

DALY, TEGAN M., M.F.A. *Solitary Creatures*. (2020)  
Directed by Emilia Phillips. 40 pp.

These poems address isolation and the way that place can shape our relationships with ourselves. They explore the navigation of solitude in an extroverted world and the paradoxical desire both to belong and to be unencumbered. They range from narrative and personal to speculative and macrocosmic.

SOLITARY CREATURES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2020

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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## SECTION I

**Homeschool**  
*for my brother*

Because you were the only other  
child in the valley, and because  
memory famously transmutes, sometimes  
I have to ask you *did it happen*  
*the way I remember?* Dusty farmhouse crawling  
with Japanese beetles, leaky roof oozing  
brown stains onto the ceiling of your bedroom,  
splitting and stacking firewood in piles twice  
as tall as me, the scraps and splinters and soot  
that come with wood heat. Nonetheless, the satin  
light enticing behind its glass door,  
the radiant heat lulling us to sleep.  
Those assignment sheets we faked  
our way through, our work never checked,  
before we could go outside.

When you say *yes, that's how it was*, I trust  
myself again. We were solitary woodland creatures  
picking through blackcap brambles, awed to discover  
old oak trees claiming space. Staring into the creek  
beneath the bridge where frogs and turtles  
lived out their whole lives unsuspecting  
that there were lakes and rivers and oceans. We watched  
white pines grow up around us while we paced  
across 80 acres of fallow farmland and wooded coulees,  
read everything the local library offered, and feared  
the day that someone would finally realize

we couldn't do algebra. I've never seen storms  
roll in the way they did over the western brim  
of the valley, purple and indigo, boiling and cracking.  
I've never seen the Northern Lights snap absinthe whips  
across another black sky. In the spring, we opened  
the windows and listened as Midwest lush sprang up  
in every scrap of dirt, and along the cracks in the concrete,  
so our yard became wilder as the years  
went on, every summer another bit sacrificed  
to the encroaching jungle. We conferred  
about what creatures could possibly make  
the sounds that came trembling

off the hills at night. It's hard now, to explain  
to anyone else the aquifer of isolation  
I've built upon. I draw up samples of it,

pour it into a jar and hold it up  
to the light to study what has settled  
and what still swirls around.

## Meander

Meander is a river taking  
time to cross  
a floodplain. Scrape  
of silt on the outer  
curve. Count the epochs  
in sandstone. Do you see?  
Slow logic of gravity. Easy  
paths of crawfish. Muddy  
river sweeps wide,  
shows its age in oxbow  
ribbons. Scars  
the land with its travels.  
Nettles and morning glories  
prostrate on the bank. You would, too—  
Perhaps where the river hugs  
a cliff decorated  
with tapestries of lichen  
and fern. Effortless  
water breaks open  
rock. The river  
follows a route older  
than landscape. Spiral  
shells embedded  
in limestone—their grit  
feels right muddying  
your hand—ancient  
seabed whittled  
into valleys and hills. A river  
giving and  
diminishing. From the edge  
of a meander, sink  
your toes in wet sand. A blue  
heron might rise  
up and flap down-  
stream to the next  
bend, where trout  
hide beneath  
a rock ledge. Close  
your eyes and feel the steady  
current parting  
around the bird's legs. (Do it.  
You'll see.) The long  
neck coiled into an S, the yellow  
eyes watching below  
the surface. Water

gliders darting away.  
What else do you see? The feathers  
ruffle in the wind.

## Exit

I was watching you  
watching me in a cheap  
hotel room. The door open, I stood in  
a tee shirt and underwear. The view  
of a snowy cornfield from our window.  
In a parallel universe we were still  
in bed, my head on your chest,  
but in this universe there you were,  
your hand on the doorknob. Yellow lamp  
light fumbling into the grey  
of early morning.

The night before we drank  
rye whiskey from the bottle and kissed  
in the parking lot. I took you  
inside and rubbed your sore muscles  
until you moaned.

I thought when you stopped  
in the doorway, you'd tell me  
what I wanted to hear. But your lungs  
filled with sand and your eyes  
were a couple of bricked up windows.  
You, bound west, and me, bound  
east, as if this was a transaction on the trade  
route we both travel. When the door closed  
and I was alone, I stood  
there for a millennium, till the ice  
thawed off your windshield and you drove  
away, and the whole building became  
rubble around me.

