

# Carnival Lights

by Heather Katzoff

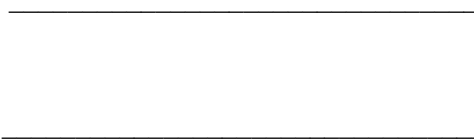
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*For Anthony,  
who made it possible for me to start on this journey*

*and*

*for Aaron,  
who probably doesn't realize how important a role he played in its completion*

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**I**

**Start**

Lining up near a throng  
of other little girls

striped knee socks rising  
from velcro sneakers of pink

and purple clashing with camp  
shirts orange and white

we waited on dead grass  
no longer green until

a whistle broke through  
the air, startling our crowd

into motion, and in the middle  
of the pack, with whipping

ponytails blinding sight  
with elbows and knees

building barriers  
locking us like puzzle pieces

keeping the herd together  
I found my way out

and flew toward a splintered  
makeshift totem pole finish

line upon discovering  
that I could run.

## The Girls of LeRoy

The media has descended  
on the former Jell-O factory town  
where bricks fade and crack on front  
porches of once-grand Federalist-style  
homes now subdivided to fit  
three families where once  
only one could really live

and the old folks who are still around  
will tell them about the days when the town's  
people could tell what flavor  
the factory had put in production  
that day by checking the color  
of Oatka Creek

and how no one really knew what chemicals  
the creek took on and brought down  
to school-grounds and playgrounds  
but the factory gave work and nice homes  
to its small New York town...  
until it didn't.

Some think back to the toxic train crash  
releasing tens of thousands of gallons  
of trichloroethylene (among other things)  
into the soil just outside of town  
but that was over thirty years ago  
and they trucked that dirt away,  
didn't they?

And all of the sudden attention  
brought to this tiny hamlet  
of industrial demise  
has arrived on the backs of sixteen  
teenage girls who cannot stop flailing  
and cursing  
and twisting,

and they've tested the water  
and they've tested the ground  
and they've examined the food

that they eat in school and at home  
but still their tics multiply  
layering on symptom  
after symptom  
with no proven trigger.

*Mass hysteria* is whispered in the streets  
but the parents don't want to hear it  
and everyone is looking  
for a convenient place to point a finger  
even if there are no pyres this time  
while the girls of LeRoy with eyes too wide  
and bodies too bruised  
continue to convert stress  
into physical pain  
continue to wait for the cards to tell them  
what is going to happen next.



## My First Barbie

She was a cowgirl  
in white with blonder hair  
and bluer eyes

than mine and white  
spangles dangling  
from impossibly large

boobies and western  
boots (also white)  
that I cried and cried

over when they went  
missing and demanded  
a pair of my own.

Her Ken was tan  
with the same white  
cowboy shirt as hers

with black pleather  
pants and a plastic  
cowboy hat (also

black) and they took  
turns riding Barbie's  
perfect palomino

and I knew no amount  
of crying could ever  
get me that horse

but still I cried  
going to bed with Barbie  
and Ken and the horse

all three tucked under  
my pillow, hiding my hurt  
at not being enough like her.

## Portrait of the Poet as a Teenager

Chipped cherry polish  
with no acetone in sight

Lighthouse and breakers  
after all the sailors  
have gone

Incomplete of face  
and frowning  
and already worried  
about lines

She's crashing your party –  
why haven't you noticed?

Ripped jeans  
and plaid converse,  
unwillingly dressed  
to the nines

Whippoorwill singing  
her onomatopoeia  
lying naked on the lawn

Bees buzzing  
suddenly nocturnal  
and looking for a fight

pleading in the mirror,  
*O, won't you show me  
from another side?*

## Eat Me, Drink Me

you try and try and try  
    but your body just won't fit  
        into a life  
    you only imagine you have  
and you change and change  
    and keep on changing  
        and none of it matters  
    nothing can squeeze you  
        into the shape  
    in your mind  
and the pocketwatch says you're late  
    but you can't remember  
where it is you're supposed to be  
    if there's even anywhere  
        other than here

Alice fell down the rabbit hole  
    and stepped through the mirror  
talked to caterpillars  
    and playing cards  
ate and drank  
    what she was told  
        to eat and drink  
and she never questioned  
    the wonders she found  
        in those unlikely places  
just herself

## Lauren's Basement

Gray couches loomed  
 as mountains scattered  
 across a world unknown,  
 icebergs always  
 giving us reason  
 to fall  
 to the carpet  
 sea below.

