

# 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.

Your hair is long and lighter than it was  
last time, but here you are: again,  
this week  
in March, we celebrate a year  
gone by. We eat fish, there is bread:  
the day  
grows blue. You order wine. *Happy birthday*,  
I say, and tap your glass, which chimes.  
You ask  
if I've seen your sister. I haven't.  
It's been three years since she's showed up.  
And now  
we talk about the books that you still love,  
and movies you've re-watched again,  
and smile  
at small dogs that walk past—but I don't ask  
what I most want to ask.  
I had this dream:  
we met en route to lunch.  
You wore a coat, although  
the afternoon  
was warm. You looked local, as though you'd been  
in Munich for some time.  
You looked older,  
finally twenty-six, as you should have  
been this year.  
We never traveled abroad  
together when you took your café lunch  
among the living.

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

## Farmer's Song

As his plane sank—man, apple, and gun—  
to a seabed rich with oysters, their pearls were crushed  
to milk beneath the heavy body.

Back in the abandoned hollow it was  
hardly improbable no person had passed by or heard  
how the young man,  
                                one day, enlisted and left.  
Under the current of days and moon change,  
his inherited horses distressed  
                                in the field unmown—  
not ridden or oated—a cur tormented  
their unshod hooves.

In summer, bees nestled  
in their clotted manes while they brayed,  
no longer much like plough horses.

The wheat-plated hills sent up  
their animal pleas—as to a jury  
ten men deep.

The gone farmer begged  
for their relief in permanence  
from famine, tick, and welt.  
So his god broke  
the fence at each gray rotted post.  
His horses were never attended again.

## 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 slop 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.