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Abstract

This manuscript—*the way of things*—is a collection of poems that, regardless of subject matter, consistently gravitates towards an exploration of the poetics of space. In this regard, it bears a relation to the theoretical work done by Gaston Bachelard, but it also stands in relation to tradition in 20th Century poetry which deals with objects (usually of the most ordinary sort), the relation of human beings to such objects and the way such objects cast into relief certain aspects of the human condition. Whether the poems touch on a love affair, whether they describe a still life or whether they explore a metaphysical longing, their poetics is drawn from their attempt to define a space and its presence on human lives. Thus, *the way of things* takes its place in a long lineage of conceptual poetry and is an attempt to add to that lineage. And although the poems might appear to be primarily conceptual, this only reveals the extent to which concepts themselves can have deeply emotional and indeed lyrical implications.

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the way of things

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Compulsory Declaration:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

In poetry, not-knowing is a primal condition.

-Gaston Bachelard, 1958, *The Poetics of Space*

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How Things Are

Lift the bowl
from the bottom shelf
and hold it

in both hands. Cup
the bowl. Let your palms
feel its weight. Wonder

what has been held
inside it, what it knows
about liquids, solids, creamy

or old. Listen:
your skin soft
against its curved edge. And you remember

your grandmother's table,
a just-ironed piece of linen over its surface.
You place your palms flat,

feel the warmth, touch
your grandmother, learn
something about her hands,

the way they work. And
this is how things are. The touch
and the years

and the wanting
something. You didn't know then
what you know now

and you don't know now
what you knew then. And this too

is how things are.

What Gathers Slowly

If this city has become
any other city and your life is
any other life,

maps and clocks are not to blame.

There is a rhythm that builds
from the familiar,
gathers itself slowly
as measured time
held in a locket.

(In a whisper):
Do not hold what is precious.

I am telling you this
because all things
will return to sand.

This is why I trust glass blowers:
they know about the breaking.

And that day,
the one that made you feel
like nothing else mattered, the one
that made you say *everything*
is alright now, that day,

even that day is gone.

(Remember): The familiar
gathers itself slowly
and then you are there, in a life edged
by dinner time, a garbage truck
and the neighbor
who walks her dog.

And this is why infinity matters:

So I can find layers inside
the details; lifetimes

I will never hold.

Leaving

When she needs to leave,
she goes.

Not like the wind
or anything like that.
More like an unraveling
of thread on a tweed coat,
slowly over time
almost unnoticed.

Even she does not notice
when she goes, only realizes
when she finds herself
someplace else. When her feet
touch a ground unfamiliar,
when the air becomes oblique
against her breath.

Only then does she sit on a chair
or a bench to unwind
the path of her leaving,
to discover when
she must have felt the edge
that let her drift away.

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Thinking About Edges

An edge allows you to point and say:
Here it is. This is where it begins.
This is where it ends—

the place where something else
happens. An edge of a wall. The edge
of your arm. Edge of sky meets
an edge of sea. This edge of sea
forms an edge of shore that changes
and is not steady as an edge of a table.

An edge of shore sinks down to the bottom
of what some people have given a name
such as Arctic Ocean or Mediterranean.
And there are edges here too.

I have been to the point where the Indian Ocean
meets the Atlantic but I couldn't see the edge.
Couldn't touch it like the edge of my door
as I leave my home or the edge of a page
when I hold my book.

Maybe the currents of the sea
with their changes in temperature and direction
perform a sensory separation of place,
some felt definition between two things.
And perhaps this is similar
to what I feel now

inside this movement of lines
pulling into me and out again—
this stir into emptiness
that drifts between your eyes
and the story I will tell.

8:13

A napkin folded with precision
and left on a table. The door
unlocked. Two glasses
with last night's Shiraz etched
upon their lips. Music still plays.
A butterfly floats outside

and a day has begun.
There is sun.
Mail is being delivered.
People are buying milk.

Inside there is only
that music. It might
be skipping; a piece
of a track echoing
itself in circles. Maybe

not. She only hears her skin.

A pair of shoes is not in the closet.
A vase of daisies nests on a dresser.
There are some spots
on the bedroom window
that can only be seen
with this particular slant
of morning. She

can feel her toes. A dog
barks. That flutter might
be one of wings
in scattered flight.
She smells rosemary
and lemon. Or maybe

that is memory. A soft pillow.
A hooting car or the phone might
be ringing. Her chest rises
and falls. There is something slow
or maybe heavy. Ten fingers. And
a cat. There is laundry to do.

In the Silence

Only the sound
of pages turning,
my pen
and our breath—

the way we are.

I know how to be with you
because you know how
to be inside silence.

I knew this about you
when you kissed me that first time.

But this isn't a poem about kisses
or knowing when.

This is about the silence:

nothing is taken,
there's no urgency—
we are lifted
from what can be held
or broken.

