I’ve heard of a smile saving someone’s life. I nodded, I had too. And with a smile like yours, he added, who knows what might happen. I’d been drawing. That’s how it all started: he came over. Whatcha drawin’?

Oh – see the brownish building over there, and how the street goes in? That tall tan one belongs right on the left, just that I haven’t gotten that far yet. You’re good, he said. You real good. Thanks. I looked at his headphones. What’re you listening to? My white friend’s rap. He’s good. After that, his life leaked out in bits and pieces. He has a son named after him. He lets his son’s mother live with him so little Shawn can see both of them every day. It makes dating hard, having her living there—but man, you know, it’s worth it for my son. He feels like he killed his grandmother, the one woman he respected, by going to jail. The cancer’d come and gone by the time he got out. All he has now is her burnished brass key chain with an eagle, and the verse on it from Isaiah, about soaring.
Flocked Crows, Bookshelves, Wind

I  Crow Calls

Ordinary Cawing

Enough for gratitude—that I am there and know it, carrying ten pounds of apples, buckwheat honey, maple cream.
Failed shortcut through the fields, all mud, fence angling me sternly right, and right again right back to where I started trying to avoid the long way home, loud wet cold shoulder of the road, gray blast of trucks. Pneumatic brakes hiss at the wind which finds my clavicles behind the zipper, threatens Should have brought gloves.
Switch your bag, pocket the free hand; no good. I’ll flash freeze your fingerbones for dinner.
Crows share their Schadenfreude with the clouds—

Announcement Call

Crows fly close, perch in the row of saplings just across the ditch. Hello there, sister scarecrow. I stop, stare. One crow sidles closer, shrugs. That wasn’t Schadenfreude: we don’t mean to mock. His branchmate jostles over, almost starts to speak. —Never mind them. This from higher in the tree. Listen: at the blinking orange light, take the mulched path past the crab apple. Uphill. On summer days your kind clothe horses’ heads with netted masks, lead them to graze; at night deer come, unled. You won’t see a soul. Starlings hurl themselves at earth, then sky. Wait for instructions.
Assembly Call

At the top of the hill there is a walnut tree.
The starling-flock swerves into it then scatters, banks, lands connectedly in the graveyard.
When I look up, the crows are in the walnut.
—A murder, the old one says, what you should call us if you want to be literary.—And if I don’t?—A flock.
I set the bag of apples down, pocket my hands.
—What is it like to have wings? She looks at me.
—What do you have in your bags?—Apples. Macouns.
—It’s pronounced ‘Ma-cown.’—Oh. Thanks. And honey.
—Wings: like carrying ten tons of air on each shoulder, like the opposite of falling.
Muscle, bone, reach; do not cling.

Immature Hunger Call

Sugarshoulders, the first one was back,
can’t help you fly, but want a climbing lesson?
Left hand on the knot in the trunk,
right one on the branch... Oh,
you can’t reach. Shame.
Brother, he cocked his right eye
up into the tree, you found us any dinner?
The old one ignored them.
—Is it true, I asked, birds
freeze to death if they eat soft bread,
that it expands in their stomachs
and they can’t get enough calories?
—We are not little birds, she said.
Adult Food Call

Once, I told her, I walked across a bridge in winter.  
It did not feel as cold as today but the river was solid  
and there were dark gray three-toed tracks  
in the snow, and patches where the ice was swept clean.  
The tracks converged, and when I got to the middle of the bridge,  
I stepped to the edge to see what drew them in.  
It was roughly the shape of a bird, outlined in gray,  
and on the inside a pinkish gray-orange, with bone splinters.  
Around its edge bits of inside and outside  
were scattered on the track-marked snow.  
—Yes.  
—Will you come down and warm my hands?  
—Yes. I pulled them out of my pockets.

Contact Call

—Climb on the fence. Put your hands in your lap.  
She landed on my shoulder, foot-grip strong through my coat.  
I touched a black knuckle.—Your feet are cold.  
She was not heavy. Small skull, short feathers.  
Back slick like the surface of water  
with no wetness underneath; folded wings  
small dams on either side. I smoothed them with the backs  
of my fingers.—Your feathers are cold.  
—Only on the surface. Put your palms up.  
I laid my hands in my lap. She held out her wings,  
stepped down my arm, sat: not feathers but skin on my skin.  
She answered without looking up.  
—It is the way we are made: a bare place hidden, to warm.
II Books on the Floor

—You have been staring at the top corner of the bookshelf for seventeen seconds now and I know you are not lost in thought: your shoulders are stiff and there is nothing dreamy in your posture.
—I’ve been thinking of the overturned pot of chili and the flooded bathtub and my bookshelf knocked completely over—
—These wooden cornered things are strange. I didn’t know where to land.
—Yeah, well, you’re destroying my things.
—What do you mean by yours?
—Doesn’t your flock own the walnut? You have control of it?
—You don’t have very good control of your bookshelf or your chili or your bathtub.
—When I’m alone here, they do what I want. Let me try again. Do you know you’re separate from your flock?
—Right now I am not with them. What is separate?
—You’re… individual. Not dependent on them for existence.
—Sure I’m dependent on them. I’d die alone.
—But you exist independently of them.
—I think I see: individuality is make-believe for I don’t need a flock.
—I… that’s not fair. There is a difference between you and your brother.
—He has a voice like a garbage truck.
—You’re right. So do you, sometimes. Though when you’re sleepy and sitting on the highest bookshelf, and you puff your feathers till you’re nearly round, you murmur sweet little songs…
—and you are almost glad I’m here.
III  Watching the Crow

The back of your neck purples
in the light from the window. You stare
out. Your feathers smell of slowly roasted straw
and something like sesame oil. You are perched
carefully between jade trees on the sill,
black claws curved on the hard white wood, one toe
wrapped around the edge. You click
when you walk, like miniature stilettos.
I miss the outside for you. My shoulders itch
as though I could fly forever if I just
got past the walls. If I touched
your back it would feel like long hair in sunlight,
hot as freshly ironed silk.
IV  What the Girl Dreams Later

Walking

Head cocked, vivid eye
blazing one hole at a time
in the world. I don’t mean
to make people squirm.
Once my gaze catches, how
can I let go?

Hunched slightly from looking so hard.
Heavy hooked thing hanging
from my shoulder blades. You’re always
sidling away. Stay near for once.
I know I’m clumsy with my eyes.
I turn too fast; there again
I almost knocked you over. I’m sorry.
My shoulders hurt.

Stop staring. I know I’m not like you.
Lend me your straight long legs
and I will be graceful, gentle to the bone.

Encounter

Who is that
behind me—what is—I feel
so strange, my back
is pulling and my feet
are off the ground—help—
What’d’he say? Let go? Spread
out my what?—What I would give
for arms! Let me down. Please.

Dear God, we’re so high up.
And I can’t see your face.
**V  Sugarshoulders**

Bet high; I’ll try
to bully you for all you’re worth.
Stand up. I’m the wind.

You only throw molecules.
Even ice chips
only sting a while.

Lower the blinds. Go out. Lock the front door.

Caress me, wind: today
my coat outsmarts you.
All I feel is soft. You’re batting,
don’t get in.

*I need your legs*
giacommittied: then I’ll twist you loose, undo
your feet’s gravitied grip
on concrete, carry you like a mirage
above the shining river.

I’m heavy as a possum.
Happy on the ground.
Go home.

*Let your legs trail. You’ll be my human*

*crane fly. Let me snap*
your age, your name off, obsolete appendages.

