

BRAIDED TRAIL

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English: Creative Writing

by

Leslie Ann Ingram Beach

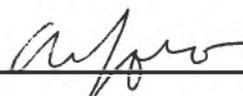
San Francisco, California

Spring 2017

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Braided Trail* by Leslie Ann Ingram Beach, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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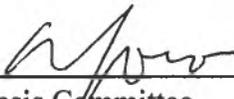
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BRAIDED TRAIL

Leslie Ann Ingram Beach
San Francisco, California
2017

In this collection of poems, I aim to capture the multiple experiences of walking on trails, the sensations, sounds, thoughts, memories, and encounters that arise and the way those experiences linger in life away from the trail. I employ a wide array of forms-- prose poetry, skinny long poems, poems more rigidly divided into stanzas of specific lengths, short gasps of poem, all with the intent that the multiplicity of form should mimic the multiplicity of trails and trailless wanders out of doors. I hope to accomplish a sort of blurring of the imaginary delineations between "nature" and "civilization," observing human interaction with a naturalist's eye and noticing the plants and animals that coexist with our urban and suburban spaces, in addition to noting the impact of wild spaces on humans and humans on wild spaces.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5/17/17

Date

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I am grateful to those whose wisdom and example taught me to travel and to attend outside: my grandma Mogi, my mom and dad, my many teachers and students and mentors in the field of outdoor education, and anyone who's ever accepted the invitation to go for a walk with me.

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An Origin

The braided borrows from geology,

not follicles. A braided stream bears

so much silt

it spurts. Dams itself.

Starts again in a different direction.

The idea lovelier than its execution, turbulent mud,

but then that lifts us back to ideas of beauty, does it not?

Especially as the body moves, bouncing and tangling in recollection, lifting an

observation, carrying it for a time, then losing it in the currents of association it

untrammels.

Some directionality endures.

The trail evokes many trails.

The trail crosses many trails.

The trail has been many trails,

will become many more. This broad flatness: former logging road,

encroached down to a deep furrow for feet

edged by riotous huckleberry growth.

That tunnel in the greenery: fox-carved,

judging by the purpled scat on the rock by its aperture.

The trail possesses its own viewpoint,

its own argument. Like an essay,

it lays out its vistas, this destination

of waterfall, that ridge of there

and back again, there,

a loop biting its own tail. Almost

an identical terrain trod with or without a trail: deep

difference. (See Chaparral Poems I and II.)

As in an essay, a creator looked at this terrain,

consulted sources-- theodolite, level and rod,

the tools at hand-- and decided

how to proceed. Straight up or switchbacks?

Wide enough for two wheels? Four?

Two friends to walk side by side, or single file? Built to withstand

hooves, to drain water, to cut direct, to meander?

Bridges or stepping stones or the removal

of shoes? Each choice a degree,

a direction of attention. Here, look here. Feel this thing.

Trail more poem than essay,

more invitation to converse than attempt to convince.

Full rests of broken attention,

the eye flashing out at movement,

fading into its mind, looped.

In the Dust, Mid-trail

Hind feet at right angles

mouths open, eyes closed

two baby squirrels

quite dead.

I wanted to look away

but, compelled by something

not unlike honor,

drew close.

Whiskers. Heads

a delicate wedge.

Curved incisors.

No visible marks

and enough flesh

on the bones

they couldn't

have starved.

The story-brain awakened:

flushed

by a red tailed hawk,

they leapt

with too much vigor,

fell together

through the canopy.

Or

their mother

was taken

by a grey fox

and they scurried

urgent from

the nest.

The heart peeled off
and gently cradled,
only slightly queasy,
stroking each strand of fur
with its imagination.

The body consigned
them to the scavengers.

On the Trail

Gravel churning under heavy tires, a diesel-thirsty engine drinking silence by the gallon. I step to the side of the fire road, placing second-hand hiking shoes in the dry grass of the narrow shoulder. Never mind that I came up here to be alone in the wild of the world. Someone must maintain these passageways; today, that someone has a buzz cut and a sunburned neck and lifts his hand in acknowledgment as I make myself as small as possible. Planted there, I remember my dad's bike accident on a fire road not unlike this one. I came home from the last day of sixth grade to find him dusty and shaken and stitched-- shocking in a man who must bleed profusely before he'll accept so much as a band-aid. Ever since that fall, whenever he hikes, he kicks and tosses tire-turning rocks from trails, defying another such moment of fear. The truck rumbles on. I slip through the dust in its wake.

Pescadero Marsh

Little, I'd drag

my legs, wish

to be slower, smaller,

snail-meticulous.

Grown and kept

too long indoors,

I skip ahead,

startle the great blue heron.

Constant: the pond turtle

swimming with head

just above water

strikes me still for minutes

Quartz

Its planes speak salt

but carry no flavor--

two and a half

decades back

I'd need to explore

everything

by tongue; today

I reserve the test

for the strangest.

I hardly hesitate

upon picking up

this assemblage

of lines too fine

to see: it fits

right in among

teeth and gums,

clinking in

under tongue.

The repeat

of those conditions

that something

so fine could recur:

astonished by what bodies do

this certain cause and effect,

hard slam and the blood between skins.

The body knows

to make its garnet

the first time

its fingers feel the blow.

Crystalline spontaneity

cracked routine.

In Oregon, Eagle Creek

Dynamite blasted a C-shaped way
through the basalt, so gently graded you can stroll
through what suggests clawing. Only near
the third waterfall does
the backsplash
slick
the rock
underfoot.

Most day hikers turn back there,
and the trail above the falls narrows, slaps
its walkers' legs with untrimmed greenery.

