

WHAT SMALL PACT

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Abstract

A collection of poems.

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This collection is dedicated to Annie Brin and Mark Billian.

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Myths

All winter, Sarah and I ate apples
in the dark, watching classic
movies in black and white,

until we saw Sydney Poitier
lean back in his chair
and score an orange rind

in his particular way—
peeling back the leaves
of orange skin

with a paring knife. We admired
his confidence and sang along
when his students praised him.

We practiced his method
and shucked more fruit
than we could eat.

Then, we learned
to make marmalade.
That was less fun.

That spring, in school, we performed
the myth of sad Persephone.
We walked home

to Sarah's house
and asked for pomegranates.
Her mother handed over

the whole fruit.
She taught us to clean
the seeds from the skin:

how to submerge
the open red flesh
in a bowl of cold water.

We counted the red teeth
coming loose. I wondered,
what small pact had I made?

An Incident

Stepping off the stopped train
at Bellows Falls, a child falls

down into the lit space
between the yellow painted warning

of the curb and the vehicle—
only ten inches, but the boy is thin.

He is quick to vanish
below the concrete quai,

and quick to recover—his instinct is good.
He doesn't linger,

but jumps, hands up—his fingertips appear—
at the moment when his father bends,

to retrieve his son like bread
from a toaster. So well-timed

it's almost choreographed—the rescue
appears more like a rehearsal of correct responses

than an accident. A few witnesses loiter,
surprised no one has thought to call out

for help. Even the mother is calm.
The parents take inventory:

Has he nicked his chin? Did he twist an ankle
or sprain a knee, and will he

forgive them for not holding his hand?

In Praise of Mark

When Sarah returned
home the fourth time
her father gave up
his office work

to become a carpenter.
He brought her along
when he built stairs
and to every cabinet

adjustment. The question
of wisdom in bringing
such a troubled young woman
to a space with nail guns

and hammers was moot
because it was
too impressive to see
a father who loved

his daughter
so much every day that he would
change every day for her
that he could,

and because, after a time,
no decision any father could make
would make his daughter
more willing to stay.

A Native Daughter Is Invited Home to Stay
after Catherine Pierce

You're kidding, right?
You want me back? My raving
on the lawn at night?
Throwing fits on public streets
on quiet evenings? You want
my truck stuck in a snowdrift
on the other side of town?
Remember when I broke
a mud flap on that culvert?
I broke my skin
in the cold. See, you want me
stained again by the cut grass
by the late summer beds
of marigolds because marigolds
have a shot at survival
through the first frost.
You want me hiding
under the bleachers
between rounds in the crowd,
selling the 50/50 tickets
for the club fundraiser.
You want me to come back
to the small town,
to the Wrightsville Dam,
and the good swimming hole
the police don't check. There's a pig
corpse in the North Branch
and rumors of E. coli.
You only ask for the worst
scenes to be replayed against
the summer movie screen flapping
off the clothesline in the backyard—
all the neighbors
in attendance—but not the truth.
I drowned a girl at Shady Rill
and no one went to look for her.

Girls

After a bottle of wine, Alice admits she's upset
with all of us who grew up on the same hill,

broke our skis on the same rocks, were terrorized
by each other for years, by stories of those workmen

who fell off the tower up in Hubbard Park
trying to make repairs. We all wrote

the same ghosts, snuck out of our parents' houses
together, fell in love with Brian Anderson when he was cute.

And now? We don't ever say what we've all seen. In the park
where the path crosses the stream and there is no bridge,

we've each come across the cowrie shell necklace, half a doll,
blue China beads, and a feeling. No one says her name anymore.

We've passed by her mother and her dog on their long walks
around the seven fireplaces, without breaking their meditation.

They roam the trails, passing through the stacked stone pillars
that announce something ahead: shelter or vista. But they don't see us.

And who can blame them? We missed the funeral. We were absent.
We owe some amends, some offering, maybe a letter

addressed to Mark and Annie
and her sister, Hannah, who loved her best.

We don't know how she did it. We don't want to know.
We've been trying not to know

and we're succeeding. Alice says if we let ourselves
think about how she left us, we'd all be this upset all the time.

If we really thought about
Sarah, we'd fall apart.