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What's Between

I love to be inside the in-between:

after I wake, but before
the remembering;

the surface of a cup about to rest
in its saucer;

before you say what you will say,
but after you begin to form the words.

I know how to hold these things;

I pause the scene,
suspend the frame,
let the tendrils of what's there
work their way into me.

Clouds soon to spill over
an edge of mountain;

a beetle and the shadow
it soon may pass;

that piece of light
angled to touch her arm.

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Getting On

I have unraveled you from my dreams
and taken up knitting.

Tomorrow I will buy a red truck
and drive north, following the line of sea.

It doesn't matter, you know.
I will still have to pee, eat, sleep.

The body keeps living
even if it's not on the calendar.

There are no books that help
with these things, only the ones
that piss you off
because they categorize pain
or the ones that take you far away
from where you need to be.

You can step over a shadow,
but you can't cut it away
unless you're in a Murakami novel.

Maybe if I drive far enough away
my life will become a choice.

And I will sit next to the sea
and learn to fish.

I will grow lemon trees,
knit scarves for my friends.

I will collect bees
who don't make honey.

Lost

I feel an edge of something
not quite smooth.

It does not end.
I can't tell of what

it is the edge.
My fingers trace it

although I can't see
anything. There are

no corners,
but it does not travel straight.

I imagine a hole
on the other side. More

than a void: a tug
between heavy and what floats.

I have lost
something I never had.

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From a Distance

Shattered glass,
a cluster of trees,
piles of stone:

the way they look soft from a distance.

I think about this,
how things change
when we get too close.

I sit on the top of the mountain
to follow the line of sea with my eyes.
I need to believe I am held
inside its frame.

What if falling apart
doesn't lead to pieces?

The way something unravels
but doesn't go away;

the way a new moon
is still there;

how hands and heat form sand
into shapes of glass.

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The Way Layers Work

From the inside

petals loosen their place,
rainbows erase their circles,
whispers angle hard.

I heard that happen once—

the slant of his voice inside my ear
made me throw stones heavy
with yesterday's angst
and no moon.

I have to try hard to be sad;
it doesn't come easy.
It must be there somewhere.

My sister and I
used to suck jawbreakers for hours,
taking them out of our mouths to watch
the changing colors all the way to the center.

My mother prefers perennials
because they tell stories inside the soil,

the way layers work.

Sometimes I try to imagine sand back
to its shape. My mind pulls the pieces together,
a floating, but with suction—

moth wings from a distance.

My skin cannot release those years we had:
when we wrote together, played cards all night,
traced each other as memory,
glimpsed each other old.

And maybe
this is why I tell the happy stories.
Because you left me

and I don't know how to say that.

To the End

It is you again
who comes to my mind
in the first piece of morning.

Stones—
to my breath. My breath
to the wind.

This is how it is for me now:
those times folded away,
placed carefully into yesterday.

That wind
to my bones. My bones
to the end.

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In Empty Space

I

She leaves her flat to walk,
to remember what she once knew
before he left
and she re-arranged her furniture
and bought a fish.
She thinks about her fish (she named him Fred)
as she walks. How he lives in water
but doesn't know it's there. How he swims
in small circles and wants nothing.

II

He keeps his secrets in a pocket.
Takes them out
every so often
to hold in his hand,
arrange them as cards
in a game of poker.
Looks at them
one at a time
from top to bottom
before he selects which one
to play, which one to place
in the middle of a table.

III

He begins his walk as usual,
around his block before turning left
onto Castle and following it
up the mountain
pausing only to record
(in the spiral notebook he keeps
in his left shirt pocket) the location
of feathers he sees on the street
and the occasional fragment
of sun caught
by a silver wrapper.

IV

She selects burnt orange
from the swatches displayed
on the antique tile counter
at which she stands on tip-toe
in order to meet the eyes
of the man
who has set out
this rainbow assortment of cloth
waiting for its place
to call home: around pillows,
on headboards of wood, over
cushions, against walls.

V

She leaves her brick house
with manicured lawn at half-five
each morning to run
with an urgency of being chased;
no one has ever chased her, but
in her loosening mind she sees bees,
packs of wild dogs, a choir of men
carrying scrolls and sometimes shadow.
When she returns home
she writes her lists.

VI

A wooden plank rests
against a brick wall. They sit
on it as if it is a perfect bench.
She peels an orange in one spiral of rind.
Hands the flesh to him. He removes
a section and places it in her palm. Then
takes a piece for himself. This
is the way of things.

Defining Distance

The distance between two points
depends upon the location

of the points: how close
together they are, if either moves

farther away from the other,
if something pushes one

in a particular direction. But
there will always be a distance

between two points; otherwise
there would only be one point.

And with one point,
there could be no segment of line,

no section of what goes on
forever, nothing which allows the mind

to travel back and forth between
dreams or glances, disappointment

or the touching of hands. Because
it is (in fact) this space between

two points—what waxes
and wanes as the moon—

that defines each point
where it is

for however long it stays
in a piece of time

that is both eternity
and shadow.

