Boundary Street

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A Pittsburgh CAPA | Carnegie Mellon Collaboration
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Introduction

This chapbook is the result of a collaboration between students in the Advanced Poetry Workshop at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and Literary Arts majors at The Pittsburgh Center for the Creative and Preforming Arts (CAPA). Throughout the Spring 2011 semester, CMU students and CAPA students exchanged assignments and worked together on poems, meeting both at CMU and CAPA for workshop sessions and discussions. This collection of poems celebrates this collaboration. We all learned from each other, and we are all better writers and teachers because of this project. We hope you enjoy reading these poems as much as we enjoyed working together.

*Mara Cregan, CAPA
Jim Daniels, CMU
Kristin Kovacic, CAPA*
born in Baghdad, my father traded city life for tents at seventeen. forced from home his family waited in the courtyard of the synagogue like the sardines he’d not yet seen. sheets strung above did not protect him from the sun so when the ‘flying carpet’ came, delirium stole his last sight of gold stone dwellings melting away like an elusive thought. he disembarked in an unpromising land with no streets to echo his father’s violin. in Iraq, he broke open books not dirt, dug chicks not ditches. in Israel, he ran away to join the Army, lose his mother tongue and patronym.

ten years later, his uncle paid his way to America. each wave slapping the boat’s side eroded desert memories. his journey took three weeks instead of hours and started him on a longer one to lose another language gain a motherland. Manhattan spoke to him as Haifa never had. he worked in lingerie and air conditioning repair, met my mother married and had me.
i’ve always wished he’d taught me Arabic. i’m greedy for words like to fill them in when people pause. but as his slip away, i have only soup to offer, a hand to hold. i can tell he’s getting ready to travel once again. i want to say please, teach me the Arabic for ‘stay’
Shambles

Minute, silvery threaded cracks in the sidewalk
bite the heels of leather- horse boots
as they
clap-clap to the rumble of baby butterfly wings
who quiver to winter’s minty wind.

The cracks open up,
and the lava ruby suctions and champs until
the yellow bones of pinched elbows are a cramped brittle.

The snug breathing of her infant patterns into a
clatter-clatter
soon repeated greasily,
with a voice gashed by phlem-spittle.

The room is quiet in the face of
blue bombs, like green-apple candle smoke
fizzing
as little children drink soda for the first time
on Clover Street.

Soon little is to be said, the soda drops
and crumbles,
dyeing the crazed sidewalk a
smug green.
You are speaking with your fingertips into an aperture,
lean arms burnt, ventricles wired to flowering strings
of shaved-down air and flattening sparks: this is the bed

at eight a.m., nine a.m., your body remembering what the body is,
a torn-up experiment, anatomical fragments. Vomit afterwards
because the mouth must open darkly. With hospital curtain drawn,

I record your intake. It must be a pill, a precisely yellow pill,
a ghost-swallowed pill, a pill of acid rain to crush and drink
before bed, a fluorescent pill, five hundred pills suspended

in the esophagus, iron and ink, crushed along the jaw becoming wax,
a terrain, a tundra, an artful and elegant pill, a chord of pills in a tiny cup,
your brain smothered in antiseptic pills, take five, five hundred,

take without food, without help, without burnt white tea
vitamin water, without checking your weight, the pill wrapped
neatly in butcher paper, a very unfeeling and blood-stained pill.

You’re safer and closer, you’re safe, there’s nothing but corridors
of pills and gowns sewed up with pills and water and waiting
for a cloud to assemble, a pill that blooms and embalms,
floods the tongue with its weight.
Nearly eight years ago I see
rooms and rooms and rooms at midnight
empty of that little vase with a New Orleans rose
and of all the popsicle-stick picture frames
that might have been packed up in boxes until today—
and I assume we will sleep in the truck
because that's where the beds have gone but
now the truck has gone and with it
everything
everything has been worn away like
shoe rubber on the pavement,
and in the blackness of a room,
in the corner of a house that in memory seems to shift
and mix with all the other houses
I've ever been fastened to,
we three kids howl like kids
that are pretending to be wolves moving
through streams and over mountains
over and over announcing our place
in the family of things,
in the forest-y mysteries of a disappearing house—
“goodbye,” he says
“goodbye,” she says
“goodbye,” I say—
maybe we thought that tomorrow
we’d be wolves racing through hallways of trees
and window winds
and little pieces of starlight spilling underneath the cracks in the doors
but we didn’t think at all
and even now that far away house
cannot finish disappearing from my mind
My Ideal Reader

Matthew Reiser

She’d be a girl, of course,
a blonde, recklessly matted
let down by everyone,
seen almost everything
and been almost everywhere
and she’s wearing a GI Joe
shirt from seventh grade
(although its much later now),
and takes my book from the shelf

and I let her inside,

she sees inside me when she opens her eyes
and she opens my chest with the turn
of my page.