On the Trail

A mile up the trail, I come upon it, looming white among the chaparral. I lift a hand this time, and the driver nods to me; I notice his stubble and a certain set to his eyes I can't read. Does his job feel like work? It must; it is. He wields heavy things, swings tools, sweats. Matter moved over distance. He's on the flanks of Mt Tamalpais. He sees the change in the landscape because of the effort he exerts. I hold this up to my past, where sometimes the changes are stark but sometimes barely there; where response can be warm as a hand-written thank you letter, or harsh as a flurry of curses, calm long gone. And what of my current source of purpose, words? I hold their merit, but there are days I'd gladly trade them for a spot in that driver seat. I walk past.

Water Off a Duck's Back

Tender child

not much in this world, but what's here stings

let those words roll

off your feathers like those of the mallards

ducking and dabbling

in Corte Madera Creek.

Survival: harsh words beading

and gathering

up with the sweet.

Years too impervious. Woman, it's time

to flare some feathers, let a few

words nestle and bring blood

to exposed skin.

July on Limantour

I will not be able,

I swore,

to separate the beauty

from the ache of this night.

Tipped back whiskey, walked ahead

a quarter mile or more.

Started the fire. Evaded notice. Swam

out far, then farther

into lifting waves

bright with bioluminescence.

Each kick. Aglow.

Nearly found

what it would take

to keep on swimming.

Used it

to swim back

to the sand

promising never

to wish for this company

this bonfire these mandolin strings

these dripping bodies steaming

too close to the flame.

Speciation

Yesterday

a scrub jay

cocked its head

flared tail feathers

on the fence post.

Hello punk, I said.

I'm wondering if I'll look back

on this tilted head as the moment I tipped

from seeing ravens, vultures, gulls

ice plant, scotch broom, rats

as the drivers-out of fragile

elaborate life

to seeing them

as nodes from with the new elaborations

will unfurl.

On the Trail

Doug firs rise above me, dust-draped, the moss on their trunks crisp in late summer sun. The forest feels a different beast from its winter lushness. More change than relative moisture in the air should impose. I don't wonder that trail work must be done in August: to truck tires, dust clouds have nothing on slick clay. I remember the passenger seat of a crotchety old Subaru stick-shift whose engine only caught every third time we turned the key, as its wheels spun halfway up a muddy hill. A special kind of terror, when all you can do is grit teeth, radiate calm, and start planning for the worst.

Chaparral I

That day, I intended no great adventure. Humble
in my loves, I lavished the dead mole
with tender look, paused
for frog after frog until they'd twitch themselves distinct
from fallen leaves, spotted
the woodpecker, for once, before he started knocking.

The yellow

orb-weaver spiders, fleshy females

dined on wasps

spindly males orbiting,

not too close.

Could that spot there, just ahead,

be the remnants of a trail? I kept asking.

Let me say a few words about chaparral:

close-knit. Brittle. Sharp. Bristling balls

of frosted swords, shrubs of little leaves that shred

and stick, the tumbling of twigs from tunneled trees

once the green had left their bark, the curve

like a lasso of the stems so grown together

it takes minutes to tell which branch began where.

I don't know how many minutes,

but I know that seeking a path that wasn't there

started to feel like swimming,

each stroke inching me forward, removing

a little more skin, leaving pink and curls of dry white behind.

I know I did not stand up straight, and

I certainly did not walk: I bent, an assortment

of parts, this arm through this

slot, that hand on that kind, smooth, rare resting place

of rock. My hat let me use my head

as a battering ram, breaking off twigs that skittered

down my spine. I could hear

the highway. Clutched in one hand,

a sprig of white sage became my talisman

or at least

it was something

to talk to, besides my battered trust

that the sounds of cars were getting closer.

I herded my mind like a nervous pony: no,

you will not die here. The plants

grow, indifferent, and probably

no human lives down here, nursing grudges and waiting;

probably, it won't get cold enough for worse than mild hypothermia.

Your muscles bend

and dialogue. Your bones

are harder than these branches.

Mourning a Lost Surrealism

I worked hard to get grounded. Learned the plants,

the jumper cables, what to do in a flood.

Got certified to drive bigger trucks,

tend harsher wounds, keep calm in crisis.

I shaved back my vocabulary to the basics:

verb and noun. Language still intentional but the intention

changed. Clarity became all.

Observing what's here

under this rain, this roof, these layered clothes

this epidermis: it's become

such literal turf.

I wander around arteries, through veins

peering down curving corridors

brushing off odd accumulations

wondering if the old doors are still here.

I Walk to Lift Invisible Threads of Thought

Abandoned, hanging down my back. Some wispy, singular. Some heavy hanks. To sort them, work thought through them like fingers through snarls. Sometimes combing smooth, coasting in memory, diving into daydream. Sometimes knitting brow, slowing down, filament by filament. Often finding the knot too tangled for one walk. I breathe in plants, the breath of birds. Half-wish never to walk back.

Chaparral II

I took the trail this time. It edged
through oak woodlands and down the slope of the canyon
that houses Tequepis Creek. Things have names
when you walk on a trail. Leaving
the beams of old valley oaks, I squinted
at the arcs of green bark ceanothus, the looping
gestures of chamise, the outsized acorns clumped
together on the scrub oak branches, giant next
to its tiny spiked leaves. I sought
the menace I'd felt before, and found it
only in that recent memory
I tried to recapture with my camera
until the machine got distracted
by late afternoon light
gilding little leaves.

The fear had been real. The scratches

still traced my legs, though it's true they were fading.

How much of fear is being

on the terms of the natural world, without

the intermediary, real or imagined, of a path?

Its padding removes the sting, also

the impact that lingers.

