CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

SPEAKING IN THE SPACES RESERVED FOR SILENCE

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For the degree of Master of Art in English

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ABSTRACT

SPEAKING IN THE SPACES RESERVED FOR SILENCE:

By

Jung Hwan Chang

Master of Arts in English

*Speaking in the Spaces Reserved for Silence* is a collection of poems which work to navigate and collect the ephemeral nature of communication. Some poems investigate the ruptures of speech stifled by bursts of overwhelming emotion. Other poems explore the moments in which two people do not share a common language—or other moments in which those who do share a common language still fail to communicate. The manuscript creates what Jean Baudillard calls a “simulated version of reality” or “hyperreality” into which the characters in the poems and the speakers of the poems enter due to the “seduction” of an escape from the seemingly “impossible” nature of human connection through communication. The poems enter this dream-space to find a means of “self-preservation” in order to maneuver through the scattered and sometimes hollow cacophony of sounds to find the connective tissue in what Wallace Stevens, in his essay “Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” explains as “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.”
Apolo

I watch

poetry swarm above me.  The hailstorm is coming.  With

little room for error, I dodge its arrows to make space.

A faceless warrior looks to me like Apollo returning from victory over mother and nature.  Bipedal serpent slung over his shoulder, arms knotted like a noose.

The moon flashes briefly.  Hesitance quickens. I remember quivers slung over my back, a strap tightening closer to my heart.

I try to recall the training.  Then a twitch.

An arrow, plumed with letters I’ve plucked, breaks against the crowded sky.
Love

That brilliant syntactical hiccup
glides over the heads
of all those cynics
who couldn’t help turning in their souls
to find answers for the trembling earth
and search for the validation of God.

At least Zeus and Hera
were realists:
monogamy was a human word.
Polytheism without polygamy would be hypocritical.

After all,
Hera with irrational jealousy
rationed her ire to all
in her path. Ask Echo.
She’ll agree to every last word.

But if you ask Zeus himself, he’ll say
monogamy is monotonous.
Zeus was almost eaten
by his own father’s desires. He would not
kneel to those of another.
Z had desires of the flesh without
the weakness of skin and bones.

Christ never kissed and told,
too tired from saving sinners,
cleansing us so we can hate
the skin we are here to leave behind.
Learning To Play

Even when the barbarians missed, they terrified their enemies by filling the air with death sounds, which T’sai Yen had thought was their only music until one night she heard music tremble and rise like desert wind.

- Maxine Hong Kingston

A knocking persists.
I hear it
on my head, on my body.
And I’m not the age
to answer. It doesn’t hurt,
but stings enough for me
to think discipline.
My father’s words vibrate,
amplify: pounding, then
thumping. Bruises appear, small
purple puddles of mud at the mouth
of bifurcation. I’m ready to eat
one direction and spit
the other. I chew
daggers and swallow
unable to speak them so
they don’t tear through lips
culturally sewn. Hands and voices
inch toward mercurial notes. Between
body and mind,
the pain piques restless. To survive,
I diagram patterns in the sound,
music in the rhapsody of beating.
A Mother’s Trade

I measure the distance to heaven from the fall, mimicking her stories.
I repel weightless past screams and celestial fire. Recalling how she used to dance, I hide in the light struck between the moon and night; the streaks pouring across panes distort life behind. I grab a parasol for some shade so I can see.

My mother’s gray eyes harden. Her judgments orbit and tug. What I’ve become, she’s given up for me. I kneel

word-struck in the prayer pit, carrying a stone-lipped clasp between my hands to lock the prayers in. Her intervention startles my grip, scattering what I had in my grasp into the chilled memories from where difficult epiphanies will be plucked. A breath of frost, brittle and blowing apart, rushes
down a desiccated flume. Beauty lies, my wreck-less religion: how she spins what evolves around her.
How To Stay Afloat

A quick impulsive jerk never occurred to me.
I should keep my hands steady while I drive

my son’s sight. I’ll practice
drowning. I’ll draw my plan

on this watery curtain.
I’ll put on a great show of splashing around. The deep end

seems closer now, seams
unseen, the lifeguard’s blood-

red suit floats across the wavy ceiling:
a rolling, bending, glass sky.

