

Six Twilights
(Still Talk)

1. Birds Asleep

Moments of warmth
mid-winter
or late autumn
when the wind stops and birds don't get buffeted around like
bits of very light garbage
and the empty ladder leaning on the roof gutter
doesn't shift against the metal,
and you can feel hungry in the mornings again.

Moments of warmth
in the middle of the night
when you can forget about whoever might have died or left you
and the closeness of a new body is like rubbing off the stuff on a scratch ticket
with one of her bobby pins.
You tell yourself, this love, it's not how it makes me feel
it's how it makes everything else feel.
This love is just what everything else makes me feel.
It changes what white pigeons do
to early morning skies,
the flapping like the sound of creasing thirty letters
in quick succession.

I'm saying, don't write a journal,
no one cares about how every conversation
feels like it's moving off away from you
and you want a still talk
and the day can get pretty rainy.
The video can fail, the tracking go completely
and you can still have your still talk,
the enclosed piece of sky,
the movie that is always in the middle,
in the rising action part,
and you won't have to see so many people leave all the time.

If you find her bobby pin two days later,
in your carpet, by your door or even in your bed
don't make such a big deal about it,
use it to mark your page
or to try something new with your own hair.
If you get hurt that bad again,
remember to not disappear.
If you had died two years ago

you never would have seen Iceland, Barcelona, Manhattan, Ithaca,
Anchorage, Paris, Bethesda, Portland, Athens.
If you had died three years ago
you never would have heard the way she grinds her teeth while sleeping,
or her alarm clock going off three times every morning.
I trust hands the most
because of all the shapes they can make
while still being hands.
And if I can't believe the awful things she did
I trust that it had nothing to do with hands
or with the worn down enamel of teeth.

You can see a lot of alive things
and know it means something other than being alive.
You can see one girl hurt three people
in one quarter of a weekend
and you can be able to forgive her,
you can find the strength deep down
to let her sleep once more in your bed and kiss your hip bone
and let her bring you one peach, one plum and one pear
when she thinks you aren't getting enough fruit in your diet.

Moments of warmth,
when everything sleeps before Christmas morning
except the melting ice dripping off the gutter
because of how unseasonably warm it's been.

2. The First Three Twilights

-Before the grinding of her teeth and the sound like she was eating a big meal.

A commotion of birds in the trees,
just a few visible alighting
on the higher branches.
And I thought of a continuous note
vibrating like a body.
And I thought of the boy with the heart murmur
at the side of the gymnasium.
He watches the class play kickball,
sees them scramble among the squares of afternoon light
on the wooden floor slats.
I'm craning my neck,
it sounds like a party
where no one's talking, just
endlessly exchanging chairs.
And I'm happy that my bed
has been slept in little,
it means I've been somewhere.

You changed the idea of a bed,
made it a place where one could get things done.
These days it's like a rest stop. I'm filling up the tank.
Sometimes someone's inside,
tracing backwards messages in condensation,
the N is the hardest part.
I could sit up here, the blankets slipping,
it would quiet the sound of
heart beats in the one ear
sealed to the pillowcase,
the swarm of human speech
out in the nighttime
or the cluster of bird noise in the morning.
The moon gets cut off mid-crescent
by the ledge of the window
and what survives into the bedroom
lights the glow buttons on the remote
and so many books I feel sick.

3. For Ruth

And you don't belong to me,
not in that sense.
The Indian family is talking on the bridge.
The boy running around their legs,
I remember legs being like furniture:
something to climb on,
something which defined the room.
I've met four people interested in birds.
The newest one said it's about spotting them.
Her moment was the Grand Canyon and a single hawk
corkscrewing down through the space.

4. The Good Kind of Nostalgia (For Joseph Cornell)

*-An awareness of time passing, and a sadness, leaving us with just what we
should expect: Friendship.*

Fields of dry lava,
covered with gray moss.
The 'you's begin to blend
over time, become something
like you felt before
you'd ever kissed anyone,
lose their particulars,
an undone button,
on a sleeve cuff
or the top of jeans.

The mountains hold the field together
like heavy snow globes
at either end of the book row.
You're trying to think about things
like you'd write them
but all you can think is "the softness of rocks" and
what outstretched jean waist
is she feeding an unshaved leg through?
What pink hues is the sun
turning Irish skin this morning?
And "I am proud of my Icelandic tan"
is a dull idea,
like "traveling will change something"
and this is the fifth time tonight
I've thought about Sundays in New England,
how Renaissance music seems like dusting,
like shaking the snowman's world
just to make it snow
for a few moments.

5. A Still Talk

-The sound of coyotes in the night like teenage girls screaming after a party.

Speechless, the window allows gray light
to prove the drum rudiments belong to hands,
that there are shirt cuffs involved,
that he might slow down at a paradiddle,
glancing at his thinning ankle,
whitish between corduroy and black sock
as he remembers eating fast food on the highway,
the vents shooting heat out
from under the glove box,
the weariness of late November farm land,
distilled down to flatness, distance
and oak trees like stray hairs.
A desert that leans a little with the head jiggling
on the headrest.
These surfaces pass over the windows,
like a colored sheet
drawn continuously over the car
and now it's 1986 and he's never thought seriously
about the drums,
his hands are unclean, peeling with paste
and stuck with playground tar.
The way he leans on them will make divots in the white palms.
He will collect his lunch tray from the table,
the remaining food sliding on the smooth plastic.

He smells the auditorium, claps once
and in the sound proof drum room
hears the overwhelming echo,
like shouting at a brick wall.
He could sleep for many days straight, he thinks,
to be guiltless, never having to say anything,
he will be a window
and things will seem either as flat,
stuck like graying leaves on the glass,
or else extremely distant,
each sound a memory of the event
which produced it.

And at sunset there's a big jet crossing above the tree tops,
it's belly glowing red with rows of lights.
It's a dinner flight
and sex seems very optional,
the only important part is it involves two people
and they can talk about it afterwards,
standing without socks,
under the eaves,
their mouths sore in that good way.
The smell of coffee siphons out of a near window
or they're quiet,
hearing the gutter isolate a frequency
from the wind's pink noise
They are closed up in each other
and the shades are posters of the Cayman Islands.