Spines of couches  
 became narrow passes  
 requiring balance,  
 precision;  
 always returning  
 to an arctic crag,  
 our twin minds  
 saw those icebergs  
 everywhere:  
*India, China, Israel, Mexico...*

Too loud,  
 we were banished  
 to her bedroom  
 of plush elephants  
 and ancient coffee  
 tins full of exotic coins  
     coins that weren't round  
     coins that were two colors  
     coins with holes in the middle  
     coins that didn't feel like metal at all

coins I slipped into my shoe  
 stolen as a Saturday night  
 sleepover bled  
 into Sunday morning  
 Hebrew school carpool  
 tumbling down the sidewalk  
 chiming like bells -  
*India, China, Israel, Mexico...*  
 she would have given them to me  
 had I asked.

A reunion memorial  
told of her adventures  
the first news  
I had  
in over a decade.  
Continents were explored –  
This time, for real.  
This time, apart.  
But icy roads  
require balance,  
precision  
and the carpet sea  
was no longer there  
to break her fall,  
no iceberg cushions  
helped navigate  
her way home.

To find them now  
where wouldn't we go?  
*India, China, Israel, Mexico...*

## Still Life in Car, with Snow

I am living in a Lincoln Towncar  
     a silver boat ferrying everything  
         I could carry  
 the only harbor left open to me  
     in a winter heavy with storms

I live in this Lincoln  
     because his last name was Hernandez  
         and not Moskowitz or Goldstein  
 like my parents had been hoping

I live in this Towncar  
 the driver's seat hunched and broken  
 where my father sat  
     slumped against the window  
         waiting for his next fare

I sleep facing the back of it  
     closing my eyes,  
 I am haunted by the memory  
     of his thick fingers around my throat  
         toes hovering six inches  
             from the kitchen floor

I live in my Lincoln  
 I am skinny and cold and tired  
     and the snow has been  
     falling  
         for hours  
         for days  
 and I sleep with all that I own  
     piled on top of me  
         for camouflage  
         for warmth

I do not know yet  
     that I will only need to survive for another  
         four months  
 and I do not know yet  
     that the snow will stop

Right now  
it is February  
and I am 22  
and I will always be 22  
and living in this Towncar

It is snowing  
and it will always be snowing  
and I'm just glad nobody has come  
to tow me away

## Into the West

highway transformations  
     criss-cross the country  
 turnpike entrances  
     dot the states  
     places recounted  
 by parkway exits  
     co-gen plants  
     give way  
     to corn fields  
 to the continental  
     divide  
     before reaching  
 the lands of the plastic people

there exists a point  
     after industry  
 before complacency  
     where scenic overlooks  
     become contemplations  
     of prairie grasses  
 the journey  
 begins at a toll booth

entrance ramps  
     gas stations  
     rest stops  
 mile markers  
 of the passage of time

    interstitial spaces  
 with roadside sculpture  
     and memorial crosses  
     replace mini-malls  
     and truck depots  
 where antelope  
     really do play  
 against barbed wire backdrops  
     and the unnatural  
     beauty  
 of a smog-inspired  
     neon pink sun



melting  
    into the horizon

but before I-80  
    dead ends  
        into the ocean  
before you reach the salt flats  
    that were once  
        vast seas  
before tumbleweed  
    adheres to the front  
        bumper

we  
have already passed  
into the west

## The Last Reading

Words flowed from her mouth,  
bees smoothed by honey,  
amplifier hum without the feedback.  
Harmony and melody,  
euphony and dissonance at once.  
Audience sitting awed,  
the sacred silence of the local library  
louder for the tension.

The infinity in a pause,  
the time between poem's end  
and solemn applause,  
carries a broken  
memory of the moment.  
Confused,  
fumbling for a thought,  
I waited on her words.

She quoted Roethke instead,  
read her poem  
on the power of sound  
then never read her work again.  
Recollection conflates  
both verses though.  
I remember them all wrong,  
the song of the memory  
mattering more  
than the absolute truth.

