THE HOUSE YOU DREAM IN

by

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ABSTRACT

A collection of poems submitted for the Master of Fine Arts degree.

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HOLD
VENUS

Oh miracle, oh Venus as the one of Willendorf, now washed

in sweat, beyond the possibility of motherhood. Tonight

you’ve blessed my living room, reclined upon the couch as on

a chaise. And stripped of all the things that make you seem

a paradox: the working boots, the hems that draw you in. What’s left?

A hip that splays and asks for no excuse. A breast that slacks against

a hairy pit. The open hand you’ve used to every end, as when we woke,

to please yourself and me. The heavy knee, the soft and massive belly. Here,

naked, you’re free. I wonder what it means for you to have

this body you were dealt, if, when you dress, it’s armor that you wear,

made for a man. And what it means that I should love you best

when you’re bare: a goddess, calm, at rest.
I wish you had been my daughter, my little girl-who-was-a-boy, hiking the hills, back, “back to home,” in Transylvania. I would have left off the bow when I dressed you for the Communists, and not given your brother sweets while you polished the hall, kneeling. An ocean and an uprising away from that wooden corridor, your mother kisses you so hard it hurts your ears, and you turn her aside to the kitchen, to a solitude where none but you speaks her language. In her fragmented English, she seems only kind: our friends eat her soup, call her Mama. They don’t understand the language in which she calls you “bitch,” and keeps counsel with a son who left his words in another country. Now, as we hold each other through a midwinter snow, I speak tenderness such as you have taught me—szeretlek and egyem meg a kicsi szívedet: “I love you” and “I want to eat your little heart.”
THE LAST DAY

Romania, 1986

The last day she ever played soccer,
Kati traveled on foot from state hospital
to state hospital, kicked
like a ball between them—not a child,
nor an adult, and more a Hungarian.
Her knee twisted, sinews
torn, white bone nearly bare. She
hobbled on the arm of Rabbit, who
bore her weight with effort, though
Kati was much lighter then. Telling
the story, Kati looks off, looks
within, not bothering to wish
that the nurses had done
their duty, but that she’d had
a chicken to bribe them. More
than chocolate or even cigarettes,
whole chickens came with
difficulty then. Every
few weeks, swallowing their
tongues about the government,
her family would line up
in two-hour shifts.

First grandma, then grandpa, Kati,
her mother, waiting for the sackful
of beaks and sharp-toed feet on ice. Chicken Surprise, they called it. There wasn’t much meat, but it did make a decent soup.
MONARCH

So little left of Grandma Jessie: hymns,  
her words like *hoo-dee-rah!* for heat, the gold-  
framed photograph, some fritillary pins. 
Her husband left when they were young. He told  
her that his intellect was like a fire—  
he burned, while she was country, sweet, and cold. 
Alone and free, she fixed to her attire  
butterflies whose pearls seemed to flash, unmold.  
Her flat, unpeopled country’s still the scene 
through which her favored monarchs fold, unfold  
themselves from north and home to certain sun,  
their wings cathedral glass, unfettered, bold.  
Our Jessie saw them, recognized her kind,  
and, seeing, lifted skyward in her mind.
FORGETTING ALREADY

Everything having been said about ending,
you crank the car radio
while I hold my own hand, remembering
two ways we’ve ended before:

in an Old Navy dressing room,
pink bikinis on the floor, and once
among lilacs, you and I, wrapped
in their sweetness, enraged,

shivering, awake, and forgetting already
how it felt to lie slack, salted, open
for one another, our whole bodies full
and ready for sleep.
MORNING AT CRASH BOAT