Girls have other parts,
they wake up tired too,
get nervous stomachs.
Joanna sits against the studio window
eating small sections of a to-go salad,
loses her appetite like it's a train of thought,
meticulously rolls a cigarette.
On that morning there was fog
diffusing light across the parking lot.
Things seemed insubstantial,
she meant little, so did words,
and it was cruel to think about her in those ways,
to look into the eye of the light bulb
and see the after-image reeling
on her cheeks and I'm fishing with my father
off the New Meadows River,
the white cylinder of water across the dam below

and being six, the wind takes off my hat
and carries it down, over the guard rail
to the slick black stones
and it rests by where the yellow foam collects
and being six I'm crying
and he's making his way down the embankment
to the hat.

It's like the dream where everything you own is in your car,
the back seat windows roll down,
the contents swirl and start to leak out
onto the highway behind you.

Towards the end of summer
the nights get really cold,
the sun goes down while you're mowing the lawn:
this is the twilight that feels most forgiving.

You don't feel the urge to drink all the time.

It mixes a lightness into things:

you aren't always sure what you're feeling.

You find the birds are interesting again.

She's talking to me outside the darkroom,
with a cell phone folded on her white knee.

She says, maybe I'll drink some red wine
and try recording again.

Sometimes passing the dark practice room,
the light makes an awful buzzing,

I see the video camera with its lens cap on,
by the door.

Every conversation

feels like it's moving off away from you

and you want a place where the light is constant
like a tanning bed,

or your memory of Islington Street on

the warmest morning December gave you.

And you won't have to see so many people leave all the time.

6. For Elliott Smith

-High on amphetamines, the moon is a light bulb breaking.

-Elliott Smith, "St. Ives Heaven"

Today I heard your new album in the record store.

Outside a barefoot man was picking brown leaves and cigarette butts
off the pavement in the middle of traffic.

Outside two funeral ushers were waiting in black suits
drinking coffee and talking calmly.

They told the relatives and friends where to park.

Birds dot the weather vane,

change positions from East to North a few back to South then West a little,
get their normal view of us.

I'm beginning to think they don't look down as much as we might assume.

When I get somewhere high, like an apartment roof,

I go right to the edge, look down,

see how small things have gotten.

For the second time this afternoon I pass the boy with the burned face.

For the first time I see a father keep his hands in his coat,

nudge the street crossing button with his elbow.

People cross and re-cross, stumble on the curb

or laugh so much they don't realize where they are.

One time an arm came to rest between my arm
and the rest of me.

I changed the way I was walking,

saw nothing,

not looking down,

just noting how light an arm could be.

My dad makes dead people look nice for their parents,
the boy tells the class.

He spends recess standing by the wall

for throwing a handful of gravel

at a girl who had convinced him

his father would catch death from touching all the bodies.

While they count to one hundred, waiting for their own

one hundred counts on the swings, he lightly drags a fingernail

against the metal siding and thinks

what if his dad's hands fall off one day and

he can't change the TV channels on his own?

She makes a little sound,

rushing out too quickly from the elevator,

nearly running into me.

I'm pushing buttons for a while,

thinking how much we rely on things to make light for us,

to grow our plants, read by, find the bad wire

on the back of the stereo,

and wouldn't it be better to be something

that made its own light?

like a miner's hat,

only more permanent.

Or better yet something that didn't need light at all.

The fingernail slides off the Three button,

catches in the groove that circles it,

the door opens to a quiet library room

and suddenly the thoughts feel noisy by contrast,

like when they get back from a party
laughing into the dark house
with leftover loud voices.
You're waking up now,
it's nice to have alive people in the house again,
you're thinking maybe they'd like sandwiches,
pancakes or ginger ale, you're a grandmother now
and you can be fully awake in moments,
like a marine.

You remember drinking
all night until every smell disappeared.
You could kiss whatever face was nearest,
have no idea if his breath was terrible or not.
You'd remember other things that night:
food poisoning from a bad fish sandwich,
the view of Barcelona from the hill of Park Guell,
the hunchback naming his bells and loving them,
and you'd wake up six hours before the grandkids,
spend the morning repotting the plants
and praying to God.

I remember now how sad you were
when I was leaving and he was tugging at the slack skin
on his jaws,
sitting up from the armchair where I would sit a few months later,
feeling very warm on his leftover hydrocodones.
He was shaking like the spokes of a rake,
and the next time I was in Rhode Island
he was fatter with what they used to make him look healthy.
They did a great job, you were telling the aunts. He looks like
he did before he got sick.

Sometimes the dreams stay with me all morning,
like the grease of an English breakfast and
I can't eat anything,
I'd rather be a raccoon or
something without obligation,
no commitment to rendering exactly the
feeling of walking through leaves.
I saw swans, small on the gray river.
They were shaking their necks,
slipping their heads into the water,
stretching their wings.
Mexican boys running gloved hands
over the railing of the suspension bridge
ask me about my camera,
what I'm taping,

if I'm a cop or not.
Black ridges where the rocks
break the shallows.
The white necks like
long boneless arms
trying to grab at something
in the disappearing light
that dissolves all contrast,
blends the swans into the water
and the camera is trembling from the
cars crossing the bridge.

7. The Ocean Comes to Islington Street

-The holidays may be over, but we still have a lot left to give.

There were birds then too, Melissa, in Kingston.
My grandfather had put up feeders
all across the outside of the picture window
and they'd come up during dinnertime,
thumping the glass,
and everyone would stop eating to watch.
I'm in Eleanor's studio, there is no carpet,
no newspaper clippings of relatives on the fridge,
no fridge,
no ginger ale cans in a plastic bag hung from
the closet door handle,
no God Bless This Home plaque,
no framed poem commissioned by a son
for the grieving grandmother,
that went something like this:
 Grandmother, don't be sad for me
 I send my love from heaven down to thee.
 If you miss me, smell the blooming flowers,
 I am there with you at every hour.
 I am there in the morning dew,
 Grandmother I will always be with you.
with a stenciled pastel flower on a saturated green background.
Instead of those things are books she hasn't read:
(old ones because they look better in still lifes)
Ulysses, For Whom the Bell Tolls, Retreat From Love,
some new ones she probably has read:
Art Since 1945, Has Modernism Failed?
Ways of Seeing and a half-knitted purple cap
draped over the head of a white plaster sculpture.
A small connection after all.