## Carnival Lights

across the river tonight  
cast a kaleidoscope glow  
    on dusky water  
    we stop and stare  
        the bridge too far  
to get there from here  
    but the light  
    from the Ferris wheel  
throws chaotic neon  
    onto the Passaic  
reflected back  
a motley of pink and yellow and green  
a fractured and blurred  
    rainbow mirror  
just shimmering  
    shimmering

**II**

## The First Miracle

He made sparrows from clay  
    mixing earth  
    with just enough water  
creating a medium  
    that He could mold  
    and shape  
the idea of a beak  
    the merest suggestion  
    of wings and feathers -  
a child's interpretation  
    of birds

He was scolded for this creation  
    since it was the Sabbath  
and the fashioning of toys  
was deemed an unholy act  
    since even HaShem rested  
    one day out of seven

Despite their protest  
    He breathed life  
    into their small bodies  
    and they flew  
and all who saw knew it to be a miracle  
the first of many that Jesus would perform  
    though some say it was at the wedding  
    in Cana that He revealed  
    the first sign  
the Quran has no such problems  
    with the divinity of a child

## Lauds

Praise each morning  
arrives on hushed lips  
before the sun casts  
its amber glow,  
before water bedews  
chapped mouths  
and parched tongues  
arid from hours  
of lover's work.  
Anoint me with myrrh  
before the hour departs.  
Crown me in tuberose  
and jessamine, their silver glow  
our canticle and benediction  
sung to the fickle moon  
before she retires,  
the Office of Aurora  
the exclusive province  
of newfound lovers  
and the lonely nightingale.

## The Baking of Bread

We baked our first loaf not long after the honeymoon in a kitchen too small for two people from a dough of flour and water salt and sugar and yeast, and there was joy in the making and wonder in the simple perfection of the work. A bland loaf, of no discernible flavor, in white plastic covered with primary colored balloons bought at 7-11 would have been so much easier. But couples cannot survive on white bread alone. So we found rye flour and whole wheat and discovered that these breads do not rise with a simple recipe of five ingredients. Additional gluten was needed, molasses and beer make for a better rye, honey sweetens whole wheat, satisfying in a way refined sugar never could, and the kitchen became ever more cluttered as measuring cups and canisters competed for counter space we did not have, requiring us to refine our technique along the way. Knowing to check the dough ball at the end of the second kneading, determining if it needs more water or more flour, testing the spring of the ball to see if it needs more time to rise, accepting that the task is not as easy as putting the ingredients together and leaving them to do as they will. And we will keep at it. There are butterhorns yet to make, and pumpernickel and pannetone, sourdough and cinnamon swirls, maybe even a Santa Lucia Crown for next Christmas.

## Song for another Adam

The world came into being--  
 an emanation of divine essence,  
 a playground for the first man.

Created on the sixth day,  
 Adam walked among bird and beast  
 and seeing the animals paired  
 and mating  
 finding comfort in each other,  
 he learned what it meant to be alone.

He went to sleep by himself  
 and dreamed of fantastic beings --  
 amalgams of parts pieced together  
 tessellating wing and fin and claw  
 to torso, imagining all the forms  
 a mate might take.

And so you wait  
 for your life's complement  
 like the original bearer of your name  
 but without the magic of creation  
 to transform your rib into a companion  
 and make you whole.

Would that I could give  
 you one of mine, fashion a likeness  
 from my bone while you sleep  
 so that you never  
 have to spend another night  
 in solitude. We live fallen  
 from the garden  
 but believe in that magic,  
 hold the incantation in your heart:

*she is coming*  
*she is coming*  
*she will come*



## Desire

I want your lips,  
    lips that are mine  
neither by birth  
    nor commitment,  
I want them to kiss places  
    with no proper names  
    in the annals of anatomy.

We will name them  
    together.  
We will baptize those places  
    with our breath  
    the order of consonants and vowels  
    secret  
    and idiosyncratic  
and shared  
    in silence.

I want your eyes.  
    I want to claim them  
    in a way that I cannot.  
I want them on me  
    following me  
    feeling their gaze move and rest  
    in time with my hips  
and I want to see what I look like  
    inside them.

## Blood

I know not where my blood comes from.  
 It flows from a source  
     as yet unidentified  
 but its course, though wild, is true  
     and strong  
 its beat predictably irregular  
     moving in time with my longings  
     and seasonal tides.

Biology dictates its production --  
 created in the marrow of my being  
     since birth it has traveled miles  
 veins and arteries  
     atria and ventricle,  
 replicating itself in daughter cells  
 escaping through accident or extraction  
 or slowly dying,  
     cell by cell  
 eliminated over a lifetime.