I thought I’d die that way—cold in my sunburned skin, in the sweet un Xenial waters of Aguadilla.
Do you remember the last morning we swam off Crash Boat Beach?
Beneath the surface of what was green and felt infinite,

we waggled our limbs. It was the strength of our legs
that kept us there, though perhaps it should have been something else:
You should have lifted me into the wave, but I
wouldn’t let you. There were lovers speaking Spanish

when the tide came in. Then ta-da! You asked me why, your eye
fixed on a man with a gull on his hat.
What could I say—that I will never choose you?
That night, your mouth cloying with aspartame

and whiskey, you said stay. You said not yet.
You held my vulva in your palm.
MASHED POTATOES

My mother never forgave my father
for calling them “mauled” potatoes:

those lumps of white starch and
margarine. It was the first

year of their marriage. He was always
clever with word-shit

and terrible with people. I didn’t grow up eating
mashed potatoes. She baked them for us,

French-fried them, boiled them
and made salad,

and my father got what was left at night.
Now, forty years later, he still
tells that story; her right eye will twitch,
his laugh pressing her optic nerve.

When we speak he says: “No,
you should have said this” and “this”

is always something more clever. He never
forgave my mother for having us,

three children who knew better
how to talk to her,

how to open up our mouths
and eat our dinner.
ALL THINGS

Across a distance you’re
the one I’ve wanted, ever.

There is no plate of fish
to fry. There’s never snow

tracked on the floor. I hear
a bottle clink the sink

across the phone and know
I’ve dreamt this. Is that sound

you, eating onion? Is
your foot beneath the dog?

I like to say I’ve brought
you here with me, but I

just have a picture: you,
as drowsy, ruddy, loose

as I can ever quite
recall, the obstacle

to what I longed for when
I left you in the fall.
ELEGY FOR A CHILD

From when I was ten and holding
a sketch of what was
to be my body, time brought
me closer to you.
Now, each morning as light breaks,
you’re laid to rest yet
deeper in my dreaming. I
am sentimental,
I know, watching my mother’s
mothering put to
a kind of waste. Those long hours
we spoke, we wept, she
taught me how one holds tight to
a child’s grief. I did
not bleed waiting for you; that’s
not precisely how
wombs work. I went about my
business, feeding the
cat, watering the tulips,
having wrong lovers
to dinner, while your future
sloughed off, out of me.
THE HOUSE, TOO

_for Grandma Jessie_

Your tiny house endures at Eads and Wright. We lived within those termite-bitten walls: it’s there you accidentally got me lit on daiquiris when I was four feet tall. The nights would spark and hum with fireflies, but when I miss that place I miss its taste, its soft, peculiar smells: those peonies; the moldy wooden door; the dirt, once host to dogs; the pantry packed with sweets you’d save. My memories slip my grip like tadpoles down the drain beside the yard. And we, who gave you back to earth, are gone. What happens now? We visit, creep down Eads, and think of you, and tsk-tsk-tsk at things the tenants do.
AFTER SURGERY

She wasn’t dying, except abstractly, my mother.

Just replacing each case of bone on bone until

one by one her joints were titanium. My brother

and I told jokes across the hospital bed, made her

laugh her flute-like laugh, played sound bites

of the bionic woman leaping felled trees.

Later, light burning the windows, she sat small

as death in her chair, whispering mercy, so in pain

as to cry tears without wiping them.

My brother fetched ice, I mustered the nurses, my father

bent his head toward his laptop, soothing

himself with cooing sounds. How diminished
he, too, seemed, an old man
who loved her, who

could do nothing, his mind
as shut as an egg.
A COMMONPLACE

Don’t tell me don’t worry.
Crust of flesh, dish

of peonies—we
are no more than this.

There is a persistent taste
of mold in my mouth,

reminding me what becomes
of a body. Nothing terrifies me

so much as losing you, though
it would be a commonplace.

Mothers leave us in this way,
as we leave them.

You gave me this body
to make babies with; I

have not used it as intended.
I’m still taking lessons, learning

recitations. Saturday
I read you Yeats (a tattered coat

upon a stick). You shuddered
and why shouldn’t you? While I

could hardly finish.
Don’t tell me, don’t worry.
SONG OF LEAVE-TAKING

Give me your mother.
Let her teach me how
she cooked under Ceaușescu:
one-egg palascinta,
paprikas without cream.