July First

I left Adam's boozy party early.
I left my red car at the Park and Ride.
I put on my shoes and ran from the lot.
I climbed to the top of the stone tower
to see the camel's purple silhouette
in the dimming walls of the place I trod on
like a bug. I ran the woods with no light
and I wasn't scared once. I thought I heard
a wolf, but she was far away from me.
I met a bear at the head of the trail,
but she wasn't in the mood for a brawl.

I ran down to the city's pavilions.
I chased a cop car down the yellow lines.
I touched the white flank of an ambulance
and spat at the state flagpole for good luck.
I ran up and up the hill to the house
to the kitchen and undressed in the dark.
I breathed night fog on the tile floor and felt
my heart work against the grout. My mom heard
the percussion. She left her bed. She sat
next to me, asked *Sweetie, where have you been?*

October, North Hero

Count peregrines nesting
off the causeway, isthmus, interstate.

Return from your stroll, visage grim, wearing dirt
and jeans. You could almost pass for yokel.

You grew up here before they found the noose
in the parlor, the noose in the granary

comedic beside the hens with their small
necks. The nooses are puzzles you've returned

to decode. Inventory: count
isthmus after isthmus.

Your neck is an isthmus. Calipers
measure the distance between chin and brow bruises.

The noose on the porch. The rocking chair clings to a pillow
in tears, in the porch light. Count everything. The chair

rocks. Count fence posts. Count forks and spoons.
Then, give up on numbers. Start to start

and end the day on your knees.
Wake up in time to watch the day veer off

on horseback towards the isthmus,
towards the village where nooses are painted

on the backs of doors. Start to leave
the house at night. Take dance lessons in the village.

Go to the festival where scarecrows hang
in nooses off the pillars. This is how

they can stay upright
all night. Wink at them. Tap loose

your longings through the soles of your shoes.
Unbutton, make cuffs of your grief.

New Year's Eve

I drive out
of Montpelier
and head east
past the Capes
and reservoirs
to the rural part
that is poor
the way people
imagine poor
to be. In New England
all my peers
are having babies
with convicts
and rapists,
and I'm not kidding,
just exaggerating.
Not *all*. We're not
all poor *that* way.
I drive out
until I see
the spine
of Mount Elmore
over Lake Elmore
and the ice
fisherman outside
their huts akin
to summer gazebos
which might
be mistaken
for guard houses
from my truck
cab on the road.
I mean,
if you couldn't see
they lack walls
all winter through
the leafless trees.

In Hubbard Woods

One afternoon, the snow stopped
and I walked into the woods on red metal

snowshoes, trying not to say aloud how perfect
the stone wall, how perfectly the snow

shaken off branches in wind had dappled the snow
on the floor of the pine forest. Perfect white, brown,

and green—the way winter forests should be.
The path trod by neighbors, their dogs, and the deer.

I walked around the seven fireplaces to the cliff
where Tim Morgan fell all thirty feet down the schist wall.

There, I found Mark and Annie—
dead Sarah's parents—on skis, softly shushing

under the tune of their poles clacking. They saw me
wearing my new adult face and my Christmas hat.

When they spoke my name aloud, I was made
corporeal. They were so beautiful on their skis.

We were all there to spend some hours
outside the city. We didn't talk long.

It was an unusually warm day.
The afternoon was blue above the tree line,

and they skied off. I walked until I didn't know:
where was the trail and the house and the road?

I stopped by a birch and lay my cheek against its chalk
white bark, the pink scrolls frozen

in their attitudes. I weighed my whole
front against the trunk and breathed

while snow dropped onto snow. Water moved inside.
I heard my heart work and stood with its noise.

Uncle Ed

Cantaloupe rind stolen off my plate
near the end of the picnic. The radio picks up
static when my cousin walks too close to its perch.
Out of the rain at Old Shelter

the kids play circle games under the eaves:
pass the seashell. No fear
until we hear thunder. We ignore
the storm. The ocean is far from the woods.

The parents talk torpedoes at the table anyway.
I thought the word was manufactured
to explain the way sugar moves—
tor-pe-do—fast then slow.

My cousin nods to the beat of his dad.
Uncle Bullshit keeps a fine-toothed comb
in his front pocket. If we ask, he'll wrap it
in a handkerchief, and make it hum.

He once sold his harmonica
to the tune of a hundred dollar bill
from the president. This was before
I was born. I don't like him much.

He waves me back from the grate where
earlier, he showed my dad how to cook
bratwurst. The charcoal briquettes
chat when the rain hits. My uncle says my name.