We get close in the early mornings,

each other is a decent way to put off the cold walk to the car
and the cold steering wheel
that we pinch with the least amount of finger pads possible.
Blasting hot air that isn't yet hot drowns out
the Good Morning Portsmouth Radio Show,
loose pennies rattle on the dashboard.
There were birds then too, Melissa,
lined up on the telephone wire the way smokers do outside Seven-Eleven,
the guys you can bet on being there at any hour,
old men that for all their years have nowhere to go.
They smoke one hundreds watching traffic.
Some have lazy eyes, some limps,
they all sit on the brick ledge
by the advertised coke prices.
You can't tell if it's the cold or the cigarette smoke
that makes their breath visible.
This is not what I meant by stillness.
I like getting dead tired at the end of the day
and having a whole bed.
The down in the comforter shifts to one side,
bunches up near the wall, the size of a body.
Whoever lived here before wrote, I wish I didn't want you so bad
on the water pipe.
In Iceland hot water smells like sulfur.
People get awful breath in the morning.
By putting things together you can:
 a) solve problems
 b) make something new
 c) get mud
They say if you say you don't miss someone,
it means you do
because you wouldn't talk about someone you didn't miss.
How many un-missed people go unmentioned? That boy,
uncomfortable with his legs, tacking across the parking lot,
grinding his fingers
into the red indents the glasses made in his temples,
how many un-missed people is he not thinking about?
I'd like to be a little closer,
to hear which song he's humming into his scarf.
I admit sometimes it gets awkward sleeping alone,
like looking at yourself in the mirror too long
but it's nice not to have to listen to what someone dreamed
when you don't care all that much.
It's nice not to have every one of your sentences turn into a laugh.
It's nice to compare morning nerves to the sound of the ventilator
or hear the workers piling scrap metal

in the back of the pickup truck
outside the window.

8. Giants Stairs (A Love Poem)

Part 1: On Forgetting to Water Your Lily of the Valley

If I repeat your name
like I have been,
pretending different things,
I will change you,
you will sit differently at the edge of the mattress,
your pants will crease differently at the knees,
create two folds at either side
like tiny water slides,
your singing voice will be even more like Bjork
(the mic cord wound around your forearm)
until I forget you altogether,
and winter will break your heart in a completely new way.
You will drive to the Hawthorne Library in a new car,
and you will find a way there without any turns
so the pine tree air freshener will never sway like a metronome.
You will watch November's thin branches
get full with snow.
The wind dislodges a handful,
it slaps down on the windshield.
The Christmas commercials begin
the week of Thanksgiving,
the movies on Thanksgiving night.
I'll measure distances in the range of a small water pistol.
Snow caked to the sides of my shoes,
I'm rubbing it off on the doorstep.
From there to the car it's one long squirt,
if you set your wrist at the right angle,
aim up a little.

Once there was a girl who hadn't slept in two days.
Not a great story,
just a tired girl with blond hair and a hand bag full of invitations.
She put a white scarf over her head like a hood and it made her mouth look redder.
The trick is knowing how tightly to hold onto something.
More often than you'd think it's not that tight.
It's easy to make finger holes in white bread,
just using the little strength it takes to lift a sandwich to your mouth.
Once there was a fire extinguisher lying down on a painting stretcher.
I watched it,
waiting for the glue to set.
It's the best story I have right now,

besides the one about the sandwich.
If I use your name in other ways,
like a joke where I can't remember if it's two L's and one S
or two S's and one L so I write ten of each on the envelope
with a save the seals stamp
then you'll be pretty much unchanged.
I realize now that you have been able to do things without me:
copy passages from a book on nomadism
in your very clean handwriting,
buy bunches of wet grapes in perforated plastic,
maybe grow a little sick of thinking about birds
while I'm standing in line to buy fold up binoculars
and at the register a man is pouring quarters onto the glass counter
for a bus ticket to Boston.
I'm thinking about what he'd read on the trip,
the light disappearing beneath an overpass,
or in a tunnel.
People Magazine, a newspaper,
the Hunchback of Notre Dame, The Four Loves
or maybe he'd talk on his cell phone,
smoothing out his tie with two pressed together fingers,
saying things we've all been thinking like
I'm on the bus now, or we left the bus station about an hour ago
or maybe he'd sleep, leaning the seat back as far as it goes
and spend the whole ride with his eyes closed and his mouth open.

I'm telling myself to be quiet,
to wait until I have something to say
before speaking.
If you were here now
I'd notice the light disappearing at four o'clock
far less,
pay little attention to the ventilator hum,
ignore the pigeons crossing the sky all together.
If you were here,
the sound of my shoes,
of a dry leaf scuffing across the bricks
would matter much less.
The cold that night makes
would hit me in the face as it does now,
but it wouldn't get inside,
it wouldn't seep up under the bottom of the coat,
or down onto the back of my neck.
Instead you'd be a landscape of a sort,
the sounds you'd make would keep me occupied.
In a bed, I'd put my face over yours,

upside down
and see how strange it was to picture you like that,
to pretend that your eyes were the right way up.
In a way we'd be freed from the seasons.
We'd sled or we wouldn't.
We could pick apples in sweaters,
shoot each other in the neck with water guns,
or we could watch movies about places without seasons
like deserts or space,
drink water from hands cupped under the faucet,
get too hot for blankets.

It's Thanksgiving again, my mother is on the phone
with the aunt married to the gas station man.
They compare turkey sizes, the times when they ate,
which cousins got together,
which ones have their own families now.
Fog wraps around the telephone wires
while Zoë and I watch enough of ET to remember that he doesn't die after all,
but it's still hard to watch the sadder parts.
I say, tell me to be strong,
and she says, be strong. He doesn't die.