Let this be recorded in me.
I don’t mind,
I don’t mind.

Where is the pail your mother keeps?
I’ll collect the onions
from the dirt beside the driveway.
I’ll hide tomatoes in my apron
and eat them as I work.

Let me be a helpmeet.
I don’t mind,
I don’t mind.

Show me these photographs.
You looked like a boy
in lace and hair-ribbon:
daughter of your country,
your country, your country.

Then I said:
We’ll go to your country, come.
Take me to the valley you searched alone.
We’ll look down on the lake of stones
and find your father.

Let me be a helpmeet.
I don’t mind,
I don’t mind.

And your house was full,
so you offered me the attic.
My thoughts were unquiet,
so you hushed the dogs.
You took moonshine at breakfast.

Your mother had steeped it
with caraway and sugar.

Please, forgive my intruding.
Never mind,
never mind.
MAGGIE ON BEECH STREET

Maggie kept chickens, a truck, and a house with a Sunday school teacher on Beech Street. The church brothers winked, swallowed their voices, called her the man of the house. It was those overalls and the hands by which she earned her living, cleaned out the gutters, carried the trash to the curb on Thursdays.

Really, she didn’t mind, knowing (as they did not) how for years she had prayed to be transformed in God’s love, peering under the covers at what felt like a vacancy, her prayers emptying out into morning.

Then there was Enola, who gathered the eggs, who rubbed Maggie’s hands with oil. Enola kissed her on the throat, held her at her breast, took her into her opening body as if, doing so, she might bear Maggie again into the world, remake her as she was always meant to be.

They grew beans in summer. It was 1935.
Look
LOOK

Knowing Emmett Till
was born in forty-one

and my father in forty-two,
knowing Emmett Till

was murdered in Mississippi
while my father was growing up

in Alabama,
knowing how quick my father

was to whistle, to hum,
to talk back, to flirt

with a girl, I turned my head
in the classroom. Turned

my head from the photograph,
from the misshapen fruits

of a river, from the luck
that made me. Stupid child:

Your father will be there

at the dinner table.
There is a mother whose son

was lost in Mississippi.
She’s telling you: Look.
HIGHWAY

What brings us here can barely be called highway: a thread of road each direction,

and vines overtaking the verge.
This isn’t a dream: Dad is driving.

We find at the end of the path three towns where my father was someone else once.

Here, houses are the hue of dust,
and sunflowers lean in the swelter.

At the Florence Sonic Burger, you’ll get a coke for your church program. There are no mountains in our midst, just twenty-three Churches of Christ—this is the land in which they are grown. This is the land in which he was grown, before something sent him searching. Was it my mother waiting unknown, was it the pulpit he couldn’t preach from, was it a mask of his own face, speaking:

a foreigner from up North?
DINNER BELL

After the rain has come along and swept the evergreens, after the crows have stilled the forest with their wings, after they’ve leapt into the fog, we hear our mother’s bell and spot far off the lights I won’t forget: the yellow lamp, the TV on, the bare white bulb above the stove, her cigarette, still lit, converging as our Northern Star. We’re eight and nine, back from the barn that burned, an outing that you didn’t want to lead. It always was the two of us. We learned to hone our anger in the wetland weed. Grimy those nights, we trudged from Muddy Lake, both hungry from the wars that children make.
STORMWATCHING IN CAMPANIA

for my brothers

You could have found us anywhere,
on the bank of any
undulating river;
we didn’t have to be
   in the shadow
of someone’s volcano,
wine nearby,
   watching lightning
shatter the upper sky,
olives pelting lazily
   the slate;
there didn’t have to be
lemon trees
   loosed of their fruit,
nor wisteria
ascending the stone.
   We needed only
each other and to forget
what it meant
   to be weighted,
grown, distinct.
We needed only
   to rest a while
in pregnant darkness,
our hands empty,
   our eyes absent
of electronic
white light.
GLADYS ON DUBLIN STREET