## A Mind to Tell

Before I met you, I was in love  
with an older man who had a wood burning stove  
in his living room. *Sears Roebuck* it said across  
the cast iron door. On a summer day, a bird  
flew in through the chimney and got trapped  
inside the stove, its frantic fluttering  
against the charred belly like  
something from a Poe story. My heart  
imploded to hear it, I whispered,  
*what is that?* The man knew  
what it was before he slowly opened the door,  
just enough to see inside, and then quickly,  
just enough to admit his forearm. When he withdrew  
his arm, there was the tiny bird engulfed  
in his hand. He held it out to me  
and I took the sooty creature. Its breath  
working like a fairy-sized bellows,  
the thimble-heart clattered in my palm.

Last summer when you and I were  
hiking to a waterfall in the Smokies, we saw  
a mama black bear with three cubs and you froze  
and held your arm out to stop me. My fear  
and curiosity tumbled over each other  
faster and faster till they became  
the same thing. We watched the mama pass  
and amble down the ravine to cross the river,  
the cubs crying as they clamored and splashed,  
trying to keep up. Their sweet voices cracking  
apart like dried clay. We gasped as one fell off  
a rock and floated downriver, before scrambling into  
the shallows on the other side. The next night  
I told you what was on my mind.

I'm sorry that I moved away and broke us.  
You text me out of the blue to tell me  
the smell in the warming  
spring air makes you think of the day  
we met, when we bought sandwiches and sat  
in Cameron Park, throwing bits to the squirrels,  
who crouched on their haunches and begged  
like dogs. You were shy, sitting next to me  
on the bench, and told me you couldn't believe  
I was bothering to talk to you.  
In the text, you say "You should come back."

This is the closest you've come  
to saying you miss me.

### **Spell to Get Someone to Forgive You**

Go for a walk after sunset alone  
while the sky dims into humid  
summer gloaming. Find a quiet  
park tucked into some trees.  
Sit on a bench and be  
very still. Then laugh loudly  
when a stranger walks by. Take a strand  
of your hair and drop it  
into the web of a spider. Enter  
a bamboo grove while the fireflies  
send missives through the dark.  
Dig up some of the dirt from the grove  
and place it in a clear jar. Then wait  
for it to rain. Don't run when the sky  
opens up. Let yourself get soaked  
sloshing through the overflow.  
Bury the jar in a field.

On the next full moon,  
toss a small object that you love  
into a swiftly moving river.

Wait for a message to arrive.

## Sleep Paralysis

You never told your parents  
that whenever they watched

*Unsolved Mysteries*, you would lie  
awake wide-eyed, waiting for light to fill

your bedroom, to be lifted.  
The reenactments seated deep

in your psyche—those foam rubber suits,  
long thin fingers. When you lived

at Grandma's house, you shared  
a room with your sister, but when you moved

to the country you had your own,  
and it's not as quiet as they say,

living in the country—there were sounds  
you couldn't explain—and it was so dark

that headlights coming down  
the road in the night would trespass

like a poacher into the room,  
scaring shadows from their burrows.

And sometimes you'd wake  
only a little, and your body

was so heavy you were trapped,

and sometimes you swore  
you saw something small and grey

with long fingers but you couldn't  
get up and run. Couldn't move at all.

In the morning, the birds  
would wake you. You were alone

in your room, and you felt light.

## On the Line

Here.

A document signed years ago when nothing seemed urgent.

A sterile form. Care bills. Two or three or  
a lifetime.

He can't explain the details.

Questions growing stale.

A struggle to find words.

And now.

Waiting for results. They'll come in the mail.

His sister committed

suicide but only

because the cancer came back. It was

everywhere. Since then another

sister and a brother have gone. So many friends. Everything

hurts, he says,

I don't do much these days.

Get in the car and drive around,  
come home.

Watch the news.

It's getting cold in Wisconsin. Good thing

your brother's here. Shovels the snow,

even helps the neighbors.

Years ago, the form signed.

your name and your brother's.

When the time comes to hold on

or do not resuscitate.

The records grow longer (his broken back, the COPD, the years  
smoking menthols,

physical therapy,

the botched toe surgery,

a hip replacement)

and now a latent

addition. Sometimes

you think there's another stair

but you step down to nothing. Keep stepping.

