

*A—uses more ordnance in a single campaign than B—used in epochs of imperial rule \**

May you not be subjected to civilizing missions

May you want to continue more than you want to stop

May God move your muscles as you lie there

May you be passed over by the local police

May God spare you the mornings of steady heat

May your computers learn to make the dead talk

May no one stop your ears to the bee-hum

May none indulge in witty banter before the eerie video clip

May God roll in, the fog in the first cool hour

May your weeping with remembrance be in slippers

May you be forcible within your heart

May your fertile regions not be barbarized, nor your large populations

May you dine in restaurants and work in offices

May the light enlarge thy days

May God occupy thy country

\* from "The Curious Case of American Hegemony," David C. Hendrickson, *World Policy Journal*

## Midlothian

Clocks addled, wandering in long daylight to land's end  
where the Esk bends, we skip rocks, pile a cairn

of granite, sandstone, bits of glass, pocky curves, striped shards —  
a river's take from igneous hills where hide, flesh, bones are stilled.

On Whitsunday along the prime meridian, churchwalls muffle  
prayer for farmer suicides, for split hemispheres of shepherd

sheep. Diggers trench field-long graves. Air transports a relentless slurry.  
Thistled clearances hold burning flocks. *Led by an invisible hand* firm as

stones that incomers might pitch or cradle in, townsfolk  
and villagers roll towels, stuff thresholds, lintels, jambs.

'He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.' ~ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* ~Fife, 1776

I.M. Foot and Mouth epidemic, Britain 2001

*Matter 29 (2021)*

Proserpine

I fell in with a man from a small country.  
He stopped on a rainy lane and asked did I want a ride.  
My mother'd told me always to follow my feet

but the fumes that day overpowered my nose.  
He bit me hard then nubbed at my love pearl.  
Red seeds fell from the wound. He says *I ate them.*

He offered me board if I paid for room  
among bloodless artistes and ivory heroes  
by charging his battery—one or two shocks.

Time passed and faded. There's a beauty in that.  
He took up his helmet. I saw he was sightless.  
I said let's let it rip. Soot fell about us.

Once I'd signed his note that hell could not be  
improved on, he set me loose for the summer.  
He'd have slipped me into his wallet if I'd fit.

Base of Parnassus

Down in the valley there's a levee  
built against a flood of lazy sex.

The central story? Hanging at the old  
mill, slogging along at the wheel

that makes cash worthless, entranced  
by rotation. Bucket after bucket

rounds the top, spills—ker-plash!  
the stream of desire: toiling drays, donkeys

slowly rising, fluted massive marble,  
volcanic pink chalky dust, ghost grandparents

spitting black pits, picking their teeth.

*The Fiddlehead* 285 (2020)

## The Entire Table Lifted Spoons

The voice need not smother words with articulated sound  
Flamenco is all about pause, and curtains frayed

Lifting the leaf, momentarily  
Rubbing lemon juice into the unfolded paper for the message

We may hang our pots instead of shelving them  
But we'll go the way of our grandmothers

There is deep sad sighing, all grief and complaint  
The texture of one summer afternoon after another

Next, please, the lady in pink  
And the rainbow's brighter end, paler span

Somewhere ribbons burst the wrappings of a present  
And a statue pats the air

*The Fiddlehead* 285 (2020)

## Cigarettes

grainy  
angels  
pass

today's  
serpents  
tense

villi  
thread

marvels  
pulverizes

channels  
want

blur

A marvellous  
thread, blood  
contemplative  
Experience textures  
the breastbone, knitting  
its nematodes  
Pulverized angels  
flutter the gullet  
allow the gut wing

A finger's reach

things wanting thread  
knits blood, runs grainy  
Villi blur, nematodes  
gutting a serpent  
Will tenses past  
contemplation  
Lungs' allowance  
the texture of fill