Urbana, Ill., 1936

Up Dublin Street at twilight, Gladys waits at windows, watching night unroll its carpet onto the floors of the house. She stopped the clock when she sent her girls to carry the plate she’d laid for their father who works nights at the hospital lot gathering tips. She’d baked the cornbread, buttered the rice, turned out the pinto beans before burning, though there are times when the shadow comes and she forgets. That hovering white face, white breath inside her breath, her heels in the icy stirrups where the nurse had placed them. She was young then and golden, eyes pale as the gray lake, hair smooth without lye, her nose keen enough. Now she walks only to church, though she’ll often look towards town. She’ll take company if the pastor stops. He holds her hand as if it were a sparrow, says:
You must not name the devil. But these things do have a way of naming themselves.
REFLEXOLOGY

I am another woman’s daughter and
my godmother Mary’s also. I have
Mary’s smile and hypoglycemia, her arthritic
toes, her well of melancholy.
On a Saturday afternoon, we see red
and black velvet Christmas dresses
in the downstairs of a department store. Mary
smiles at me, mentions some
child I will have that she didn’t have.
I frown, withhold a joke
about clocks, look off down the bright avenue
of housewares. I remind her
I turned thirty-seven last week.
At the Zen Center, amid orchids
and red plastic wall hangings, Mary takes me
to see her healers. They nod
as she lists my complaints, then a woman
presses her fingers into my feet:
This is for bowel. This is for pancreas.
This is for heart.
After this I will no longer
write poems about you.
I will gather
my belongings, sort them
into KITCHEN, BEDROOM,
LIVINGROOM, MISC,
and go north
towards you, my home.
You'll be there
in the bed. Your mother
upstairs, her TV so loud
I can feel it
in my kidneys.
    I have spoken
what words I might—should
have kept to myself.
Stirred you up—my kettle
of ginger tea, spicier now
that I have hurt you.
    My big,
fat mouth got your eyes
snapping with light, and you
talking again of second jobs
and four months' pay,
and little things
that some women want.
A LONG WAYS

My mother’s father never knew the man who fathered him, though daily when he’d shave, he’d see the bluer eyes, the paler hand that underlay his own. His mother gave her son what start she could from scrubbing clothes, but no word of the man she’d met—or where—in love or something darker. Not to know that history was a shame he seemed to wear. He wandered far afield, from home to war, to work, to marriage, out of marriage, gone. He left the little girls his young wife bore, still looking for a father, finding none. In summer he slept days and woke by night, humming *Motherless Child* till dark was light.
GO NORTH

Picture yourself at the bus stop, the sun on the brick of the bank. Imagine real dollars in your pocket, a woolen coat, a satchel full of chicken and cake. Your mother will be at your back, head tilted as if to say she knew. As if to say a mother's duty is to be disappointed. Don't worry. Her sister will still feed you in Chicago and tell you where to find warmer shoes. You wouldn't believe me if I told you about the cold, how the air will blacken over your park-bench. Does it matter? You will find a church. You will meet a woman. You will find yourself nearly whole.
BROADWAY BOOGIE WOOGIE

There was what
he meant
to do then the street

at night asserted
light then
taxi then delivery truck

Underneath the hum
smoke rhythm
from a dance-hall band

How clearly you can see
New York
shimmy in yellow

and red, especially
the blues  He died knowing
he’d come so close

but still had painted
a thing akin
to the house you dream in
EXCAVATION

Early in the summer morning
we gather, each of us from a bed
far-flung, someone’s three children
graying at the temples.