I don’t want to be
hips and a brain.

*I’ll give you stunned black treetops*
cluttering the sky—
*I’ll give you back the windmill.*

It is not yours; you only move
its wings. You’re wind.
You would forget
how low I have to be to breathe.
Smoke

Imagine us in a house together,
Borges and Beckett smoking with Kafka
(and you) whenever I look away, air
draped around Part One of Rilke’s
“Spanish Trilogy”: From this
cloud, look!... Then what? Babies
would ruin your life. Wouldn’t they?
And you’d return the favor.
I am not being fair. You may know
how to love. Am I this angry?
I thought I had forgiven you.
No, I thought nothing
to forgive.

Imagine us in a car together, music
without words and melodies unless
by melody you mean the large pattern
thought finds in well-placed silences.

Imagine us on a roof together.
In what country? I don’t really want
to travel. In New England. What
are we doing? We could be putting down
tar shingles, which last for decades.
We could be smoking
out a nest of raccoons,
though only people tired
of their lives would climb on a roof
with a mother raccoon. We could be—
first I said, leaning back on our elbows,
crossed ankles, streamed shadows.
We could be standing
on top of the house. Staring off, parallel.
The Unnamed Civil Servant’s Daughter Addresses Mitya Karamazov

“On one occasion the whole town went on an outing in seven troikas; it was winter, it was dark, and in the sledge I began to squeeze the hand of the girl next to me, a civil servant’s daughter, a shy, sweet, poor defenceless little thing.”

As you say, you did not compromise me; when I married three months later, he found no marks

because you left none: your kisses in the dark erased.
There is a story about soldiers who leveled

a village carousing: place in their own country,
burned with shouts and dancing, disbelieved

afterwards what they’d done. Next time this village would know better, if it were not a charred patch by the road,

stones split to show bright insides past their smoke-dark skins.
Your mouth on mine. I began nowhere, ended: hail melting.

At first I thought *So this is kissing*. Then you left, and nothing stepped back; crowded in. All my life I had lived

unknowingly inside a clear capsule. I notice now that it’s thin to breaking. Do I want

to stop feeling? So close, too close, all over me at once your hands—
Dmitry. *Call me Mitya*. Voice so tender I feared for you,

and that I cannot forgive myself. You felt no ecstasy.
Many girls are kissable, but that’s not love, that’s trying to forget.

It wasn’t trying to forget. Animal hunger, not even; you touched because you knew you could. I wish my blood had stayed thick

but it seemed to sublimate past gas into spirit—so fast I got dizzy. You eroded what braced my lungs calmly empty, flamed my ribs.

My cheeks float burning on the frozen wind.
*Gentle reproach* you saw afterwards

from a distance; I never let you near enough for speech. You knew I thought you’d call after the troikas, asking to speak to my father.
After the wedding we got on a train.
It was powerful, stopping, hissed fit to scald the whole world

but once we were moving it was just like my heart, churn-clanking
forward, and the pastures streamed by but not nearly as fast

as I had expected. I left the burnt place silently. I do not feel
his hands as I felt yours. The red dish cloth reminds me of you

except when it slips from its hook, lies
bunched on the smooth-worn wood. Then I do not know

what to think of it. I wonder whether I will love
his children, whether I will learn by kissing them to want their father’s lips;

I wonder whether their father wants my lips or just a curtained house
and boiled potatoes in a sour cream broth.

When I hate him, I watch him step through the front yard, unlock
the door, and think of adding vinegar to curdle dinner. Other times

his mincing steps awaken all my pity
till I want to kiss the small bare spot high on his head

when he bends to unlace his shoes. Those evenings
I light no lamp in the kitchen when I wash up. Trees stitch themselves

into the solidbright sky while the fields soak up darkness.
If there is meat the air inside hangs thick. The plates

are cool, gelatinous, slip clean in cheap soap and I say
my name to myself softly, till it becomes my own foreign word.
**[Biography of Käthe Kollwitz]**

1867  Käthe Kollwitz is born as the fifth child of Carl and Katharina Schmidt in Königsberg, Prussia (today Kaliningrad, Russia).

1881-90  Kollwitz’s father discovers her gift for art; she studies with various painters and printmakers in Königsberg and Berlin.

1891  Marriage to Dr. Karl Kollwitz; move to Berlin.

1892  Son Hans is born.

1896  Son Peter is born.

1901  Kollwitz begins work on the image cycle “Bauernkrieg,” based on the 1524-25 German Peasants’ War

1904  Beginning interest in sculpture; Kollwitz studies in Paris, visits Rodin.

1908  Kollwitz breaks off her relationship with Vienna publisher Hugo Heller, enters period of artistic frustration, begins writing journals at her son Hans’s request.

1914  Son Peter is killed shortly after the beginning of World War I as a volunteer soldier in Belgium.

1921  Grandson Peter is born to Hans; 1923 granddaughters Jördis and Jutta, and 1930 Arne-Andreas.

1925  Kollwitz’s mother, who had been living with Kollwitz and her family since 1919, dies.

1932-33  Kollwitz and her husband sign urgent petitions attempting to unite left-leaning parties and prevent the rise of the National Socialists.

1935-36  Kollwitz is unofficially forbidden to exhibit and later interrogated by the Gestapo and threatened with internment for an interview given to a Moscow newspaper.

1940  Karl Kollwitz dies.

1942  Oldest grandson Peter is killed in Russia.

1945  Käthe Kollwitz dies in Moritzburg, days before the end of the Second World War.
Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz

I. Kartuschchen

In one drawing you are smiling with your head slightly on one side and your face cross-hatched so fiercely it seems your skin could not look smooth but it does which is maybe why Karl fell in love with you that and the hair you drew as though it were scrap cloth wisping and clotted about the head when in fact it was silky In your drawings what are you saying to your father who thought you too plain to marry In your drawings what are you saying to me I avoid self-portraits because of what I might see What are you saying could you not ever smile again or would you not in art because of what you had seen
II. *How to Untake a Lover*

Occasionally I must dream of Heller. Once the night bell went, so that I was woken straight from a dream—.

Repetedly I dreamed
that I had a little child again and felt all the tenderness,
more than that, as in dreams one generally has heightened
experiences.

It is an unspeakably sweet bodily sensation

in these dreams. At first it was

Peter who lay there and slept and then I uncovered him
and it was a very small child, exuding that warm bodyscent.—

In dreams of other sorts also the feeling
goes beyond the feeling experienced while waking.

When I dream that I am having intercourse
—I rarely dream it—

*I have an unbearable feeling in it as though I must die.*
III.  *Dreimonatkind*

Always the same, you said: men lose their jobs and women turn all mother: union strikes or alcohol—they do not care. Sickness. Beatings. Silence. All the same. Even when their men lie dying they will not relent: Do you not see I told you If only you had Look at your children

*At Frau Becker’s.*

The three-month-old
emaciated covered in flies in the stroller.

*Trudchen still*
can’t walk,
pale and friendly.

*Frau Becker no longer accepted*
into the lung sanatorium.

*The husband has work, but makes an embittered impression.*

*Frau Becker always*

*with the same friendliness and gentleness.*
IV. Eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe

Beauty will lie; grandfather taught me not to let it say
the thing it wants to about other people’s pain.
Gifts are not hard to give away

once you’ve made up your mind.
I thought I did not pray, but drawing
is surrender. Listen, ladies: beauty lies

in these worn faces. Stop your games
of manners and disguise; you bore me.
Watch out or you’ll give yourself away

by your coiffed hair and empört nose.
You’ll make our posters for us: your disdain
as backdrop for the girl picking a flower

from the Abfluss. Beauty drew me first,
but now I watch Karl’s waiting room.
Each day the figures seem more bent.