What Empty Is

It is not full of longing
or inside something else.

It cannot be held,
but it is not without measure.

It isn't something to see:
*That chair is empty or pass
a blank sheet of paper.* No.

It is an absence
beyond what feels alone.

A silence outside
of no sound.

Bones might tell
of distant dreams. But
you can't know this.

You may love me
in one thousand years
but I can't hold you now.

This is as close
as I can get.

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Echoes

It's not that I'm intrigued by darkness.
It's more that I'm in awe

of how they know their world.
Chiroptera, hand to wing—

the only mammals capable of sustained flight.
They are twenty percent of us.

And they know where they are
because they say things

and watch the echoes.
The sky is an echo of itself.

You taught me this one night. When I was dreamy-eyed
and you pulled me back.

Everything we see is already gone. This is what you said
and I held on.

The next day I looked it up: The moon
is just over a second old. The sun,

eight minutes old. Most stars are so far gone
my mind can't grasp the time.

If time is an equation inside distance,
I wonder how far away you are.

Bats know where they are because they feel the distance
on the surface of their wings—

little bumps with tiny hairs let them coast the air,
skim the surface of water for a single drop.

They have an immediate life: send out sound,
read it, go that far—

again and again inside a framed space.
I don't have a frame that holds me:

what I know is already gone.
And this is how it is for us too,

you and me: there's nothing we don't already know
and nothing that isn't already gone.

It doesn't matter that we can imagine

the collapse of time because there's nothing here

for me to hold.

So it's no wonder that I need something from the bats.

They know, too, the depth of sky,
but they know more than this; they know

how to find something inside the distance,
how to turn an echo of what's already gone

into something to hold right now.

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Ways to End

That was it.
She swore she would never think of it again.
Nothing now but the sound of crickets.

It was the very last time it happened.
The call, the boat, that day.
Even the pigs wanted to leave.

She put the dishes on the shelf and walked away.
Inside that room, he stood the way he did.
The only thing left was a small bowl of salt on the stove.

And the rain fell.
She slept alone that night.
Neither the birds nor the moon had a clue.

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Lovely Meeting You

He speaks in round, full sentences
with a politeness she finds unfamiliar.
She trusts him because his eyes are soft:
so she stays, standing next to him at this party.

She can't tell if he finds her interesting
or only passingly amusing. But she likes this time
suspended in its awkwardness.

She stops her mind from writing the scene;
concentrates instead on the way he stands
perfectly still while he talks—a calm island
inside the room's din of glasses and laughter.

She has a hard time with small talk;
her questions are either too odd or too big,
but he laughs when she asks him his favorite color.
This comforts her and the moment continues.

They talk of the mountain, the butterfly effect
and something about his dog. There are a few smiles
and one slight brush of his hand on her arm.

She says: it was lovely meeting you
and he winds another long, soft sentence
that she carries with her for the rest of the night.

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How Many Times

Since their first date she planned to write a book about him when he left her. She was not a pessimist; she didn't even have a dark side, at least not like the characters in her books.

She liked him for his details: how he folded his socks and placed them in alternating colors in the second drawer, how he only took baths on Wednesdays, how he ate creamed corn from the can with a sugar spoon.

It wasn't that she didn't love him. She thought she did. But on most days she found herself observing him as field research. She kept records of what tune he hummed in the mornings, how many pieces he sliced from a single carrot, when he went out for the mail.

He often told her he had never met anyone so calm, so accepting of who he was. She kept a tally of how many times he said this.

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Oblique

They sit at an oak table rough around its curved edge. She asks him what he's thinking. He mentions an egg and his lost red sock. There is silence of the kind that stretches taut. He butters a piece of rye bread. Hands it to her and asks her what she's thinking. She licks butter from her lip and offers a few details from her day: the little girl with a cut finger, forgetting to feed the dog, wanting more time to paint. She hands the bitten bread back to him. Tells him a small bird flew into their window earlier. It didn't die, but was dazed. He nods. Bends down to tie his brown shoelace and pauses to notice a small bruise on her left ankle. He pushes it like a button with his middle finger. She pulls her hair behind an ear and tells him about the mushrooms she got for dinner: baby portobellos. He rises from his chair to take the leg of lamb from the refrigerator. She says something about rosemary. He presses play: *A Case of You* and sits again. She pulls out one of the long hairs that now grow from his eyebrows. He asks if she wants wine or gin. She gets up to open the metal cupboard and removes the goblets her sister gave her. He takes the one with the slight crack on its base. She tells him lemons are expensive again. He removes his watch from his right wrist. Uncorks the '97 Cabernet and pours her a glass first. They clink and say what they always say when they toast. He gets up to make a phone call. She looks to the sky and notices the moon is a faint sliver. He hands her a pen and she draws a crescent on her left thumb. Later he will notice. He puts down the phone and ties on his apron. She refills the peppermill while he chops onions. Soon two tears will fall to his cheek and she will wipe them with her smallest finger.