Sometimes the documents jumble.

Things aren't so good

here, he says. But the painkillers work alright.

He's waiting

for the mail to arrive. The neighbor stops by

to ask for a favor.

He says I'm on the phone with my daughter.

I can hear

the news in the background.

### **The Battle of Bad Axe, I**

Sunset watercolors the sky on the other side of the Mississippi Valley. In between is Swift Creek, shoving its way to the main channel, and past the sandbars crowded with mulberry trees is Broken Arrow Slough. Just different names for the many limbs of the River. This is the country where Blackhawk made his last retreat. His people crossed on rafts from Missouri and fought all the way north, taking scalps and losing some, to this strange land of sheer orange bluffs and rivers. And rivers. Most mornings in the fall, you can't see across the mile or more to the limestone Minnesota hills. The barges bellow out and whip their spotlights through the fog: eerie beams in the void. Old men and young men in baseball caps sit in the mist at the lock and dam on overturned 5-gallon buckets, smoke cigarettes and let out their fishing lines. Flick the butts, pour coffee from a thermos. They toss the small fish back. Who knows if they think twice about all those starving Sauk Indians who were gunned down — and now we have quiet river towns to show for it with names like Victory. Retreat.

## **The Battle of Bad Axe, II**

Pulling over in the state park, you wouldn't guess  
this is where it happened. Across the main channel,  
sandy islands tangle the backwaters. Downriver  
a dredging boat digs up muck to keep  
the bloated river deep. Families picnic  
under the red oaks. Pelicans skim the water.  
The historical marker is down the road. It will tell you  
that a steam-powered battleship cruised upriver  
from Prairie du Chien, cut them off  
as they attempted to cross. Pursued  
from land, they were driven  
into the water. The marker will say  
they were fired upon. It will say that many  
who weren't shot down drowned in the current.  
It will not say massacre. It will say  
*1832 ended the Blackhawk War.*

## Ley Lines

At the sight of the bell  
curve—south-shore of Lake Michigan  
from 20,000 feet, a gear moves inside

me, *click click* catches  
and whirs. In the empty belly of a puddle  
jumper, clanking and rumbling, I can

feel the dust lift. The Celts were right  
about ley lines—confluence of ethereal rivers,  
deltas, and flood plains we wade

into unknowing. From this vantage  
the land unfolds geometrically.  
Without caliper or compass,

a shape emerges. I recognize  
the map, tipping the Northwest  
axis on which I will land, watch

the tumbling hills break the gridlock  
of corn and soybeans. Their swaybacks  
branch, green-alive, embroidery  
of gold-glinting rivers.

A landscape of passages, brimming.

## Midwestward

All the times I wanted to be right  
here under hillside silhouette sky  
cool sandstone bluff breathing out  
    just here  
even on the Carolina coast I was crumbling  
scraped through strip mall cities    while old men called me baby and I barely cared  
I just wanted  
    to be here  
while excavating parts of myself in the Rockies  
I didn't know were underground    till I was watching my step through high country  
wilderness    bear spray jostling on my side    and all the girls asked "aren't you afraid  
to hike alone?"    I was still planning my return    when I was falling  
for the Northwest    canopy of Sitka Spruce rolling in the wind  
coastal mist and sea stack crash    I wanted to fill up  
  with spring water    hunt mushrooms in the  
  coulees like when I was seventeen    and now  
  I am    watching sunset turn  
  sandstone to stained glass  
  Mississippi current threading  
  brown backwaters through canopies  
  of maple and mulberry islands  
  but I still don't want  
to be  
  anywhere I am

### **When Your Eyes Adjust**

The first time I went to the coast at night  
a primal swell ran through me. I couldn't

see the moonless waves, but they were  
louder than what I remembered.

The spray misted my face. My body  
leapt awake at the thought of being

swept away. You told me you've never seen

a shooting star. There's not much of a trick to it.  
But you do have to be still in the dark.

You have to look up.

On my way to you,

I drove alone through the desert for hours

after sunset. I couldn't tell how far  
the approaching headlights were.