Black and white in many copies: what I give away
is fighting. Bleary eyes, her needle up, through,
underneath. Children asleep next to her lamp.
V.  *Land der Dichter und Denker*

It was not until much later Goebbels said
Screw democracy the people will follow anywhere
their leaders call Vaterlandsliebe, call

security. You didn’t say Screw Vaterlandsliebe. Karl
spoke quietly to Hans, Let me go instead.
It was just the three of you
that sunny afternoon. Peter
had been gone four years. You said you saw
on Hans’s face that he felt buoyant, as you did. You went home
together. Hans said Vater,
ich kann das nicht annehmen.
I had not known, you said, what could be
between human and human.

You drank wine and read Goethe
and Schiller aloud. “Wiederfinden,” “Siegesfest,” “Selige
Sehnsucht.” You emptied the glasses and set them
away, bound by one ribbon: next time

we are together
VI. **Selbstportrait**

You carried yourself like a worker, did not hide. I am not like you.

Even if I finish all ten pounds of your diaries I will not know.

Each evening my trying-to-be-beautiful ends in a smear, blackish and brown on a tissue in the trash.
VII.  After Drawing “Mutter und Sohn” at the Museum

Are those furrows only age? where is the fierce,  
hunched look I cross-hatched heavy in my sketchbook?  
I am listening when I read your journal,  
I am eavesdropping. Photographs: you  
on a bench, hands in your lap, loose blouse  
light as your hair. Staring away. Images  
of your art: the mother’s face shadowed black.  
Am I trying to earn a friend-across-time, 
kernel of who you were sixty-some years  
ago transmitted—to my eyes? My brain.  
Heart. Palm, because I feel your son’s dead  
fingertips. I saw your bronze: her forehead  
clotted, knuckles clenched to mouth. Now I find  
you meant her thoughtful, thought her beyond pain.
VIII.  *Ohne Modell*

Eventually you knew our bodies so well
you could work without models; such ease
you said then, such joy. Drawings
flooded from you. Some of your comrades gave us words
in their pictures—Erwin, close the window,
my work’s getting sooty.—Ach Mutta,
dat riecht heute wieder mächtig fein
nach den fettigen Roosh von Krematorium!

You rarely gave us words, and yet to see your lines
was to hear. The Kaiserin saw
and wouldn’t come to the home workers’ exhibit
until that woman was removed—that poster—
those bones in her cheeks, slack

irises half-focused, flooded
with shadows weighed down
by the heavy black lids
IX. *Pietà (Mutter mit totem Sohn)*

She-bear beaten
locked in around him
hold holding holding holding

Käthe you say it is not for his sake

the holding like this you say
it is wrong

§

you made her small
you made her
a foot high

§

you cover his eyes

he has fallen into
your lap you cannot carry
his weight

with one paw you cover

your other hand is human
your upturned
palm supports his
fingertips

§

Käthe I say
at one angle her forehead your
forehead shines smooth

his quiet
fingers cupped
in your palm
then light
aslan the same
forehead clenched
mouth
clamped to the back
of your thumb

§
much later they needed a Denkmal,
think-marker, made her larger than life said stand
for all the victims set her

in Berlin into the pillared
marble where the soldiers used to
watch

her dead son
lean back against her

§
somewhere you wrote
it is no longer pain just
sensing-after Nachsinnen

he is there
in your arms
    in your face
X. You Left Eight Hundred Printed Pages’ Worth of Journals

Frieda Winckelmann disappears
in database searches behind J. J.
Winckelmann
who is supposed to have invented art history,
and then behind the Frida with no e,
Communist pedagogue and politician
who died three years later than she

whose pieta Käthe said was
greater art than her own, had peace, real joy.
This was while Frieda lay dying, sickness
returned though it had seemed overcome. Strong
willed, winged by her Catholic faith,
carried by friends, at the end
she made her best work. I can’t find, now,
what medium her pieta was in. Akin to mine only in the way the mother holds the son’s dead hand.
Mine is not religious.
In the son her work and mine are more similar, but hers is better.
The head of the Mary is not empty, as Hans called it—it is lifted.
My Mother stays contemplating her son’s rejection.
Winckelmann’s does too, but is also Queen of Heaven.
Frieda Winckelmann was surely of the same opinion, though she said
nothing.

On the 12th I was still with her. She was very limp but full of compassion.
On the 13th L. rang me up. She had come to her as the clergyman prayed.
She was partially unconscious.
Once it had seemed as though she were recognizing L. Then closed the eyes again.
Today early the head nurse told me she had fallen asleep.
She said she had maybe never seen such a gentle death.
XI. *Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden*

*Looking back on*

Your eyes are exhausted. All water
has dried, they say, ten thousand years
could not give back what is lost.

*the time in Belgium, what is most beautifully in my memory*

And yet. Is that what they say? Gifts and tasks given:
sometimes I think it is peace in your eyes. You wore
your grandfather’s confident, unselfconscious mouth, kept
of all his lessons the one that told you how to work.
Old, you drew yourself seated with Karl,
in profile, his two hands resting
on a walking stick. You both look the same
direction. “Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände
Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende!”

*is the last afternoon*

Your diaries begin by describing
your house, cramped and too quiet,
comparing your sons: male teenaged silence

will descend on Peter even earlier
than it has on Hans. But years later
you remember summer nights

when the air rang with children’s playing,
when you’d call him in, late, and he would joke
and dance around your calling, climb

upstairs finally, heated and sticky with games,
in the short gray suit with the white collar,
wiping damp hair out of his eyes.

*when van Hauten drove us there once more. He left us alone*
Those figures: who will accept from me
only silence. Their wordless bare
rigidity. Their future

*and we went from the figures to Peter’s grave*

You wrote him long letters, the first year. Help me stay true,
you said, uncolored. On Karfreitag you wrote
This was his day, when he celebrated spring, took Faust,

grew off in silence and came back
with willow catkins tucked into his shirt.
It took you years, you said, to find

the place where Goethe writes
those words that are your son’s:
“Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken.”

He was eighteen.

*and everything was alive and wholly felt.*

Bombs smashed your Atelier. But Hans lived
to lose you.
And Karl survived to old age.

*I stood*

Your lips have given themselves
away. Goethe, you said, reminded you of your duty
to joy. The parents kneel.

In 1918, you copied out a passage from Rodin’s book
on cathedrals. He says he wants to take them in,
but there are no artists living who can stand

next to the carpenters and masons: she is too big,
Le Mans, stone friend. She stands free
as trees, and some day in the middle of his worries

he’ll see she’s taken root, is whole: the too-close
light that blinds
will then illuminate.

*before the woman, saw her—my own face—wept*
Käthe. Come
sit with me. No;
no. I am afraid.

*and stroked her cheeks*

They called you Malweiber,
painting bitches, at the Zeichenschule
für Damen in Berlin. Bareheaded,

fetching alcohol from a pub to thin your paint,
you proved your decadence to the city:
In the morning already they drink

*Karl stood close behind me—I didn’t know it at first.*

In your last house, Goethe’s death mask hung
above your bed and in the daytime you sat measuring
wind in the trees with a compass, writing down words

*I heard him whisper:*

Stray bullets; madness. Black hands cast into the sky. Pitchforks flooding right to
left.