Antique Holdings

They sit side by side on the pastel blue couch he bought
at the antique shop on the corner that summer
of 2002. He said it was just what they needed.
And you can't find upholstery work like that anymore.
No one cares about details; now
it's all about mass production.

She watches his hand stroke the fabric
on the cushion, move his finger
around one of the brass tacks holding the cloth
tight around its curved arm. She lights a cigarette.
Reclines to stretch her legs over his. She wonders
how long he will stay this time. What his story will be.

He only speaks of the moon today. And Miles Davis.
He has rediscovered him—wants to play his records
all day and night. She listens. Wonders
when his tone will change. When she least
expects it.

But what if this time they sit all night
on this blue couch the color of the room
they painted that same summer.
What if this time he holds her the way
he did then. Before. When his arms
could still wrap around their problems, hold her ache.

Perhaps such things can be solved on a couch.
Perhaps an old couch in a brick room
on a summer evening six years later
is the only way to release what pulls taut, tugs
around, holds down something—
fabric against cushion and wood.

From What I Know About Spiders

At the time I believed it. That it was a meant-to-be kind of love. And I'm not writing about the love part. I am wondering about the believing. I can't tell when to make up stories or when to reject all meaning. It doesn't seem to matter either way.

Spiders don't think about what things mean. They just keep spinning webs. Yesterday I went to the forest to watch the tree tops mingle with the sky. I saw a giant web extended between two of the tallest trees. There was a black object in the center. When the clouds came by, I could only see the object. When they drifted on, I could see the web again. I let time pass in this way for hours until my mind spun itself back to the ground.

I want to know something about the spider who made that web. Is that her most perfect one? Does she want to live in it forever? Would she have any sense of loss if she came home to find it washed away? From what I know about spiders, I am guessing she wouldn't. She would recognize her web was gone and, out of something close to habit, she'd spin another.

I wonder what that something-close-to-habit feels like. Maybe it's like how we find our balance inside a place of gravity, how we know when we fall and then we get up. I don't think making meaning is like this, but maybe I can imagine it this way. Maybe if I made meanings like a spider spins webs it wouldn't hurt so much when I lose them. I could come home to find everything I know washed away and all I would have to do is tell another story.

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To the Point

There is no map to show us a line
like where the sky meets the sea
or where the paved road turns to gravel.

We spin our own story
and I am done pretending.

Kettle water burned my hand;
the pain makes me forget
my bruises from that night
we played rough on the wooden floor.
After you said you wanted to wrestle.
But that wasn't it.

I can't sip tea and write these things.
Even the fish laugh at me. (I can hear them.)

Someone once told me
I live in a romance movie. But

popcorn doesn't float once you eat it.
This whole thing aches of yesterday's news.

I want to know something else.

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A Little Something

I will calculate for you
any angle on which
to walk, any space empty
or full. I will calculate
what you have left
and that for which you long.

I will measure patterns
you cannot see
and find points
where before
there were none.
I will line you up
and turn you apart.

I will do it all for you.

I will rotate your figures,
reveal your missing rules.
I will even list the uncountable
inside your time
and fold it all
into a succinct triangular
prism for your pocket.

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Whimsy With Dirty Birds

Today I tried to hate a pigeon. I scowled at it. I called it a name: *ugly, useless, flying rat*. I let my mind imagine it knocked out by a piece of falling concrete at the construction site where it was perched. When it moved its neck like it was doing a little dance, I didn't find it cute. When the morning sun lifted shimmers of lilac and honey from its feathers, I rejected any bit of beauty. When it made that sound pigeons make, I was disgusted at the lack of tone quality, bored by the obvious beat. I did not wonder what it was thinking or daydream about where it might go next. I was working hard to hate that pigeon. *I hate you, I hate you, you silly bird*. I muttered this out loud and people around me thought I was fierce. When the pigeon cocked its head and rotated an eye towards me, I did not fall for its charm. I met that crafty eye with a grimace. I was a hater. No longer will I engage in whimsy with dirty birds. And when that god-damned pigeon finally flew away, I did not watch it go with any longing, nor did I admire its drift of shadow upon the table where I sat. No way will the echo of its exiting flutter remain forever in my heart.

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The Depth of Things

His hand palms the bottom of his glass, transfers heat into the body of what promises to erupt with textured oak, chocolate, a hint of blackberry. But his eyes are not patient. (He could not have made such a wine.) He demands, expects, does not trust what is gentle. And so I do not like him. I know this is not fair. I should not judge someone because of his eyes, how he looks at his glass. Should not measure his worldview in a glance. But I do. I am like this. Details matter. They tell the depth of things. So, I am sad for that wine. For those grapes. Even for that glass that holds their story.