I can see into her clearly
with my penetrating gaze

and she curls up in her bed at night
my book in her soft hands for days.
In scripture, the good shepherd goes to find his lost sheep. He leaves the pasture, knowing that his other sheep will be safe. He passes through the dark forest, confident that he will return. Beyond the forest, he climbs volcanoes, ignoring the intense heat of lava flows. He swims through oceans, avoiding the whale that Jonah could not. He travels through deserts, where Satan’s temptations fail to assault the good shepherd’s will. He descends into valleys, littered with the bones of forgotten soldiers. But after searching the world, one volcano, one ocean, one desert, and one valley at a time, The good shepherd returns to his pasture to discover the sheep he is looking for, behind a tree just outside the pasture.

I am that sheep. I don’t mean to get lost or to worry the good shepherd.

I simply want to explore: I want to see what was beyond the pasture, what is beyond the dark forest. I want to breathe the sulfur air from a volcano and feel a salty breeze from the ocean. But I cannot make it past one tree: I know I might never see the pasture again.
Josie Griffith

Natural Shades

The ocean has forgotten how to wear blue.
The color of your eyes sink into never ending, falling blue.

I remember you from long ago; you used to wear a shade of light blue.
My skin has frozen from the cold, it has turned an inevitable shade of blue.

You say you love me and then dive into dark, black blue.
Something has stained you pale skin blue.

The midnight sky burns with blue.
And we are forever some other color besides blue.

I told you that I thought you were beautiful especially against the blue.
I think maybe I lied, your lips have turned a dull, average blue.

Suddenly the world is cracking open and bubbly blue
ink sinking into every place you forgot, invading blue.
I promised you something I forgot, something deep and alluring and blue.
Our forces run Ocean deep,
Even alexander the great was
A philosopher’s student.

From warriors, to farmers,
Politicians & monks, prophets
And Addicts – they are all
Amongst us.

When the time comes for battle
They raise their pens
  And the ink explodes
For weeks in meaning
  At the speed of thought;
And god said “let the word
  Turn to flesh.”

Poetic Army
Aaron Bernkopf
Life.
I wonder.
Will it take me under?
Imagine black diamonds and pearls.
Imagine I’d free all my sons.
Imagine I ruled the world.
Visions of summertime pleasures,
diamond-encrusted memories.
Escaped convicts of depression crave
for better living, the type of place to raise kids in.
Raw fantasies.
Soft nightmares.
Take my hand.
We’ll walk right up to the sun
and we won’t land.
Time is not measured by seconds
minutes, hours
days, months
or years.
The fruits of satisfaction.
Forever ripe.
Metal howls back at highway wind; a bus roof above shudders. Passengers rest swathed heads in nooks between glass and plastic seats.

Sky scrapes clean its plate above houses gathered into Appalachian collars. One white spire asks upward, rises from its sandstone seat.

Emma lost one earring in New York Port Authority, gilt tucked into seam of tile and wall. Some grime hand carried it through dawn on a faux velvet seat.

Vending machine shrine – Kit Kats and Twizzlers glow hallelujahs. Feed nickels into the slit to clasp cheap plastic, return to your seat.

Three days from Arizona, a mother cups baby to chest, asks a stranger for french fries. Rest stop tiled floor, this place is lost for softness, offers binge yellow smooth seats.

Pull onto the freeway, skeleton of Greyhound clattering. Money paid to spell distance to afternoon, don’t smell your seat.

Dealer from Erie folds long legs flung wide, tells about the Russian lady he found when a boy. In a patter of monotone, he relates her dangle from the porch beams, languid in his seat.