It looks no different than driving. What delight-
ful infection. The coming

night crawls into my skin, a needle
pushed to empty quiet into my veins. It’s rising

with the day’s light. They’ll simply judge it
as a quirk woven in consequence. I’ll float

here for a moment
in this sun-warmed bath, trace

an outline and keep
one eye on the slow moving

trails. I imagine
my son at my age

trying to keep his hands steady: his fingers, desperate,
trying to hold time from spilling from his hand.
Tracing Lines

The world seems strung together
with words. I heard a noise

that sounded like memories being exhaled into glass
rolling above fiery coals. I reached out
toward a boundless universe, unable to touch
escape beyond the translucent dome.

I think of the burden of a boy.
The curious weight of having to choose so others can dream.

If not for the burn of blinding
wax dripping into his eyes, he could
have avoided disrupting the ocean. The ripples
might have never reached me.

Mistakes I’ve sewn onto my skin rank
of terrain and weather of faithful journeys,
the visions of which in someone
elicited this gesture of stitching
a similar symbol upon my sleeve:
the meaning of which I’ve misused along the way.

I’ve dragged loneliness like loose skin.
My mind has wandered, raking its own steaming coals.

What combination of offerings,
actions or words,
could unlock this box?

I’ve dropped the frame one too many times
and playing with puzzles somehow loses its charm.
The pieces fit, the picture’s right,
but it’s not what I remember.
Open House

The brain biopsy detailed the epicenter of the disaster.
I thought it better to

give up my art
   for the sake of what
      I conceived as love,
riding onto shore
   in a scallop shell.

   The profusion of soft sea foam
      distracted my judgment.

What did I think of myself? A golden slave?
The unextinguished passion
   I tucked away in a clamshell?
The dubious gift I shaped
   for that thief who      stole
and gave away       the living
       glow from    my precious coal.

   I fell into a coma
from the strain of pounding
   furiously at your heart spilling
sparks and blood, forgetting

   the jagged, rough, dusty, and black
unfinished pearl.

I concern myself with the chandelier
   and how to keep it
   from falling. But it’s still.
      It’s the house that’s moving.

I sift through myths
   my sister and I created to fill
the silence between the scenic
   seconds
mom framed.
Mano-a-Mano

God became real when I was fifteen.
My pastor’s hand confirmed it. His thoughts might or might not have been

with me or Him. I may have fallen asleep or awoke dreaming.

It was better when I couldn’t see—
mine to protect:

my rabbits, my duty, my charge.
My uncle’s firm hands hoisted their unlucky legs skyward where the branch struck like lightning. The night burned, slapped with blood and wood and flesh, metal – both hare and head strained, carved and stained. The first blow flushed away before the shock entered my mind. Taut, he handed my duty down to me.

That night, he said
I was a man. Then,
I killed a friend so my family could eat.
Leaves fall all autumn
without ever touching
the ground.
I blink and turn before
they can.
I clasp my hands
(I wish in applause),
knees begging a position
bending towards grace. My body tries to mimic
the dancing leaves and practice the art of drowning
in the swirling, fickle-minded winds. Even though I try to stop
imposing meaning on God’s will to ease my head,
my prayers succumb to passing seasons.

I hear my mother’s voice say, *stand and turn
away, knees upright and locked.* Exhausted,

I pull dead
leaves from her name
as the water I see through clears
and I can feel my eyes again.
Gravestone Rubbing

Wise old men sift
listless. These owls
want repayment for the use of their wide eyes, eagerly
await worms arriving early for dinner.

Gluttonous night prowlers

cautions us: uphold the old rhymes
as suns die flaring and shedding,
the mural smeared of grime and glory
with a softened starlight glaze.
How they bask in silent self
dedication. Their daylight slumbered,
they question into night.

Who desires the craft in cutting flesh
to expose raw prayers
under the awning of another dawn approaching?

Who rides to keep the horizon in
clear sight while swinging over
branches of the unknown, a silly, fruitless journey?