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Shame

i.

He says it is better
than it was. And
he is good to his staff.
They get paid pretty well.

ii.

There exists a rhythm
of many drums
from the bus station
in the morning.
You can see it too. Like
a tide washing into the city.

iii.

She says she has a right
to keep her bag
on the front seat.
It is her country too.

iv.

There are many things
to buy here: goblets
of etched glass,
carrot cake,
leather shoes with pointed toes,
mango strips, mosaic tables
for the veranda, elaborate
gates to keep the view.

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At a Red Light

The road. The car. The car on the road. The car on the left side of the road. The man on the road. The man with his pile of papers for sale. The man with his pile of papers for sale on the road. The woman. The woman with a smooth black skirt to her knees and soft shoes. The woman on the road. She walks somewhere. And the plastic bag. The plastic bag in a tuft of wiry grass. The plastic bag in the tuft next to the green pole with almost no more green. The plastic bag in the tuft of grass by the road. The wind. The wind on the road. The wind moves a piece of the plastic of the bag. The edge wrinkles, sinks in slightly, and a blade of the wiry tuft says something. What it says is not of bags or plastic or tufts or poles. Not of the news of papers or of women walking. The wrinkle bends almost to a full crease and a point of the wiry blade pokes through the plastic and holds on. The blade of grass in the tuft next to the pole next to the road holds onto the bag, the plastic bag that might otherwise blow away.

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The Name of Foreigner

May 2008

We stand around a table to peel potatoes.
Four Muslim South Africans, an Israeli,
a Canadian, an American. We do not talk
about where we're from.
The older women teach us
how to hold the potato, the knife,
how to pull pressure down
gently towards the thumb.
We fill large buckets with what we've carved.

We drive in caravan to Solomon Mahlangu
on the outskirts of Khayelitsha
to deliver crates of bread and a pot of soup
that takes two men to carry.
We drive slowly and think about what it means
to leave a home for another place, who gets
the name of foreigner in a place of need.

She sits on a blue plastic chair,
her baby wrapped to her back
with an orange towel. She waits to be served
four slices of white bread and a Styrofoam cup
of split-pea soup. She speaks from a place
of effort I do not know and says:
Thank you for bringing us food.

The children still smile. To them
it is just another place to explore.
They pick up five-cent coins, pieces of plastic,
small rocks and discarded chicken bones.
They hold pieces of bread folded
in their hands. Take bites and leave crumbs.
When I say: one, two... they say:
three, four, five.

Cited

Everyone¹ loves² the³ mountain.⁴ Yet⁵ it⁶ doesn't⁷ strike⁸ his⁹ heart¹⁰ like¹¹ the¹² poems¹³ say¹⁴ it¹⁵ should.¹⁶

¹ You are included

² to enjoy, feel great passion and smile the daydreams of climbing, photography, picnics in the sun—

³ this particular one of each and every day, the one people reference for the weather, the one on postcards, the one you came to see,

⁴ hard table of rock anchored amidst fleeting clouds en route to other places.

⁵ Otherwise

⁶ that which embodies something that might be touched

⁷ does not, will not, should not, could not, will never

⁸ rupture of a kind of depth that holds

⁹ some person perhaps not unlike yourself.

¹⁰ Tracing memory as a finger to palm

¹¹ is similar to

¹² something known or held as if of earth

¹³ in the spaces with holes for minds to fill; dances not yet danced.

¹⁴ Utter

¹⁵ what might be pronounced as a moment next to sea—

¹⁶ ought to be, like a dream or breath coming home.

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Method for Imagining

Whatever you are doing, wherever you are, stop and notice: the edges of the space, who you are inside it, what you can touch, what you can't. Let this continue for as long as it takes you to hover yourself inside your mind without holding time—you are distance. Now drift some lines between the colors or sounds around you, let this happen in the rhythm of your breath so you become aware of the shapes you make with your drifting. Let these breathe too and they will make you think of things: people, scenes, other times. Whenever your mind registers a meaning with an image, let it dissolve back into a line (if this doesn't work, trace one of the lines on your palm and pull as if it's a thread to unravel). You won't want to let everything go; there will be things that tempt you to stay, but to linger is daydream. Imagining is different. So stay with your lifts of loops and angles until you get a sense of the texture of your thinking. It might evolve as something you see or something you feel (or maybe something else), but this is where you are inside the imagining. You will get glimpses: pieces will connect without meaning and your ideas will seem quite outside yourself. They will come to you because you don't expect them and you aren't trying to form them. This will not be romantic or spiritual in any way because you are inside the immediacy of thinking where such things don't exist. You release yourself from dream-memory, let go of holding on and something new happens.

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Don't Believe Me

When I say it's okay that all things go,
if they break or die or leave,

when I say everything will return to sand
and this is the way of things—
an inevitable, righteous circle,

don't believe me.