Excuse Me Hello Good Morning Good Night

Clear for days  
the firmament masses cumulus  
during the hour of eclipse  
so the poppy-red medallion glides unseen  
(jet fuel burns without our boarding)  
and when the viewing time's elapsed the clouds disperse  
doggedly as stage machinery  
(with or without our purchase cows are sliced and packed)

A Bronze Star  
pins the hero  
a year after combat duty  
while in *Newsweek*'s cover story his wife learns  
(put 'waive fee' code into the system)  
for the first time that bits  
of bodies stuck like mud  
(there is no charge for checks)

Please decline  
sweets from strangers  
if you hope to survive a cold war  
or the iced globe after nuclear catastrophe  
(how restrained, the oppressed, toward the West)  
else the sun may set on  
famous women, fair men and their progeny  
(dictators unroll carpets of democracy)

‘What is the shape  
of the earth?—A pear!—the wimpled  
teacher’s mouth waits not  
hand chalking detail of the cell’s mitochondria  
(Pluto, Mr Pluto, do you hear us?)  
and outlining the effects of sudden cold  
upon the human kidney  
(for we are nuns without the veil, and chemists)

## Miracle Miles

In the American tradition of realism  
I do not live where I was born.  
One self or another  
I make as I go along.

I can cross paradise without my shadow  
—a legal resident  
permitted to swear in, swear out  
—like helium—my presence.

I hear better in landscapes without deeper  
meaning—ballparks, movies, restaurants—  
than when I stand next to the pump  
when they refill my tank's vermillion.

It's hard to admit I convalesce  
from my attempts to drive away  
the natural sounding sounds  
and the way the sun can set me.

*Stand* 227: 18, 3 (2020)

Slip

The maker of my asymmetric kitchen bowls  
regards them seconds. The lip of one  
curves out, another up. Yet they nest,  
a set for soup, for stir-fry hot with ginger  
on half-lit days when rain astigmatizes

sight. Keats fears the clay of self-undoing  
collapsed upon ambition's wheel  
more than a name vanished, ink on water.  
He knows abandon a more vibrant thing  
than mere perfection, more

nourishing. Bowls rimmed with  
vines distinctly green from which droop  
purple-blue—wisteria bud? or grape?  
This could be flower, could be fruit  
blurs as though through watered glass.

*Stand* 227: 18, 3 (2020)

## Miracles When They Are Needed

It was a way to eat in Periclean Athens and in nineteenth century Paris and is now, where I sit disrobed in an underheated room in Rockland County, subject

to the winks and chuckles of suburbanites who stopped for drinks and kiss-the-wife and an exchange of business suits for leisure wear before the weekly evening class.

Breathing and stretching, I rise from the pedestal, step to the grey floor, stroke a foxtail brush, mix pigments to set off the central figure on a canvas:

A commuter sways in the primitive john that empties onto the tracks. Another swerves across the coupling into the caboose (of German derivation, meaning a hut).

His fellow (toward the periphery) clammers to the cupola where he will overlook the train's forward rush, the windows static silver with momentum, *The Times*-screened profile

of a brisk CEO, dandruff flakes on padded shoulder. A flesh-colored wad of gum flicked to the varnished center aisle awaits the closure of a pick-up broom held by the naked sweeper.

The clock chimes, end of artists' break.  
I drop brush as door pushes open to the musty room,  
canvasses on easels near identical. They file in

in smocks, mustaches, goatees, cherooting their accomplishments, expecting that my long legs will grace the platform, that my body will be folded on the drapery's folds.

Fingers a fluid sweep as crowds murmur in my brain, on my way out the door I purloin their supplies—watercolors, charcoal, pastels. Years breathe by, my dimples disappear. My paintings

are presented. I cartoon my subjects, gesso my love

for them, wipe the turp rag on my need for them  
—braggarts and don juans who can't sit still.

Passenger trains are shorter now. Crews walk freely  
through the cars, rendering an inspection lookout obsolete.  
The caboose has seen its day. I ready a frame

for the fish that bites the apostle back when the loaves  
split twelve thousand ways into crumbs on the water where  
a lone man walks. Rainbow oil rings surface on Galilee.