On the Trail

The engine announces its approach again. This time as I step off the trail I make no acknowledgment of the driver, nor does he greet me. I've settled into the landscape, established steadiness and low threat, like the deer whose passage barely ruffles the flock of chickadees. I will not disrupt his trajectory. This, my approach to dealings with my species, and with other species, though for different reasons. Among creatures, I walk slowly and sit long. The Wilson's warblers build a nest over a coastal creek. The chipmunk ascends the vegetal stalk of a cow parsnip, stuffing cheeks and scurrying down to feast. Imperfect compensation for the brash enormity of my kind's usual profile. Each footfall a beg-pardon.

The Farthest Point of a Long Walk, Laoting, People's Republic of China

The smell is uncured sewage, but the soundscape is divine.

Small plots of sorghum, peppers, squash, and rice

stand guard before long walkways. We walk through

expecting suspicion-- we were novel enough at the crossroads,

where they were courting tourism. Now, miles off the paved road,

we find it. Old army jackets hang

from wiry frames, smoking outside the small store.

You don't translate the gossip for me, but I get the gist,

smile vaguely, lean back on one hip

to listen instead to the chorus of frogs behind me.

Fat on mosquitoes, they've dined on these men's blood,

one slim step of separation, and tomorrow

will dine on mine. I don't begrudge it.

In this tightly cultivated ecosystem of the paddies,

there's still room for the demi-wild:

startled heron, running rabbit with long ears streaming,

and this invitation

from the realm of the frog queen.

The Trouble With Writing Outside

Too many paths. Feet twitch to tread on each river stone.

The lizard's precise pose congratulates my eye:

well-honed, human, you could nearly believe

you were born to all this

looking, all this absorbing

Talked with Avi about beauty the other night

how maybe he saw it in the mountains in China

because we're supposed to see beauty in mountains in China:

the plane ticket, the blisters, the gear demanding

a response as return for effort and resources put in

but sitting here I find ideas of beauty barely relevant.

I am among rocks, striated smooth hunks of sandstone

arranged and abandoned by long-gone water

I'm among the bunched grey-green sagebrush

waxy coyote bush, lemonade berry

and up ahead, mountains, not so sublime perhaps,

nothing craggy or granitic or accented

with snow-- just scrubby upthrust scrapings

from a subduction zone, studded with fossils not so different

from shoreline findings today.

I practice being sessile. What if my best bet

for comfort lay in slowly growing

in a new direction? As humans go, I think I'm quite gifted

at sessility, ready to accept

cool grit at lower back, sinking sun on neck,

shadow moving across my knees

the passing hum of insect or persistent companion call-- I'm here, are you there?-- of

an unseen bird.

This feels like boasting, as though my bare toes

on sun-warmed silica have earned silent superiority

over booted counterparts.

I'm not comfortable

with this assessment,

I'm also not comfortable with Bertha Harris' assertion

that "literature is not made by good girls." I'm concerned

with being good I always have been

out of grief

at this enormous ailing world

at the thud

of our species into other species

and into

ourselves.

I rail at being of the Anthropocene

strove for years for self-effacement

as the greatest gift I could give

It's impossible

though

isn't it

to remain alive while fading

And not enough, to boot

To barefoot

I'm dipping toes in the arroyo, ready to engage

in what had been endured. I look to vascular,

rooted, photosynthetic mentors. To my left,

a fuzz-leafed being, lifting dried flowers

twice its general height to unleash its seeds

Closer in, a grass I've learned to call a weed,

alternating blades to ladder out of the shade.

I unsettle sagebrush to open its cells on my fingers,

breathe in our mingled scent.

Is being a body among bodies being good?

I've been reading Fanon,
dancing around Freire, and the poet
Tongo Eisen-Martin said last week
that anything we write is political
even the damn daffodils
because you can't write a daffodil without glancing
over your shoulder at the rising tide.
I believe him, did before he spoke, and I'm always glancing
at the greyed old orchards (still producing three years ago)
now barely recognizable with no ground water to tap,
at this ample canyon still hosting
a handful of sycamores, though mostly given over
to smaller iterations of chaparral, since its flow
was needed elsewhere by the growers of avocado and citrus.
Sun on my pale skin stokes freckles
and penetrates further than it ought

in February, and here I am trying to recommit
to my species, to redefine the relationship
one hormone, one ethic at a time.

I pinch off some fennel, crush its stem
between incisors, pass the smooth sweet licorice
back along my tongue. I trained this body to be sensitive--
how have I forsaken pleasure for so long?
I will the fly that's circling to land on my breast
so I have a reason to mention its bareness. Showing blue
of vein and sage shadow. I touch the smoky
grey leaves to skin. I'm not sure who
I'm seducing anymore, but I suspect
a local topographic map would shift
over my shape, jumping at a heartbeat
renewing vows to biota
lingering wild and hungry in the late sun

that brushes spiderwebs, dried inflorescences,

the pale strength of my skin

semipermeable

just ask the yucca

Circles

When taking children out

to look for creatures,

I'd circle up their bodies and wandering minds

around two circles in the trail dust

(in rain, quick hoops of branch or rock)

"This pebble"

holding it up

"is you."

Laying it in the center.

"This acorn"

lifting it up

"is your best friend."

Laying it close by the pebble.

"This circle"

touching the one outside

"is your awareness.

As you discuss

your homework or that next level on your game

squealing and chuckling like chipmunks

a rhino could walk by on the street where you live

and you wouldn't know

unless it walked inside that circle."

Sometimes laughter.

"This circle"

touching the one outside

"is an animal's awareness of you. Your impact.

Birds gossip. Others listen.

If a chickadee flock lifts up 'seep'ing,

the deer raise their ears, look down

for coyote backs.

If a finch drops down quiet, the rabbits go to ground.

Probably why you've never seen a rhino

on your way to school."

If no laughter

I've talked too long; time to run through hairy tree bodies,

to crush a leaf of sorrel between teeth, or find something to climb

but if they still bend toward me, I'll push on.