Some days I convince myself with Bachelard
or my pen. Other days I hide inside the hold
of romance movies or lists of what-to-do.
But every so often I am brave enough
to sit still and feel the breaking,

notice the edges of what has left
(and what will leave),
let death unravel
as more than a thought.
And this is when I know

it is not okay when things go.
This is when I know
not only do I hold things, but
I am good at holding.

I am skilled at savoring
each object, person or fragment
of memory as if their stories
grant my very breath,
as if fingerprints of before-times
reveal the most incredible promise
of what will come to me,
of that which I soon will know, will hold,
and have as something more
than dust's fleeting light,

more than dreams of mathematics,
more than layers
of numbness inside the rain.

Hadedas Geographies



Hadedas are nothing much to notice
until you hear them—*baa baa dee dab*.
Some consider them a nuisance
that interrupts morning love-making
or evening conversations on the veranda,
but for others their call echoes home.
It is often said they call for the rain
or call about it coming. I think
they might be saying something else.

Southern Right Whales come each winter
to breed—swim in playful circles
close to shore. Their large flukes sailing
with the wind, rough white patches
on their heads. People travel great distances
for boat rides and coastal hikes
that bring them closer:
close enough to hear
what these ancient beings have to say.

The dassie is a small rodent-like creature
who lives in mountain rocks and trees
near the sea. It is the closest living relative
to the elephant. I love that someone
figured this out: noticed similarities
between tusks and incisors, studied
pads on soles of feet, traced
the abdominal placement of testes
to a large, distant relative.

Stories seem to evolve with animals:
How leopard got so many spots, why
crocodile has big teeth, the reason
crow sings inside a full moon. But stories
are not only for children. We need them
to tell us what things mean.
So we know what matters
and when to let go.



People migrate to the city each day—
a tide of uniformed blue washing in
with the first glimpse of light
and washing out as the sun casts
deep orange low on the horizon.
The circadian of the city. Every day,
except Sundays, this happens. People come
and go in a rumble of earth—a pulse
that remains after they have moved on.

Hadedas travel almost the same route
every day. They are punctual to and from
their feedings—*baa baa dee dab*.
They are as predictable as morning coffee
or late afternoon tea. Their rhythms
follow the moon. They come and go
underneath a scumbled sky
pushing sea against sea.

Mollusks begin as larvae,
then attach their mantles
to fish hosts for nutrients
that grant them freedom to leave,
to move on to other places: boulders,
fishing boats, whales.
Some of these places travel;
others stand still. I wonder
if mollusks can tell the difference.

Animals get clues to tell them
when to move; they follow sun or stars,
scent, magnetic field, memory. They go
in search of water or food, a better climate.
They go where they go to get what they need.
Some movement is grand: wildebeest
in tides across the Serengeti. Others travel
outside our view: a blanket of moths
in a night sky or a lone sea turtle mother
seeking land to lay her eggs.



Touch sends signals
from the bottom layer of skin
through the spinal cord to the brain.
This path registers the feeling,
tells us where we are,
that there is something to know.

Bees go into and out of petals
to collect what they need.
A metronome of wings in pursuit
of what tastes sweet, what nourishes larvae,
what might become honey.
Some bees go home at night,
but others stay to drift asleep
inside the hold of a flower.

Hadedas fly to the ground
in pairs—*baa baa dee dab*.
They land in cattle kraals and open fields
to probe the earth
with long downward curved bills.
They eat earthworms and insects, spiders
and snails. They feed by what they feel.
They feel to feed.

What begins as mountain or hillside
eventually turns to sand.
Time moves in this way. But dreams
are a different kind of time.
They work in labyrinths
to send glimpses we cannot count.
Dreams open what we hold in our skin:
footsteps, salt, stories.



Galaxies hold solar systems and solar systems
hold stars, planets, asteroids and moons.
There are billions of galaxies layered in this way.
Everything is where it is
because of the push and pull of things
in relation to their mass.
This is all we are:
matter in constant tug with other matter,
trying to hold on to our place.

Some creatures build their homes
out of habit: beavers, ants, spiders, birds.
If something comes along to destroy the place
where they live, to sweep it away or step on it,
if it gets dismantled by weather or human hands,
what happens is this: they build it again;
collect branches or twigs, haul pieces of sand,
find another place to begin.

Male baboons stay with a troop only
for so long before they leave to disperse
themselves in a Southerly,
in search of another place.
Every so often a baboon does not find his way
to a new troop and so he stays alone.
Some people think this is sad,
but it is the way of things.

Hadedas do not perch, but they do come home.
It is here where they nest and do their billing—
intertwine necks and preen each other.
They grasp bills and rattle:
move their heads up and down, side to side.
This is how they ask each other to stay.
This is how they tell each other what matters:
touch, sky, holding on—*baa baa dee dab*.