They wavered and brightened.  
I would switch off my high beams and drive

for miles before we finally passed. I realized

that on Earth, distant lights glitter

as though the space between were strung  
with a sheer curtain. I've been fixated

on what you told me. I'd like to drive  
away from the city some night with you,

down a backroad that leads to an open ridge

and lay on the hood of the car,  
and watch the bright ends of travelers

who spent eons tumbling toward you.

## **Rib Cage**

If I could release you from my chest like a long-held breath,  
you would emerge hot, full of the steam of my body.

You would open into the cool atmosphere, then condense  
like vapor into snow, crystalized around a particle of me.

Instead you lodge in the bedding beneath my ribs,  
circle several times like a dog and lie down.

I feel you match the rhythm of my breath,  
I cramp up when, in your nightmares, you start and whimper.

If I could have you removed, like a chimera removes her twin,  
I wonder what you would look like, bared on the operating table.

I wonder if you would skitter off the stainless steel,  
or if, without me, you would disperse like smoke.

## Against the Universe

In the margins of an astrophysics book,  
someone wrote *mortality* and *continuity* over and over.  
All this preoccupation with one's own  
death, meanwhile the universe is ripping  
like a mother giving birth. All those galaxies hurtling  
through the cosmic web. When ours collides

with Andromeda, the particles of your body  
will be there for the ride. We'll be flung

like the cracking end of a whip.  
Hard to say if this will be a birth or many deaths, but enjoy  
the view. All new stars. Same old

gravity. The book says there's far more emptiness  
in the universe than matter, and as we spin  
off through the darkness, it's the emptiness

that's growing. In my heart,  
I believe Earth will survive humanity, but it won't

survive the sun, when it expands to a red giant, and boils  
away the water and sears off the atmosphere. I can't  
think about it for too long. It took so many billions of years  
to become this full. Planet like a palimpsest,  
transfigured and whispering about the past.

If there were a god, I would only pray to keep becoming.

The irony of existing, self-aware, in this electric mess.  
My friend's father survived  
cancer and drowned on vacation. In the margins  
there's not enough space. We hope we're rare

and beautiful. Like photons sailing on a magnetic field.  
But I think we may be something more like cargo

ships, loading and departing from dirty ports. Bending  
water around our bows. Docking and unloading.  
Our function more vital than form. Our eyes trained  
upward as we navigate.

## SECTION II

## The Old Farmer's Apiary

The orchard is bare,  
not barren. Six miles east of the  
Mississippi on a slope of hillside  
which shoulders into  
a narrow valley. A creek trickles through.  
The creek aspires to become  
the sea. It feeds off underground springs,  
the snow that soon will melt and flow.  
For now, it's fresh  
powder. It lifts in the wind  
and fills the valley. It drifts along  
the tree line, and catches the light  
of a sun set low by the lean of the planet.  
The grey-white boxes are stacked at the edge  
of the orchard, in the full southern slant  
of the light. You can take the snowshoes  
if you'd like to go—they're leaning there  
in the corner. The hives are by the Ida Reds  
where the creek bends west to the river.

In the middle frame of the low deep,  
softly latticed with honeycomb, each worker  
should be flexing her wings, revolving around  
the queen. The honey safely capped and stored  
to last them until spring.  
Together they keep her insulated with furry bodies  
in motion. Clustered tight, they shiver.  
If you visit the bees on a day like this,  
you cannot lift the lid. You will not see them coming  
and going, you must not disturb the frames.  
But put your ear to the side of the hive

and tap. When you return, you can sit in the chair  
by the woodstove, and I'll heat water for tea.  
If you tell me that you heard them  
buzzing, it will put my mind at ease.

## Hemlock

In the wood behind Henry's house we imagined  
ourselves as trackers. Indeed, the moose made it easy  
to believe. Her hoof prints crisscrossed the fresh snow,  
wider than my hand and nearly as long.  
We could see the toe prints clearly defined.  
Gazing ahead we became characters  
from an old Western: "*She was heading in that direction.*"

This new growth forest. Reclaimed  
pastureland cleared for grazing sheep.  
The larger native ruminants forced  
to steep slopes of the Green Mountains—till now,  
decades after the sheep have gone.  
The stone fences are still  
among the trees, taking their time  
succumbing to gravity,  
to the hidden forces of roots.