“*Ja, ja.*”
Selbstgespräch mit Franziskus  
[Interior Monologue with Francis]

Look here: I know they were bored  
stiff. Also, expecting food. And when I blew  
into their nostrils, they didn’t really think

§

I always thought  
I had a wild side  
something that rolled its rrr’s  
and roamed ravenous searching  
for anything so ecstatic  
it would make surrender  
the only  
obvious choice

but if I have an alter ego  
I am afraid it is mostly Hausfrau

they didn’t really think  
I was telling them secrets. Liebe  
geht durch den Magen. But the tan one  
(uneven cut on her forehead  
frozen pale pink, which will fill  
eventually with white hair) stayed  
past nosing my coat,  
let me rub the narrow bones  
above her nostrils, scratch an itch  
in the hollow

§

what if I  
could hear them  
outside my window  
whimpering what if  
there were nothing  
at all I  
could do what
if there were 
would I in 
the night even 
if it meant 
I’d be standing 
barely able beaten 
with them as 
night ends tomorrow 
our moans Flügel 
der Morgenrőte

hollow of her throat, press 
my fingers in small circles 
down the ridge of her mane—kraulen 
is the word I mean— and stepped 
closer, eyes half closed,

§

In the gospels, when a rich 
young ruler comes to Jesus, asks 
What must I do other than keep 
God’s law, Jesus says Sell all you have, 
then follow me. The man in the gospel 
leaves, crestfallen. Franz, you stayed: 
of course it was mostly your father’s, 
what you sold, and without asking 
which seems somewhat problematic, 
though when you relinquished 
your inheritance I think that counts. 
Bales of silk and brocade, 
the beautiful stuff they stitched 
into robes for priests

half closed, arched her neck 
over the fence and moved her lips 
toward my shoulder to reciprocate. I swiveled 
slightly out of range—fillies will put teeth 
into massage. The tall one with the profile 
of a mule nosed in. In summer
§

(Probably it is not true about the wolf you tamed, the one who was tearing live people limb from limb and then eating them and when you came to that town they said Please do not go you will die but you went to the woods, spoke sense to him, said Be at peace I will provide you with food from now on. So the dogs did not bark when the wolf went door to door eating scraps, and he died two years later of old age)

In summer he will be coal-color, sleek. Here in the evening light his winter hairs glow red before they come to their black tips. Sun pours through his ice-gray lens—such

§

You went naked to the woods a scandal a crazy a smiling silent boy tending lepers, unfazed utterly by the taunts; Frenchie they’d called you before but now Fiancé of Poverty, and if we call Her holy today it is at least partly your fault though you’d say you only loved what was beautiful; but how is it beautiful to go about in burlap barefoot in snow rebuilding tiny churches and how was it that your friends, fops, sons of rich men too, began to straggle to your homemade building site, take off their shoes
such big eyes you have, so clear, lashes little wings
along the lid—he’s headshy but keeps coming back

§

I cannot stop thinking about you
how cold you must be at night
how hunger has deepened
past emptiness, a trembling pledge,
weakness the weakness of love,
each wound a place to start anew

I line my windowsills
with potted plants
and if I go out
I wear well-padded
winter boots

I am embarrassed
when I think of you

back to breathe, close
and closer so long
as I keep my hands off.
Steam from our lungs
between us, sun reddening
toward earth’s hungry curve
Dürer Darling

Revelation of St. John

I have been told you are apocalyptic.
I can see wanting to think about last things: fear, then obsession. Brimstone sounds ridiculous, but this is different: there are no devils in your etchings. It is the angels who are scary, the Christ with sword-tongue.
You were pyrotechnically in love
with disaster. Small wonder Martin Luther impressed you; you knew what he was afraid of.

Conjoined

Anything deformed was worth a trip;
scientific interest of course: your drawing is still cited as evidence
for the dicephalous baby today.

You’d have loved horror movies.

The Hare

Almost-curls stroked
in tiny gouache brushstrokes.
Not lush ones, though;
you saved those for yourself; just fur
gone damp and dried. An ad for my favorite radio station subtitled it Peter brooded,
having been left out
of the carnival of the animals.

Horses

What did you teach in your workshop?
One not-exactly-gentleman left,
did knockoffs of your classic white horses.
He gave the big one, seen from the rear, an evil glare
at the viewer, who may also note the groom
unconscious on the floor. The small one
comes up in a series, where pale horses graze,
get frisky in a forest; not to be missed
is the front and center stallion,
pupils tense, fully erect in one picture, kicked
by the mare he was eyeing in the next,
in the third foaming his semen on the ground.
His penis with the foreskin drawn back
looks like a lamprey,
 vicious flat mouth.

Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand Christians

All the naked Christians have beautiful skin,
and the ones being pushed backward off the cliff
(it’s not a very big cliff, but there’s a nasty thorn bush
at the bottom) have charming loincloths. The headless
and about-to-be-headless in the foreground look well-fed,
and two of the ones on crosses have their arms trussed
above their heads in a comfortable-looking position.
At the far left of the picture is the third crucifix,
seen in profile, and this man has a shirt on,
from which legs protrude that might be bloody,
in a dried-and-crusted way. His arms are splayed
and tied at the wrists, legs hunched along the center pole
of his cross, where there is no foothold
to ease the cramps in his rib muscles
that paralyze his lungs. The thorn bush
isn’t the only thing under the cliff.
There’s a dog licking up blood
next to a pile of chalky bodies,
warm-colored ones thudding on top
and a clothed man,
axe raised high.

Wing

Are you really German? Such
colors—those birds
don’t come to Germany even in the summer.
I’ve lived where you’re from
so I know—where did you get the turquoise
in that sandy-banked lake?

Same place your countrymen
today get their six-week vacations.

What would you have done
in a cubicle—staged the end of the world,
burned down the building?
Or been docile,
sat dreaming of Italy, imagined yourself
with endless glossy curls?

*Self-Portrait*

In the teenaged self-portrait you have limp
straight hair like mine, hair that won’t do
ringlets like the ones you gave yourself at twenty-nine;
I remember hair oiled and coiling
from under a velvet beret
as though incapable of stringy flatness.

Checking now there’s no
beret; in fact the hair at the crown
of your head is believably stringy.
There are gashed sleeves, but smaller
than I thought, and your robe
is just brown. My book says
you’re posed as Christ.

*The Artist’s Mother*

Did she change? Or did you?
Were you afraid your eyes would drift apart?
Your mother’s must have—
you did a picture of her young,
not thirty judging by the tiny crows’ feet.
What age were you then, ten?
Already good with oils.
Peach-rosy lips, delicate eyebrows
raised in thought; the faint line
descending crookedly across her forehead
is the only clue she could become the skew-eyed creature in the later pencil sketch, head low as though about to charge.
For a Daughter

Don’t use barbed wire  
to enclose horses. Their ears spike  
to attention if you rustle something as you pass.  
Hold out the red, white, round mints  
you pocketed, forgot. Palms flat.

Be careful but don’t be afraid; most horses  
are only violent in fear. Like this: make  
your hand smooth, the sugar  
in the middle. If your hands are salty,  
they may lick your palm. Their tongues  
aren’t like a dog’s, won’t leave you slimed.  
Bigger and damper than a cat’s. Not long  
and ropy as a cow’s. They’re most  
like human tongues, but stronger, thicker.

Spread your hands wide. Look  
at your fingers, the white  
oak alone on the breast-shaped hill,  
guarding the miniature horses.