I want to know how to find my way home.
Not by sight or sound
or following a map. I want to feel it
without my mind tackling it down.
Know it like the hadedas know
when to leave and when to stay.

I want to feel this kind of knowing:
how it threads its way through me, how it
pulls me in, where it shows me to go.
I want to know from a place
outside of what we know about knowing,
away from dream or memory;
somewhere inside instincts of skin.

I want to know what the spiders know,
what the sea turtles tell their young,
what moths want from the wind.
I want to feel movement across fields,
the tug of magnetism against my breath.
I want the urgency of it all: the need to take,
to go, to come back.

I want to hold what cannot be known,
fold it into me, let it stay. And then maybe
I will find what the hadedas have to say:
what they call for, what they want from us,
what they know about knowing
and letting go—*baa baa dee dab*.

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Not So Much a Lesson, But—

When you lift a shell from where it rests on the sand. When you lift that shell to hold it for a moment. Feel its curve. Glimpse its present texture. Lick its salt. When you lift that shell. Even if you put it back close to the place where you found it. Even if you put it back only a millimeter closer to the equator or the Southern Pole. Even if you hold it only for the tiniest speck of what we have come to call time. Even if you whisper your name onto its surface. Or hold your breath against its story. You alter that shell's shape forever. Nudge its release of sand from what it otherwise would be. What it would take from its tides. You shift its path to another layer, another time. Another fraction of space that is both here now and was here then. And you become part of it. Part of its path, part of it all. You are tied to its imprint upon the earth. Because you bent over to lift it from the place where you found it. That place next to millions of other places only a footstep from where you now stand.

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If

Imagine yourself as a fly.
You see quickly
in multiple frames. Now grab
on to a piece of light. You go.
You go fast. You are traveling

fast and seeing fast.
And so everything
looks slow. So slow
it's as if nothing
is happening at all or maybe

it's like everything
has already happened
(it's hard to say the difference).
But there you are, going on
and on like this. I wonder

what you're thinking about. I wonder
what matters to you. And I wonder
what would matter to me
if I could see as fast as a fly
and travel at the speed of light.

Perhaps everything would seem
much the same as now. Or maybe
I would think about how an elephant sees
the world or how it would feel to travel
at the pace of a new dung beetle.

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Casting Matters

1.

A wormhole begins where you are and goes
through time so you can land in a space
that otherwise would be far, far away.

It's a shortcut to another layer of now.
But if you're the kind of person who would worry
about what you missed after you jumped in,
then wormholes aren't for you.
You might be better suited for a house on a hillside
with a garden where earthworms work to turn your daily
egg shells, banana peels and coffee grounds
into what will grow next year.

2.

Darwin said, "It may be doubted whether there are many other animals
which have played so important a part in the history of the world,
as have these lowly, organized creatures."

And yet on most days we look up and out—we look far,
we try to go farther, we want what's new and fast; what glistens.

Earthworms don't try to go far or fast.
They contract their muscles long, then short to move along,
to aerate and mix; they gurgle as they tunnel
their way through what we would walk around.

A wormhole is a tunnel too, a hypothetical one
since the only way to go through is if you're made of negative matter.
So I imagine the symmetry of myself in empty space—
an invisible casting of my shape in air.

But what's the point of this? Unless, of course,
I could find a wormhole to bring me into the universe of a worm's skin.
Here I could learn how to press my body against air and push it
as I move what's dark and deep into what matters.

3.

When it comes down to it,
the distance between where we are
and where a wormhole might take us
is no closer or farther than we are to understanding
what a worm knows: how to burrow in and cast
what's there into what's new—what glistens.

The Set of All Things

She liked him immediately. It wasn't his glasses or the way his belt missed a loop in the back. It was how he shared his idea at the party, like it was such an obvious thing: that there are hidden worlds in the discarded objects from people's daily lives.

They didn't get married; neither believed in such things. She bought a house. They moved in. He built narrow wooden shelves around the perimeter of the third floor, their attic study. They each had a writing table; hers was round. There was a soft red chair that either of them pulled next to the other's table to nestle in and hear about the day's thinking.

He mostly showed her revisions. The day he found a way to describe the broken button in terms of its edge instead of its whole was the day she gave him what would be the title of his book: *an atlas of ordinary things*. He never intended his collections to become a book, but she believed in him and he was forever powerless to his reflection in her eyes.

Many nights after dinner they returned to their study with the rest of a bottle of wine and sat on the carpet in the middle of the room. He placed some of the objects between them and they talked for hours about the people who may have touched the objects, from where they may have come.

She had long stopped worrying that she loved his project more than she loved him, although the thought of his book's near completion caused her mind to spin. But she was the steady one. He got unnerved when the market was out of broccoli or the newspaper's thud on the door was slightly off-center. He liked her calm. She liked his predictability. They created this story long ago and it was here where they lived.