*The Woven Tale Press 8, 4 (2020)*  
included in [The Ruined Walled Castle Garden \(2020\)](#)

## Housekeeping

Summer approaches  
    along the lane borders:  
nettle and bramble  
    blue viper's bugloss  
fragrant white rose.  
  
    There's the dome now  
along with the ferris  
    wheel by the river  
and on very clear  
    days (when one sees  
further down  
    in one's up) the monument  
to the Great Fire.  
  
    Perhaps that wedding  
cake steeple, I say  
    to myself (every  
time) is St Bride's.  
  
    I forget I am somewhere  
and lean past  
    the castiron rail. My nose  
nears the building's  
    vent pipes. When I turn  
'round the vista's  
  
    The Heath: stretches  
of grass mown  
    or meadowed.

City life curates  
    its exhibits, pollards  
trees flat, rumbles  
    below, overhead. I could  
trance rather endlessly  
    throughout the morning  
were it not for that card  
    in my pocket  
they will ask to scan  
    at the gate.  
I hop down black grill

on my way to  
black cab, lock the fire  
    escape door, hide  
the key, wash up dishes  
    she won't have to  
face at the end of  
    the day—my sister  
who works near St Paul's  
    while the London  
Eye wheels.

From my tiny  
high window  
    there's growing small  
the pirated pointer  
    Cleopatra's Needle.  
That pharaoh  
    parked her barge  
by the Nile's  
    mouth, far from  
sandy passé  
    obelisks.  
Thutmose owned  
    this one  
shrinking by the Thames.

## Structural Uncertainty

You wrote the promissory note a year ago  
That he would not be improved on.

Perhaps the day could magically be re-opened  
To a place where it would not collapse entirely.  
Perhaps your heart could be treated with robustness  
And lemon drops before you fall asleep.

Not that you want an extension.  
It's time for his flash of light in the night.

*Vallum* 17, 1 (2020)

## Face To Face

What about the self that hasn't prospered,  
opaque and sliding the store window  
when you bend to look more closely at  
a new wool hat? Whose eyes do not waver  
when yours slant toward the diner's  
silver siding below a neon sign.

Poor body! willing to swim with you  
closer than loggers have to be  
felling a tall tree. A diver in a glass  
fronting the next bent shopper  
who riles an eyebrow toward a visage  
possibly familiar, sipping a raised cup.

*Stand* 227: 18, 3 (2020)

## Turning In To The Windswept Garden

It's a messy sloppy business, this  
immersion in samsara, the load  
of murmurs twisting, out of joint.

In a heavy duty jacket against  
the whipping air, the place called  
home is just so small.

Struggle to the shrine. Face the calm  
without benefit of baptism.  
It's the left hand you must worry.

Consecrate impatience as spindrift  
breaks into specks of shade. Lift  
the missing limb over your mouth.

*Hotel Amerika 18 (2020)*

## Heat Wave

Pools of rubber bands, staples, tape—tools  
that anchor small pieces of circumstance—  
still the left drawer. The right swells with  
burnt memos clipped, blank index cards.

A mosquito netter flutters the corner  
bewildered in its search for food.  
Shelves hold hollyhock buds from Delphi,  
serpentine from California, a double sailor's knot.

There's much to do and no call to do it,  
nothing to breathe or suck, no blade to  
shave this callus, nothing to despair of.  
Devil on left shoulder breaks a pencil.

Idleness works up defiance, entices  
God to sweat—the devil's fool.  
Moist forearms peel the map of the oak desk.  
Astrolabe and compass slip their anchors.

earlier version in *Stand* 224: 17, 4 (2020)

Girl Next Door

The half-remembered split from a warm body  
rich with all you'd need? or is the prickle

fear of the omega's being luminous, not  
galvanized steel, not a waiting room?