Beside us stands the hollow Dumpster,
massive, attendant, rebuilt
of rust, the deep of it glistening
with a night’s good rain. Ken

moves first. He lifts
the garage doors and gets
the dust shimmering where
the house that once held us

meets fresh air. I follow him in
as fast as I can bear. Beneath
a network of pipes, we uncover
Christmas decorations, their

wrappings trimmed with blooms
of mold. There’s
a wise man, some sheep,
a baby Jesus our father painted black—

his swaddling blanket near
to unraveling—and some
red globes splintering
from the heat. I want

to pile them up for repairs, hold
the hope our parents
placed in them when they
were twenty-three.

Ken photographs instead what he
won’t let me keep: a big-wheel,
a Stevie Wonder record, a
Hershey’s Frisbee smelling faintly
of chocolate, and goes on
   rolling. Greg shadows him, crushing
each object and hurling it out
   towards a bottomless past.
CHAMPAIGN COUNTY GOTHIC

I heard the keyboard rattle. Something unfurled hot in my chest and held me there in the bed. I could hear the shuffling of work boots, see wiry arms, the outline of a painter’s hat. Limbs full of blood again, I sprang up to stand behind the doorjamb, clutching a glass lampshade. I didn’t know what to do so I called him a motherfucker, thinking of all the things he might have come to take from me. I surprised myself—watching the horror movie you wonder who you’d be, if you would slip beneath the surface of terror, await execution under the sheets. Or if, heroically, you would grasp what was needed. There’s an algorithm to survival. I assured him I hadn’t seen his face, told him to climb out the way he’d come. He didn’t answer. When deeper night overtook the house and I could hear no more, I crept out to where he’d stood. The desk lamp showed him gone, the windows unbroken. I slunk back to bed, lampshade still in hand.

The next day Aunt Laura came; we clasped arms and said a prayer to cure the ghost’s restlessness. I apologized for calling him a motherfucker. It was, after all, his house,

my some-great uncle, unmet. I was told he’d been a housepainter and had visited Grandma Jessie before me. He was a dirty old soul. He’d come round once while she was leaving the bath and pinched her ass.
LIGHT I: CAT AND MOTH

Deadlocked in argument,
the cat and moth sit, lit
beneath the lamp: the cat
enthralled beyond hunger,
want of water on the tongue;
the moth trapped, soul-torn
between certain death
(that great harrowing beast)
and this—the seduction of light.
LIGHT II: BRIGHT MOON BRIGHT

Bright moon, bright powder-colored moon
above my windows, bathed
in pools of starlight, moon above
the whole of Baltimore,
so bright that I mistake you for
the sun, the sun at dawn,
with chill and grasping hands that reach
inside my bed. You bright,
you flinty, frosty moon, release
me, let me free of you
and down into the sweet ravine
of sleep. Where is your shroud
of dusk, cold moon? Why do you light
my sins, my flickering dust?
LIGHT III: TO DEATH

Strange I have resisted you
all this time, worried
you work your will

against me in the dark.
How wrong I was.
You mean the advent

of daybreak, its
attendant tendrils of light.
True, you are the oak

inclining itself to earth
in autumn. Do you not,
too, beckon what

rustles beneath the leaves?
MY FATHER SPEAKS

I.
His brother Lafayette
died at the creek
with six boys
standing round him.

My mother told me
these things. Neither of us
knows anything
for certain.

II.
In school in Connecticut
the other black children
mocked me for the way
I spoke (wannabe-white-girl-
Oreo-cookie). I could hear
North Carolina, Georgia
in their voices, the journey
from South to North
that our parents, grandparents
had taken. I lived
in a white neighborhood.
They thought I spoke
like my neighbors. Each time
I opened my mouth, how
those children must have believed
I hated them.

Then
they shunned me and I did.

III.
My father is a talking man
and speaks as though
he loves the taste
of his words. He says “purdy,”
as in “purdy as a pan
of buttermilk biscuits,”
which I am
and am told regularly. When I
point this out to him,
this word of home,
he says the word “pretty”
so many times I begin
to forget who he is. I hope
I am never pretty.