"The goal of the wildlife biologist,

of the hunter, the bird-watcher, you and me

is the same: to switch those two circles.

If you go out alone

undistracted

move slowly

or sit still

the circle of your impact pulls in tight

and awareness spreads.

A woodpecker's knock up 100 feet, the red flare

of his cap. Warblers bearing twigs

to a promising branch

over an alder-tunneled creek.

A bobcat loping by

careless in late afternoon gold

en route to a field rife with mice."

"These words haven't changed everything. You'll forget. I forget,

talk loud, think I need music

to keep me company,

go whole days seeing nothing with a heartbeat

but our own outsized species.

Then I remember. The possum placing paws along the fence,

fluffed from drying rain.

Skunk scurrying into the culvert

under someone's driveway.

Walk out with someone who understands quiet.

You'll remember."

Then I send them out to walk alone,

spaced a minute or three apart.

Some clump and holler.

Some run from snapping twigs, or for the joy of snapping twigs.

And some rejoin me

faces kindled

ears almost visibly stretching

and I know I have new company.

On the Trail

Among humans, eluding notice soothes me. The practice has become a form of self-care: no, dear one, you needn't make everything okay for everyone. Your awareness is free of obligation. I shrink from sight by habit, half-ignoring so I'll be ignored, hoarding attention for the ones I love. Today, though, even in pursuit of solitude, I feel the lightest touch of regret at going un-greeted. I crave this truck and its driver's recognition of kindred impulse: spontaneous combustion of curmudgeonly regard. I turn away from his wake, coughing small dust clouds of my own. I turn down a trail too small for his tires. We do not meet again.

Driveway

Green plastic cans

bright red tomatoes dangling over the edge

I pick them, of course, ever a gleaner,

obliquely sad my neighbor is moving out—

we've only spoken twice, once in the driveway

when she confessed to having borrowed my rake,

once

when I'd locked myself out.

Stocking-footed, I knocked

on her door, disrupting the glass

of wine she was drinking with a cute priest

to use her phone. I called my mom

to bring the spare key, sat on her couch

trying not to fall in love

with the handsome clerical collar (was he really wearing one

or is that an embellishment of memory?). She offered me

the tale of the time she'd done the same, only

instead of a mom, it was her ex-husband

she'd needed to call. In the following days

I thought hard about neighbors

stoked daydreams of friendship, of knowing her daughters

and sharing tea, but never asked

until I asked

her movers

to shift their truck so I could get out of my driveway.

I roll six tomatoes between my palms under the faucet,

feel cool water over their firm flesh and my scarred fingers,

eat them

by one

by two

by three.

Bay Nut

Unbuttoned through the lip of greenery, plucked from roadsides, dried leaf litter, winking round green-purple pulp. Shuck it bare. Chuck the husk. Tuck the body against your own, homeward bound, to the bowl carved whole from burl, where it awaits baking, 350 degrees. Thunking crunch. Mild lift. Lush.

Selected Past

Mostly landscape, the pickleweed curling under my toes, orange snarls of dodder, acacia trees holding up a bundle of egrets, sleek white, long necks tucked in so they seem dense instead of supple but still all grace. They used to nest at the Martin Griffin Preserve.

Every year we'd go see them, and I caught the reverence of those around me, though I never fully grasped why looking through binoculars at blurs of white meant more than pausing on my walk to school to watch the one that wrapped its yellow toes around the rusted corrugated pipe connecting the backwater to the Corte Madera creek, creek to the bay, bay to the ocean, source of the bat rays that sometimes broke the surface of the water with their wings, source of the small fishes speared by the meticulous beak of the egret.

I Spent Five Birthdays Among the Taxidermied

Friends placed gifts under the splayed paws
of a grizzly
one way, two fingers, in the direction the fur grows
we'd touch
preserved corpses of the creatures I'd lay awake at night
trying to be:
badger, coyote, mole, bobcat, funneling my brain
into their small skulls.
Fingers tingled for the coils of gopher snake
cool plated gloriously alive.

Tonight I crouch under redwoods
in the diffuse
glare of streetlight. I feel among the leaf litter
for smooth cool ovoid

flesh, scoop the fruit of the bay tree into my slung shirt,

pass the springy

steps of a young deer at the cross street

sit in the back

yard darkness with two bowls

sorting tannic pulp

from rich nut. My fingers tingle. I reach for the edge.

Roo

I wonder if the little cat can tell

when I'm thinking

about her skeleton.

Her long hair's

been cut, the clippers

leave abundant ruff

but velvet nape,

reveal the place

where spine meets skull.

It's not

violent impulse

that leads me to examine

the way her bones and sinews fit together,

but I do

acknowledge

her vulnerability.

She's given me

her full weight,

rubs her chin on my pen,

wants that intense attention to herself.

I thumb her forehead,

think idly

of the bobcat skull on my desk at home:

those jagged seams, those sockets.

Pulling Weeds

For pay

by the bike path

between dorms and the mall

I can't always

dodge notice

with headphones

tight gaze

on pinnate

vs palmate

to know

which I uproot

which I let grow

someone stops

a hub man

others orbit

takes off his headphones

I take off mine when he

tells me

"I'm an environmentalist

That's wrong

Why are you doing that?"

Mazed away

from a clear answer

by the mycelial web of possibilities,

I fall back on

"It's my job."

as many have before.

Hub man moves on

righteous in his version

but a satellite

won't let it fly,

asks me, "Hey,

aren't you an environmentalist?"

The short answer is yes

so I give it.

The satellite shoots off

remonstrating with his hub,

leaving me

with a black bucket of oxalis

and European grasses,

combed out

from these trailing Australian vines

organic matter divided

by desirability, function and form

human fingers pinching their directions.