Tonight I feel like I'm doing something new
watching geese disrupt
the blue sky of early evening and sometimes
Tonight it seems like the most original thing in the world
to play out our roles:
rain and dirt
and the impact, the puddle surface breaking
is the important part of weather.

Part 2: November 23rd

I find you sleeping on a couch in a building,
leave my credit card receipt on your bag
because it has my name on it
and you will wake up sometime.
And you just want your own room
where you can put your record player
and your records
and sit listening to your records all day.
I picture an unmade bed,
white sheets
that give off light

in an apartment somewhere off Islington Street,
five stories up,
with a humid heat,
plants thriving in their bowls,
a yawning dog, nails clicking on the floor boards
leaving tiny scratches between the knots in the wood,
like dotted lines drawn between black holes in a strange astronomy book.
There won't be so much bad jazz organ there,
or so many people practicing drum rudiments all day,
just Cat Power, Depeche Mode or whatever it is you like.

Part 3: Music Unfolded Like the Events of Your Day:
Somewhat Out of Your Control

You feel like apologizing all the time,
like the niceness you deserve from other people
takes too much out of them.
The farmland gets sick,
there are bees on the pavement,
dead with the cold.
The winters get very dry
but you don't believe in chapstick,
think it's like smoking.

I've seen elevators stop at floors
and no one get off.
A boy wanting to go up,
got on my downward bound elevator,
began apologizing so much I actually laughed.
He offered to ride it out
but I hit the open-door button,
let him off.
I thought about him the whole time I was going down,
saw him later that day
walking with a girl
in the back fields
where I was filming crows circling the compost pile.
She was talking,
her hands tucked into coat pockets
and I could tell he was a good listener,
probably the best listener in the whole state.
I lay on my back, pointed the lens right up at the crow cloud.
The whole place smelled like garbage
and I thought how nice to be a librarian
with all the parts of your lunch in different sandwich bags
in the coffee room fridge,

how you get to see
the light move all day,
making shifting rhombuses on the heads of the people checking email,
how you could set up framed pictures of your pets,
spend your breaks researching low prices on airfare to Cuba,
Cozumel, Atlantic City, Luxembourg.

Part 4: They Must Have Their Details

I'm trying hard to talk like I feel,
to not get pushed around so much like a record needle.
I want to fall asleep like a dog,
without readjusting the blankets thirteen times,
without washing my face in scalding sulfur water,
without New England jerking me from fall into winter,
without the heater fighting with the open window all night.
In the morning your arm was cold where the blanket didn't cover it.
I want to know what books she was finding,
kneeling in black sweat pants in the HV-J1 aisle
on the third floor of Hubbard Stacks.
I saw the way her fingers grew yellow under the nails
from supporting the load of books.
I saw her run her palm along her jaw line,
yawn and cough.
It was a dry sound off the cloudy glass tiles.
With no light outside, the window was opaque, painted shut.

Part 5: Tonight I'm Letting you Drive

Tonight the car dealership looks like a cemetery.
Tonight the tires make a smooth sucking sound on the road.
Tonight I'm letting you drive.
I've got the seat belt rigged up under my armpit
as a place to put my head,
to keep it from bumping on the glass.
Cigarettes smell different when you're not the one smoking.
I hear you light it.
I hear the window roll down,
feel the cold come in,
picture the smoke pour out.
I picture the young way you look
squinting down towards the lighter.

Two seagulls landing by the toppled shopping cart
in the parking lot,
one flies up its wings
alights on the chain of balloons

at the gate of the dealership,
grave robbers or late-night mourners.

Part 6. Hampstead to Minneapolis

This time I didn't hear from you in months,
the trees thinned at the tops,
it was dark before dinner.

This time I drank all night,
thought the sunrise was the best thing I would ever see,
felt sick all day.
On a paper plate you drew a picture of two birds
on top of each other.
I said it looked like a 3-d image when you don't have the glasses.

This time on the air mattress
I couldn't tell you I loved you enough,
thought my parents could hear you crying
through the thin part of the wall where the stove pipe feeds through.

This time the leaves made no sound
skittering on the tar,
while the wind plummeted between two close buildings.

This time the window stuck a little open
and I was cold all night,
kept half waking and dealing with the same problem over and over again,
some song I wanted to remember
or why women don't usually have beards.

This time you saw your second seal,
its head skimming the black water off Star Island
and I was reading letters
instead of talking to you.

The worst thing is that
no one cares how every conversation
feels like it's moving off away from you
like migrating ducks
or a car filled up with everything you own.
You watch the windows roll down
and the contents streaming out onto the highway.
You want a still talk
and a place to stop driving.
The day can get pretty rainy.
The video can fail, the tracking go completely

and you can still have your still talk,
the enclosed piece of sky,
the movie that is always in the middle,
in the rising action part,
and you won't have to see so many people leave all the time.

11. The Holidays May Be Over But There's Still A Lot Left To Give

-She said in her way, the twilight in tragic.

-He said in his way, generic birds? You mean like Bird Brand Birds?

On the Bath bridge headlights twinkled among the guard rails.

This was the last thing I saw
through the a in café in café crème on the window,
lines to show the heat
the cappuccino mug gives off
and I don't want any heat right now,
it escapes out of mouths,
out the top of heads,
lingers a bit in armpits
but that's all.

I see the old man rest his forehead on the driver's window
and his breath collect like very light spray paint on the glass.

How tired he is that's all

I can think to say right now.

I would rather have warmth,
the kind that doesn't make you kick off the sheets,
the kind that sleeps a lot and
makes the thickness of your socks just right.

Later there's a dollar bill in the hand of a five-year-old boy.

He offers it to the cashier
but his mother has already paid. He wants
to be old enough to pay for things
even if they turn out to be shower curtains,
baking soda,
dry diving suits.