Grease hair swept by sleep, hunched forms shoulder bags, disappear into gray. I find my label, Emily, and feel my back retain the shape of my seat.
We share glances. I know what this man wants.
He stares at me as I turn in a manner so graceful,
peering at a kid beside me who sways
back and forth like a rocking chair centuries old
waiting to tip the wrong way and fall over.
I shoot a look at my plate, still fuller than my stomach.

She knows what she’s doing over there, eating like the queen she is.
She’s looking away pretending she can’t see me, but I know she can.
I can see right through her beautiful brown eyes that she needs my love.
It seems like she doesn’t want to eat for some reason.
I would love to see her eat more than what she is
just so I can watch her beautiful bright lips move in hypnotic motion.

My face shrivels, as he continues his stare, waiting, waiting for me to slip
just once and drop the chicken that has now sogged to grease dripping
from my lips.
I purposely stop eating, never satisfying the man desperate to see me
clench
as the dry potatoes slip from my mouth that doesn’t speak. He’s
desperate to have
conversation for later with his friends who will ask to hear the story
of the girl who for some reason couldn’t hold in her meal.
The kid next to me makes a face.
What I can’t forget about you, remains with me, for I relive it always, everyday I remember more, the pieces are put together, and I wonder how I could have let the light turn off so quickly. Without even a warning it was over, I hung around too long.

One day I’ll learn not to care, I’ll know what I did wrong. One day I’ll talk about this with a wise grin and not these gloomy eyes, that tell the story far before I open my crooked and bitter mouth. Who would want a tale with no happy ending?

An unexpected beginning and an unclear middle? I’m stuck between these each day, yet I persevere. The sky is blue like us, but the sky isn’t sad. It ignores its own colors as we look up at it, “The sky looks so beautiful today.” It, too, feels the brush of sadness at times.

They say time is the best therapy; sadly, I left treatment early. Regardless, I can rely on myself, and I do.
She flips the mattress
turning over and over
sticky soda-pop stains
that leave pink ringlets
like mease marks,
trying to decide
which side is worse.

The tenant left like
he was evacuating
the city, taking only what was
necessary, leaving behind
bottle caps, a box of old CDs,
molding cheese in the back of
the fridge, a stack of postcards.

Cologne lingers in the carpet
and stale smoke from cooking
meat hangs in the stagnant air.
She peels posters off the walls,
strips the house naked.
Scrubs every inch of soap

scum and burnt grease off
marble surfaces and porcelain
sinks, dirt left like a fingerprint,
her cleaning a patient ritual.
The tenant left in such a hurry,
but she takes her time.
Standing and waiting, 
what was she supposed to do? 
There was a toilet, 
she did have to go, 
the dripping water from the sink 
wasn’t helping either. 
The green walls freaked her out, 
made monsters in her mind, 
and the water in the toilet bowl? 
What was it for? 
To clean afterwards? 
No, that didn’t make sense. 
And what about the knobs 
on the sink and toilet? 
Was she supposed to push them? 
She thought back to how she got to 2010 
from her home in 2114. 
Nothing was the same, 
her eyes filled and wet, 
her body drained of the need to pee. 
She sits on the toilet lid now, 
head in hands. 
The green paint makes it cold 
and the scent of orange 
reminds her of the orange tablet she ate for snacks. 
No one knew of the tablets here. 
For the taste of an orange she’d have to peel one 
herself. 
She hated the feeling of 
being in the bathroom, 
alone.
something in here is clicking
and scraping
and shearing off teeth
squealing like a stuck pig
on a cracked axle
now I know I’m insane
wide-eyed
muscle-spasms
rocking-back-and-forth crazy
the clicking gets louder
I feel it in my jaw
the ache
the stretch
letting it out
would be more intimate
than I ever want to be
especially with myself
so I flash a dog’s toothy grin
and feel like sinking my incisors
into the next thing that walks by
just to see how much it takes
to break the skin
but my mouth snaps shut
to the rhythm of the rattle and growl
of metal on metal on bone on flesh
and covers my fingers
with half-moon scars
when the street
is empty
When she was four, she went to parties. With her poofy dress, with the frills, ribbons, and tights. She would play games with all the other kids and show off that outfit to all the parents she could. But then, she got to the age of ten and she got too old for “that type of party,” the kind of party that was mostly about making her parents look good. Now, it was time for Romp N’ Roll, flirting and giggling. She was like a mixture of that little girl she was at the age of four, an adult, and a chipmunk. She played games, brand new ones. Ones that were better for her age. A minimal amount of innocence was gone. Then, you turn fourteen and she was “grown.” She and her friends were batting their eyes, waiting for a group of boys to come over and tickle them. She eventually found herself in a scene of “Not Another Teen Movie.” She didn’t always get to choose what she became. Although things changed, it was always a fashion show for her to put herself on display and let others evaluate, the way they did when she turned twenty.
and she believed she was on top
of the world, but she was
actually on the ground
going ready to regret the whole night
behind her.
Daniel Lipson