Who can drink and stomach the senseless
passion, a practicality, a youthful exuberance.

Who savors to see with beaks pursed,
cooing pines of longing after mites boxed in sawdust.
All neatly dressed and ribboned,
delivered in trucks driven solely by faith?
Paper Christ

He seemed to float among us
(the paper Christ)
with veiled glee

warning a paper tiger
would shred our fleece,
scatter the fluffed clouds
and shatter heaven.

We dance desperate, wonderful.
Our movements wander thirsting,
bleating hymns of pain. He hands us
serums. We sift through the molasses
to find the memories of an Eden
before the shepherd and his dream.
It’s better to know
not the sin we ingest.

Our hooves cloven to mimic
the gestures he teaches
paw the backs of pews
fumbling to fill the pockets of far more desolate pastures.
Instead we pay for sins
to build a heaven.
We leave. We learn.
We return to suffer. On

a loose nail hangs our savior’s
painting. Our hearts cross.
Our eyes wooden, trace an out-
line of sacrificial reason.
Unraveling Silence

I watched fireworks as a child
and imagined each as speech. So fast

meaning can’t be gathered. Only
the smell of burning
leaves remnants of words: their anatomy

ground into the glitter of calcified bones.
Blood vibrates
to the music of taut tendons retracting lives

in that burning hearth. It settles
and sits to watch the embers, like Icarus,
have a go at it.

They die somewhere between heaven
and the heads of trees. These shine-less
stars float towards us dried fossils, dust-
formed amber, preserving
feeling, and falling—
hardening onto paper. A few will be

excavated. Or pressed by
curious hands between lines onto a page,
smudged together to form combinations

of decimals and letters. They collect
the dust shed by human remains in paper museums.
A Fool’s Errand

If you want to improve, be content to be thought a fool and stupid
- Epictetus

Seams frayed, collar flipped.
My loose laces swing to a vagrant rhythm,
tripping occasionally on my careless tongue.


I have no business,
distinct gardens,
or fresh strains of fruit.

I find moving boxcars
to jump, count trees, and
keep to the meter of tracks.

Rides need to be hitched.
Sometimes I’m forced

beyond simmering towns through
homes that mark a familiar distance.

I could pass judgment looking
backward. I could pretend

the wisdom of living.
I could stop to reflect –

take root to sow stories. But
there are stranger sounds
and brighter lights coming
from the next town over.
Finding Love at Summer Camp

Men have no true connection with nature.
This is why men constantly work to woo her.

- Alice Fulton

Dawn speaks through light reflecting and sounds refracting.
This is what I know of her.

Every encounter I treat as a birth,
I name them all:
her screams cascade;
her laughs twitter;
her tears dew, rain, and flake;
her anger twists and cranes.

I mimic her supernumerary songs,
chime springs and rustling generations of wheat,
drum up storms and strum spectral rays,
plot percussive keys for the coming harvest.

I profess I love her by sowing,
by growing seeds, by mounting monuments.

I wake to words and music,
scattered in what was left of her sleep.
Drowsiness

Pulled over by the sun’s wink,  
my tires roll and run over caution  
cones costumed in thistles  
and leaves. Lazily, the car purrs to  
a stop. The old girl could do with  
a nap, not yet ready  
to crash nor push through. The horizon  
can wait. A short dip in the wavy desert  
couldn’t hurt. I wade in toe-deep and kick  
up dust to dream  
shadows into mirages  
that the bending arm of mid-day heat brushes.

I tell a joke about a cellar door to trees  
whose doll-like limbs, a wind-chime  
loosely strung with sap, knock  
together to form a hollow song.

The desert, at high tide, drinks down rising mountains  
and trees, courting late into the closing  
minutes before the day looks  
up for the evening.

A spinster fish, dust drunk,  
burrows from beneath  
the sandbar to weave with fins  
a story of drowning  
in the arid desert,  
grasping for clouds to weep.

Aroused by seeing the dream closing  
toward death,  
the night undresses. First  
gown, then slip.  
Stars stream threads,  
light sewn a latticework of lace,  
to seduce the rising sun.
Lullaby

It wasn’t the sand-
man who left,
littering ellipses of stacked smoke to settle in your throat.