He gets upset maybe cries a little
leaving the store

as his mother zips the coat up past his chin,
seals him in. He spends the whole ride home
counting the wreaths

the city of Bath has nailed to the no parking signs.

Besides the spirit of generosity, love, forgiveness and togetherness

I'd say the best part of this month

is the bags the city puts over the parking meters,
happy holidays park for free.

Now I think they look like prisoners about to be executed,
standing straight and proud,

perfectly motionless,
not even waiting
because when you have a bag over your head
all you know is how warm your breath is
as it circulates, locked inside the cloth.
At least that's what I'd like to think.

Weak sunlight through a sheet of clouds
so you can look right at it
so now at noon the moon lights up,
becomes a flat disc the clouds bury again
and the wing tips of a turn
between me and the buried moon.
Here comes a propane truck,
now an SUV with a pine tree strapped to the roof.

The thinnest flurry is burying Brunswick Maine
at the same speed Europe is drifting away from America.
I can see it only in the dark parts
outside the green door,
the spaces above the tires,
at the base of the lamp pole,
the two crows pecking at the frozen grass.

The man comes out of the video store
sees the remaining orange light of the sunset, says
looks like it was a good one.
It was, I say.
Why didn't you come to get me?
He's using the corners of his eyes to smile.
I just sort of laugh.
I'll show you the tape later, I say.
Merry Christmas, he says
and gets into his car.

Old people drift out of their American cars
across the parking lot,
up the stairs of the catholic church.
It's four o'clock they've come for the matinee.
The two old woman pass, tell me they're going to ruin my shot.
Both of their husbands are dead,
they lean on each other,
help each other up the stairs.
They have enough money left to eat out
every Saturday night,
enough to buy a tin of butter cookies once a month

for the Sunday cribbage group,
enough to buy the Times Record every day
from the woman with the retarded son
instead of subscribing,
enough for a bus tour to Nashua every July,
where they sit in theaters,
knitting, thinking about the Irish romance novels
they trade back and forth,
not watching the actors.
They don't think once about how easy it would be to get out of their seats,
run up on stage,
start screaming,
maybe attack the woman playing the narcoleptic princess,
ruin the whole play.
This is one reason I don't like theater:
the whole thing could fall apart just like that,
simply one guy with fanatical urges.
I think about the time
after running off the stage,
out into a night
lit with ashen parking lot bulbs,
maybe wet pavement,
when nothing that just happened seemed real
and there were so many cars passing
with the same headlights.
I see police guns in smooth black holsters
in airports
and I want to take them,
shoot out a few tires
on those shuttle carts with the flagpoles,
not to do anything violent,
just something completely unbearable,
something that would clearly ruin my life for a while.

People change
or they have no time for you,
spend their days with lovers under blankets
watching the flow of television
until it becomes like a river
moving over a tree root that juts out from the bank
into the current
and the root parts the water,
divides it as commercials do.
They think maybe I'm a little strange
for always having a camera on me,
for the silence when the record light goes on.

It's about creating something to say
from white silence,
picking through old things:
videos taped over too many times,
the drives into town,
finding a parking space
at the tontine
on Saturday afternoon.

I'm listening to what the window does
to sounds of tires on new snow,
how it exaggerates the low creaking,
how sometimes with a big gust
the snow gets plastered to it
and that makes a sound
like a ghost knocking.
When we die our bodies get very soft.
Our hands form the shape of the things we touch
and we can clearly tell
by studying the palms
who last used the hammer,
who last petted the dog.
But this afternoon the snow isn't howling,
it's coming straight down
between the reflections of the inside lamps,
it's collecting in the crotch of a tree,
it's finding the places where the branches split discreetly,
it's melting on the headlights of cars,
it's convincing me there are a few ways to be a ghost
and in this one you don't get to fly
or melt through walls
or change door knockers into the shape of your face
or prove the importance of Christmas.
And I see your picture everyday
and it doesn't even look like you. I don't trust cameras.
That spot the fixer missed
is not the face of a dead person.
That blurry streak is not a space ship.
That is not the way you smile.
I think how many people might not look like they do in photographs:
the man in the cardigan who came free in the picture frame,
Nathaniel Hawthorne, his portrait by the sensor gate of the library,
Angela something, customer of the month in an Anchorage supermarket
and I think of how many people will get your face completely wrong,
wouldn't recognize you if they were close enough to smell the shampoo
three days after you last showered.

This is the newest day so far.
I'm young today,
waking up very slowly.
I'm tucking back someone's hair
behind their ear
like it belongs there,
to keep it out of her soup.
The first moment was hard sunlight under the door,
second was mist rising off the soccer field,
third was this painting of a ship
with lateen sails and a sick eggshell blue sea.
Carefully I notice the soup disappear,
the hair come undone again.
A friend of mine from way back
shot once in the leg,
once in the arm,
who is learning to write left handed
in a California hospital
once put his beard in tomato soup
for a joke,
let it drain a little,
wrung it out like wet socks
with both hands.
The trick light plays with shadow and hue,
because there is no absolute color to the carpet:
it is not dark like under the coffee table,
it is not the sort of white you need to squint at
though you are
because in the morning any light
is just a little too much,
any touch really gets to you
and that first cigarette is really something.
We all go loose eventually
like the proverbial blue balloon,
we all get translucent and thin,
blowing across the sky then up
to the height of airplanes.
I'd like to see a blue balloon coming across the cloud tops
from my airplane window.
I'd like to measure our speed by how quickly the balloon gets small.
I'd like to be the first one to see it,
I wouldn't wake you,
I'd let you know later,
let you imagine it however you wanted.
Yes darling it came from a birthday,

slipped out of a cake covered hand
and it was a sunny birthday
and only one kid cried:
the girl who can't stand to see a dog with its ear flopped back,
can't stand to see no one doing anything about it
and all the little tunnels and folded hard cartilage exposed.