§

I knew a stallion once who grabbed  
his groom (six-foot, two-fifty) by the shoulder,  
threw him clear across the stall.  
Broke seven ribs.

Who knows but the groom  
had beaten him. He was Arabian,  
the stallion, chestnut with a blaze  
and one white stocking. It is hard to know  
what’s going on inside them—fear,  
pain, malice. He bucked  
when my mother tried to make him side-step  
and she said he must be hurting;  
six months later he died of a twisted colon.

Hard to know and harder to help.  
Pico was one of the geldings, sharp  
at getting out of work. He died
of liver cancer, the vet said afterwards.
We watched him stand in his stall for days, head wedged fiercely in the corner,
frozen with pain.

One mare my mother loved
was light bay, tender-mouthed,
soft-gaited, smart as she was beautiful.
She shied at her shadow just to feel her grace.
Only my mother and the stable owner rode her.
Her foals all had high hopes
pinned to them, then died spectacularly
before the age of two: Winnetou bit a barbed fence
and panicked at the pain, tangled
his mouth and then his body,
thrashed so hard they had to put him down.
She had half a dozen gorgeous kamikaze colts
then the breeders gave up.
Pull

I
Heart’s thumping ruthless, no time
to undo the clotted necklace, solve the fly’s
muttered attacks. All night I’ve followed you
like a devoted thing, panting low at your heels.
I heap up words on your doorstep like rats
freshly dead.

II
Back at this house with its tiny,
smooth-muscular loudmouth dogs,
ironing boards that won’t fold, mirrors
that show me my face
from the lips on down.

III
Beware the towering
enchantment of tree-frog song:
it shimmers the whole brain
useless. The sky twists
out of grasp, presses itself
to the ground.
Smoke

It was hot and every morning I woke
wondering why the air was electric. From our hill,
we could watch purple lightning storms on the pink
Sangre de Cristos.

At home
I charcoaled your face onto a painting, using
the one clear photograph I had, in which you look
wild and silent. You would have held your wine glass gracefully
but were pacing

the fringes of the opening-night
reception, looked out over the crowd like a mountain animal
considering domesticity. What is there to say? I was afraid of you
at first. Maybe always. No smoke

without a fire.

There was a steep
hill behind the dormitories; one morning at sunrise I climbed it,
thinking I would stumble upon the hiking trails I had been told ran off
into the distance.

Round-topped hills, ravines,
everything balding. Charged sagebrush. You never mentioned
a lover, only a girl who had twisted
your arm to bring back something turquoise. I asked you point
blank, months later, what we were doing. Doing? What
do you mean?

Speak
for yourself. Am I slandering you? I am not objective. I sold
the painting with your face in it, almost

mailed you
a slide but people had asked for photographs
when you walked around Manhattan, and you’d always
turned them down. A makeover-show hostess cornered you once
and tried to convince your date to get you to go on the show: I can just see him—cut
that hair, a suit...  

Your eyes coaled
fierce when I laughed. I stopped calling
after the third try (months in between) when your voice mail spoke so quiet
it cut: Hello. Leave

a message.
Departure

Your shoulders: blades
against my knees.

Attention. My palms,
your hair. For security reasons,

do not leave. Thumbs
smoothing lines

from your forehead.
Do not accept.

Small evening grit.
Items from unknown

persons. I am surprised
by the give

of your temples.
Unattended.

You have porcelain
edges beneath your eyes,

like rims on the cups
you made me, narrow, without

handles, thrown so thin
sun glows through:

closed eyelids
but cream-colored.

Luggage.
Cushion of your cheeks

before the rough.
How does my face

feel under your hands
when we trade off?
Is subject to.
Your thumbs, pure sensation,

pressure and slide.
Immediate. Gentle

over unprotected skin,
teaching me ecstasy can mean

knowing the harm
one chooses not to do.

Collection and search. Thrill up past
my ears when you reach

the slip of muscle on my jaw.
What are we doing alone

together? Do not
May Leave Be

damaged or destroyed.
December

Dear little girl in the light aqua sheath skirt
with hair a silky housemouse color
wearing a dusty purple coat with maroon piping:
can I get beyond describing your clothes?
The color of your skin does not matter—
though I did think, Maybe I looked like that once.
Of course the color of your skin
matters; still it is not your skin or your skirt
that rooted you here in my mind
standing so still. I am standing
making noise in the group of carolers.
At first I was afraid you’d catch me staring.
Have you never seen adults singing?
But you’re looking beyond us,
do not seem to feel my eyes on you at all.
Maybe you are tired of your family, relieved
just to be left to stand and stare
through singing into something else.

We do not sound transfixing.
Do we?

I feel naked as a bell freshly cast.

Are you breathing? Make sure you breathe.
I went on a field trip to a glassblower's once and Nicky,
who was built much more sturdily than you are,
fell over with a thunk
just as the man was pulling ears and a tail
out of the glass horse's body.

Ears and a tail. I have a little mouth-blown horse
upstairs, pale peach and much less fragile
than it looks. Much harder than the tiny wood-carved fawn
an old woman offered me from a box full of treasures: Choose.
You are not robbing me, her face said, I want you
to have it. Anything here. It was the smallest thing,
in the bottom corner, and I barely
dared breathe picking it up. Its frail joints
were shiny with glue even then.
I can’t remember whether the legs have broken since
and been repaired, or whether they are like my fake front tooth: the real one snapped on the black and white entry-hall floor when Benjamin twisted my arm behind my back and tripped me, after I pushed him for cutting in line. The dentist fixing it said This won’t stay on long, I’d guess, it’s only plastic, glued. But it has stayed. I cried when the tooth broke: terror of irrevocable damage, shock of air on bare nerve. I learned fast closing my mouth made it better.

Have you ever made dolls from poppy flowers? Mouth closed made me think of it. Hay fever found me, twelve, in a field of wild poppies. Gradual closing of the sinuses, eyes puffing stiff. Poppies are tricky, petals hardly hatched then they die. You must find a perfect flower, crepey red still new. Then an old one, ovary ripe: this is the bodice. Really you’re making a dress. Fingernail X the base, attach your fourpetaled beauty upside-down. You’ll never find a skirt so flimsy, so red, so much like skin. What I didn’t know while my eyes watered: they’re veterans’ flowers because they grew first on the graves.

That was summer. This is Christmastime: so say the songs we are singing. There is red in here too: pennybright pot on its tripod, stuffed with coins and dollars. Small warrior between us and people passing: diet rootbeer, lightbulbs, bread in their wire shopping carts. Which side is it protecting? When I arrived someone was ringing the tinny bell, till I said Is this driving anybody else stark staring mad? In the silence I felt rude and jangled and when you walked up, was half afraid the tin
might bite your fingers pressing in the bills. You do not seem to think us dangerous.

How long have we been at war? Do poppies bloom on graves along the Tigris? Will they ever on Saddam’s grave, or is his cemetery groomed and watered, weeds and sand kept out? In the jumpy black and white video, Hussein in his Shroud, Viewer Discretion Advised, his face is bruised and silent. I do not understand the numbers of dead.

So much death
just outside Christmas carols.
So much death just inside grocery stores.

When I was seven my father asked me what life is. I looked at him impatiently: Things are alive or they aren’t. But how can you tell, he asked. Well, when they’re dead they don’t breathe. Is breath life then? No—when things are dead their hearts don’t beat. Is a heartbeat life? I don’t think so.