A year ago when she thought he was about to finish, she made him a list of twenty possibilities for new projects. That night in bed he held her more tightly than usual, but he never mentioned the list or her writing it. Since then, he keeps the list inside his favorite book. More than once she has seen him fold it up and put it back as she takes the last step up into their study.

Last week he put a note above the full circle rainbow photograph that hangs above his table. She read it. *To-do: cobbler, garden hose, Friday-press send*. He hadn't told her this would be his last week of revisions, that he was finally ready to be done. She knew better than to ask him. Instead, she brought up a '95 Pinot Noir from the cellar and wrote a note herself. *Friday: lamb, mushrooms, mint*.

Today her writing is more focused than ever. She ends a short story and a poem presents itself on the page that she's wanted for ages. Normally on a day when he hears her pen working so hard, he rolls the chair over and says: *tell me all about it*. But today he keeps the blanket on the back of his chair (their cue for needing silence). So she finishes her work and goes downstairs.

Soon he will come to the kitchen at his regular time. He will kiss her neck and ask what he needs to do to help. Tonight he will crush garlic and mint with salt and olive oil, then spoon it over the lamb. They will sit at their kitchen table pushed against the sky's reflection and wonder what comes next.

But what comes next might not interest you. She won't leave him. She will stay. He will too. They will go about their quiet days. Two people who stay inside such a life might not be the most riveting story, but it's the one I am writing because it's the one I want. And perhaps this story no longer pulls you in because there's no tension or loss to grip your finger to the page, but maybe you want something else too. Maybe all that any of us want is to seep into an ordinary life that rests suspended in someone's deliberate gaze.

Atlas

I do not know what Atlas knew of turtles.
But he stood on the back of one
when he was told to hold up the world.

I do not know how turtles swim the depths of sea
yet find their way back to the shore of their birth,
even if it happened a hundred years before.

I know turtle eggs hatch as female or male
depending on the temperature of the nest. I know only one
in every thousand hatchlings will survive to move on its way.

Turtles first arrived here 215 million years ago
and since then, I know they have found a way
to pull their heads back into their shells.

Air brings fire, fire needs water, water makes earth
and there's a fifth—void-space-sky. I didn't know this until
I saw turtle's five central scutes down its carapace.

Many people want a piece of turtle: they use its plastron
for medicine, eat its flesh, turn parts into Crème de Tortuga
for their skin, pray to its form.

We all seek something from what we don't know.
So maybe it's not about what turtle knows
or what we know of turtles.

How we name the way of things evolves from what we need.

If turtle turns to warrior with a shell of plated armor, we require
protection. When turtle becomes fertility goddess, abundance is desired.
Turtles created the world: we belong here and things are in their place.

"It's turtles all the way down" quiets those who ask why.
Three elephants on top of turtle; the oceans—
a new world to start again. And sometimes
we only need to find a way across a path, so clever is enough.

Turtle has been around for many ways of knowing;
calendars of time steady on its back, turtle keeps on—
follows angles of earth's pull to carry along
that for which we search; what we will never find.
It is turtle who reflects the sum of things—

brings an atlas to our knowing.

Sacred

This day stands still.

There is no wind
and I have nothing to say.

There is breath;
even memories rise and fall.

Some things exist more
when we cannot see them.

We make it this way
to lift away the heavy,
dissolve the order,

so we can hold ourselves
in place.

To believe is to tell a story,
find prayer
inside a labyrinth.

There is the story of the ibis,
the sacred one
who flies from sky to sea
to forage in clumps of kelp,

the one who brings light as Thoth—
mind of god—the one who knows,

who comes each day
without a sound.

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This

Today I can't tell
the sky from the shore;
the heavy white
blurs the ground.
I blend into the scene
on the road.

My mind holds
only the small things
today; I rest
on the cusp of silence,
but am not quite still.

Tree branches are
the mirror of their roots.

I believe this today
because my heart
needs a pocket.

I can't say it softer
than this: I need you
to find me

and bring me home.

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Of Searching

And what of the frog who perches all day in the same spot.
Or the kettle that does not whistle. The crease
that will not remain flat. Or the bird
battling the wind.

And what of her reach across the table to take
what she needs. His eyes grazing the angle
of her neck. The faint music from her spoon
around the inside of her cup
that only he hears.

And what of her dream. Of the slug on a wall
of faint shadow and slime. Of her car
without wheels. Of the cupboard that empties itself
when she opens it. Shelves no longer
even with dust.

And what of this thing she feels outside
of what she knows. Outside of time
and the order of days. This thing that grabs into her
but takes nothing.
Only stirs her awake.

And what of the days with their rises and sets.
With their three o'clock appointments
and dinner guests. With buzzes to come in
and robots red.

And what of the road that ends somewhere. Stops
when it must because of mountain or sea.
In this space of edges, of layered time
we touch but cannot see. After all,
this is where we are.