Peer Editor

I wish your red pen could mark up my life
the way your friendship would
you've read enough of my writing for one lifetime,
You know I've read a lot of yours
I made a mistake, you know I did
I make a lot of mistakes
You know I always have.
I curl up in corners, seeking comfort and attention
I keep a clean history and a filthy mind
I run blindly into walls and wear chapped lips
I shatter like glass at your steel presence
I let my showers run long and my teeth go rotten
I sink through the unpublished novella you helped me write
I become a captive of your carefully chosen words
I don't tell them
I pushed you
Will Marchl

Earth Angel

And there I am alone on that wicker chair,
thinking about who invented wicker,
and what they were trying to accomplish by creating
furniture that pinches you when you first sit down,
and then there’s you,
and you smile,
and I wonder how I’ll write you that poem.
So I start to pace around the room past the picture of me and my dad,
the one where he’s dressed as the Easter Bunny and I’m
peeing my pants and I look at the tears on my chubby
baby cheeks, toddler cheeks, it doesn’t matter. So I stretch out my
bones ‘til I
hear a pop, but now it’s silent, and my notebook is at the bottom of
my bag with the pen that was like the one my dad would use,
so I take it out and draw a picture because the ink looks good on paper,
and I chew all the skin off my bottom lip so I can feel the sting,
and I want you to feel it too,
so I put on THAT song,
and I look up prices for turntables,
and then I see that painting of the,
fat man in an overcoat and his mutton chopped
head, next to the cup shaped like Winston Churchill and the bottle of
Clubman’s,
next to the mirror, and my own scraggly rat stache,
and I see him with you, or maybe I see nothing at all,
but it doesn’t matter because I look in the mirror and all I see is a
razor bump.
Then I see you and me,
but we’re not talking,
and you tuck your hair behind your ear,
and I try to check if I’m wearing deodorant while you’re not looking,
and go to say something witty,
but then I hear THAT song,
and I start to choke on my tongue,
so you shove a wallet in my mouth and call for help,
and I see that wicker chair and I see it pinch me
but I can't feel it
and I see you dressed in your ceremonial attire,
and I'm locked in that giant wicker-man,
with your wallet lodged between my teeth,
hollering,
“Ooo baby, let me be your pagan sacrifice.”
And I'm on fire but I don't shout for help.
So I'm back on the floor,
and the paramedics arrive,
but it's too late and I can't see,
but I think you're crying,
and through my gagging and suffocating,
I spit out my last words,
it was bound to happen.
She was a bleeder; 
ethe kind with a red pen and a penance 
for its and theirs. She left bodies 
scattered over coffee tables 
littering her kitchen counter, spilling 
onto her stove top and interrupting the silence 
like screwdrivers against chalk boards. 
Her clothes were battered, riddled with 
holes like a victim of target practice— 
she believed in manual labor to punish punctuation. 

Driving her pick up, she made a lesson 
plan in her mind, comprised of art lessons— 
it’s hard to miswrite with paints made for 
waterfalls. She would teach the importance 
of good housekeeping, the kind with well 
made signage, complete with consequences. 
Spell out your policies before you commit, 
written in red, sat above her orchid named Cheryl. 

Her students learned to apologize 
for excessive punctuation, prepared 
for a marinade of rank acorns and 
wet chickens. Shovels in hand, 
they led a crusade on dirt 
and misfortune, slinging mud 
behind them like piles of semicolons. 
Fearing the fate of their 
good faith, bound to her tirade 
on the importance of syntax, 
they left their own hope between 
the lines. Running, they cried 
for comfort like ice cream, 
praying for lenience, hoping 
for mercy.