What is dead about the inside of this grocery store? The pastels on the card rack straight across the aisle do not breathe. I begrudge the Care Bear’s yellow, feel betrayed by his smile. Cuts of meat I can’t see. Would I eat them if I had to kill chickens myself? I don’t believe the vegetables are screaming. But it’s the people whose deadness surprises me. It’s us.

We’re singing in the odds-and-ends space front and center of the store, where they keep non-staples, bright plastic, things you don’t need. Sparkly foils: poinsettias displayed haphazardly, earth spilled at our feet.

Before you got here, I requested "I Wonder as I Wander" but it’s so steeply minor everyone lost heart after three bars. We are emphatically not out under the sky.
Are you sad? I imagine; when I hold still
like that I usually am. Sad,
but not dismal: I think you feel sky above you
past the high cheap roof.

There’s your sister tugging your hand,
your father with the eggnog.
Dear little girl in the light aqua sheath skirt,
thank you for the tone of your listening.
Smoke

My tongue is covered in the crushed aftertaste of chocolate. On the radio the flutes never forget they are cylinders of trembling air cut by lips sharpened to a singing edge. I am not waiting for you to call. Are there new versions of you? This one breathes deeply, awaking, does not snore. This one has irises like round glass knives. This one makes my shoulder sing when touched. Everything sings if you know how to breathe on it: direction, velocity. Sun breathed on the lilies for one day and now the blossoms are all shriveled. I hear coneflowers are hardier, though they’ve always looked timid to me, chastised, as though they had their petals blown back from their faces by a roar from directly above. Maybe they were brazen once, reached shamelessly as though the sky could fall in love with them. The sky, seeing their foolishness, spoke in a roar, reduced each to one terrified eye. Lilies have their day: on May 1st everyone carries shy fistfuls along streets in France. Taste: flower, root, stem, fruit-bulb. Say medicinal if you’re afraid of poisonous. Lilies will grab you by the heart: skip, stammer. But it only takes one day of sun and they are dead. I am afraid of the sky. Today I’ll dead-head my maybells, ask the neighbors for coneflowers and brew blossom-rhizome tea. I’ll drink it very hot and think, How strange that no one seems to know where Mayday, the distress call, came from. It wouldn’t be May 1st, and M’aidez is not how to call for help in French.

I am hungry with tiredness. In the kitchen a knife gurgle-clinks through the jam. The solo flutist etches a melody into my lungs. Phone connections got crossed sometimes when we talked: you were out in the middle of nowhere. There was a cough once in the line followed by silence, then a woman’s voice, scraped raw with age.
January

Afternoon: the world
seems not to know about the thaw. The trees
aren’t buying warmth, lean
in longsuffering silence
at this new cruelty of winter’s,
which pretends to have lost
the train of its thought, dreamed of Mexico,
where trees need not keep their sap frozen
till March to survive. The water’s tickling
has not moved the beeches to soften
their tight spikes, though I wonder
whether the peach trees over the hill
will be as wise. In Chicago,
the daffodils are above ground.
The birds appear too stunned to sing;
one quiet muskrat paddles its tail
close to shore, where the ice
has turned gray and retreated.
Strange: freezing and unfreezing
go the same direction, start
in the reeds, head into the lake.
Not strange: the ground adjusts first
to the air; they taught us that in physics:

one thousand calories to warm

one kilogram of water one degree.
Same number whether you watch
or not, though I’d be dead
if I had sat here staring at the ice
and waiting for its soggy vanquishment
from when it formed until today.
No one is pranking the trees. Winter has dropped its scepter; the snow cover is wholly inadequate or it would not gape,

after one day of straight talk from the sun, into open patches already discovering green.
What You Said When You Turned

I have thought of you and wondered
about the way you touched me,
the way I sometimes moved
away or stiffened
sometimes stayed, did
what you said, lay
your head here.

Once I helped you carry drums,
stands to a van’s open
doors, stood waiting
while you crawled in to stack.
You closed one door,
and in the pollen-covered glass
I saw my shoeless feet, hem
of my dress moving along night air.
You turned then stopped

before continuing, breath
catched.
Smoke

Last night I made you
kiss me, but it seemed wrong,
even in imagination, without
your consent. So I straightened
my arm, pressed my palm
into your shoulder, sent you spiraling,
weightless, away.

Ropes unhinged
that had bound you
like a hot air balloon
with no passenger basket, just
the gas burner roaring
into the slender, bright mouth
straining up. Go on, rise
offward, skyward, be a tiny emptiness
between the clouds and sea,
a toy and then a spark.
Man works at an airport. German song—Above
the clouds the freedom must be borderless. A plane
takes off, shakes the asphalt, makes him watch till it gets lost
in veils of rain. Someone in the staff lounge brews hot coffee.
He admits to rainbowed gasoline wär gern mitgeflogen,
would have liked to fly along.

There is liquid on the concrete
at the foot of the stairs in the alley: a smear of sky.
Just think, if houses
and pavements and tree bark were reflective, how much light
there’d be down here.

§

Down here. Not made of atoms but particular.
Not clouds, not cotton candy, sweet water, circles.
Not complete. Not the flat crackling sheen
I peel helplessly off birches, leaving pale apricot scars.
Not a thing, but touchable. Not holdable except by God.
Nebuchadnezzar had a soul even when his wits
had scattered out the tips of his wild hair,
escaped his clawgrown fingernails.
Soul is not optics. Soul ≠ rainbow.
Rainbow ≠ Noah, though if Noah, flood, God,
then rainbow = promise.

§

My rainbow means: come find me hidden in the gray—
hidden to spare your nearly senseless, fragile self.
Yes, you. I have tried ten thousand ways of calling.
Can you hear me (bits and pieces) with your eyes?
I call to show you why to see.
Look for the nook of cloud, catch color
you have never known till now. I will close in
like music moving through your ankle-bone:
beat, counterbeat, throb, marrowed harmony.
Try: give the color and the melody
one name.
§

One name. I do not want to speak to you in capitals. It feels like shouting, makes you enormous, vague, far-off. You are enormous and far-off. unlike, all-powerful. You are everything that makes capitals necessary, deserves terror, justifies refraining from address entirely, keeping my unclean, inadequate mouth off words that claim to name you. And yet you call.

§

You call. You’re hiding? I thought I was the one. I will come looking, carry my concealment wrapped and curtained through the clouds. I’m sprung from shiny cracks, slipped webs, intricate failures. I fear your unknown color will mean seeing through, unsafe. Skullbone, aorta, soul. Do they belong together? What if Hell is knowing what you mean? Pale apricot scars on my palms invisible unless I open, show you. Can this place be touched? Will I survive?

§

Survive believing: I am not Martin Luther, shaking in coarse socks at thoughts of Judgment, therefore brave beyond reason facing lesser threats. My growing up was filled with repeated Jesus loves you’s, his with descriptions of eternal implements for torture. He knew uncounted varieties of burn, knew that alone the gaze of God can kill. His father was vicious but his mother doted on him. So we both end terrified of the love of God.
§

The love of God: I am not single-minded. I fear ever petty thing you can imagine: embarrassment, ugliness, dishes that begin to smell. I want my vanities affirmed, do not want virtue. Is it true you made me to be more than the hawk who carried that limp creature into the chestnut yesterday? It was so quiet, the swoop, the flying off. I feel like less most days, ungraceful, dishonest. I know I am failing all the time at goodness, at unselfishness. Apparent success just means somebody needing what I want to give.