No turning blue this time, no cold air, hand slap, howl.  
The bellows wheezes down, gaze not registering picture

--rug and rocker breathless, blurred.  
You glide to the highway of desire you've just found.

From the vestibule, a muffled knock thuds.  
Curled fingers wait to clean.

*Stand 222: 17, 2 (2019)*

## Child Need Not Grow Up To Be Prez

Good body, captive to the prosperous self  
whose virtue is momentum. Everyone is happy  
or at least files good reports. Oh, they cost!  
stroke crowd, slip gifts, thumb-type, grin.  
But to reach the disaffected? Try  
the striking figure in that mirror:

Under fringe  
at the top  
below skull's center crack  
sits the *corpus calosum*.

Via this bundle of nerves  
the two sides of a brain  
can interpret incoming signals  
in synch, can generate movement  
of two sides as one—dot the nation's  
net with its noils—or cut a simple snarl.

*Stand 222: 17, 2 (2019)*

did your mother ask *who do you think you are?*

a foot tapping new ice, brocade splayed white on rivulet

the odd wrench in the socket set

one of the self-sowers, flower probably blue

a soapy fluid rounding off an opalescent sphere

so many apples, sauced

the dash for clarity

fairy duster? filaree?

gentle vertigo, a door along the floor

a frail clang, the steep pilgrimage

a page torn unevenly

*Notre Dame Review* 47 (2019)

## Waiting For Inspiration

Rubbing our legs, eye to eye in insecurity  
we discuss the afternoon's infinity—

me and in the middle of the room elliptically  
a vagrant symbolist buzzing figure eights.

The housefly parks—wings closed, a hieroglyph—  
halfway down the ceiling lamp's hanging braid.

*Stand 222: 17, 2 (2019)*

## Stealing Across the Silver

A small firmament is turning on your finger as you rub its emeried surface, the embossed silvered bear. Your brute enjewels the universe —while someone else eases arthritis pain in four short weeks, bothers with hay fever.

Spare yourself a life of needlework and picnics, your scuttered hair permed alloy. Blood pressure screening may be free and confidential but try out the universe seen from afar—pale green.

Galaxies bailed out on their blue period eons ago. Astrophysicists average the spectrum of planets, stars, white dwarfs, black holes to a wavelength nearly turquoise.

What glints from bilious matter! and so distant across space. The yet more distant future average will resemble slaughtered meat, chapped lips, a face after a load of hiccups.

*Hotel Amerika 17 (2019)*

## Infinitives

To admit fields are on fire, oil fields,  
though we do not yet see them burning;  
to remember our grandparents sweltered  
each summer, waiting for the streetcar,  
for nightfall; to irrigate loosened earth  
with native water; to bail out the seed  
banks, to chew our food; to call the bluff  
of the brand name, the marketing genius;  
to digest resources burnt to a crisp threshold;  
to savor our craving—to satiation;  
to be free of litter strewn beyond us  
steering through the Hesperides, sacred  
groves, Blessèd Isles, past the ghost  
of a man on the moon's new frontier,  
our course set for the destitute sunset.

*Stand 219: 16, 3 (2018)*

## Floats To The Sky

Initially I did not plan  
    a painting of a ladder  
        faithful to phantom  
            noises before sleep  
wearing a clean chemise  
    beneath dirty shorts  
        under a worn abaya  
            in my pink slippers  
with my red cheeks in the shop  
    for spots of vitiligo  
        and smoothing of their  
            plump ragged history.

The canvas came bare  
    as a bell before it's struck  
        by brisk forced air  
            on open waters  
or the blue wasp  
    that loved me  
        when I was a child  
            with a sting to the pineal  
scattering bars through light  
    all the way to dark  
        faster than brush  
            leaks down my hand.

*Vallum* 15, 2 (2018)

AUDIO online at *Vallum*'s Poem Of The Week 25 March 2019

AUDIO also available on <https://marygilliland.com/?cat=2>

Baghdad [aka Desert Storm]

He keeps on touching her against the wall  
beneath crucifix and candle, as blue silk  
of the shade catches wick flaring white.