Octopus

in my skin

blended in

last shared ancestor: tube with stomach

so how alien

our intelligence?

kelp-red, lurking

between pancreas

and spleen

ready to slide

down the gradient

to salt water

the next time

I enter

the sea

Outline for a Work of Botanical Sci-Fi

I. Humans are dead and gone.

A. How?

1. something nuclear or otherwise violently intended
2. something gone out of whack, climate or robots, intended only for use, but awry, so awry
3. some merciful astronomical body

B. Does it matter?

II. Infrastructure remains

A. Lonely parking garages

1. full of cars or empty
2. in a lesser urban center or mall
3. that light filtering through cement posts

B. Roads already cracking

1. Fireweed first
2. Wild Plantain, Chamomile
3. those who thrive in disturbed areas

C. Relieved slump of hay bales, foreshadowing.

III. Animals

A. are gone like humans? What becomes of plants?

B. remain? Then what do we do to keep them from stealing the focus?

C. No matter. We'll ignore them, beyond their role in pollination.

IV. To the heart:

A. Those who thrive in disturbed areas

1. Fireweed, Plantain, Chamomile

2. Poison Oak, Hemlock, Stinging Nettle

3. Sorrel, the real possibility all we get henceforth is a liberated Jepson's

B. Those who make their own way

1. minute Redwood seeds

2. Wild Cucumber with its hulking roots

3. Horsetail hanging on in ancient endurance by the watermains

C. The outline, too,

blurs into

blooms

Reconstruction

This bright day

we try. We scuttle down a runoff scar

to the cove, pluck purpled invertebrates

from the slurping back-and-forth,

climb each version of rock—mussel-coated

and close to the surf, spray-dabbled, lofty—

we can find. We fake laughter

until it comes with ease.

Handholds and footholds,

crisped boneless bodies sunbaked on

to the rock shaped like my back I make my seat,

the-forty-some-odd stairs we climb

past soap lilies and fruiting lupines,

lead us straight to the next thing

we suddenly want to do.

It feels good to be sculpted,

self-conscious, sure,

not quite spontaneous, but forced

with good will, to sift the sand.

Restart

Halting language and forgotten terms: the sword fern has one stalk, off which blades grow. The wood fern, one stalk, smaller offshoots, and then green leaflets. Bracken ferns have branching stalks and dry brown and brittle, goldenbacks are tiny and spread brilliant spores. Maidenhair and five-fingers differ so wildly that they're easy again: it's these subtleties of branching pattern that tangle in the mind, and of course I can't recall if "stipe" refers to fern or kelp or both, or what exactly constitutes a frond, but here I am, back in the world.

Three landscapes

Two days ago we climbed Ring Mountain. Serpentine jut, bay laurel clustered in crevices. Wind smoothing over old shapes. To see him back among climbable rocks, the joy exuding. I scrambled some, but he swung, slung his sweet body over the top of a boulder I hadn't even tried in 12 years. I scampered up the easy way and met him at the top, shooed off the settling urge to feel I held him back from anything at all, let myself tuck myself into the circle of his arms, against the wind. We looked down on anchor-outs on Richardson Bay. I thought about that life, unhinged from the sense and stupidity of life on shore, wondered whether my particular brand of stubborn ethics, hard work, heartache, could earn me a place there, and if I'd feel removing my feet from this dance could be enough. His internal landscape spilled out after I asked: it sailed with the tide, mapped the ins and outs of the harbor, noted the way our open-minded bay interknit itself with global closednesses. All I could do was radiate heat, was fret alongside, was love this land and this human, was finally acknowledge I will be sad when we end ourselves even if other life fans out in our aftermath. Our footfalls, descending, shook out ripples of dirt.

Gradient

Wet day

soaks into my hems

hard to tell

what's creek, what's trail

Lupines lift bundles

of indigo; I consider

between finger and thumb

Ask

their fleshy petals

to stand in

for the skin

over your collarbone

One Rivulet Runs Red Brown, the Other Yellow Grey

They trickle over soil substrates upstream, sweep up silt to paint the gutters. The part of me that stayed a teacher when I left the woods nudges: clays for faces. Yellow swirls and red stripes. A burnt tree offering charcoal lines. The conversation with the kid who first says *we're like Indians*: but we're not, Indians are like Indians, and what that means rests in their hands; they're still alive, many tribes arrayed around the Bay; Ohlone, Miwok, Pomo; one week a year their kids came to my summer camp from the cities; I taught the uses of plants I'd learned from reading about their ancestors and willed myself unnecessary, a forgettable link in the chain; who else might paint their faces? Why? No kids follow me today, so I ponder my own questions. Leave my face unpainted.

Adapted

November is coiled and ready to pounce.

I'm feeling my whole skin's numbness at once,

fingertips tender where the nails were just cut.

Not knowing what or whether to want,

let alone how to pursue it.

Danced today, though,

hands like hummingbirds

dinosaur swoops

so many strings

tugging tendrils of joy out.

I worried I couldn't spare it,

should have kept it in

for a later day but

sometimes joy has an expiration date.

Better to use it when it arises,

vine-ripened

body shakes the dust

and remember those birdsongs?

The junco's soft percussive warnings.

The ratchet of the California towhee.

The names new, the sensation old and comfortable:

a grass-backed frog with tender yellow underlegs

climbed up and over and along brown stalks

and I found tiny exultation

in its motion, and urged it to stay.

It grounded me in myself, a burden

too foreign for an amphibian to bear.

Its legs

wrapped tight, then let go, then leapt,

halting progress—hop, pause, watch, maybe

hop again.

The black line around its black eye,

bumps on its back so small

I might not have been able to feel them even if it let me:

each trait was a word in

our conversation.

Our unsteady vocabulary

followed me among the redwoods

through the deer, who were fairly certain

this dreamy, slow-moving creature

posed no threat,

but remained watchful, as I was,

ready to flee or freeze or disappear.