Buddy, he goads me, get your inkwell.
My squire, we've got a report to write.

The Mayor of Topeka

He sees them leavened, laudable
hoppers. One hare blunders over a furrow

in the field on her heels—I mean, before
his shot stops her. See, his name is Juarez de Topeka,

and he is a native of that august land. He is
the protagonist in every story he enters,

in spite of the digs he's made—
the city potholes hold his toppled plots.

His last living uncle disowned him at fifteen,
citing impasses of Juarez's construct.

He said there had been *entêtes* with kind civilians
who didn't merit his nephew's ire. There's no need

to give examples—name officers of the peace or
prescriptions, mishaps or duels. Now Juarez

waits, demonstrates his will to be patient
outside city limits. Still one more year

until his grand return, some summer afternoon,
when he might decide to ride up to the dinette on Main

just in time to take his tea and an orange with you.

Tour of the Grounds

Anjourd'hui il pleut. Sortir la parapluie.

Welcome to my home, a kingdom
of health and plants – avail yourselves
of the macaroons and mesclun
at my buffet. My man attends me
while I learn English.

Geoffrey, my jam is hot.
Geoffrey, my jam has cooled.
Have you seen my um brella? I sing good.
Our tourists must be famished.
Geoffrey hates the hungry and dusty.

Ignore him and nest yourselves
at my table. That smell comes in
with the sea foam. Yes, we dipped
your plate at the water.
Your fears are false, be assured.

The jam comes from the fruit orchard
as well as the colorful
insects we suspend in each jar.
As promised, I present the bicycle court
and the vegetable garden, our broccoli.

Mother says she's ill at ease
to know you're on the grounds. Now
stay close with me. Smoke in the chimney
means she'll shoot at will.

You admire my watch, see
the velvet hands. It vacations
every fourth hour if it is not wound
tight. It voids the unpleasant moments.
Noose allowances are posted

on the board. Delays are habitual – poisons
and rockets prohibited. Days crack open
against each other. Interdiction
against carrying them in baskets, you see.

Bells time and mowing time are the same,
but not bound together.
Straw hats encouraged at both.
Today it should have rained.
Geoffrey will break the umbrella later.

No impudence need be
tolerated. Immerse yourself
in your cabin. Jolly engine driver,
that man you brought. We'll shave
his beard later and give him a bath.
Clean bodies make good sleep.

Interpretations of Philip Guston

The curator's plaque calls attention
to the single bare light bulb
high in the center of the tableau
which was *perhaps a reference to the artist's father
who committed suicide by hanging*
although nothing in the scene suggests
his family life. It is still life,
although the cartoonish objects show
no sign of decay or care—blank-sided boxes,
boots overturned on a shelf, and a bulb
the pale yellow of a moon made yolky
in an afternoon of blue
it just won't leave.

This mid-century work
suggests one might never recover
from this particular type of loss
while the world keeps hanging one's paintings
from walls, keeps insisting on wrapping each
swordfish steak in a perfect twine-tied package
that the butcher swings across the counter
too fast so you catch it by its knotted bow
and love its weight the whole stroll home
where you place it on the countertop
beside the inherited lamp whose cord is still wrapped
around its soldered globe while it waits to be moved
to the dining room, to be hung and filled with light.

Childish

You said I was kidding about the formaldehyde,
but I wasn't kidding at all. When I was a kid,

I read the side of the tube of toothpaste
and the chemical was listed there

in all its carcinogenic glory—that's why
you're not supposed to ingest the stuff.

You know there's no formaldehyde to be found in dental paste,
not these days, but they still employ it at morgues and museums

where large mammals are shipped dead in crates
so they can be cleaned and whitened, picked apart bone

by bone then reconstructed and made to stand still
so as not to disturb their coats of preservative arsenic.

Believe me when I say, *Go eat a tube of toothpaste,*
I mean the kind of toothpaste they used to make.

The Oboist

I can't sleep next to you. Watching your face for wakefulness,
I'm still too much a teenage girl with open eyes on a stormy night,
thinking your face is wholly a boy's face when he is peaceful
and not racing on the harbor path, not climbing a tree or down a fence
or kicking his heels against the dock, rueful and brooding.
What does your sleeping face say? *I never told you*, he says,
but I can play the oboe. I learned when I was ten.
I used to put my lips together and practice scales for hours.
Here, put your hand on my stomach and feel
the resistance to breath that makes a whistle sound
high-pitched. And here's low: Tyler snores in his sleep
so loud he wakes—the body an instrument, all song
a set of instructions to be spoken aloud.