Pointing out the slouching boughs, Henry said,  
"*They like to spend their time beneath the hemlock.*"  
Hemlock. The heavy breadth of the branches.  
The deepest green of the needles.  
They are the state of sleep just before dreaming  
where alpha waves lull the conscious mind.  
The limbs become too heavy to move.  
Hemlock. Beneath their canopy, the trees slowly  
craft a mat where travelers can rest.  
Each season the mat deepens;  
the soft swaying reaches.

Guests leave their signatures in the snow.

### Shifting

Some years we became antelope,  
remember? Thin and strong,  
we picked our way along cliff faces.  
Then there were the years  
as black bears. Faces to the ground snuffling,  
or dangling our limbs from limbs of trees.  
We didn't ask questions about the transformations, we wore them  
like a mountain wears snow.  
Even that year when you became a sea gull  
(riding coastal breezes, surveying islands like a mapmaker)  
but I was a bat, tumbling,  
snatching trinkets from midair,  
we both learned about flight.  
I'm not sure what you are  
now, or what I am for that matter. Last I saw, you were clean  
shaven and walking upright. I take care  
to file my claws and step along  
in time with the pack mules.

## **Crazy Hold**

You left your hair gel  
in my medicine cabinet a year ago  
when you were here. I moved  
to a new apartment and brought  
the hair gel across town, up the stairs,  
in a box. I left it on the shelf beside  
the sink for a few weeks,  
then I put it in the linen closet.  
Sometimes when I need  
a towel, I open the door and instead  
I pick up the black tube and hold it  
just for a second  
and put it back on the shelf.

\*

Here in the kitchen I'm kneading  
salt yeast flour water.  
It helps to put muscle to something  
solid. The table creaks with each  
stroke. The dough dries and cakes onto  
the edges of my nails—something to clean  
and scrub. I think I'll bundle you sloppy  
into my bed. I think I'll risk you.  
Introduce yourself to me again.

\*

It's your birthday next week  
and I'm looking in the mirror imagining  
the message the picture I will send you  
if I have the nerve. I'll frame  
the parts of me you loved the most.

\*

The lost sound of you  
playing piano in the choir room.  
Your drunk voice in my backyard.  
The creak of your shitty car door.  
The humming of Bach from the shower.  
I saved some messages you left  
on my voicemail, but  
mostly, I don't listen to them.

## In the Details

You held my jewelry in a denture cup  
while the giant magnets of the MRI performed  
their ominous acrobatics,  
peering into the mysteries of my body.

The morning I realized I couldn't move my toes,  
we had planned to drive to Iowa,  
hike the riverside bluffs, and take the long  
way back along knee high corn lined country roads.  
    Instead I stared at my unmoving digits and remembered  
    the time a Zen monk told me I could find God  
    in my pinky toe if I tried.  
    Instead you sat with me for seven hours  
    in the emergency room, while triage nurses sifted  
    my file behind all the people who came through  
    the door with their mortality spelled in bold letters.  
My quiet fear, my beating heart, were classified  
*low-priority* to everyone except for you – a doctor  
not of medicine but music. A choir director  
in hiking boots.

    We watched the procession of  
    sick babies,  
    flashing gurneys,  
    damp bandages,  
through the sliding glass doors.  
The old man in line behind me  
showed us his bulging hernia.

What deity would dwell in my paralyzed toes,  
in that hospital of slumped bodies  
in wheelchairs, and grant miracles  
of MRI imaging in perfect equanimity?  
    Ensuring that every time  
    I was brought to tears, sitting on the bench  
    in the florescent waiting room,  
you would squeeze my hand and make me laugh.  
What an act of faith to do both at once. Now,

the message from my brain dissolves  
somewhere along my damaged nerve.  
You live a thousand miles away, and sing  
in stone churches, while I look for  
signs from my toes. On the phone,  
we're only haunting each other. You hang

the silence on the line and tell me that I deserve better.

So I expect that when I call, you will answer  
but I won't be able to hold you.

I expect that when I shove my foot  
in a shoe, the toes will curl under  
and I will walk anyway.

## **Divergent Sunset**

Standing at the crosswalk digging  
for the shopping list while six lanes blur  
into hypnotic fumes, an orange hand

warning me from across the street,  
until a couple redneck lowrider Carolinians  
in flat-brimmed caps roll by and

catcall. I almost startle, but too  
moved by how the sunlight spreads rosy  
through the opalescent clouds above

those six lanes and the strip mall on the other side.