The red stub gutters. He's a waxy paraphrase.  
At the edge of himself what he meets  
is uncannily familiar, his plausible fiction.

The fire's light astride them—about, above, around—  
he shifts her leg, her foot, off the ground.  
The farther back she moves the further he swings.

*Matter* 22 (2018)

## For When Nothing Is Remembered

On the eighth day we looked on and realized  
it wasn't good anymore. Where did they go,  
the shared rituals? We buy greeting cards  
that could be sent to anyone, nineteenth  
century fixtures shine without a lamplighter  
and the city spent millions wiring  
the whatnot.

Coffee in a paper cup, a painted wood duck,  
little darlings on the back stairs fed  
morning and night--no one born yesterday  
will ever see contraptions that we use to  
communicate. What of the game under  
the tree root left behind the hill?  
Step up.

And leave the affirmations by the wayside.  
Inveigling all the separate types who  
might begin to dance is no path of light.  
Your hygienist can look for other work.  
You might as well slink off to your room  
without lipstick or a gold dress, seeds  
in your hair.

*Matter 22 (2018)*

## Earthly Mishaps

Faint, humming, inexorable in the damp  
below the ruined walled castle garden  
Mare's Tail tunnels an eight-foot root.

Sly-boots, I've spaded the circle, reached to my elbow.  
Still the plant breaks. As Eve brought a man  
his labor, it will multiply tenfold.

I shop for survival: a sprayer to level pride, melancholy  
and unwanted shoots. The canister is lowered from  
its shelf, bagged in plastic. The till rings.

Keys in hand, I see the carpark as a horsetracked swale  
where Cadfael leads his roan, saddlebagged  
with an apothecary box. Medieval herbicide?

As he stumps through mud, the monk's brass scale tips:  
one pan sways with the bitterness of interrupted life,  
the other, Eve's radical helplessness.

*TAB: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics* 6, 2 (2018)  
AUDIO also available on <https://marygilliland.com/?cat=2>

## Guest in the Neighborhood

I was on chicken surveillance that night:  
fowl to be roasted whole or split and fried,  
delivered to the busy suburb.

My mind ran to last week's manifest destiny  
wanting to return to the meadow  
thrust into the newly green, sun humming  
off the pond. Working the line—a private  
lake—would have to fill in that longing.  
Then the night shift rooted its wishbone in my chest.

I passed the guard, crawled the sidewalk. But  
a frenzy of messy barks—the beagle next door—  
had me turn. Each tray of hens was carried from  
the walk-in cooler, each carcass bathed,  
patted dry, set on the appropriate counter  
with a little clearing around it.

That odd feeling of walking in place  
closed my throat, the inexorable remains  
of feeding on wages, hungry for wings.

*TAB: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics* 6, 2 (2018)

Compared to What Was Is Beautiful

the bread eaten, the westerlies  
intuitively understood

lattice-blinds hanging askew

*meander      deserter      maneuver*  
marching on but not over the tongue

the orchid's pouch gradually enlarging

bunchgrass stippled, light flexing  
on rags hung to dry

*Hotel Amerika* 16 (2018)

## Perhaps I Left the Car at Big Lots

My yard is limbo, rampaging beds  
of succulents and stalks, a place for  
the innocent, a palace of nonresolution,  
its conundrum cross or crucifix—  
the clean whistle of perpendicular boards  
or the gallery of whispers  
around the writhing figure,  
the little piece of culinary art.

I have my own sadnesses, having reached  
the end of my smoke rope and all my  
excuses for lighting up—that it keep me pagan,  
transcendental, strong and young, lit from within.  
The telephone rings, mail arrives,  
there are meetings to attend  
and the list divides, clones, unfolds mercilessly  
until, looking for the rake among leaves against

the slatted fence, I am convinced  
that it was stolen by the cook  
next door, traded for crack. Where is calm, peace,  
absence of war? It's all bits, parts, fragments,  
divisions, subdivisions—the brilliant  
jay, the desperate squirrel, my neighbor in his  
old Yankee cap sobbing by the garage  
wall—I've found the keys. But I can't leave.