Baltimore by Night

In the vivid city, I take a call
from a friend. He's coming to the potluck, he says,
he'll bring eggs. *Wild*, I think,
because in the dream I just had he brought eggs to a party.
They were cracked and leaking into a clear plastic cup.
He comes to the party. He brings eggs every night for a week.
The first night he doesn't show,
my teeth fall out and I don't bother
to replace them. I take albumen from the leftover eggs
and smear it on my gums.
In the morning, my mouth is full
of blooming daylilies, although it's still dark outside.
The florist's shop is closed, so I go
to the doctor for help. The doctor turns out to be a midwife.
She tells me the flowers are beautiful. Then, she pulls
an orange octopus from my uterus and advises me
to switch to a gluten-free diet
and a new brand of contraceptives.
I can only accept her suggestions.
She disposes of the cephalopod through an open window
with a tennis racket and a strong forehand.
I take the bus south to play hooky
at the aquarium. I make moose faces at the residents,
but they mistake my antlers for anemone.
Three clownfish perish
trying to get to my hair through the glass.
You're so appealing, says a passing oceanographer.
Then, he asks me out to dinner.
We eat vegan grain sculptures together by the harbor.
When the waiter brings seaweed ice cream for desert,
the oceanographer cries on my shoulder
until the restaurant floods and slips into the water.
I tell him I have to go back up the hill;
I can only survive on dry land. I ascend Charles Street
on foot and stop on my friend's porch to complain
about the lame oceanographer and my dry salted skin.
Go take a swim in fresh water, she says. *The fish at Loch Raven*
might find you appealing, she says.
I've heard that before, I say, but I can't remember where.

Summer Poem

Drone of the cicada, drone of the fan
on the ceiling in the room
next door. The humidity
lends itself to those in need
of excuses not to move,
not to slip out of bed
except for a drink
of water. All the writing
felt atmospheric, reeked
of sweat. I wasn't made
for the south, for
these attitudes. In any season,
I was not destined to be
a great writer of love poems
although I loved pretty freely
for a woman from New England.
I was often complimented
and chastised for my coolness
in the same breath. Wet air
pasted me to the floor boards—
wide pine planks available
in almost any state.
The summer weather exhausted
me, my will not to overanalyze
the condition of the affair
to which I was a party.
I woke up in a man's apartment
three blocks south
of the monument to General Washington
on August first, unsure
where to go with my day.

Nice Houses

I leave through the back door
on footprints I made last time

it snowed. It's snowing
and I am going for a walk

dressed in layers.
Tyler says we're good

at creating intimacy
while building in space

like parking lots between
stores at the mall.

Each has its
own color carts.

I start running down Colley
Road in my plain clothes.

In the half-black, there's a figure
ahead with a dog

and we run at each other.
We so want to be together.

Somewhere, someone is filming
the encounter. The stranger

says, *It's like he's been waiting
for you all his life.* The oaks lean in

with their romance, their ice coats
evaporate in the heat

of the suggestion.
I kneel on the salted sidewalk

to hug the dog. Of course,
he was talking about the dog.

I move on through this neighborhood
of small mansions, past German echoes

in the Midwestern architecture,
between the snow banks that keep me in place.

Correspondence

There's another e-mail from you waiting
when I wake up in my messy lover's
apartment where he studies medicine and I pretend
I'm writing.

I'm almost never writing
anything worth keeping but my typing
gives me credit. I go to the bedroom
and climb under the pile of clean laundry
like a small dog.

I remember one night
we didn't go home together; it was
pouring. On North Ave by the Daemen L
I got a cab, but you insisted on
walking until you caught up to a bus
headed to Lincoln Park.

That night I sat
in the living room, dead cold in my clothes
on the couch for an hour. You left that year
without plans to return.

Please don't sue me,
the e-mail said. You wrote a short story
about riding the bus in Chicago
and one of the characters has my name.
When I read the name of your latest town,
it catches as though I'd spoken aloud.