§

What I wanted: as a child, the things I cared about were sleek, slender-ankled. I gave up on cloud-shapes when I realized anacondas in the sky are bunchy, ragged, and that if you find something four-footed one leg is stumpy, another bends the wrong way, one may move into delicate poise but not before the last one glides toward dissolving. Cloud-shapes are not for finding what you know you want. They are unkempt promises I barely understand.

§

Barely. School afternoon: cloud-cover brighter than this paper. Trees like licorice, clumped leaves like pocket-squashed chocolate. Even through glass I know the smell: earth-rot, slimed roots. Paintbrush between my lips like moss, cold lace, against my tongue. Grainy black too light for trees, paper too heavy.

Dump the destickered pickle-jar, rinse, re-fill: this is as clear as water gets. The page shines wet. “Aren’t the clouds even a little gray?” I close my eyes and tree-sky shapes flicker, gold and veiny. I know water evaporates, will leave me wrinkled, duller than before. I dip my brush.
§

Dip. Rise. Clouds are all the same stuff: steam. Sometimes, free of ripples, lakes reflect like quicksilver or plastic wrap. The sun moves catlike up my lap, settles with infinite precision. Dear airport man, you aren’t missing much. These planes are sealed so thick it barely feels like flying. Looking out reminds me I will never walk those gleaming clefts. It’s wet out there. Unsolid. At least from the ground there are more colors I can catalogue; no daydream, just a list. Charcoal, slate, periwinkle, mango. Sky.

§

Sky. Command the shoulderbones, Stop growing spurs that pinch the nerves off, numb the arms. What right have I to order?—not my shoulders, not my lover’s. What right? How foolish. Humans get promises in the Bible, covenants they usually break. But even Job—when God finally responds, rights slip into thunder. Answers? Not hardly. Jesus ordered storms around, drowned in injustice when it came to his own body. Neither my lover’s nor mine. Breaking.

§

Breaking. Shoulderbonespurs: gentle violence as violence goes, taking another family’s father apart. His little girl is afraid of him in hospice. Isn’t pain pain, death death? No. Silence the dead with words or without; the dying remain inconsolable—you among them. The sayable is puny, indecent. Use your voice; the inarticulate sometimes rings true.
II

Lise und Markus
Lise und Markus: Home

The stairs will eat me. Everyone is leaving. Listen, Markus. Behind the doorway they sneer, wearing only their faces. What of kisses. If you dare come near me I know by the force of your heels on the floor it is too late. Laundry grows stale in our closet. Go bury the socks. Do not touch me or I will what will I? I don’t know. It does not matter; what you touch is not me.

Honey, I’m home. My smock—look, it’s torn; today I tried rolling all over the paintings … Lise darling hold me I am desperate. The faces on my canvases terrify me. Where are they coming from? Lise, Lizzie—Listen! Lisbet. Stop it. Hördoch—come close. Please I am lonely for you. Touch me. Everything will change. Help me be home.

I’m upset. You’re upset. I’m making fun of you. You’re making fun of me Everything—again. I don’t understand. Nothing is different. has changed. I am only me Who are you? here, back from work. You smell Lise? How am I so strange of many poisons. to you? Mmm, what are you cooking—This place is not home. Not when you come from there.

Lise. Remember. The studio.
Take me along.
I want to go along.
I’m scared, and work—
all day children
rocking sick
at the mouth

Talk. Talk. What If I was wrong,
Markus, when I agreed you should rent

space there? I am tired
You say yourself of this argument.
the faces terrify. Yes. But
Sick people. they’re gone.

_I can’t help them._

Whatever they were wearing They were cold
however thin They were alive. I know.

It is not possible the distance so short.

Do you remember we visited How could I not remember:
It was

_It isn’t anymore._
Lise: Der Mond ist Aufgegangen

I got off the bus two stops early
walked home along the Landstrasse.

You know the place
where pastures slope into the valley?
Just outside the carlights’ sideways reach
there were eyes up waiting
to see if I am as blind as I look.
I almost was, but thought I saw
a taut-cupped ear:
    one crunch
toward the fence and they’re off,
down the steep dark.

Their hooves leave sounds
like a fast heart’s
arrhythmia on the turf.
Lise: Married

Your hair is red and your voice full of gravel. The skin around your eyes is ashen blue. As you look down your lashes are white unsleeping butterfly wings
Markus: Homesick

Rusty truck
in radiant fall trails skeins
of the blue in mother-of-pearl

Lise, where your mother
keeps the washer in the basement:

that room’s smell is cruel to me,
plays touch, abandon:
first fraction of an inhale
sweeps me back to Iowa,
moist-cement clean, Tide—
but even Tide is different here.
You boil out stains instead of
bleaching,
and the full inhale leaves me forlorn,
disoriented on my cold bare feet.

No skunks here, wolves, tornadoes,
forest fires. Earth is so tame
contained and parcelled.
Even your oceans touch
gently: long shallow
tide-flats, never cliffs.

Your deer save me.
Licking salt in wintertime,
in summer slim wild specks,
far off in fields gone mad
with flowers. See?
Right where the trees
begin.
Lise: Akt

This is not what I wanted

I wanted you
to know without needing
to be told

Buy me
a charcoal-grey
compact sturdy light-weight umbrella
that is what I want
all I want
for my birthday

Stop
with your chalk and your dark things
on the light paper

leave my shape alone, my eyes
stop pretending you are

touching me with those lines
Riddle

matches lose their heads over it
then it goes down in flames slowly
watch: it stops time
Markus and Lise: Evening

Lise bitte

Lise listen to me please
I am afraid to come home
you stand and wash dishes
how are there so many
why do I feel you’d do anything
to have your back to me

Match:

a tearing
sound of wings flailing
air attacks
a small bright
vacuum
Lise Dreaming: Leaves

Have we met? How did air
I have forgotten and gravity begin
we are not alone their extensive collaboration?
The leaves want in Do you hear them?
Listen Markus
The street is wet cold why are you not listening?
they scud, scrape You are asleep
I ought to be.
wear out crawl Middle of the night.

Tomorrow I will tell you

tired
as a rattler’s old skin
my swollen eyes will probably
Please help dampen, ridiculous, signal
this is the time to close

srrsrrrrrr on the sidewalk
listing
What does it mean? You say I’m going as though I did not know
now
flesh of my flesh
Soft motor-whoosh: black treads
leave me connected, clinging
to my tiny skeleton
of dried-out veins
tears make you want
to disown me—
In the morning
it will be all right—
I feel like I will blow away
no hands
to hold myself in place
Sleep far.
Light will invade, lie
sharp against gutter-edges
spiny trees, cut
into outlines
Showers, thick coffee
comforting poor thin air.
I will be
grateful to you
just for opening your eyes
breathing
a waking man’s breaths
Tiergarten 4, Berlin

Markus, there was an exhibit at the cathedral:
posterboards everywhere
with photographs and print—they moved
even the pews. It was an exhibit
about the church’s failure.

Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten..

Upstairs in the choir loft there was a special room
devoted to the T4 killings, to euthanasia.
It is the room that is the exception
to Niemöller’s poem.
Looking at the panels I heard
my grandmother’s voice:

Deliveries might contain anything; we read the pamphlet
about the woman whose daughter’s
remains were mailed to her. Mandelentzündung, the form letter read,
tonsillitis; our condolences. But she had her tonsils out
at six, the woman wrote back. Two weeks later,
the mailman delivered another brazen container of ashes.