Grams

Clare McKendry
My class takes a school trip
to Washington, D.C.
Mrs. Christopherson-Clark pulls me into
the Library, tells me
we can watch anime later
if I just focus, just try

Gold walls and half-naked women
She hands me a pencil and paper
“Write,” she says “write what you see”
Lines between tiles, 3 staircases

The paper is snatched from me
and she erases that first line
with a dead eraser
that hurts
The sound of it screams in my ears
I cover

“This is an exercise,” she says
“to find a bigger picture”
But how can I tell her, lines
interest me more? Instead of admitting
(I have no concept of it)
Dar Williams plays on my Ipod
Bliss

Dad says it’s important
to make eye contact,
but it physically pains me.
Clouds, blue angels, circle plate
I want to watch anime,
eat wasabi covered peanuts,
put my feet on the back of chairs,
st-st-stutter, without trying so hard.

I smell my classmates’ sweat
Time to go home
When I think of my father’s mistress I remember trains—No. I remember one train that rumbles endlessly across backdrops painted with trembling fingers on a fingers shuddering along the window groove with this great forward gasp. My mother sleeps on the chair beside me, one of many that crowd and chain-link like fish her head on a ball of fleece and loose hairs that tremor alike with each whisper capable beast.

We had listened for hours to luggage carts, plastic wheels whisking over marble of coffee cups in litter tins, the cosmic disturbance of a napkin falling to floor, 

I hate traveling she’d said Well

I hate this part, the rush and wait, the catch and release. I had shut my eyes then, sucked donut glaze from the valleys of my fingerprints, a cold horizon—

No. A smudge on the racing window that fits my temple, my glass-burned cheek
yellow canvas—frayed as the skeleton of a tree, a leaf—my own

scales or serpent skin, rests
of her damp breath and lurch of this solid,

and the coughing, paper-folding, the impermanence
startling the split-flap board into flight like sparrows from a telephone wire.

breathed out. I want a desert—no, an ocean—no,
My ghost comes in sequences,
haunting in changing flows.
Her goblin-thin hands patter over the chalk board and she whispers of linguistics of the sleeping mind, a weary owl at rest.

She speaks a thousand different languages
and stays, wide awake among my heart-strings.
She collects ivory and beeswax and paints murals of river boats.

She navigates unknown rivers
and builds villages upon sapphire seas.
I’ve never seen my ghost because she works beneath my wing.

Others waft below street lights
and tend to fly around the world.
One day they’ll open up a newspaper to find their bodies have fallen away.

The bodies have gone to build a steam engine
and chug away, through cloudy streams.
They’ll feed their ghosts pennies and prophesies
to ease their brittle minds.

For now every ghost is wrapped up in our ceiling fans,
cooing chants in ancient tongues.
We’d ask that they stop with their waves of bone-riddling chills,
but they have clearly stated this position.
Photographs came out of people appear orange, mango, greens and seem more than life. Irrational? People overlook abundance for less. The easy devotion to the soul, the body, the cosmos, the universe. They are not understandable but all ignore this. Prohibit and avoid change. The evolution to royal slaughter, taboo on consumption of text. Status- religiously restricted. Unity of all life? Justify restriction, no change occurred. The important event that helped to shape modern complex: slaughter of function.
Beautiful House

Next time, I’m going to fall in love
with a country. I’ll pass notes to India:
do you like me like I like you?
Ireland will buy me
a vegan milkshake; Canada
will bring me gas station
carnations; Israel will give
me matzo ball soup; Sealand will send
a t-shirt, make me a baroness; America will sing
under my window every night for a month.

In the end I will love
an imaginary country, a white spot
on the map. No history.
The national bird a magpie.
The anthem a cacophony
of wind chimes.

My country and I will live
in the most beautiful house in the world,
on a highway next to a Wendy’s
between Pennsylvania and New Jersey.
I have not seen every house in the world
but I know it is the most beautiful:
flaking white paint, a blue door,
leggy rose bushes, a mulberry tree.
Never mind the beer cans, the needles.
My country and I will have a three-legged
cat, a pit bull with scars on its neck,
a lending library, a rope swing.
We will get up early in the morning
to drink coffee and listen
to the traffic thrumming
like the ocean.
I don’t like it is an expression manufactured in the mouth; a hinge connected to the brain by a thread like a loose tooth.