The searing flashes of a phantom comfort steams
and urges
you to drink

the white lye your mother forgot on the nightstand
beside your dreams
while she caressed you goodnight,

shoveling piles of silent night-
mares in the ditches of your slumber.
Older, you build hours at work, laying brick and cement

so you can earn a clean leaving
as time stamps out the things
she’s touched.

Your children succumb to another.

You

leave a kiss on their heads and forget your milk
on their night-
stand eager to return to bed.
Spoke in the Grass

Sliced, her notions litter
plots of notation. Sounds stumble

and earn their place between ticks
coming from the music box: a language forming

inside the breathless ones, twos, threes,
and the final belt, a sad looping stroke

of vibrating hum fading into who,
a whisper says. To free her mind

she rides, tires stuck to the road,
seated in flight, the night’s sun seems

close, bearing down. Bearing up
destination or life, unsure which one
is steering and which one is stirring.

Her eyes peer through
the asphalt sky shooting a searing song.

All that was wrong

were the tears. A pool near the crest
of an unattended edge, young moon.

Somewhere at the end of night is fate.
For now

chasing, she pedals leaning into a face
that changes with every tire spin, a little luck

locked into a wish. Racing
a needle which measures movement

and time, she bends toward silence
in the sun’s light, searches the ink-smeared air,

and catches – a bit of sinuous sweep – the hem of night.
Reeds rattle in the spokes of her wheels;
She holds up a paper sail and rides.
You swim through the murk
wearing goggles so you can
keep your eyes open.
A short drop from the cliff,
you slip a step beyond
the rye field, distracting everyone
by spinning yarn with anyone in earshot.
No one counted on your being
a terrific listener. You know why
the word phony was always drawn
to your lips. You only lie to help
define a truth too large to grab. Maybe
you learned a lesson in missing
the chance to catch your sister so
she can continue
to play. She has to learn on her own
that playing with rings
bring trouble.
A New Home for Max

*It exists in silence, is invisible, unspeakable. An imagination of order. A music of spheres.*

- Robert Hass

There exist yet others who swim in emotion but can’t smell blood, who possess less teeth. Perhaps less menacing, still,

a first thought gleaned, then discovered in an indigestible beak and pen to be the only two parts of their existence on the page, uneaten and un-passed. Their ancestral shells are lost, the myriad of feet with which they walked through poems are the same arms used to write. They tend to be strong swimmers, hunting alone or in communities to catch images with their camera-like eyes and telescopic vision. Unlike human eyes, theirs do not change position to find perspective they use to write. Certain species even fly through meaning for short distances outside of the poem. Some, even further evolved, have skin covered in metaphors which enable their poem to change color and suit its surroundings, making its center, whether emotional or rational, invisible.

Both intelligent and spineless, they write with their hearts.
Preserved

My still-born daughter.
Was it not all what you expected?

Your delicate mouth frozen
in a tiny
Oh!? 

It could hold a spool
of unwound words.
If only it could straighten
or curve,
burst in ticklish laughter
and awaken my searching,
indifferent
eyes.

If only the weight of your
years could strengthen
my arms that will grow tired,
heavy from pushing
an empty swing.

Dawn’s found her separate peace
(caught in Orion’s net).

I dream of reaching my wife’s eyes
and closing them.

Hoping for a word
from any one of our mouths
to say that we are healing.
Parsons Code

He extends the pocket prism with which he discovered purpose
and lays a foot on a passing crab

ccontent to be a footstool.

He taps one end
of the grainy glass cipher,

then raises it to pipe a sound.
Land-washed kelp form lines

in the sand. Falling
cocoanuts, milky blood stirring,

release their grip on windswept fronds
and add percussive rhythm

below. They appear to note movement
of the stars, the trees, the wind and waves. All the moonlit shadows

sway in mimicry, brightly mocking the storm
with idiosyncrasies they learned under the sun.

The palms above pull at the storm, delaying to rejoice in the islander’s
fear, watching him forge writhing letters into song,

striking illegible sounds to a careless clock, heaping seconds upon
the moment, keeping time to the changing winds.