I know not where my blood comes from  
 but I would mingle your blood with my blood  
     your flesh with my flesh  
 and fashion life beyond ours,  
     or failing that  
 I would open each artery and vein,  
     tear a thousand glass splinters  
     from every limb  
     and let it flow  
 if it meant one more moment with you.

**Sext**

Noonday sun  
smiling down upon us,  
we have come  
to the most auspicious  
of hours for prayer.  
The garden agrees,  
blossoms opening  
their faces to the sky  
the same way we tilt  
towards each other.  
Mystically favored  
though it may be,  
this hour has ever been  
the shortest.

## My Collection of Tarot Cards is Contraband

their intended function existing in conflict  
 with the new vows I took last Easter  
 Vigil, when a priest baptized me  
 in the name of the father  
     and the son  
         and the holy spirit  
 spending part of his annual allowance of chrism  
 on my heathen forehead, claiming my soul

for Jesus. So now what do I do with the collection  
 of runes hidden from my husband in a box  
 that he vaguely intuits should not be approached,  
 that also hides spell scrolls  
     and fairy lures  
         charms for lovers long since lost and won,  
 carved from gem and antler and bone

quietly collecting dust? And what would my mother  
 think about the state of the tallit given her little girl  
 on that Bat Mitzvah day  
     decades ago,  
 well before my Hebrew was traded for Latin  
 and tattoos barred me from Jewish burial,  
 its fabric now shading a lamp with its faded stripes  
 of white and blue? Never again to be used for prayer

the shawl is no less holy,  
     the antler and bone as beautiful  
 as the day they were hewn. Can I no longer  
 contemplate the cards without risking  
 the wrath of my religion? Who do you consult  
     about the proper protocols  
 for retiring the artifacts of a former faith?

I sometimes wonder what Jesus did with his tallit  
 before the cross made it passé. I wonder  
     who gave it to him  
         whether they asked for it back,  
 I wonder what the priests did with their bones and charts  
 once used for tracking the movement of stars while seeking the will of god.

## Stork

My brother gave me a baby for my birthday. Wrapped up in a bow in the backseat of his SUV, the infant writhed in the discomfort of being a tiny human. I accepted the gift as I would any other, as though arriving unannounced with a small child was a perfectly common way to celebrate the day of a sister's birth, and I did not doubt for a moment that this baby was now mine, a foundling brought to me instead of the usual scented candles or another copy of the complete works of Shakespeare. So I carved it a home in my little one-bedroom apartment, nestled among the houseplants and the parakeets, lined a dresser with blankets for a crib, and I was just about to pronounce the baby's name for the first time when I woke up, alone, beside a half-empty drawer of socks.

## Fabric for the Soul

The Lord in pleasant pastures knits  
a hood and cloak for those who wander.

A vengeful god, He plies his trade  
with skeins of scratchy spindrift,

creating gossamer webs to gird  
the hearts of the righteous,

chain link crowns for fools  
thought wise enough to wear them.

His loops and purls grace the hips  
of gypsy dancers in the valley,

covering the skulls of saints  
and sinners, their threadbare robes

providing no protection upon  
entering the halls of Valhalla.

Those lost in the dark forest cry  
for their share of his raiment,

carving their runic warnings  
for the woad-adorned warrior,

spinning straw and tears  
to supplement their lot.

The mothers of our fathers  
taught Him well his craft.

## The Anniversary Present

Orchids  
arrived Sunday –  
unopened, purple-black  
full of the promise of petals  
to come.

Days such  
as these, also  
promising, seldom bloom.  
Sonnets and insomnia take hold  
instead.

Petals  
never emerge,  
bulbs remain closed, blossoms  
failing to form even when sleep  
arrives.

Flowers  
in this dreamscape,  
fed with bitterest tears,  
rip their way through imperfect earth  
in vain.

Throw  
the vase away. Why  
cry for what's already  
dead. Salt water never could make  
it live.