## **an imperfect figure**

is making biscuits in the morning just  
for myself worth it  
kneading in the butter  
filling the kitchen with godly golden  
crumble smell  
breaking open like a confession  
steam gasping into the air  
apron covered in floury  
handprints not caring  
that it's hot in the kitchen I will  
say of course and more

and then opening the jam  
last summer's Michigan blueberry  
the near-black nectar smothering  
licking my fingers  
I can live with the softness  
padding my ribs for this the crumbs  
all over the sticky counter  
like waking up in the bed of the one I love  
a trail of my clothes set loose  
across the floor  
unconcerned if it's messy  
the answer is yes and please

### **I'm that kind of girl**

I kissed Frankenstein's creature on the first date even though he didn't look like his profile picture. I gained some weight, he confessed, and I liked him

for admitting it. That trim picture of him online must have been from his years on the run. The scars washed out by the flash in the full-length mirror. His life seemed quieter

now, perhaps he'd gotten comfortable. Hadn't been on a date in a while. He wore a shirt with little hearts—a bold move for a man. Maybe he was trying a new look. He said he had baggage. He didn't want

to talk about family, so we tasted different beers at the bar, but all the while I just I wanted to know how he was constructed, feel those muscles containing me. It was clear he was a composite

of different bodies, but somehow it didn't bother me. In the parking lot, after the date, he touched my waist and I touched the place where he was sewn together. The stoplight

changed, the bartender came out of the bar and dumped the empty glass bottles. In the creature's dark gaze was the reflection of a familiar figure. I let him walk me to my car, watched a flicker

of something very human on his face as I pulled away.

## Swallow

Saturday nights I pour  
beer into plastic cup after plastic cup.  
Every time I lift the trash bag out of the bin  
the cups rearrange and settle like ship passengers  
tossed on waves.  
No longer the convenient, orderly stacks  
they were, they'll join the prescription bottles  
inherited by hermit crabs. The shopping bags  
decorating the necks of seals.

At the bar I ask my boss about recycling.  
He says not worth it, tosses another  
cup into the ocean. I asked a customer can I  
reuse your cup? A frown creases her face,  
so I toss another cup in the ocean. An albatross may find it there  
and swallow, swallow, swallow.

Mayflies also live for one day,  
but when mayflies die, they feed  
ecosystems, trout gorging on the flurries  
of frenzied bodies. When beer cups expire  
their corpses linger, nourishing no one.

Baleen whales will scoop up  
whatever comes their way. Whatever  
is in the water. The cups

are lined up by the taps in rows so I grab  
another. Cups  
gleaming under the lights. In the back there's a box of cups  
in case we run out. A new sleeve of cups. Rows of cups  
with life expectancies of 45 minutes, and afterlives  
of 450 years.

Sometimes the cups  
stick together, so I use two  
for one beer. The dumpster is full  
of their flimsy remains and each  
week they go somewhere.

### **Cotyledons**

Extending perceptibly            the tomato sprouts  
   covet sunshine

Tiny hairs of their stems        catch light  
   and refract                    Was it nostalgia that moved me

to sprout them here                In a second-story  
   apartment with no garden

I birth them to a life                of captivity  
   The supple daylings arching

toward a dirty window    are a pact of light and air  
   solar-powered energy unfolding

Slender magicians                    reminding me of gardens  
   I've left in the past

## Heirloom

After the cells multiplied  
and became your body,  
every egg you ever had was tucked

away in you as you dozed  
in your mother's womb. Nesting  
dolls which open lifetimes stacked

within lifetimes. You flush one  
down again and again you wonder  
how many are left. The mDNA fueling

your cells was your mother's  
and her mother's  
and hers. A tradition

going back before *homo was sapiens*.  
But today we have ways of outsmarting  
biology: you dupe your body with a plastic

hormone drip. With medicine you can  
indulge in being too busy, too broke, to alone  
to pass on life. A modern marvel: Your great

great grandmothers had no choice. They gave  
up their bodies to hungry mouths, and you  
water your houseplants, watch the lines

between your eyebrows grow deeper. The months  
turn over and over years, instead of treasure,  
you hoard a growing store

of emptiness. How would it feel to plant a piece  
of yourself and let it unfurl? Your body fine-tuned  
for this magic trick. Look again: now there's two.