Verdict

The first year I lived there
on postage stamps and food
stamps, on beer and water
stamped with expiration dates.
I watched as they passed
by the tip of my nose,
giant icebergs in the pool
of good intentions, roadblocks
for mid-Atlantic dream
liners. Preservatives made
for strange dreams, so I cut
them out. All my food
expired too quickly. That year
I slept on plastic sheets
in three different hospitals,
someone else said. I was
the only incarcerated woman
left in my woods. I dove
into the mountain pond
like it was late ski season,
like I had any choice
in the matter of Ms. Heney
versus the world: I was
the plaintiff. I lodged
my complaints
as they came up. I recorded
the scores of rib bones
and their shadows
outside on the body,
and, when it finally arrived
in the city, the wonder of summer
I didn't feel I deserved.

Goodnight

On nights when I can't sleep,
Tyler tells me stories about his brother
who insisted the sun and the moon
were the same well into his teenage years.

“Everything looks different at night,” Ryan said,
“because it’s darker.” We laugh to distract
ourselves from my concern: the return
of a recurring dream

leftover from my childhood fear of a war
that would arrive over the mountains
and tramp up to the house dressed in black
gear with guns. They enter through the front door

late at night and move upstairs. They open
every door but mine. I listen
to the shots, the radio calls, the clatter
as they exit. I watch the ceiling, waiting

for the nightmare to prove itself
unreal. I sip water, and Tyler wakes.
“Have I told you what my brother thought
about the moon?”

Tell me again. Insist this
kind of thing doesn't happen
in our waking country: the sunlit field,
the orchard, and the trailed woods I trust.

Travel

Travel was the thing
I wanted for my life.
The fix for uncertainty
was more

and more movement, an abundance
of locations, where I might
place myself briefly
and coexist among other

possible selves. I wanted
to know them all.
They were so mercurial
and so beautiful—I could tell

from outside because there,
I was a tourist
visiting my body
without melancholy.

From a distance,
I thought, I have nice legs.
From a distance, I
could appreciate my muscles

exercising their power,
and my ability to surprise
myself. I could always go home
from wherever I was at any time

and this felt nice, seeing me
make the call again—
from a Costa Rican phone booth,
in a Chicago airport,

in a hotel lobby in Budapest—
never afraid to admit failure
in any of her forms, I was
ready to start again.

Far from the Sea of Galilee

Growing up, I loved the stories
of the Bible though I barely read
the book. I listened well
in church and believed in

my gut: there was
a figure—fearsome and good—
who would forgive whatever
I had done wrong, if I'd just confess.

As a grown woman, I've forgotten
most of what I learned about the apostles
and saints—those vassals of miracles
for a god who bestowed health and pardon
without hesitation
upon adequately repentant souls.

It's been years since I believed
I might merit that generous brand
of consideration from whatever governs
this world, but I've still never had a love bigger
than the trout I held when I was ten

on a lake beach, when I thought maybe
I could perform a miracle
like the transformation
of a few loaves and fishes into many,
if I was granted the power.

When You Get To The Gambia

The black men will exit the black car first.
One will rub chalk numbers off the trunk
as they approach your clandestine taxi. The driver will turn
to say they know who you are. They'll grab your arms
and pull you from the vehicle and march
to the red river bank. One says you've arrived
at the border—you won't know which.
Someone says crocodile in English.

The river is in the middle of this fingerling country
so you won't be where you expected
based on early light and your good sense
of direction. The driver grabs your hand.

He takes the documents from your pocket
and leads you with confidence. He helps you over a bale
of barbed wire: it rakes your legs. You run when he runs.
You imagine yourself from a distance—two hurdlers
in an empty field. Over some taller wire fences
you see the whitewashed Customs cabin.
By now, you know where you're going.
Across the border, more sand.

On the porch, the driver shakes the photocopies
from your passport, your *titre de séjour* from Dakar.
He will not find a visa. You have no visa.
The driver makes a gesture
to suggest some transaction, and you wonder
what you have to barter. You hold up a bill for 20000 CFA.
He says that won't be enough.
Now, you will have to make a choice.