Then a flick of his hand cuts the wind in lacerated delight,
each finger bouncing back the gale in staccato. He peers through

the tiny cracks between his wind-whipped and salt scrubbed hair
to grasp brief glimpses of his work. Swinging

his hand in an inverted arc, his lens capped baton pulls
a wave from the ocean as it climbs toward the tidal rush. Quiet comes

crashing. His feet swirl and shift the sizzling sand.

22
Sheeted holes, dampened and cleft, leave more space
for notation – where, later, he’ll read night’s music

and recall before being
moved from speech, his mother’s hands knit
into the sky, gifting names and stories to the stars.
Make Me Promise

I.

Try it once. Learn to swim by practicing the art of drowning.

Earn patience by being pushed into its possession.

There you’ll find a difference between giving up and giving in. The beginnings of art.

As if made of wood, skin and bones and every hair want to float.
Allow the tide to pull you underneath. Beneath its reflective surface, beneath what seems life in writing, a raft-like beast floats closer: mouth open, eyes closed.

Lost and shaken, be taken between its teeth. Swallowed, but not eaten. Swept by unexpected sounds, past the cavernous mouth.

Try to remember the lateral glide across the palate, through the velum and the guttural slide into its stomach.

Be found not blind, but patiently wading through a belly full of mist.

It will clear into the places where intended meaning becomes digestible.

II.

Explore what it feels to be flesh and blood, fighting through a marionette’s recollections, soft and sentimental. Not held, but being
held and pulled to write
what’s already been written.

Call to hear if anything else lives.
Become reunited in conversations
thought to be the residue of your own
voice. Renew a love of rhyme
lost on the surface when the end seemed near
and your beloved echo drifted.

The subterranean city of sounds
wakes with one eye open,
the other still dragging with the drowsiness of sleep.

Don’t be startled as he rises
for air to find a place in the poem to surface.

Letters like the stuff of stars
fall, dusted over bending glass.

Follow the spout to spray the heavens
and fall back in. Ahead through the whale’s
eyes is the safety of the horizon.

Hold on as he turns away.
He’s seen it before.
Dive with him again
and return to the untrained
school of fish, all learning to swim.
The Climb

One day, I will find the right words and they will be simple.
Jack Kerouac, Dharma Bums

Dawn breathes static letters and releases shapes, not sounds. She rolls a beam of light, gleaning against the cylinders, like a pen on her cumulous lips.

A mason beneath the bridge passes time between bricks, waiting for cement to solidify.

He moves with Dawn’s eyes toward the caudal shape of the sky, contemplating a white whale that is melting.

He imagines coiling up the cables, ascension wrung from the steel banister with lifting anticipation. Such wobbling and warbling implied in the transition between coming and going. His hands were made to work the bridge. Its mortar as unclean as art:

the steel feels clean;
anxiety lifts. A prayer floats by, grazing his head. His hands meet to preach, a sermon written in granite on steel. Dawn presses her pen at the base, waking where the mason works.
Carving up old stories

Digging joints into muddy memory,
I beat toward the rising rain and
whistled into my throat so I could
sip slowly the hurricane’s rim.
The cool burns spread across
my deserted skin and awoke anticipation.

I leaped to reverse
the spilled curds, the sheered
sheep, and the spider
spitting a trap inside
her. I pulled apart
a familiar curse to forget
the knitting and twisting
in the order and the color of things.
Students in younger years may think in their brief thoughts that it is a sin to tax a sentence to its parts.

Words, they think, should be simple. Meaning, they hope, would be clear.

Some youths, so coolly relaxed and yet given to impulsive construction, write wild variations of almost poetic lines which explode, in rays, toward airless contemplation, lacking conviction, stuck in a mud of lax discipline.

So close to touching reckless beauty, they grope and grasp, forget and relapse.

Poetry is love written on paper. Life is a line of words, sounds and visions stretched eternally. We are willing to break our hearts,

but not a sentence.

Not able to see that a sentence, like a heart, doesn’t always break cleanly.

There are those practiced who made a craft of breaking. They know a cleaner cut heals faster.