IV.
We go back home. There is
yellow brick and dust and clay
I think belong to me.
We play kickball on Christmas day
and my sneakers redden
in the mud. When I speak,
my cousins call me white girl.
They laugh when I say “y’all.”

V.
I learned to speak from my father.

VI.
The year he desegregated
the university, my father
wore silence wherever
he went. Some wished
it would be
his death shroud.

The voices
came at night
on the telephone, threatening
a brick against his head or
buckshot to his gut, his father
to be turned out
of the metal factory,
his mother’s house to be
brought to kindling.

There was one
white girl who smiled
at him each day on his way
to the library. If he had dared
to speak to her, he
would have begged:
Do not be kind to me.

He could feel his starched collar tight, hear rope creaking against pine.

VII.
Father, burden me. Tell me the story of how you slept at night. Tell me, was the governor at the gate,

and did your father gaze through the window into the long evening? Tell me about Lafayette and what it meant when we hung a wreath on the door that Christmas. Tell me about the night you left for Chicago, never to come back except on holiday. Burden me with your secret voices. Tell me about your mother and the restaurant that went under when they let her go.
WADE

Wade in the water, children, wade in the water,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.
INVOCATION

You gaze at me
from above my desk, you are
unsmiling, small in the world,
your shoulders rolled forward
into a servant’s invisibility.
Quiet radical. Master thief.

Seeker of confederate bombs. Leader
of men into the breech.

Your left hand holds down
your right hand, still
trembling with purpose.
Most faithless slave, most

faithful sister. Harriet,
in your serviceable dress, pale
tuft of scarf. Hair braided back
as our mothers taught us.
THE LUXURY OF FRUIT

Harriet Tubman to her young husband, Auburn, New York, 1869

How hairy this peach you bring me from market
  How fragile and torn the skin of your back
How bright this lemon in the pocket of your overalls
  How tender this ear lobe between my thumb and finger
How soft this plum gone deep into its sweetness
  How rough the weave of my working dress
How firm this quince you pull from the field
  How slick the oil of your aching shoulder
How hard the stones of these sour cherries
  How fine and steady your knee beneath me
How green, how tart, how cold this apple
  How pebbled your skin by the breeze from the door
How warm these grapes from under the sun
  How strong your thigh against my teeth
How ripe the crop of this strawberry patch
  How coarse my palms, the soles of my feet
How bitter the pith you peel from the orange
  How heavy and how cool my breast
How honeyed this pear you cut with your knife
  How bare my long and ticklish neck
How full of juice this blackened berry
  How thin my wrist in the grip of your hand
How hungry you are, how hungry I am
  How bountiful and rich our God
How sweet such fruits as He gives in the free world
  How sure these lips, how sure these lips
A two-pound object, hurled skyward and intended to punish another, smashed into Harriet Tubman’s skull in the dry goods market. It splintered bone, ground the fabric of her kerchief so deep as to touch her mind.

*Not worth* a *sixpence*, her master would say of her afterward. She was thirteen, what some would call a child.

Thereafter, she’d see starlight descending, the herald of a holy voice. And a slumber would sweep her body, even as she spoke, though it would not rest her, would not relieve her, merely take her deep, deep, deep.

*Years later*: winter, blessed darkness, frost, the stars blue-flaming the icy waters they wade. No promise of blanket or barn. Just God telling her “go” and “now.”

Araminta—African lady, with eyes that pierce the mist—

you yield to prayer, they yield to you.

*Moses*,

they say, *Moses got the charm.*
RAID AT COMBAHEE RIVER, JUNE 2, 1863

They moved over the rice fields, not in flight not in murmurations not moving as one black body against the wind, but in the terrible breaking of a dam over the Combahee River.

Women jostling babies, packets of bread and fat, grasping chickens, holding pots still hot with rice, men dragging pigs, shouldering children, children running on thin limbs catching up or being caught under, where alligators snapped, bit as the maw of the shackle.

The sly boats whistled, signaled: we are here, you seven hundred fifty-six, you shall not be left to the Confederacy.