Next night, from the sun-brushed

branches of a tree top,

movement along the path

drew my eye:

a coyote, a big one, emerges, stops, feels my gaze

sees something else

bolts

down the hill

far under me.

What could possibly

scare a strong coyote? I listen:

more birds

flare, flutter, sink

to calm chatter

before I will descend.

This game of language, inflection,

interpretation,

narrative

settles me into a place I understand.

Tuned high, gathering detail.

Every So Often I Stop

For no reason but to check my body's capacity for rest. One telltale: twitching. Another: a certain twining glow of energy, like the iridescent tendrils on a nudibranch's back. A third: an ebbing restlessness. At stake: another night of furious movement, eyes closed but limbs lashing. The sweet spot, how I'll know I got what I came for: when my muscles, at rest, tic and pop like a cooling car.

During the Flood

I had to stop moving vehicles, computers, precious files, to stress-eat chips and salsa. The bike was the reason I worried first. I pulled it out from where it lay, already half-submerged, and watched the water rise another foot, two, past the cement to lap at the wooden stilts that hold up my cottage. Across the way, sodden sheep blinked, goats bleated reproachfully.

I stood amid the beds, photographing fallen fence posts, muscled currents, moments before the plants were covered. I watched the pumpkins float out of the greenhouse and the scarecrow succumb. A moving shadow proved to be a deer, not quite desperate but swimming; out of the water rising to the animals' enclosure wriggled a cotton-tail-- who knew they could swim? but then, what can't, when necessary?-- and bounded through the goats, reckoning time under open sky to be worth the risk, just this once. Contagious, concern for others spread to concern for myself. I shoved beloved t-shirts into one suitcase, and was about to start on the books. Twice, I cried. I talked to the bosses and landlords on the phone, waved across the flow to my neighbor Dave, who was mushroomed beneath a blue umbrella, caught one of three words he shouted, and wondered which of my words made it to his ears. I moved the vehicles again, returned to an interior too calm to match the outside, ate another handful of chips. When I looked out and the water had fallen-- just a touch, but hours before the tide would turn at sea,

offering the drain we thought we waited for-- I prodded my fire, played a song on the guitar I'd been considering moving to my car so it would be there if I decided that the wisest thing to do would be to leave.

The smells: mud made fresh, green things split, delicious in their death. Easier to be out in it than sitting, making each creak a catastrophe, especially once dark descended and I could no longer watch the procession of debris swoop past my window. The boys' yurt: now the water subsides, I should check for damage. Slick layer of poly-something, my beetle-shell, keeping me dry, or dry-ish. The kettle that's been sitting on the stove all day chooses this moment to boil.

I go out to walk the fence. Each step slurps. The beds are recognizable; carrots and cabbages cling to the mounds they call home. The water stopped a few inches shy of the yurt's door. Further on, where the gate used to be, the pumpkins and flower pots wink from their perches in the tangle of willow. A kayak--since when do we have a kayak? Or did it float from somewhere higher upstream?-- sticks its yellow bill out of the muck. A sheep trundles to the fence, calls out. I wade around to the gate, go in, to comfort and be comforted. Caressing strong jaws and sweet, snuffling noses soothe me. I didn't come through this alone.

After the Flood

Rain on the roof: no longer soothing. I imagine
each drop pock-marking the silt, all so saturated still
that anything could rise on its base. The new scars may obscure
the tracks of splay-toed possums and opportunistic
foxes round the chicken coop-- the girls, for once,
indebted to the fence. My own prints
provide the steadiest footing, as I walk the perimeter again,
seeking sense, or at least a what to do
next. Shawn couldn't stop smiling, tight
control in his eyes; the impact is fresh and not
full for him and I see him bracing for it, needing
to face it on his own terms. For me, nothing is intact,
though the buildings are unharmed. I talk to Luna
and can't tell her how I feel, not from mistrust or bashfulness

but from a fundamental lack of the vocabulary. Betrayal
by the creek, awe at its power, responsibility
to the land and the animals, guilt at having left and vulnerability
at having returned. She mentions the future and I realize
I'm scared of all the ways my vision has been shaken.
My mind stutters between solution-- cold comfort, as it
is out of my hands-- and grief. Candles in the windows, the old
blue blanket over my curled legs, the books it feels wrong
to open, as though distraction would be cowardly,
disloyal, the fire in my stove which made me feel
impervious before: the cushion between me
and the raw impact of the natural world
is thin. Anxiety sits
in the base of my stomach, demands a vigil
I feel too old to keep. That thin-ness is what I've celebrated,
the challenge what has filled me with life,
and this is the first time I've questioned my ability

to face it. I put my head out the window again

to check water levels, don't really breathe

when I see they haven't risen. There are more stars

but they're not coming yet.

In the Foreground, Floods

That was the year that,

done with myself,

I tried to give it away.

To love, but love pled ignorance, turned her back.

To work, but work wrung out what he could

and handed me the scraps.

I sat with myself,

sometimes liminal, always liminal,

bodily uncertain how to go on--

bite the food, dear, pick up the foot--

but certain of green. Certain of salt.

Certain, wrenchingly,

of something continuing after my self was gone.

I picked the stones up off the body of me,

lugged them back

to the water,

ceased to wait

for the tide to rise.

In Imitation of Galway Kinnell

When one has lived a long time alone
dodging the humans that populate one's life
to maintain the unbroken sense of solitude
lurking in one's quarters, hoping all the rest
will hurry up and forget that one exists,
urging the moss to overtake the roof
and fungus to fruit, trumpeting the spread
of decomposers under heavy soil,
one trusts that the mycelia, at least,
will never let connection lapse entirely
and feels this fact with mingled joy and grief
when one has lived a long time alone.