## Slipping An Opinion Out Of Them Is Easy

They've seen it all, been round the bend  
and back. Is it my job to ensure answers  
I record reflect their actual beliefs?  
One guy claiming to be 'not denominational'  
scored the perfect mean for liberal media reader.  
I sense an emptiness in such respondents  
although they maintain the mask of good  
manners they bring to the landline.

Once there was a voice I could completely  
give a body to, she was so well oiled, most  
of her time probably spent at the marina  
sailing her yacht into the fiercest wind in search  
of a lungful with that old-time feel of  
shock and grit. When I asked how she thought  
she might survive the Rapture without smoking  
she growled 'Can I swim in your pond?!"

*Hotel Amerika 16 (2018)*

lucky number

7 8 9      1 2 3  
lasso of infinity

spring stalled, the buds like eardrums  
waiting for the work to work in me

you have a headache, you cannot sleep  
you want the sun out and gone

a yellowed yellow pad  
the loose unpretty heart

## The Old Man Brought Home

My father once wore one shoe and one slipper  
pressing star moss and vole tracks  
walking steep land

A stubbled saint fizzling in a twentieth century  
incarnation, afraid to use  
the cellar stair

Or to digest the darkness that had been  
his middle age. He broke off  
old branches.

As his hand brushed their papergreen lichens  
brittleness pleased a slender novelist  
tossed inside

Who spoke to a cobbler bent over  
blue suede or white leather  
at his bench.

Is a transcendently beautiful place not to be ours?

The sea bangs about and sweeps out half the earth  
of Isle Dernière, with half its 1856 summer residents.

Chance combinations of genes or plans based on  
the weather consign personal fate to probability.

How many can rise to the side of the saints  
and float among the rocks in a white dress?

Shifting winds sweep Emma Mille back in. Little bags  
for keeping miracles streak her cheeks, lumps of fool's gold.

On the last barrier island, entranced, shivering  
beneath the doctor's stethoscope, Emma fever dreams:

The great clod across the marsh channels  
erodes with each storm strike. In the century

after steam, then the century after flight  
mortals will rebuild, sight rocks to float among.

## Outside The Tunnel Snow Is Melting

Thank you, Mom, I found just  
enough tablets to relieve  
the worst symptoms.  
Empty radiance or radiant emptiness—  
why grouse about what's perfect?  
This peacoat's already original sin.

Now it's just up these last steps  
but after I unlock the door you better  
go first. We have to make our way  
through these stacks of boxes that came  
down from the attic a few days ago.  
Watch your knee on the newel post.

Born into the old blues, can't you  
see what they've been doing  
to me? with spiritualist church services  
and one-liners written in hotel rooms.  
How deceiving, the darkness.  
The subtle capitulate, the young refuse.

I would have been a missing manual, blank  
on the dusty flattened glove  
you just picked from the parking lot  
or the fluorescent lights  
above the day-old bread  
or the winter night itself.

You might have been duped by  
serving evil or living for thrills  
on the chance of one vulnerable moment.  
Careful, that cup's chipped.  
Here's a lace doily. No, password  
has another meaning.

Can you preserve  
the years in forty folders  
fast and careless  
as a transalpine express?  
or coat the lawn with

genetic code or tragedy?

All these years you've been gathering  
fruit at the end of a branch  
I've spent time with the monks  
incarnated this once as woman.  
Do you know their cry  
while flying? like ducks  
with head colds.

See those ravens at eye level there?  
and on the ground blacked-in  
outlines cruise. We didn't  
warm any else of it up.  
Watch what happens  
when what's happening  
wants to stop.