Dakar Study

Moussa collects me in a van
whose driver he doesn't trust; he tells the man
directly. The sky is gray and every faded billboard
advertises powdered milk
or a beauty product to make your skin lighter.
We are on a peninsula. Moussa says,
 From every tower,
one can see the sea. He narrates traffic
in French that sounds so round
 it might be like Portuguese: *Voici Les Almadies,*
voici la Voie de Dégagement Nord where the road begins
 as a traffic circle that rings the new monument
to a westward-looking future. The hills are orange
graded dirt around this construction site
 down to where the cemetery starts,
then the *gris-gris* and jade vendors, open markets,
and embassy-lined residential neighborhoods
 of increasing wealth as we approach the coast.
You came here to do what? he asks. I think:
to be a student, to live in a different mode,
 to learn what you need, to speak French (although
who could admit this?), to eat fish,
to respond to the urgencies of the world—who says that?
Moussa says that as he hands me a small Nokia
and tells me he hopes the phone will keep me safe.
But one week later, when a faulty outlet burns mine,
 I refuse to buy a new one. I've no use
for communication off the peninsula. This is how
I'll ensure I'll learn: no more calls.
 I climb the ladder to the roof to find my friend:
Moussa, first-born son. He smokes
a cigarette on his prayer rug. The whole sunset dims
 each time a bat passes in front of its lamp
and when planes from Europe obscure the orange
light as they descend in Ouakam
 where I landed seven days ago. We go
down to the second story kitchen to chat with the maids,
then down to visit the boys who play brutal soccer
 in the white tile courtyard where Daba referees
eating boiled peanuts from a colander on her chaise lounge,
and we make it to the dining room in time
 to catch Barcelona's win on the big screen.
He makes me an omelet with three eggs
and a cup of peanut oil, because the meat looks bad.
Moussa is a local journalist and he already knows

not to believe me every time I insist *tout va bien*,
but I worry that he doesn't understand that I do love the world
 from my assigned distance with the same affection
I have for the grain I feel in my knees when I sprint
over the concrete blocks that make a wall
 that marks the edge of this continent. He shows me
how to move across the city on yellow buses
and which blue vans travel north and south. With his help
 I map the peninsula like a flat world.
Inefficacious me. In five months, I will leave.

Dream Song
For MBD, 1980-2011

From Chicago, Moussa and I read along
as the Socialists won in France.
In a rainstorm, we watched their old rhino flee
to the Bois with his Italian. A Madonna
in Tripoli leaned out to glare at the assailants
who put a rocket through her kitchen wall.
Any day, he said, peering over my shoulder at the screen.
Any day the fighting might have stopped
in Aleppo where things got worse.
The powder blue helmets loitered too long
at the border. We lingered with our coffee
watching headlines. In London,
Rebekah the Red was led off handcuffed,
and this seemed just. Dust on the combat boots
of Sri Lankan soldiers thickened in peacetime.
For months all news from Colombo was good.
Hunger in the Congo got harder to sell as a cause.
Fumes on cricket pitches in India obscured scoreboards,
but got rid of crickets. Children bathed in buckets
on Pakistan's streets. When the Swiss flipped switches,
new particles lit up. I asked Moussa, What
does that mean? The States held
an election that changed nothing.
One morning, Moussa read me a story
at the breakfast table: a famous giraffe
in Lodz lost his companion to fear
after hooligans attacked their zoo pen.
In one photo, the widower bowed his head so low
his long neck seemed to have snapped. I cowered
behind my oatmeal. What are you afraid of?
he asked. I slid numberless windows open
into what was happening. I read
recklessly. In the twelfth month,
when a young man murdered students and teachers,
we went out and drank copious amounts of beer
and went nowhere near the newsfeed,
the livestream, the digest.
We left the kitchen quickly those cold mornings
at the end of December. No longer curious
or hopeful, we exited unscathed.

A Prayer on Tabaski

That the sheep dress themselves
in their skin again
That their heads stick back
on their spines
That their blood jumps
up from the canals where it flowed
down to drain and sat for a week leeches
into the sand slowly
That the eye returns
to its place that it never rest
on the courtyard tile

That my life takes me back
to this peninsula
where nothing happens
while the meat is cooked
and the meat takes hours to cook

That the holiday arrives
on the calendar again
That your hands command
the festivities as usual the long knife
to make precise cuts on the belly
of the first ram
That the cousins hold him prone
by each leg and tear the skin
all in one long coat of white while you saw
the hooves from the legs
That you never cut by accident
your own hand

That my wishes do not fester
packed in suitcases
like black shirts ready for travel
or occasion to be carried on my arms
That my two eyes never
leave my skull

That there be peace
where there were five sheep for five men
in this house last year
where today there are four