Amoebiasis

always

at least

a little

unsettled

we stir

in the tunnels

of intestine

encyst

so our offspring

will swim

through your delicacies

even after

wormwood

and cloves

have had

their way

with us

lest you think

your body

is only you

November 9, 2016: Waking to Election Results

I drove my love to work at three a.m. today. He usually bikes the dark streets. I was awake and staring. Why not stare together. A few minutes early, I pulled up at the curb; we sat. We stared. Into the field of vision. A rat. Bumping its hindquarters up. Climbing the trash cans. I didn't mean to say it. But these words, drenched in tenderness, came out: Hey. Little inheritors of this world. I hope you do a better job than we've done.

I meant it deep and sweet. Not bitter in that moment, though suspended in bitterness. Furred bodies. Resilience. Warmth. If enough is left for them. This experiment called life. May keep unfolding. As I drive off. I latch the idea of rat. To my breast. To nourish. Hope.

There's Something of a Code

To best abide, I shave back ties to humanness. Camera changes the noticing. Notebook slices through the continuity. I'm trying to remember. When I do it right, I notice just to notice: nearby frog voice stops, I stop. Voice starts, I edge closer. Voice stops, I stop. Until I find its source. Or restlessness and a startlement of quail launch me into long strides, or up the branches of redwood, one at the edge of a meadow, because the mid-forest trees drop their lower branches once the canopy knits out the light. Decentering myself. Settling into their way of being, greeting plants by name.

Today I break my code. It's been raining steadily for days. I said I'd hike this trail, the one I climbed in August, the one where I crisscrossed with the white truck and its driver all day. But December has its teeth in me, and all those hours of silence-- of stripping away-- seem unwise. I compromise. Wrap my phone in plastic against the pervasive wet. Put in ear buds. Swap drip and gush for someone else's story. Eye pools outlined by pine needles, while narrator speaks. Meadow shouldering water into badger holes as characters unfold. I take pictures, too. Bright yellow flare of witch's butter. Sideways pupil of rough-skinned newt. Do I see them less now because I'll see them later? When I get back to the trailhead, a great blue heron fishes the tumult chuting down the flume. I've seen this heron before. Last time placid, slow, fierce. This time braced, feathers splayed, stabbing. The picture misses the difference. I wonder about poems.

The Green is Back

Glowing green, glossy green

If you'd asked me on Wednesday

what color is the hazelnut

in the back yard?

I'd have answered green,

but it would have been

at best

a half truth.

How To Be/Have/Gather

I've never had the collector's mania. Sometimes I regret it, walking with an eleven year old who knows the difference between a house finch and a purple finch and wants to have seen both, or my friend Zack, who distinguishes sparrows whose only visible variation is how yellow or white the stripes on their foreheads, who takes his day off to go looking for the rarer one, the grasshopper sparrow, whose call he mimics, through his teeth.

Cancer is not a flower. It does not seed or bloom.

Though the rest of the cycle

of flesh, of flowering

carries on, all but unnoticed until

the one white camellia

opens

on the bush in the back yard.

Ghost

I hate that it's still alive, this perfect curl of snake, crushed two thirds down the length of its grey-green body, so that when I gently touch its nose to see if I can sing over it yet, it recoils, with vigor, with the indignant force of interrupted life, black eyes flaring, body, slimmer than a pencil, looping in perfect spirals around the paralyzed place, the width of a bicycle tire. My whole body convulses. I've spent the morning crying because I cannot be another species, sobbing out this nearly lifelong grief gazing at trees, imagining my cells their cellulose, and here is this creature, creature of structural integrity, creature of niche, of no outsize harm, warming its bones in the sun this first warm day of the year, now waiting to die. I wish I were the sort who can take up a rock and smash, the mercy killer. I am not. And what do I know about snake death ways? Could be they need the time. I apologize to it up close, on behalf of my lumbering careless solipsistic species, and walk down the hill, unable for once to greet the cyclists that blur past me.

Insect Apparition

Four days after she passed, he spoke to her.

"Okay, I think it's time for one of those signs. Three friends say they've heard from you. My turn."

Her ancient beads lay still. Bright cloth they'd pursued and gathered from around the continent did not fill and fold around nothing. But on the rose bush in the back, the preying mantises hatched. Green spindles unspooling. A bending and unbending of limbs.

He sat there, watching them, and her, disperse.

In My Dream

I find

smooth horn, still attached

to the whole ear

of a deer.

Muttering reasons, I climb through

water-sculpted basins.

Then I find

the deer's head.

Climbing up

among pillars so regular

they might be sculpted:

its body!

I gather the parts near me,

carry them up

lay them down.

Deer's eye twitches

open. Though still free

of its body, its eye follows me.

When I pick stalky crisp greens

it eats them

with a will.

I wake up

still wondering

how to bind head to body

so the bones will knit.

Tennessee Valley, a Pause in the Rain

I don't see the rabbits until I'm almost kicking them. Their legs stronger, bent back, potential energy held until the trigger, that is often me, that this time is not me.

I notice someone noticing, and then notice what she notices. Two creatures. Their ears tubes. Cropping the new grass short.

I'm split between the cottontails, so close, so unperturbed, and this contagion of noticing. I've wielded attention like a tool. Sometimes encoded-- the sign to my students to quiet, hands on my head like antlers and chatter fades, eyes open, the signal passes back. Sometimes frantic-- on the Golden Gate Bridge, catching the eyes of walkers pressed to their cameras, gesturing at the dolphins below, uncomprehending that they could continue after a polite glance. Sometimes pointed, silent-- ears and eyes so tight on the great horned owl that others' eyes pull, gravitational. And sometimes, truly lost, to myself, to intention. As now. With rabbits.