Readers dig for it. But writers cut beauty from the same sentence spelling tragedy. A simple break. Control inspired. We make incisions to extract hope from beneath the skin of agony.

This break shows an ageless love before we are aged, a love before
we define it. First thought before the sentence is what a break can reveal. We at times assume that the finished sentence in a poem is a diamond. The line break adds value to its beginning. Grab and hold the whole, the coal which adds heat. At the edge is a final but continuing word formed for its black residue.

Poetic line and poetic sentence when married become messy, clear. Together they burn and shine.
A Brief Breath of Spring

It seems as if the ocean had sprayed its last mist over the fine teeth of the mountainside.

In a season clouded with overcast skies, the morning hit a pitch, coaxing silence to bed.

Instigated by the metered chirping of jays, somewhere backstage, hidden within the family of leaves.

The first crack melts through the frozen lake, the first note of morning light. The sun wakes and begins to stir in the earth below.

Soon this too will peak, dropping and rising through the summer’s dogged days, wading through the waves of heat until leaves tire and fall.

Dawn will dim. She will cease her daisy picking and chain making. The anxiety of joy: too much too soon. She will ease herself under a tree.
Just Before Saying Hello

Letters form words and babble
on and on. Mutter evolves to chatter,
the matter of which tongues pull
precise incisions to loaded words.

They form smaller cuts from larger lines,
ink patched over open thoughts
or big bursts of cracked lead
smudged from a little brush

with light. They sip the music of sharp nights,
street nights I stay awake to walk
to find answers to secrets
I don’t want to know.

They cramp, crawl, and call,
held and forgotten, in shutter-
clicks which trip laughter. Ear canals

open to passages of long waited tales,
sidling along walkways which flicker in and out
of sight. Up above, lamp-posts smolder, sparked by tiny men
who use matches for twigs

to make light. Embers spill
childish beliefs, like notes from windchimes,
and bring the brief chill of toppled control.
Dog Tags and Charm Bracelets

I imagine Hannah somewhere,
    skipping class and kicking rocks.
    She keeps her distance from trees.

She can’t stand to see paper. She can’t grip
    a pen.
    Besides, the dog tags
    on her charm bracelet clink too loudly
    against her desk when she writes.

I want to caution the other students not to stare.

What did she care about contracts,
and broken lines, second thoughts
and unexpressed gestures?

She can’t read poems about war. She can’t stand
    the talk of family.
    She gathers
    trinkets like words, each
    trapping different sounds.

She moves in
the stories they create.
She won’t
belt her songs. She won’t
sell her stories. She won’t
tap her strings. Her movements won’t
dance. In all
her reluctance, Dawn admits,

*I tell poems.*

I watch the crook in her
arm when writing rise to her throat. She walks
familiar words through unfamiliar sounds, maneuver
reticence to a lilting jolt. And in this
suspension, I see
an open gate. I grab
a bottle, tighten my laces, and follow
sounds to find stories she won’t tell.
I splash up muddy hills
to a field of calla lilies.
Thirst grates my throat
and fills it
with splintering thorns. I moan
as my words trip and try to walk
gingerly over eggshells already cracked.

Checking my tongue
in the rippling mirror
slowly leaking from the petal
wrapped flute, I drink in the burning
to briefly quell the pain.

All is swollen:
tongue, lips, and throat.
The body becomes liquid.
Hannah carries home
with her. The cart
has a wheel that wiggles;
it must be difficult
to maneuver. Looking straight
ahead, she goes where
the cart goes, trips over
night after night, stumbles forward.

She no longer haunts her childhood home.
Her scattered calls of distress diminish.
What could a coin mean to her?

She learns to barter
with memories, silent
thief of sight. Surrendering
to the pleasure of her inner eye.
She gives up

her father for a blanket,
her mother for food,
her brother for a book.

Pressure expands away to-
ward a peripheral
field where
her nerves have been
pushed.
Detour to Where I Love

Speaking grew tiresome – we anticipated each other’s words. We never knew they were codes, or did the combinations fail to mean what we dreamt in our philosophies.