The painting can be argued over and controversial points will be accounted for but only galleries possess the credentials to say what goes up and what goes down the basement, only to be moth-eaten from the dew and mold that freezes in the ears of three men in scarves: It’s cliché, ironic, surrealist, groundbreaking defying! (but it all adds to zero.)

If I were a judge I would zipper mouths and throw away the keys like a charade and paint oranges breathing tendrils of white and call it “The Bread of Death” to frustrate them and views would vaporize under tongues, solar systems combusting.

The World was born a simple place: the blades of grass were minted sugar, the deer were molded out of velvet and grace, and hands were sacks filled with desert sand. All water was cool as God’s breath.

I wish they would rinse their brains so that I might touch Michelangelo’s David with my hands.
Jasper Wang

Moon Boy

His grandmother once told him stories about
a prince with a heart that
glittered
like lantern-light
And oh, child
that prince could do anything.

And so as he grew up he believed
it was he
and when he was six
he sat in her dark
curling room and listened to her voice
stretching and cracking like a balloon,
and watched the moon
and carved it out of the sky
because he believed he could.
He broke it in his hands
and ate it, and it shone
in his eyes
and his heart
like lantern-light.

And when he turned sixteen
the wolf came for him with her tangled hair and
glistening eyes, bright mint hoops
around green pupils,
and he didn’t remember the words she tricked him with,
just her hair, long spirals tumbling around her shoulders
and she breathed dark and wet
into his ear
and they sat together on the creaking wood of the pier.
Didn’t he wonder
about the folk tale of the wolf
who disguised herself as a lamb
and pulled a pretty face
for the shepherd boy?

But no,
no, he didn’t see it then,
only her eyes a large and jealous green,
so when the sun disappeared behind her cheek
he didn’t question it
leaning forward that evening
the longest evening of his life, when he kissed her
and she drank the moon from his throat
her eyes black as night
and then he saw the wolf,
slick and beautiful
who’d tricked the light from him
and turned with wet paws to leave him
cold and lifeless on the pier.
He told this horrible story and
the more he told the more horrible
it got. We were captivated,
curious, and thirsty for gore
until the little girl met the pit-bull.
The details were cradled like marbles
beneath his tongue; the cadence of his voice
crashing down on the instant day.
It was sunny outside, bookstores
were closing, and heads swayed in the heat.
Ink daydreams propagated like flies
on flesh and crawled across paper.
Ceiling fans lapped at the air, their shadows
ebbing like pools on a polished surface.
When he finished, time was crowned sovereign
and we laughed for comfort.

It felt empty. It was spring;
no one was really being persecuted.
We could hear the month slowly killing us,
its fangs a dull pressure on our throats;
everything dripping with acceptance
as the afternoon rotted.
And suddenly, I noticed that the room
felt too small. I got up, cracked all
the windows, and spent a breath
barking at the moon.
I’ve been pretending to run
up this mountain now
for 2 years. Fake it, cheat it,
Bop It!—Eventually that guy’s
going to have to open his
eyes and get with the program.

Some doors need a good push
and others smack you in the jaw.

Remember when we would watch
Independence Day? Must go faster!
Kick out the stool and
watch his glasses hit the ice.

Don’t leave now. I only just got here.
Some doors need a punch in the face
and some open like a book.

The Kinks said everybody’s a dreamer
and everybody’s a star. I only just noticed
that when the stars are out
I’m the only one dreaming.
Loving you is easy because of the latest fashions; Charm. Deceit. Humor. Lies. Sensitive. Emotionless... Nobody wears them better than you. Nothing’s better than laying my head on your chest, covered with a sweater of carelessness that comforts me every time you decide to show up. Tonight is every night, when I lie awake on our tainted bed sheets that keep me warm, even when your fire cold hands aren’t there to paralyze my conscience of everything besides the naïve. Every morning there’s a new smell on your neck when I embrace your ego. You caress me and I feel your skin burning with nothing less than artificial, I-just-do-this-in-my-spare-time love. Nothing has ever felt more sincere.
jiggling the key to our apartment door,
in swirls of snow that left my fingers stiff.
I struggled to set silver grooves and slip
inside to climb the stairs where I could fall
asleep alone, within the silent warm
embrace of my now empty double bed.