All you will ever be to me
is the boy with the burned face.
I will never begin to know
your favorite Bronte sister,
how you can tell them apart at all,
how hard the news hit you of
carnage in Mosul
as the paper calls it,
how your face might not be burned
if you hadn't had that second bowl of minestrone,
if you had rechecked your shoelace instead,
how you might have just been the boy
smoking outside the coffee house
on a day before the weather turned
and made a frozen drip at the end of each twig
as I lay in bed letting the dreams fade out
very very slowly.
The leaves linger into winter.
They freeze into puddles
get rolled across snowdrifts
like capsized ships
or stick somehow to their tree,
in a shivering group,
blotting out very small portions of the sun
or very big portions of the sun,
depending on your distance from them.
On the news
an autistic boy wandered off a week ago
with thick socks and rubber boots
but no coat.
We hope to God he found a warm place to stay
says the father as a voiceover
to a shot of police with police dogs wading among brambles and bushes
and so many leaves the calendar seems arbitrary
like how you truly feel the sun should rise
whenever we do.

Let's die everyday in a different way,
to learn the most dramatic way of diving off a mooring into freezing black water.

Let's dangle these Christmas ornaments off each of our fingers
and put on a tiny marionette performance
that we will forget by morning
but that the children will remember for years
like I remember the one time my father sang yellow submarine.

You're seeing seals everywhere in the waves,
the white crests,
the slick heads of far off ducks,
and the black buoy by the old pier, now just squat posts
and we are getting sand in our eyes.
Your lavender skirt is moving once again
in a very slight wind
and it's June somehow
so you have to dig down a little with your toes
to find the cool sand,
you have to dig down a little further
to find a reassuring tone of voice:
it will be alright I promise.
It takes years sometimes
of it not being alright
of it being downright awful
before I realize that you were right.
There will always be points in your life when things feel alright.
Now that I don't know you
I can trust you. I can look right at you
without sunspots in my eyes floating over the beach,
catching in the water like seal heads.
I can look at you cleanly, empty,
without seeing my face in your sunglasses,
without seeing the creases of your armpits,
without knowing one thing you've dreamed about
the past three years.
One afternoon the wind was so strong
my eyes watered until I couldn't tell a Canadian goose from a seal head,
I thought how quickly would a ball of snow dissolve under a hair dryer?
Like one of those cornstarch packing peanuts melting under tap water.
My father showing me says, you could eat one of those if you really wanted.
I wouldn't recommend it though.
We say a lot of things so people respect us,
often just real simple things like how the lava fields
are covered in gray moss
and they stretch out for miles on either side of the road
seeming soft and warm or,
I've never loved anyone as much as I've been loved or,
no this song is not in a minor key or,

how the word embankment will always remind me of Einstein.
For a while I'd lie every night in the living room
watching the oldest video tapes I could find in the closet
television movies taped over innumerable times,
one section of the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe
bleeding into the opening credits of a Nova show on gray wolves.
The colors get weak, the image slips, the gray wolves
stutter mid-pounce above quivering tundra
and then a Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial,
the bucket streaming heat, the ghosts of all three Christmases
peering hungrily from the background.
I'd get as close to sleep as I could,
stay like this all night,
at seven in the morning do all the dishes in the house, play Good Morning America.

I'm amazed things hold together as well as they do,
stuffed animals pouring out the windows of the car,
You watch them skittering across the highway,
and in the dream you can't turn the tires or slow down.
There are a few places where it's impossible to stop
and walk around.
The middle of the highway for one.
A mid-sentence turn of the page,
trapped inside an unresolved clause,
with no bobby pin to use as a book mark,
the steep parts of Talkeetna, going down,
where you have to keep running with the momentum.
There is no place to stand among the saplings,
to run hands over the fresh cold bark
and afterwards how strange the flatness of the parking lot
and the baby crying in a closed car.

12. Return From Away, Please Return from Away

You put all my change on a small plate,
the kind you could use for eating sliced pears.
My peach has shrunk very small over the past week.
It is shriveled, very shriveled
like the nub of a birthday balloon
one and a half months later.
The plum still looks alright,
maybe because of how dark it is
by the window tonight.
Maybe I know better,
like how the balloon will never come back
and the old man will stand in his lawn
saying, please blue balloon come back

please God make the blue balloon come back,
make it come back, blue balloon please come back,
please come back, please God come back
for about three hours,
until the light gets weak
and he gets hungry for his dinner.
Maybe how we picked the same Elliott Smith song today
means less than a flock of white birds over a Delaware field
when I'm not sure if I'm hallucinating from caffeine
and the birds are beckoning me to join them
and to fly away and I have to tell them,
sorry, I'm doing alright without flying
and I have to get back to New England
in this car today.

13. Exhausted Bird Part One

Your elbow drew such a thin line
in the window condensation.
I remember my mother in the morning
with a squeegee to keep the wetness from ruining the sill.
She did it every morning.
You drew a circle in the condensation
only once
with the tip of your elbow.
You didn't just want someone to talk to,
you wanted someone to not talk to,
someone to take shifts
melting the ice cube in your mouth
that kept you from speaking sincerely about the small things,
the weather, the attenuated light at 5:15 Tuesday evening,
how you feel colder after eating,
that kept you from laughing when no one else laughed
at movies everyone but you had seen before,
at the way the dog caught the snowballs in his mouth
like it was the most important thing he would ever do,
like his entire life had been preparation for this moment of agility
and he was doing a pretty good job.
You watched them shatter inside his mouth
and any hard bits of ice get chewed up
and out of kindness
you threw only the cleanest snow you could find
and it was a slow, careful kindness,
something to make up for not stopping the pizza man
you had given directions to,
who had misunderstood, walked through the wrong parking lot.
You just stood there, smoking among wet black branches thinking,

I should stop him,
I should shout something.
But he was getting further away
and you would have to shout very loud now.
You thought about the pizza getting colder, even in the thermal pizza bag.
It kept you awake with a freezing tongue,
kept you from appreciating
the pleasant way a tooth sinks into a macadamia,
so much more trustworthy than a cashew,
you always told me.
I wish I could get you to laugh all the time
like you do after you've been crying,
with just warmth,
no joking around,
no hotness of intent,
with just warmth like you get sometimes,
very tired at the end of a good day,
when you know you deserve to laugh
and to sleep.