## The Naming of Things

We dance around the vocabulary  
    but there isn't a word  
        to suit  
and all the ones tested  
    sit ill on tongue  
        and teeth  
neither of us certain  
    that a words exists  
    to define our relationship  
        one to the other  
neither of us certain  
    we need definition

Adam went about the garden  
    telling every bird and beast  
        what it ought to be called  
ignoring the fact  
    that they were what they were  
        whether He liked it  
    or not  
ignoring the fact  
    that the snake  
        would charm  
            and then bite  
no matter what name  
    He gave him



## Compline

At the end of day  
the hours of Our Lady  
come to a rest in the garden.  
Brighter blooms have closed  
off their sweetness to the night  
sky, scents of evening primrose  
and moonflower cloak the air  
with their musk  
and I grow weary of this love.  
I shoulder this ache along with the rites  
of the hour, kneeling in penitence,  
fumbling through hymn and antiphon,  
quietly awaiting the benediction  
while a mockingbird  
can be heard singing  
*Salve Regina.*

## **The Bedroom**

This is the room where we first shared a pillow, tucking crown under chin on hand-me-down sheets, pretending it was comfortable enough to sleep that way. This is the place where I first saw you naked if we don't count the picture I happened to find on your computer. These are the walls that sheltered us from the storm, eggshell white and cracking though they are, they still held Sandy at bay. That's the window where we watched the storm roll through our town, though we couldn't see from where we sat just how bad it would be around the corner. This is the mattress that became suddenly small while sleeping back to back, careful not to touch the other without prior permission. This is the bed where we held back our tears, and where we will finally let them all go after it is too late, clutching each other for one more night, one more day, one more kiss that we won't know will be our last. This is the last place we thought we would be. This is the place where our marriage will end.

## Minor Arcana

The Queen of Swords  
flew out from a copy of Kant  
and I suddenly recalled  
where I had hidden my tarot cards.

Wedged into poetry  
and prose to hide them from prying  
eyes, unwilling to surrender  
their secrets to the trash

in order to preserve some semblance  
of canon law within our marriage.  
I sought them out now, started  
A scavenger hunt with myself

through every book I owned.  
The four of cups was marking  
a page in HD's Trilogy  
while Aristotle held the nine

of swords. Emily Dickinson  
carried the Page of Pentacles,  
a young woman holding out  
for a transformation that may

or may not come. The King  
of Wands continues to elude  
me. I flip through every volume  
and pamphlet on my bookshelves

in vain. The set is broken.  
Too beautiful to put away  
forever, I dream in their images,  
willing his return to me.

## Love Songs at the Crossings

My dove in the clefts of the rock,  
I wonder what will last longer,  
the memory of her lips  
or my kiss from further away

in the hiding places of the mountainside?  
There are many ways to love, you said,  
and I wonder if the saying is true:  
the love we get is the love we deserve,

a response from the universe  
returning to us that which we project  
and demand.  
Show me your face.

Eight hundred years of love,  
eight hundred hundred moments  
spent in the arc of falling in love  
have brought us to this place,

this sea beyond the sea -  
we can't be strangers now.  
Let me hear your voice, you said.  
I sang even though you could not hear me

and it made you smile to think of me singing  
while the vineyards were in bloom,  
while the birds folded their wings and cooed,  
and we bowed to something we felt

but could never describe.  
I tried to remember the day we promised  
that we would never hurt each other  
but that was when we still had sharp teeth

like the little foxes that ruin the vineyards  
and steal away to the crossings.  
Catch for us the foxes  
before they find the fruit,

for if your heart is not mine,  
if your lips are not mine  
at least I will have this harvest,  
this song before the reaping.

What is the song?  
Who is this paradise for?  
Who is it we fear is watching us  
when we make love?

We are each here  
to allow the other to be here,  
in this paradise that was not meant for us,  
but we both know we cannot lose  
a paradise we've both seen.

Good morning, love.  
I hope you slept well.

*With thanks to the Song of Songs, the poetry and conversation of Nathalie Handal, and the magic of text messaging.*

**III**



Nothing  
is ever as it seems  
    beyond the shallows  
    currents  
unseen by the eye  
    carry the saltiest sailors  
                    astray

ripples of purest silver  
    and dreams of sunken treasure  
collide in men's hearts  
    pulling them below  
while the topography of water  
    holds her secrets close



## Palette

When light fails  
and shadows color  
your mind  
shading gray  
what was once joyous  
and rainbow  
cast your last crayon  
like a flare into the night sky  
I'll find you by touch  
I'll bring all my paints  
and brushes  
We will remap the stars  
with Elmer's glue  
and gold glitter  
We will repaint  
the sky's faded glory  
in crystal blue

## Still Life

Choice is balanced on the edge of a knife:  
will he use alizarin crimson or rose madder  
for the blood in this still life?

The composition forms, a youngish wife  
but captured alone, painted sadder  
in muted colors laid by the palette knife.