The mothers and daughters  
hidden in you would be hidden in her, too.

### **In the back corner of a Tennessee graveyard**

The family names rise in broken stone  
from concrete borders covered in rubbery sea-  
green lichen. It gives a bit under my fingers.  
I pass a rusted shovel resting in the grass,  
find the oldest stones:

*Little Chassie fell asleep*

*May 28<sup>th</sup> 1874*

*aged 22 months*

and George, the bishop's son, beside her.  
Beyond the concrete, past  
the springing lush of lime colored moss,  
in the gravelly dirt by himself is Jim Haskin,  
who died on New Years Day. Looking for others  
near him turns up nothing but the windfall  
of a heavenly patch of chanterelles, florescent  
as a hunter's vest, the bells of trumpets  
rising out of the dirt like a displaced choir.

## Origin of Longing

### I.

Hands. Tools. Language. With these, we draw a line between us and every other living thing. Think of the inventor alone in the lab. The artist in the studio. Think of the mathematician scrawling on the blackboard. To think is to be alone. Think. Your body as container. Distinct. Now think of your DNA. Assembly instructions come in the package. A code that defines us in contrast to them. A path in constant divergence. *Homo Sapiens*: The thinking man.

Once there were others.

Tool makers. Hands like ours for holding. Thumbs for grasping. Walking upright on two feet. Feet like ours. Feet made for running, not for climbing. *Homo Erectus*. Upright man. Hands that built fire.

We met some of the others in our travels. The men in the Neander Valley. *Homo Neanderthalensis*. Could we have lived together if they had survived? We bore their children. Think, thinking man. Think of a world where they survived. Think of them in line at the store. Their bodies pressed against you on a crowded subway car. Think of those hybrid babies. If Neanderthals had survived, maybe by now we would all be fused into something different from either. The divergence rerouted. A whole new set of instructions. Think of that.

They didn't survive.

None of them survived: *Habilis*, *erectus*, *denisovans*, *heidelbergensis*, *floresiensis*, *neanderthalensis*. We brush the dirt away from their bones, reassemble their skulls, the fractured pieces like an instruction manual torn to pieces, tossed:

cranial section tooth  
mandible cervical vertebra tooth

Did they have voices like ours? Is there an echo? Thinking man was left alone to listen to the wind coming up the canyon.

### II.

Did they bury their dead?

### III.

Thinking man thought up new brothers and sisters. He saw them everywhere: In the water, in the forests. Shapeshifters, half-humans, elves, fairies. Hidden from all but the most clever or (un)lucky human. Selkies make good wives if you can steal their pelts, but they will return to the sea eventually. Fairies may take your child and replace it with their own. Wolf men walk among you during the day and terrorize the forest at night. Mermaids warn of impending shipwreck. Have you seen them? Have they spoken to you?

(They don't speak to me.)

*(stanza break)*

When people are taken into alien spaceships, they see upright creatures. Bipedal with front-facing eyes. Hands like ours for holding. Thumbs for grasping. In our desperation not to be alone, we conjure twins from other planets. Doppelgängers of humanity, they reflect us to ourselves. Reach into our bodies. Make us watch while they do it. It's better than being alone.

Once a man named Percival Lowell thought he could see them building massive structures on Mars. He made us fall in love with this idea. An observatory was built. Theories were posited. The structures were canals, built by the Martians to move water across the planet. Up they went and down. Advanced agricultural systems moving with the Martian seasons. If we could only send a message. If only they would see us, too.

(We were mad scientists assembling a creature we couldn't bring to life. They were never there. Not the canals. Not the Martians.)

#### **IV.**

In many myths from native North Americans, animals act, and can even appear, like humans. A woman marries a bear, or a dog. A mountain lion marries a jackrabbit. A human becomes a hawk and a coyote becomes a man. A woman changes into a white wolf and guides travelers.

In the beginning, the animals all spoke the same language.

In one way or another they were transformed. It depends on who's telling the story.

We exist at the end of a branch. When we turn to look behind us, we get caught in the weave of limbs. When we look ahead of us, we are picked up by the wind and snared by the sky.