So when you came downstairs with all the force
of gravity and lateness at your back
I didn’t stand a chance, as the distracted
strength of your shoulder left me to bleed
while your momentum carried you away.

And later while I washed out blood beneath the cold water
you struck me again, with the strength of your metaphor.
Shanquae Parker

To: You
From: Me

You lied and said you’d be back but never came.  
You forgot where you came from cause that’s the only thing that stayed true about you.  
You acted like you didn’t know me, every time they came by to see you.  
Why did you offer them sandwiches and fruit punch and leave me in the room by myself?  
You said those sad things to me, and you used those bad words with them.  
How could you forget my name?  
I didn’t want his name dripping off the tip of your tongue like lemonade. It just made me sour, you know.  
You traded in our friendship bracelet for that diamond one on your wrist.  
You tried to teach me how to ride that two-wheeler, but why did your let me go so early?  
You left the park while I lay in the grass crying with that big boo boo on my knee.  
You rode the PAT bus with me but didn’t sit next to me. That would’ve never happened on the big yellow bus.  
You forgot to poke air holes in the top of the jar you kept me in. I just flew around glowing like a firefly, hoping that one day you would see my light again.  
But, no, you choked on smoke and breathed in life.  
You grow fat on lies instead of mama’s homemade cupcakes with the chocolate icing.  
You didn’t say bye in the mall, you just walked into Victoria’s Secret, while I looked around for you still in the arcade.  
Shanquae, you left me in the past being the one to end our childhood.  
Shanquae, I miss the pixie sticks, the powdered color sugar that once covered our lips, the childhood rhyme time, willy wonka fun dip.  
Shanquae, I miss our friendship.
Disease becomes this family
like an inheritance.
Nobody truly belongs—
my brother was not my brother—
until the day he found his body
was broken in some small way
until a cure was needed
and yearned for, until we
commiserated together, his healthful blood
was not our own.

When I was five, my mother taught me
how to point two fingers
to shoot down the evil eye.
The white veil of hospital beds
and plane crash dreams were foiled
by my own hands, each day under my desk
twisted like a sign language G, or like baby Jesus
in my mother’s painting, hushing the world
with an empty palm.

We love little cures. We lay white cloth
in the backyard to catch moonlight
and cover our faces.
In the morning, look – we have grown
old overnight, and we can forget
any face we want.

We rub oil on our aches, eat breadcrumbs
so we won’t starve when we’re ancient.
My mother sleeps on cut roses and blessed
coins taken from Egypt’s earth.
When she touched my finger to a bruise, I smelled
silver and crushed petals.
“All good medicine
leaves a mark.”
To forget her husband, my grandmother swallowed eggs.
My brother and I pressed our ears
to her nightdress to listen
for the fall
a crack, and the sound
of doctoral wings beating
carrying
a memory away.
what we used to have was beautiful.
time pushed us to dream up crazy dreams. i want to dream up crazy dreams!
why can’t we dream up crazy dreams?
what happened to your dark mouth, with pink lines? voicing your opinions freely. speaking out of turn.
i miss you,
but you've changed, so i can’t really miss you.

i guess not all things have a silver lining.

please stop hassling me to do things differently. why do things differently?
i liked playing pretend. i liked believing in us.
where is us? we left too soon.
i’m begging you to stop using so much heavy make-up. i can’t find you under there.
what happened to our yellow flip-flops that never fit? what happened to our children’s books?
why don’t we sleep face to face anymore? your hushed snores used to put me to sleep.
i don’t like sleeping facing the wall. turn me over!
i’m going to burn in the heat of my own frustration.

let’s just call it even? sit on different shores and play with empty seashells shaped like hearts?
i can’t ever find seashells shaped like hearts! i want you on my shore!
i promise to let you pick first! i promise not to be so pushy! i promise to stop yelling!

i’m yelling aren’t i?
please.
don’t leave me like this. naked under cotton, with my bruised arms exposed.
cover me up. do something!
i’m sorry. i promised.

i’m breathing now. no yelling. let’s just talk. can we talk?
how about we just start all over. begin again?
because honestly,
what we used to have was beautiful.