I dig a hole to bury what I can of my words, unable to caution strangers passing by when one crosses before me, unwilling to speak.

My hands spring motioning, telling her to go around. She stands still, I figure, trying to understand. She isn’t from here. I try but fail to find the motion to ask her name. My faulty assumption. She points to the waking sky.

Dawn reads the grave I have dug with her hands, her fingertips searching the contours for words. I can see her exhausted mind fall frail to a pillow of dirt, a night—time carousel she rides to recover. Feeling the crystalline ruin of her speech, I dream into the night a language of hand-spun signs illegible in natural light. I trace the simple language we share on the mound of earth between us.
Tracking Footprints

We spend the seconds
   learning how to step
   in and out of tangled vines
   and wrap our imaginations around bodies
   of trees watching, waiting for
   its fruit to fall into our grasp.

Carefully forming a cradle with your palms,
you keep wordless
knowledge from tipping over

your fingers. Forgetful
of the warnings to stay
within the lines while we color,

you let your curiosity search
its red skin, looking for an opening
to burrow into its flesh

to discover the sharp taste of acidic wit
   and soothing burst
   of sweet praise.

Careful not to commit the sin of speaking,
you motion for me
to take a bite,
an apple waking in your palm.
Winter melts cool and liquid. The tongue can tame differences in temperature it can taste.

Throughout the city, in the scattered blinking porch-lights, the anticipation of change sustains me. At my door

a fair-haired girl calls
silent, her thoughts wandering

like dandelions bursting in her preoccupied eyes
as she unpacks tupperware buried deep in her mind.

As the light flickers darkly
over her face, I see envy

lit. In every passing shade, my own
imprinted there. Her silence seems stitched through her skin
to keep from exposing her nerves. Her words,
the cadence of her design by day unformed,
dangle around her neck—

harmony of strings and winds at night.

Tension, almost touching our lives,
gnashes like earth-packed plates.

She must have seen past me to the walls’

measurements, foreign names, and changing faces. A momentary image of a house
collapses as she looks away. Hannah came
and left without a word.

Here and gone, a thought repressed.

She must have seen what I once saw. Needed
what I then wanted:
a new day to call home,
another place to hang my hat.
Map-Making

The topography is unsettled.

Photographs still need gathering
to mark terrain.

Legend yet defined can’t let go
of gods and natural objects.

The tree is not yet
able to evolve
branches into arms.
    The acorn, stuck
in solitary debate, can’t decide
whether it should be napping
    safely in shade or burrowing
    into the shadow. Words lie
pregnant in a dirt bed, wondering if
hikers passing through would hear its sounds
as speech stripped bare.

The horizon
    isn’t. A gaze
cannot. Too much
blue to distinguish
a hue. Too saturated
with tears to be fit
for ink to take root.
Rhyme can’t help
    but be pulled
to break.

Yet the record is written there. The markers
seem treacherous, like nostalgia, always moving

forward, but not away. As if they know
that the threat of taming is gone,

paths and rivers begin to appear.
Moving Eve

All color, names, doodles, and heights
once traced have been scrubbed

and flushed down the curbside gutter

into the sea: a mirror wiped,
walls clean and bare.

Leaving one task I sit
and wait, house almost

ready for sale. All that’s left

is leaving. Killing the fire

in the morning before I go
would be more practical.

I don’t want to freeze tonight.

This evening is frigid
as something moves in, audible fumes

filling the empty house,
escaping through the first, second, and third

cracks of the hearth. And I

pull up my heart, anchored to the heat,
to those memories drowning

in the sea. I tear

a page to make a sail,

a prayer hatched to catch the wind.
Night Sky

A click, then a soft scale
of notes descend down a busy
street and buzz
lamps awake. They dim
slowly in tune to a cooling air.
The cloudless night hums.

Winds strum power-
lines which nameless night birds alternate mute.

The neighborhood returns
home to soft percussive
beats. Branches chime in,
rustle their leaves. Beyond the row
of buildings and trees, a short stone’s
throw from here, cars take
turns rushing
to the rhythm of lights. I stand
asleep while the city, my mother,
sings me to my dreams.