## Fog

I don't mean to come up blank  
when I'm spoken to. I get distracted looking  
at patterns, grind my teeth till my jaw hurts.  
It's a reason to live alone: I don't want to explain.  
In the morning I make laps across the bed,  
tell myself, soon I'll get up.

I read that some women inherit  
mutated genes for detecting  
more complex shades of color. I want  
so badly to be one of them, but I know  
I'm not. Morning light thickens  
into afternoon and I scrape my feet through  
civilization. What stunning spectrums  
assault me undetected while I assess

- motorcycle mumbling at stoplight
- kids smoking pot under a magnolia
- first lemon daffodils of spring
- fat striped caterpillar crossing the sidewalk

—their true colors a mystery. My heart's  
desire is to be surprised by something. I know  
the places where the sidewalk is broken  
and I lift a little higher. At least I'm not breaking  
my toenails on concrete anymore.

### Holding a Solitary Creature

A sure sign of getting older: that you wake  
in the morning and don't even look  
in the mirror. You already know  
your hair is flattened at an angle  
and held that way by grease.  
No one will see it as you grind  
coffee, tip it into the Chemex.  
Two nights ago, you got so drunk  
you let your friend kiss you: the one that always  
wants to. Backed into a corner of your couch,  
his clumsy tongue was in  
your mouth and you realized too late  
it shouldn't be there. His soft touch  
and mahogany eyes—you should want this,  
but you told him you'd call him  
later. When you take  
your cup to the window and look out,  
a man on the street glances in.  
You become aware of your claws.  
You didn't let your friend  
stay just because he wanted to.  
Overnight there was something big  
rummaging around in your bedroom wall.  
*Maybe it was a squirrel?* you think now  
as you watch them flounce across  
the branches outside. Whatever it was  
was knocking something around in there (*a walnut?*)  
You stared at what you couldn't  
see, flicking your tail. The body doesn't  
stop wanting. Just you and the rodent in the wall.

*The truth is, you think,*

*I like to be alone.* Who would

believe a thing like that?

The last time you slept

with a man because he was persistent

and you were lonely, you felt like ashes

stirred to a slurry—there was nothing

to ignite. You lost a favorite earring

in his room, blue and dangly. The next day you wanted

to shake him and watch him scurry.

You imagined him finding the earring

weeks later, under the bed. Throwing it away.

Like some child's flip book,

winter days flicker by: you feel like

a stick figure strolling down the street

just to reach the end and do it again.

You'd make all the couples

more comfortable if you weren't

on your own. An old desire: to be seen.

A new desire: to move silently

through the underbrush.

You laid awake waiting for the animal

noises in the wall to stop.

Every day morning light warms

bright squares on the kitchen floor.

You stand on one while the water boils.

## Uwharrie

A bleach-white quartzite spine  
cooled from a molten glass vein.  
The bulk of mountains washed  
away, exposing sharp  
vertebrae. Remains lean into earth  
like a collapsed tool shed  
built generations ago—

a pile of warped grey planks,  
crumbling shingles, rusted  
nubs of nails. Angles and edges. They were  
and they went before their bright bones

were quarried for arrowheads and axes.  
Ribbed layers of shale snapped  
and tilted upright. I step across  
epochs. Roots of mountain laurel grasp  
the cracks between ages. Along the river,  
I startle a ginger fox. She flees, her black legs

blurring the forest. Mountains, too,  
break apart. Become soft, stooped,  
overlooked. Crushed slowly and dispersed  
into rivers, carried back to the Atlantic.

Their remnants worn smooth  
like sea glass left by the tide.

### **Body in Motion**

Four thousand miles of pavement passed  
beneath me while my mother wished

I'd find what I was looking for.  
Less need to keep moving, more fear of being  
lodged in place for ages like the bones  
of a Neanderthal in a Russian cave. The same reason

geese leave their warm winter homes,  
migrating north even before  
the snow melts—the clamor of their flight  
against the gold morning, the answer to

an uprising. I could not keep waiting  
to be uncovered. Body in motion,  
scaling the dead silence of pine struck  
mountains. Body at rest, breathing  
desert sky wrapped in starry gauze.

I found the mossy edge  
of a continent, and an eye for safe places  
to sleep. Mornings of campfire

coffee, the skill to change a tire. I found  
Sitka and Sequoia and Saguaro.  
A blue creek offering itself  
to a brown river.