For Margaret in Yarmouth

To the harbor Pack the blanket and the whistles
Bring the children to the landing

Do not take sand from the ballast
Do not tamper with the rigging

Once unmoored do not steal from lobstermen
only check the traps whose buoys wear your colors

Do not abscond with an excess
Haul for your table and maybe the neighbors

Before you feast sing with the children
Do not complain about the soup they salted

Teach them to eat the small bones
if the cut has not been cleaned well

At bedtime confess your error
to the children Do not blame the red tailed foxes

Tell them how you left their pet's cage open
on the summer porch Say it's wrong

to keep winged things Press your hands together
They'll forgive you Don't be nervous

Last Call at Touba Diallo's

For anyone who refuses to grant clemency to the sheep that shit in his courtyard
and likewise, to the watermelon seller whose
donkey has no qualms whatsoever.

For all those who have spat black tea onto a white doily in a British tearoom
and pretended it was a sneeze in lieu of disgust.
For anyone who has audibly savored licorice to prove a point.

For anyone who has hoarded tiny airplane bottles of wine
with half-off day at the Laundromat in mind, drunk them straight from
the bottle and left spots of Malbec on his clean blouse sleeves.

For anyone who has ever told a border guard to zip his pants
and take the damn bribe.
For all those who have spoiled the bike ride home
with a question at every traffic light.

For anyone who did not kiss the girl at the lakefront
on a summer night when there was beer in the knapsack
and no reason not to, except that things were so nice on the verge of romantic.

For anyone who has had his heart broken in a Parisian train station
and sung the SNCF theme song to calm himself—*pom pam pom*.
For all those who do not clean the toilet every month at least once.

For all those who have been drinking soda water
with grenadine and four cherries all night.
For anyone at this bar who knows what they want.

A few thoughts on *Iguana iguana*

What is so special about the green iguana?
A regenerating tail is not unheard of in the reptilian world,
and chickens share most of their small secrets.

The mysterious third eye is more a trick
of photosensitive cells than intuition,
though one can imagine how

such a feature might come in handy at parties
where the other guests are two drinks ahead
and already climbing the walls.

On days when I remember you don't love me,
I think it might be nicer to live as a moderately-sized reptile
who moves with the light to live happily.

Vespers on Mirror Lake

It's evening and I'm leaving
 for one final lap
across the small lake

between the mountains in Calais
 whose surface so clearly reflects
the pine forest that leans over

the shoreline. There's no wind
 no ripple, no jumping fish
in the cold August water.

I swim out to the boulder
 in the middle and clamber
up to catch my breath. I perch

there, looking down
 to where dead trees stand
straight as sharpened pikes

to protect the deep,
 where ducks find grubs
and my nightmares sleep as sunken

fish with white stomachs. Everyone
 who leaves me comes here to reside
in the mud under the buoys

for loon nesting. I look through
 the scrim of green quaking
leaves reflecting off the hillside.

I say goodnight to my friends in the silt
 and swim back to shore—face up,
floating—no digging, no throwing dirt.

James

My teacher in New York won't speak to me
until I quit saying I'm sorry. He said,
You're a fine oboist and a serial apologist,
and I've no interest in investing in the latter.
One learns through practice, but I break
the exercises too often, taking the reed
from my lips to form words. James draws
his mouth into a hard line and taps the page
to say, *Begin here.* He underlines a word
two letters at a time to form a tri-pl-et, then again
to make it even. He hums, tongue chipping a song
from the air flowing against his dentures. Their ivory
came from East Africa, he confessed once,
although he was not ashamed.

On Saturday, We Recall a Spring Barn Fire

We agree: it was late April
 when the small green farm caught fire.
Before the family woke, the flames jumped
 and lit the house. The father, Mr. Carver,
 had time to walk to the Skeas' before the roof collapsed.

But was it the spring before the return
 of the seventeen-year locusts? And was that the same
as the year of no rain? Didn't we all thank God
 they farmed trees and berries, and not cows?
Was there any carnage? No, we recall;

there were few losses. Still, our table of neighbors wonders
 how we could all forget such a date.
You could see the flames from here
 and the smoke like a brume
 that hung low all day over the tree line.

But how can we know which spring it was
 while the maple's rings are hidden?
Staples in the bark hold
 the tree closed over the striated record
 a shade darker to mark the year the Carvers' barn burned.