14. Exhausted Bird Part Two

What will give us our life again?
The rotation of flies above the bed
in an Anchorage apartment
or the boy in New England
we'd hear punching his walls at night,
who once spent all day cooking a very elaborate cake
for a girl who had stopped loving him a year ago,
who once came into the kitchen with a broken hand,
who once tried to convince us he had slipped on black ice
and fallen on it wrong.
I like his enclosed problems,
how he punches at his small walls
and takes such care with a cake,
even wears an apron.

And we're cleaning out my coat pockets
throwing out record store receipts,
creased bus schedules nearly falling apart.
Here is a blank grocery list,
a silver cigarette wrapper saying pull,
a letter from my father
telling me how to wind the pocket watch
and that a house across the soccer field burned down,
that he saw a mink by a bridge in Gray Maine
and it had a rich dark brown fur.

It was the first one he thinks he's ever seen.
Here is a red and white peppermint,
a golf pencil,
thirteen or fourteen bits of hard paper
that I'd twisted up with my hand in my pocket
without thinking or understanding how the smallest things accumulate
and make a good sized handful.
Here are the Library of Congress call numbers
for A Season in Hell, The Flowers of Evil, This Time and Don Quixote.
Here is a tiny plastic spoon for sampling rice pudding flavors,
a ticket stub for Blue Star Naxos and one for Glacier Bay Cruises
but mostly it's just bank slips.

Somehow you have held onto the quiet in your life
like light snow at midnight when it's not too cold
and you aren't too tired yet,
that feeling stretched out for five months
straight into July.
I'm not sure how you did it,
maybe with the typewriter,
or the pencil lead permanently lodged in your palm.
You let the hot drink cool off by the window,
you put the ice cube in the child's soup.
You let the day slow down at the dwindling hour,
like echoes catching up with a shout
or a throat clearing.
You let the day slow down so much
you could see the flickering still images
whose succession made movement possible.
The red and orange apple with the brown stem
in the microwave for a moment
just to take off the chill
so it wouldn't hurt your teeth to bite it.

The old woman in the CVS is bobbing her head to the music
very, very slightly.
I can only tell because of how close I am in the line.
And the old man outside is having a hard time
getting his quarter into the parking meter
half-buried in the snow bank.
They get to sleep in the warm afternoon
in the sunroom.
They get to have a sunroom.
They get to watch baseball games all evening
and think about the parts of their day before the nap
like it was a different day: refilling prescriptions

and getting two for one on Kleenex
or cutting out the funny parts
of the police blotter for the son in law
who appreciates a good laugh once in a while.

The important thing is knowing what to do with the afternoon.
After lunch makes you tired
and you can hear the tree branches lightening themselves of ice in the sunlight.
How good a sleep you'll have
if you can last until tonight
and think back about the sound of melting snow
being brushed out of bangs
with a mitten
and the tiredness won't have the panic
of afternoon tiredness
because there is nothing left to do tonight
except be tired and sleep
and let your elbows warm up
and let your morning breath develop inside your mouth.

You want what humpback whales feel
under the surface of Frederick Sound
or the exhausted bird
who gets to rest on the deck of an oil tanker
in the middle of the Bering Sea
who makes her legs disappear under the round settling body
and then tucks her head behind a wing
so that too disappears.
Someone said those ships can save an exhausted bird's life.

15. Ambient Kisses

-Just using the little strength it takes to hold onto something.

This is waking up with you number five
to crows that sound exactly the same no matter what town you're in,
to kissing with closed mouths because of how your breath is in the morning,
to being unable to recognize you at this closeness,
unable to bring such detail into focus.
Little white wrinkles on the sides of your neck.
The loudest sound all morning was a finger tracing my ear cartilage.
The funniest thing was you doing the I'm going down the stairs trick
at the side of the bed.
I am remembering the thickness of red wine in my throat
like eating muffins too quickly,
brown light reflecting from the inner part of your eyes
and a red bump like a spider bite in the exact middle of your back.
I really like breaking off the lip of ice around snow banks

and I really like the slowness of ambient kisses in the morning
when they don't lead to sex.
Like a conversation about whether Belgrade is a country or a city
or taking photographs of the Reykjavik ship yard
at midnight on the longest day of the year
or a squirrel's body,
capable of such movement
and such stillness,
heartbeats too tiny and too quick to make a difference
and while you sleep I watch your neck moving with your pulse.

16. April

I was hoping that spring would help,
that two ten minute sessions in a tanning bed
would fix the problems of the ice cube.
You had swallowed it frozen
and it settled halfway down your chest.
It made you cough a lot,
especially at night
when the worry of waking me up
made you have to cough more.
It made you do the robot dance
in your bedroom in Bethesda,
while I lay in your bed,
smelling your sweat
in the down comforter that was a bit too warm for the season.

I was hoping I would have faith in spring.
Instead it made my very nice winter coat ridiculous and unnecessary.
It made an awful clatter of birds on the mornings I hadn't slept yet.
It made me feel like an old man
who hasn't learned how to be old,
who still stands in his lawn whispering,
blue balloon please come back to me.
And it made you write things to me
simple things with small details like:

I found your lighter,
the one from Greece.
But I didn't know what to do with it
because giving it back before talking to you
would feel very 'giving back your stuff',
but I know it's sentimental and that you want it.
I also found a little plastic whale
on the corner of Islington and Atlantic
and thought you might like that too.

Now I have my glasses off,
so I can only see the closest things:
the torn open salt packet,
the Dixie cup worn thin from over use,
the new eyes I haven't learned the color of.

Now I have my glasses off
so I won't have to watch her leaving for so long.