Botanizing on the Asphalt

At a hint of heat

the city pretends tropical:

bass players sprouting from street amps

forgetting the words to their songs

evangelists germinating quietly

by their sandwich boards

leather and silver blooming out on velvet

tendrils of eye contact

swooping up sundresses

the usual street residents

tug back

skate harder

monologue louder

or tuck in

pull blankets over heads

capture warmth for later.

I try flaneusing

but I miss being ignored

and can't walk barefoot here.

Waiting Room

provides a chance to get to know

the nearest plant. The spoon-shaped leaves

of this one to my right

stretch out for fluorescent light

shoehorning it into

sunlight's role.

Gloss on turgidity. Tiny hairs

might discourage nibbling insects elsewhere;

here, nothing encroaches

but the wicker chairs.

Greenery to soothe the person soon summoned

by therapist or insurance broker. If it dries,

lugged to the green bin, replaced

with cousins or clones.

I deadhead surreptitiously, worm fingers

into soil, checking for wet

cast about for water carriers, wonder

at vehement defense

of individuals

when the cycle

whorls out of control.

Last Breakfast at the 2 Bird Cafe

We sit down to eggs with asparagus and cup after cup of

coffee. You've knitted the waitress

glovelets, grey-green shot through with red;

I smile and smile with nothing to offer but bittersweet,

but gratitude. The creek's swollen murmur

spreads and soothes

through the open window.

I mumble about a new love. I'm afraid

you'll take it as betrayal of our spinster sisterhood

but if you do you hide it well

while I pledge not to talk of nothing else.

You're moving in 7 days, describe the boxes

and the piles, marvel at the way things accumulate.

We talk like we're not going to ache

for these floorboards, the fire in the grate,

the way broad windows

filter into conversation.

Sculpting

There: a tiny plastic succulent on our table.

It's likeable. Black flecked plastic dirt,

yellow-green leaflets lifting imitant photosynthesis

to an imagined sun. Someone

took the time to look at the original, architect

with marked attention, to examine nodes and joints and where

the radiant rosette sets out from central point

to carve it into wax molds

and pour in the petrol byproduct

ancient plants processed and reprocessed

finally shaped in imitation

of their own descendants.

Disclosure

I'm talking to

this lizard.

I'm telling it

Everything.

I'm in

Death Valley.

I'm

seventeen.

Somewhere I got the notion

it's dangerous/it's trivial

to talk about

your loves.

I want so much

garnet-like

to grow into

myself

to be knowable

for me intrinsic

me quiet attentive dreamy

me dragon me wild

Not me in terms of him

of her

the ache attaches

so no one knows

Not him not her

nor those other ones either

my writings cryptic tangles

even I can't make out

So here

in the desert

small blooms blooming

Cheek on a cool rock

I look at this lizard

and open my mouth.

Word Fast

Whole day

nothing read

nothing written

woke in darkness

slogged through

dew grass

rock pile

stock pond

two streams

tent up

no companions

but spiders

acorn woodpeckers

lupine patches

few thoughts

warm sun

dreamless naps

fast climb

ghost pine

sun down

before me

bats drinking

horned moon

deeper rest

than I knew

I needed.

The Twins

A general bleating

lets me know something's up:

a change in the rhythm, an open box

or door. The boys, handsome

black and white kids, have conspired

to overcome the gate. It hangs unlatched.

A year ago

Yogurt the goat dropped three kids,

two living. The third

filled a bucket, limp and wet and small.

While she was buried the others

sucked, shook, stood, climbed their first rocks.

I left them feeling raw.

The goats are good neighbors
with snuffling noses who happen,
from time to time, to try
to eat your shirt. Some days ago
my boss sought my vegetarian
sanction: could I stomach
the dangling bodies of two male yearlings
in our walk-in fridge? Tomorrow
is their day of reckoning.

So when I hold out my hand, feel
the familiar nuzzle and huff, grab a collar
and begin the ritual dance of goat to fence,
I feel what I am part of. I can't claim
to bystand. I could leave them out,
see if they'd take the chance
to go. Instead, I take

their trust into my hands,

walk them back into their pen,

scratch the rare spot one can't reach

with his horns, let the other nip off

a few threads from my pants,

love every last thing about them.

Ento(~~anthrope~~)morphism

I've left the trail to look at the sea from above. Instead I'm watching ladybugs. Four of them. Two locked in congress, piggybacked, the female climbing steadily, ridden. They fall. She climbs. Another fixed in parallel, threading its way out bending blades of grass. It falls. It finds another bending blade to thread along. Falls. Finds another. One, vertical, ascends, exudes gray wings from under orange carapace, jerks into air, lands, reascends. It's familiar, this getting locked in patterns. This trying something new until I find it's not new.

Inevitable

Sun slips down long trunks

I stretch up

from moist shade

we're not touching yet

but we will.

The Trail is Always There

Sometimes I forget, going about day's distractions, plunging the French press, scrubbing egg off a pan, or scurrying around the bookstore seeking someone else's title, half-recalled. Other times I remember, suddenly, and wonder with startled urgency whether the varied thrushes are back, whether the hound's tongues are opening small blue faces, whether the orange cup fungus withstood last night's frost. Certain trails return more than others, twining without destination through my speculation: the looping path I walk endlessly between meditations on retreat, its stones and contours and puzzled ponderosa trunks that held that first pileated woodpecker. The long loop around Lake Atitlan, through milpas hung with fresh beans, where I hung back to wait for Janey to finish vomiting, sick with exertion and altitude and last night's wine. I start to notice the profusion of certain prepositions: through, to, around: and drop into awareness of the thing the trail's supposed to help me notice, the habitat, human or animal, the landscape shaped by lives, almost anything but the trail itself, subtle sculptor of experience. Gentle but insistent director of footprints.