At the Wayside Diner

Don pours another coffee
for the amorous, off-shift
waitress. "Here, Gertrude:
two creams, one sugar,

and a tuna sandwich."
"Well, I never eat fish
at home," she says.
"Don, *mon amour!*

Pour me
a tall glass of water, too.
My man's not
gonna show."

She points to Pluto.
"See through that grime
greased window?
It's still a planet."

Don says, "No, Sweetie
that dime's a headlight
and you can't shame me
to clean my restaurant."

Gertrude lays her coat
across the counter
and irons it well
with a napkin holder.

"I got chores to do," she says.
"It's about time you head home,"
Don says, "so I can close
down this shack."

Gertrude waddles out
singing, "Fish me from the river,
Pops. Send my regards
to your broad woman."

The Pool

Get out, he said, *out of the water*,
swatting up leaves and legs and chlorine
in the same stroke.

Thomas, who had not
adequately swept the pool of junk
and moth bodies,

got caned with the pole
of the leaf skimmer that reached across
the cement patio—

hit behind
his small knees. *How many times have you
been told don't swim*

*when the water's full
of crap?* Thomas Joseph Anderson
stayed the silver pole

against his back.
See Thomas, red and boney as trout,
and see his mother,

not looking up
from her chaise. Remark upon the line
of five shivering

ten-year-old guests,
whose tan bellies wet the wood fence rail,
watching the family uphold its laws.

Red House

It is snowing It is rare to see snow in November
It is the night of the fire It is 1990 I go down the maid's stairs
in my dad's arms I wear pajamas I have my otter I am afraid
my dad will drop me down the stairwell in his haste

In other memories I step on a needle in the sewing room
I break a window in my sister's dollhouse with my thumb
I fall in the pool in my green dress and my dad pulls me out by the arms

But first smoke and looking over his shoulder
at red roses in the pattern of the wallpaper
and the acrid smell and the sensation that will become familiar
later when I dream of running off cliffs and my legs seize up and I wake

Hubbard Park

In Vermont, where people expect to walk
for miles in any capricious weather,
where conditions are often made grander
in retelling, I grew up on a hill
just below the famous tower that was
never finished because—the story goes—
one of the stone workers jumped from the top
and no one could bear the project after.
Now, tourists enjoy it for the view
and especially for the story. No rail
installed on the ledge—as suggestive
a gesture as ever was written.

I walked home from school unencumbered while
my sister studied cello and sweat
as she lumbered with the great thing on her
back. Then, in the kitchen, we watched the purple mountain
wall darken across the valley; in spring, heard bagpipes
from the Catamount Band louder than trains
at the junction.

Our neighborhood was
not populous in a suburban way,
segregated by tree lines and stone walls.
I thought, if my parents didn't mind,
I might reside there forever and never
work. But they came home, made a real meal
and planned the next day.

Now, when I return
by train and arrive after dinner's done
to the cold stop at the junction, we drive
directly to my grandmother's house which abuts
ours—although it's really a couple miles
away on the slope. Every light ablaze,
her house is a brazier in the forest.
She keeps the door unlocked, windows open—
unworried by cold. She can't walk downhill,
but my father hikes to her each evening
when the road is bad. He brings dry wood
off the cord, checks the mailbox and the stove,
digs up her newspapers that still arrive
hours before dawn though the path's not plowed.

Chittenden

1.

Bushwhack the old path, follow the cable
 handrail and stakes camouflaged
in rust, orange lichen. Cross the trestle
 over the Blue Quarry. Stand on the rotted tie
 and watch the serrated leaves sink slowly.
Shed your shorts, pray, and jump.

2.

Praise the water for its stillness. Approach the edge
 without hesitation, take the rope in hand
and push off. Cling until the upswing,
 then relax your hands and fall. Eyes wide,
 enter the three hundred deep feet
of water and be calmed.

3.

Scale the white marble walls,
 curse their slick red newts and spiders.
Find the rope and confidence to sail into the long, dark box.
 Climb again, fall again. All afternoon, flee
 the tree line, move into the lightless water
without fear.

Biographical Statement

Julia Heney was raised in Montpelier, Vermont. She studied French at Beloit College and at the Université de Haut-Bretagne Rennes 2. Throughout her studies, she spent time in Senegal, Martinique, and France. She received the Academy of American Poets Prize in 2009 and 2010.