Look closer. Her pale face is rife  
with tinted concerns. Does it even matter  
whether this place still holds life

for her? No longer the rosy-cheeked naif  
he wed, her faith is rent, tattered  
drawing her closer to the jagged knife

on the counter, wrist offering a slice  
of her dreams, now mostly scattered  
to the western winds. Still, life

pulses on, whether woman alone or wife  
with dreams intact or shattered  
with or without the will to wield the knife,  
whether or not she can admit: this is still life.

## Empirical Madness

*[Parmenides] speaks of perceiving and thinking as the same thing.  
-Theophrastus*

The voice of a man is whispering to you  
     but it is 4am and you are alone  
         and all of the radios and TVs  
         are silent, and when you press  
     your ear against the cold  
     walls of the apartment  
 the only sound you hear is a pounding,  
     the blood in your head  
     pulsating in vessels against skin

but when you step away he is there  
     again  
     broadcasting his voice  
         his words just beyond  
     your reach.

The instant you try to listen harder  
     the sound is gone.  
 The man's voice fades into the white noise  
     of refrigerator hum  
     and fishtank bubble.

You worry that this is what it is to be a prophet  
     or a madman  
     and cannot rationalize the difference  
     between the two.

If you can hear him, if your senses  
     tell you that the sound of his speech  
         arrives at your eardrums  
     the voice must exist  
         even if you cannot find it  
 even if you cannot figure out what it is trying to tell you  
     even if you are unsure whether to listen closer  
     or not at all.

## Wandering through Lebanon

I found an old house at the corner  
 of 10<sup>th</sup> and Cumberland  
 in a town named after a country  
 in the Middle East  
 in the middle of Pennsylvania  
 during the summer I ran  
 away from my marriage

And this house is crumbled and fading  
 its lingering grandeur  
 now subdivided  
 with one feral rosebush growing  
 from a crack in the front walk  
 forcing its way through  
 uneven angled brick  
 no one tending it  
 still alive  
 still vivid

Sun-burnt petals  
 dry and ragged at the edges  
 brave the bees and the afternoon heat  
 but it blooms  
 it is blooming  
 it is fucking in bloom  
 in August  
 long after all the other roses  
 have died back  
 or been cut and put in vases  
 decorating dinner tables  
 and sideboards  
 for those who cared for them  
 who bred them  
 and watered them  
 for the specific purpose of their decorative death  
 and I wonder what that rosebush knows  
 that I do not.  
 Someone tell me  
 would you please?

And I once said  
    that I write a lie into every poem  
        to put on the page  
    everything needed to be said  
without being tethered  
    to the truth  
So what here is untrue?  
    That it took 30 minutes  
        to get the rings  
            off my finger  
    that the finger is still healing  
        after 3 days  
    that it might be months before  
        that left-hand digit  
            will feel normal again?

I walk on  
    the color of those roses  
        fresh in my mind  
    not red like blood  
    or valentines  
but of the terrible lipstick  
    my mother wore  
        and smeared on my face  
    in an effort to make me pretty  
and I wonder if anyone  
    will call me pretty  
        ever again  
    now that I am ringless  
        and untethered  
or if anyone would call those roses  
    pretty  
    unadorned and wild  
        and just blooming  
the way nature intended  
    even though they are dry  
        and ragged  
    and I want to believe they are  
        still pretty  
tell me that they're still pretty  
    would you please?

## Summer's End

The boundary of seasons  
blurs as leaves change hue  
and die in a flutter

towards the forest floor  
making branches bare  
preparing for the buds

of spring. I lie naked  
next to you and dream  
of flames. I lie naked

next to him and dream  
of nothing  
but falling leaves

no idea that their season  
is over, no concept  
of the still of winter.

## Atypical Aubade

The glow of the computer screen  
mimics the skyfire  
smoldering the east  
and we cannot find the words  
to sign off from this evening  
of syllables and sighs.  
Retreating to our separate  
beds, we grope  
for new vocabulary,  
forever fishing for  
another way to  
say goodnight.

## Static

Crackle and hum clears  
to the sound of voices...

*What did he say?*

Top five at five coming to you live from the middle of  
everywhere...

*Turn the radio up.*

*Turn the radio off.*

Station to station, musical inflation broadcasts  
across the U.S. nation

and we hear it all                      and we hear nothing.

The stronger the signal  
the larger the audience  
the more similar the sound.

But someone underground has a transmitter  
and a generator  
and is broadcasting voices  
most of us will never hear.