Sarah brought home Rechnungen
from school with questions like How many Einfamilienhäuser
can you build with the money it takes
to run an institution for Gebrechliche?
Plain suited men opened the gates between our hedges,
stepped stones across trimmed lawns.
We burrowed into our houses, traced
infirm lips, pleaded for silence
and at the doorbell willed our eyes
vacant. Nein, nein,
keine hier

Markus,
my grandmother told me once
that they wouldn’t let the doctors take Frank. And then she said
But the others
who weren’t sick, weren’t
our relatives, we didn’t
know them—
didn’t, I mean, know about them
Lise und Markus: Winter

some word-scrims
eyelet lace more flimsy
  open than a chain-link fence
  here in a tornado
  above unstoppable
the sink and I’m

our long white windows helpless
  Markus sparrow
dear wings
  birds battering
will they along the mesh
ever come back?
Fourteen minutes on the clock I sobbed  
an hour after dawn                       
I prayed don’t let him hear me          
feel me coiled shaking our bed          
Don’t still asleep                      

impossible pressure will evaporate      
if he rolls over this is not the time    

touch, speak                            
there are no answers no words for asking 
it would be unfair to him so possible and warm 
sleep even breathing no words now        
lie next to me awake                     

not here
In den Vereinigten Staaten

Your language is killing me
he says Does verstehen mean anything
other than understand
I say No I don’t think so
look away

trying to remember the word
I thought of while reciting
poems to myself in the car
stunned
to be loving the sound of my voice
not mine exactly more
the taste of the clean-scraped words

nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille sich lautlos auf
only sometimes the curtain of the pupil opens soundlessly

this Landschaft does not move
all the buildings flat and too young
billboards slow and soggy
where the sun was setting there were
no clouds keine Wolken
billboards sharply black

with brightness behind them
brightness so short then
slipweaving trails in my Lampen
all the parallel wheels

Da ist es There it is und weg
and gone as I followed the dotted lines
slowed to a red light at the end
of the wrong off-ramp driving abwesend
as my mother always feared I would

The rainy black pavement shone green
The word left
a space I could drive through
It was lowercase
so a verb or an adjective
It started with a
had to do with the defiant song
sung in former East Germany
Thoughts are free it said
no one can catch them

He said he was learning
my language Sprache sprechen

But we have been in his country for three years
why is he asking about verstehen

What is watered silk
and how do you make it
why are you sitting and drawing
the Knoten I tied in my blue
scarf reine Seide pure silk

My mother painted it
stretched gently in a square wood frame
she scattered streuen rock salt
while the ink was wet
that’s what the little star shapes are

\[ \text{Dann geht ein Bild hinein} \]
\[ \text{an image enters} \]

I wish that when you asked me questions
you wanted answers
hörst du you hear

siehst du you see the dotted lines
run everywhere
knots hard to follow

Markus I am afraid of this room
not your deine fault
all the mismatched easels
not yours
which may fall anytime drop
the light unframed canvases
this week with colors
meant to be bright but in fact
muddy schmutzig dancing
The walls in this room
overwhelm me with their length
their blankness
Space is so cheap here
but I know these windows in daylight
vinyl frames you can’t open
to get fresh Luft to breathe
screens that turn the world blurred
alltagsgrau gray

geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille
goes through the limbs’ taut silence

I am not
I don’t know how to tell you this
my language
even if you understand verstehen
you won’t

if I say it out loud will that take away
all the me you know

I went back to visit
two weeks ago
got off the plane
searched for the reason
in German Grund Erklärung
for my earlyness
Rückenwind I said
but did not trust
my voice or the word
because it translated
so easily from English
If I had remembered tail
means Schwanz
and Rücken back
the shiny airport tiles might not have dropped
from under my feet

What is it
that I want to say to you
and who are you
mein Bruder and not
the lover I wanted
my father all not
the man who stood here
said what you said

if only you were innen here me mit
APPENDIX

“Smoke”
  p. 17: “From this cloud, look!” is Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the beginning of Rainer Maria Rilke’s Spanish Trilogy, Part 1: “Aus dieser Wolke, schaue:”

“The Unnamed Civil Servant’s Daughter Addresses Mitya Karamazov”
  Epigraph taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Ignat Avsey.

“Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz”
  *Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz*: “After Self-Portraits by Käthe Kollwitz

I. Kartuschchen
  *Kartuschchen*: “Little Cartouche”

II. How to Untake a Lover
  Italics in this section are translated from Kollwitz’s diaries.

III. Dreimonatkind
  Italics in this section are translated from of Kollwitz’s diaries.

IV. Eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe
  *eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe*: a gift is a task
  *empört*: indignant
  *Abfluss*: gutter

V. Land der Dichter und Denker
  *Land der Dichter und Denker*: country of poets and thinkers
  *Vaterlandsliebe*: lit. “fathercountrylove”
  *Vater, ich kann das nicht annehmen*: Father, I cannot accept that.
  *Wiederfinden*: finding again
  *Siegesfest*: victory celebration
  *Selige Sehnsucht*: holy/blissful longing

VI. Selbstportrait
  *Selbstportrait*: self-portrait

VII. Mutter und Sohn
  “Mutter und Sohn,” also known as “Mutter mit totem Sohn,” or “Pietà,” bronze sculpture, 1938/39.

VIII. Ohne Modell
  *ohne Modell*: without a model
The German in this section is taken from the dialogue accompanying a drawing by Heinrich Zille, showing a one-room apartment with a boy at the window and a woman sewing. Erwin’s answer [in broad Berlin dialect]: “Aw, Mom, it smells mighty fine again today of the greasy soot from the crematorium!”

IX. Pietà (Mutter mit totem Sohn)
Mutter mit totem Sohn: mother with dead son
Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden: seed fruits shall not be ground
Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände, / Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende:: “Create, the day-work of my hands / High joy that I finish it”
Karfreitag: Good Friday
“Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken”: “I saw the world with loving looks”
Malweiber: “painting bitches”
Zeichenschule für Damen: Drawing School for Ladies

XI. Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen warden
Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen warden: “seed-fruits shall not be ground”
Kollwitz closed an open letter printed in Vorwärts with this quotation from Goethe’s novel Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship).
Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände, / Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende: Goethe, “Create, the day-work of my hands / High joy that I finish it,” from poem “Hoffnung” (“Hope”).
Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken: Goethe, “I saw the world with loving looks,” from poem “Zu meinen Handzeichnungen,” “To My Hand-Drawings.”
Rodin: passage referred to is from Les Cathedrales de France, in German translation.

“Selbstgespräch mit Franziskus”
Selbstgespräch a conversation with oneself
Liebe geht durch den Magen: Love goes through the stomach.
Flügel der Morgenröte: wings of the dawn (from the title of a song based on Psalm 139)
kraulen: scratch, rub, massage (an animal)
Franz: Franz von Assisi, St. Francis

“Lise und Markus: Home”
Hör doch: Listen

“Der Mond ist Aufgegangen”
der Mond ist aufgegangen: the moon is risen

“Lise: Akt”
Akt: a nude
“Tiergarten 4, Berlin”

Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten: When the Nazis came for the communists
Rechnungen: calculations
Einfamilienhäuser: single-family houses
Gebrechliche: invalids (lit. “frail ones”)

“When the Nazis came for the Communists” is a line from a Martin Niemöller poem, originally given as part of a speech to a church in Frankfurt. The full poem, translated, runs:

“When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.”

“In den Vereinigten Staaten”

in den Vereinigten Staaten: in the United States
Landschaft: landscape