Out front: the General watching for torpedoes,
Harriet

singing a hymn,

Moses,

parting

the waters.
COUNTERWEIGHT

It wasn’t a brick or a stone that the overseer threw in her direction, but a counterweight. *Like this one,* the man says. And he drops something into my hand, which dips deeply under the heft of it.

I roll it around in my palm. It’s no bigger than an egg, shaped like a bell with no tongue or like a lily of the valley turned downward in spring. The object against which flour was measured or nails. The object against which escape was measured—hurled skyward, intended for another.

He says he wishes his wife were here: *It’s more exciting the way she tells it.* He does his best. Stutters as he tells me of his great-great-grandfather, who owned both land and the people who worked it. He instructs me that black men owned slaves also. He wants me to know his ancestor’s kindness, that he gave them land to worship on—the land against which freedom was measured.

Beside us in the field, a black boy passes on a John Deere.

I nod, I say: *Yes, that was kind.*
TRAITOR

An early snow hovers
without landing, moves
upwards with wind. Seven
pairs of boots slog

in the marsh. Six men
behind, following her,
following
the drinking gourd. Samuel

limps, lest his foot
press too deeply into the mud. The others
have bound it, offered arms
to lean upon. He thinks of his wife at

the firelight with
their daughter, holds them
inside of himself against
the wind, against

his shame. He will learn tonight:
he who whimpers
at the pain of his foot,
he who turns his head

southward, he who would go back
to the whip, to his woman’s
dark body,
he who has seen the secrets

of the railroad and would tell them—
Harriet will order shot.
*Nobody goes back,* she’ll tell him.
And to the others: *Get your guns.*
CROPS, ENDLESS AND DISAPPEARING

I can’t get away from that bridge. Out, Bestpitch Ferry Road. Past what is now Blackwater Refuge—the swamp, the trees

where she’d wait weeks before others could join her. I’m there now, on the bridge, breathing. I’m thinking: On this very ground.

I’m saying her name over the Transquaking waters, over the conduit to a faraway life. My boots pressing the wood of the bridge.

The dun-colored water moving against itself. This is what it means to be hollowed out, filled in with swamp water, filled as a low cloud,

filled with borrowed memory. Far afield I can hear a shotgun fire. And new wheat breaks the ground in even rows.
ARAMINTA

Before she was
the General, before she
was Moses, before
she was Harriet Tubman, she
was *Araminta*. A name
of two roots:
Arabella, meaning
“yielding to prayer”
and Aminta,
“the defender.”

O,
the might of her arm!
Perhaps her mother, Rit,
had felt the squeeze
of her baby’s fist.
And didn’t she know
her child would peer
into the marsh, search
for the face of God,
and find it?
EASTERN SHORE GHAZAL

At Long Wharf Park, a great blue heron guards the water, a patient fisher leaning his beak toward stirring water.

Now-peaceful Long Wharf, where whole bodies became this: strong legs, good teeth, backs to carry bathtub water.

Araminta’s grandmama in the ship’s heavy heat. Stench of shit, dead flesh. The air outside, soft as water.

Black sailors—freemen—bearing news and friends, showed Araminta the Northern Star to travel by land and water.

To this shore she’d return, hide for months among trees: patient fisher of men by the Transquaking River water.

When Moses went to die in the home she built for the poor, her lungs filled up to choking with thick green water.

Imagine me, Amanda Gunn, traversing this bridge, Mahalia singing me there—Children, wade in the water!
NOTES

“A Long Ways”
The title of this poem is suggested by the lyrics of the African American spiritual “Motherless Child” (traditional).

“Broadway Boogie Woogie”:
The title of this poem is from the painting of the same name by Piet Mondrian (Dutch, 1872–1944). Oil on canvas, 50 in. x 50 in., Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

“Wade”:
The title and epigraph of this series are from the African American spiritual “Wade in the Water” (traditional).

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