Popping  
with electromagnetic interference  
the battle cry is clear...

*Talk hard. Steal the air.*

*Turn the radio off.*

*Turn the radio up.*

The antenna struggles  
to pick up the faint trace  
of the pirate signal.

A deft hand manning the dial  
can just find it

of falling snow.                      through the sound



**Eastbound on 78**

The wind chill  
    made the air  
    feel 14 degrees  
        below  
when I left this morning  
    before the sun  
showed its face  
to a sky of perfect  
    sapphire  
        blue

and the sky is punctuated with stars  
    too bright and too many to name  
        and I want you  
to tell me which ones they are

but I leave while you still sleep  
gently kissing your forehead goodbye  
    and though you stir  
your snoring continues

I drive east  
    and watch the sun  
work its magic  
on the Pennsylvania landscape  
    the colors of it breaking  
my heart  
    over and over  
I see the spectrum  
    everywhere  
in fields of snow  
on the rock walls  
    lining the highway  
in the memory of your hair  
    as it catches the moonlight  
before you wake

## Waiting for the Snow

Window bright but gray  
foreshadowing stormy weather,  
we wait for the snow

with neither dread  
nor hope for what it may bring.  
Let it rain down white

petals of fresh joy  
for small children. See its gloom  
if that be your lot.

It is not ours. Here,  
we wait at the window  
our pens ready to record

the storm either way. It may  
not come after all. But no.  
Look. It has begun.

## Cento: In the Darkness

It's hard to concern ourselves  
with what winter means if there's no spring.  
Our time in darkness is payment for the loss  
of beauty marks, the shadow  
of plum under night-shaded  
broken telescope worries  
reassuring that we, just as temporary,  
are beautiful too.

A bell can ring, toll, chime,  
imagining decades of scripture painted  
to fill some measure of space.

If I am to meet you on the water,  
let our better angels  
enter through our blood stream,  
let me be pulled from the quicksand  
by a sweet, sticky sap  
slipping in between the seams of my skin.  
I'm praying for a morning star.

If I am to meet you, I will meet you.

*With many thanks to the members of my workshop whose words make up this cento: Sean Battle, Adam Bowser, Elizabeth Kim, Nate Tagg, and Bryanna Tidmarsh.*

## Northern Sky

*Planets don't twinkle,*  
 you said.  
     We flew down  
     a winding country road  
 the ink dark sky  
     showing more stars  
 than I could name  
     and planets besides.  
     Jupiter  
 (it was decided)  
     was the planet in question  
 glowing gold, hanging low on the horizon  
     an overripe melon  
 light years away.

Polaris  
     and the dippers  
 (big and small)  
     maybe Orion's belt  
 were the only ones whose stars I could point at  
     and match to names I knew.

I know there are others out there.  
     Cassiopeia on her throne,  
     her daughter beside her.  
 The dragon and the hydra,  
     both slain by Heracles.  
 Aries and Taurus  
 and Gemini and Cancer  
     and the rest of the zodiac  
 populate the night  
 somewhere, in some other sky,  
 the stories of the ancients  
     all laid out among the stars.

*How do I know if it's a planet?*  
     was the question,  
 wanting to tell our story  
     through the stars  
 picking out the objects that orient  
     you to me

picking out the path that led us here.

I decided  
we should be able to use the planets, too,  
make the constellations  
that will carry our story forever,  
one that will be remembered  
by us  
and the stars  
and no one else.

Name them *The Queen's Coin*  
letting Orion's belt  
be its silvery circle.  
Let Jupiter be the light in the ballroom  
at *Casa Bardici*.  
Pick out four legs and a tail  
call her *Beatrix, the Beagle*.

And maybe  
(just maybe)  
on some clearer night, we'll look  
up to the Northern Sky  
find each other in the brightness  
and name it *you and me*.

## Notes

“Love Songs at the Crossings” contains text originally found in the *Song of Songs* in the Bible and Nathalie Handal’s collection, *Poet in Andalusia*. The poem also contains fragments of conversation with Handal and excerpts from text messages sent from and received by my phone.

“Cento: In the Darkness” contains lines from poetry written by the students of Rachel Hadas’ graduate poetry workshop during the spring semester of 2013. I appreciate the inspiration of my fellow classmates: Sean Battle, Adam Bowser, Elizabeth Kim, Nate Tagg, and Bryanna Tidmarsh.

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