17. Birds Awake

*-I wish I could have read it more closely before giving it back.
I gave it to Zoë by the way,
which you probably know.*

Heartbreak is comforting in other people:
the guy who paints all day in his attic,
cooks the last of the beets with leftover rice
and wakes up very early because of how hard it is
to sleep alone after so long.
Having no one's arm to hold on to,
feels too much like falling.
And each day is a long sunny gift
that he gets more and more used to opening.
His broken heart, how he dyed his hair,
started wearing cleaner jeans,
comforts me
because I don't have to know about the awful trick dreams
where she loves him again,
where she tells him that it's been a mistake,
this whole alone thing has been a huge mistake
and she puts a bare knee on his leg
while the dog circles the table leg,
winding the leash around it,
until he can't move and can't breathe and can't unwind it.
He wakes up in a lot of pain
like his eighty six year old grandfather
and paints frantically all morning.

He thinks, disappearing is fine except for the whole rest of the world.
Disappearing is fine for the one who gets to disappear.
But not for whoever is left
wearing brand new jeans,
wearing her hair up tonight,
wearing her night shirt as a regular shirt all through the day,
buying a dog later as a rebound gesture.

Yesterday you felt it when you saw light hitting church windows
a week after Christmas.

It was a lack of something:

the way downtown Brunswick changes,

an insurance agency took over where the greeting card shop was,

how they moved the grocery store thirty feet to the left

and it took about three months

and you had to go to the other grocery store all the way across town

and when the new store was finished

it took you another three months to figure out where everything was
because the aisles were all different.

When you stop and think about it

no one should be alone, ever.

You wanted to walk down the side street

by the bike shop and the back end of the Chinese restaurant

enveloped in a strong, warm light,

a huge hand cupping your body

like my friend Evan felt one time

when he fell asleep at one of his youth events

and dreamed that Jesus Christ was sitting next to him in the bleachers.

He felt a warmth and a strong light

coming into him.

I always picture it in my junior high school gym

with the large black and white mural of the huskies

just as every house in every book I read growing up

was my house.

At the end he wakes up and the sermon or whatever is over.

He is alone on the bleachers and feels pretty incredible.

One of the councilors tells him,

yes that was really God,

it happens sometimes you know.

This is the same councilor

who gave up cigarettes

by smoking a whole pack in his car

with all the windows shut,

pulling over to the side of the road to throw up when he had to.

Evan and I are drinking whisky at Simpson's Point.

I don't tell him how many people could dream that,

that I've felt, lying in bed,

a huge warmth coming down into my chest,

that I've felt a giant hand cupped around me

like one of those clam-shaped chairs from the sixties,

that I've felt how out of control a normal day is.

I let him keep going about why he has moved so far away from God,

had sex with a few girls,

taken up drinking,
and he starts crying
though it's mostly from the whisky
and I say, yes that must be hard,
it must be confusing but I feel alright about those things
because I've never believed.

Today you felt it when your girlfriend of one year and seventeen days
decided that she needed space.
And space meant only that you couldn't kiss her anymore,
except for sometimes on the cheek after a particularly sad or nice evening.
No one should be alone, you thought.
No one should have space.
The scariest thing you could think of was
working outside the space station and getting your cord cut
and floating away into space forever,
trapped in your space suit
with nothing to stop your momentum.
Never being thought of again, that was bad too.
Being alive without anyone knowing it.
Or the panic of free-diving too far
and the long fight upwards to the surface still ahead.
Or a bird flying up, up, up,
a mile or so straight up
until it gets too tired and the oxygen gets too thin
and it sleeps all the way down,
crashing finally into the Atlantic ocean like an unopened parachute pack.
It is just very big spaces that scare you.
Death is not a big space.
It is a small area,
like the highest step of a step ladder
where it warns you never to sit, stand or set things.

To make the flight from pole to pole, twice a year,
a bird must have three things:

1. strong willpower
2. a good sense of direction
3. a passion for the journey

A bird is never enveloped in warm light from a giant hand.
A bird dreams only of telephone wires over the Kennebec River
or the highest step on a step ladder.
A bird's heart beats like it is in love all the time.
and it lands on the metal deck of an ocean liner, spent,
and goes to sleep very quickly, without flossing.

Why is it that each time someone leaves you get so sad,
completely forget how someone else will arrive soon?
But why should we rely on new things to replace old things?
Why should we rely on strong warm light from a large hand?
Why does your life get so confused by the way she stretches her legs in the morning?

Don't spend all day with a pitcher in one hand,
 waiting for the potting soil to get dry enough to water.
Learn how not answering your phone in the middle of the night
 can save you a lot of heart ache.
Never shave your face unless you are doing it for yourself
 because of the way the stubble hurts the corners of your mouth.
Believe in God, but don't believe in waiting, or
Believe in not falling through your mattress in the evening. Sleeping on your own
 is so unlike falling, I can't even begin to tell you.
Drink less when you are sad.
Drink more when you are happy.
Don't trust that four tulips will stay strong in a glass of water
 for more than four days.
Don't rely on alarm clocks, use the laughter of crows from the parking lot
 or your own sense of readiness.

She told me she liked to hold my hand while we watched the movie.

This is tomorrow, and I felt it removing the tape from the VCR
and seeing just one of her small socks on the carpet.
When I watched her sleeping in the morning
I also watched her heart beating slowly in her neck.
The pumping blood moved her throat very slightly in two places.
There were crows laughing outside the window
and I couldn't sleep anymore.
I got up and used my finger to brush my teeth in her bathroom.
I felt a little hung over but not too bad.
I was thinking about happiness.
I was thinking how no one can ever really be happy
because happiness is a stopping, an end.
It is getting to sleep when you are truly tired,
but sleep will make you want to wake up.
It is only in the shifting between things.
Happiness should be something that you have
and which having, makes you want it more,
so that the space between having and wanting is very, very small.
It should not move at all,
except as hands do
under an old Mexican blanket,
her thumb moving over mine,

my grip tightening a little in response,
her fingers sliding further into the spaces between mine
so the webbings kiss each other
and nothing really comes of it.

And you want a still talk.
You want the slowness
of ambient kisses
in the morning
and you want to see Islington Street again
and the Atlantic Ocean.
The day can get pretty rainy.
The video can fail, the tracking go completely
and you can still have your still talk,
the enclosed piece of sky,
the movie that is always in the middle,
in the rising action part,
and you won't have to see so many people leave.