*Hotel Amerika* 15 (2017)

## Fresh Coffee After You Are Gone

There's studied madness in opening bills after breakfast,  
signing bank transfers. I clear my mind enough to know

a fallen stick of incense won't burn the house,  
to figure out the cassette's lack of sound, the rasp

of its rotation, is my error not the answering machine's;  
side A not B is the voice, still there, metallic

in the renovated room without its furniture:  
*I'll be he-e-re*—the abecedarian of 4 AM—

*I know: Dinner time's the best time. Talk to  
you later*—the manic laugh, disintegration after

successful surgery inside the frontal lobe.  
*Pick up. Pick it up! I am healed.* Oligodendro-

glioma spreads its treeroots in the brain. If I  
could have work to do, take aspirin and move on

instead of staring at the sad museum pieces  
that pondering sculpts from love, as though understanding

were a place to live. If I could simply talk about  
the damp closet upstairs, the milky trail of mildew

on black velvet, the yellowed dry cleaning tags.  
Is the number on the scrap of paper 6 or 9?

As though knowing would be alchemy? Square one:  
hot bitter brew, then the nothing that has to be done.

For an agitated hour I bundle one towel about  
another in a ball, sort the light fabrics from dark.

*Notre Dame Review* 43 (2017)

AUDIO also available on the NDR website

AUDIO also available on <https://marygilliland.com/?cat=2>

## Offering the Body: The Tibetan Practice of Chöd

The eagle does its day job  
feasting on what's left by crow and vulture.  
Anything I'd planned to do is over.

As my head nods its usual consent  
to imaginary promises and dreams  
my corpse appears before me.

Time's come to set my mind  
to ribbon flesh, chop small, pile it in a dish  
made from the cranial bones.

I scout the stinking ground for anything  
to start the fire, use my own desire.  
The skull cup, on its tripod, enlarges as it heats.

Half-moon on a finger  
pokes from the pile of blood and bones  
simmering to stew, to nectar.

All who are wise, the ordinary, furred,  
obstructors, germs of sickness—  
may their bodies, minds, be sated.

From every distance and dimension, beings  
afraid, unsatisfied, or blessed, feast to satisfaction—  
devils, angels, animals, everyone I owe.

I see no stopping to the world  
but there is respite from the demons  
that arise daily in the head.

That this ritual could do the same thing twice  
—my awareness cuts that thought. O, I cherished  
this poor body. I quake. Invite.

Now, knife the ritual words   *in vast space*  
*reduced to dust*       *mounded like clouds*  
*clinging*       *dearly held*    to let in silence.

For all that is perceived, flesh or consciousness,  
appears then disappears, image in a mirror—  
red drop, a fingernail, a ball of hair.

*Tampa Review* 51 (2016)

## Loggerheads

Muck mostly decomposed  
beneath the fissured shell  
    the top barnacled

On the great back that had been their earth  
flat miniature yurts ride  
    white, some with a smoke hole:

*Not to be handbag leather, our world, nor cosmetic oil,*

Clutch laid, her flippers had troweled  
the sand smooth and then stranded  
on ruts left by surf fishers' trucks

*turtle soup, eyeglass frames, jewelry, shrimp boat clutter*

Hatchlings born for the guidance  
of moonbeams reflected off waves sometimes  
crawl toward lights streaming the road

*but a simple sacrifice, to headlights and round rubber*

*Stand 14, 4 (212) (2016)*

Motherwort

As forest green leaves reverse in wind  
dusty silver undersides' veins bulge.

Embryonic rings of spurred seeds  
halt hand's slide at intervals  
along the tall four-sided stalk.

*Leonurus cardiaca* has a robin  
sherwood shine, a slightly darker slightly  
danker nature than its fellow weeds.

Minute orchids top the taloned  
seedcrowns—frillpink visors.

Whence the fomentative power  
—plucked, bruised, steeped—  
to break fever, lift childbirth cramp.

*Stand* 14, 4 (212) (2016)

Occupied

Bruised ribs, raked shins  
in the search for a sweet grape  
among dry vines

Endlessly back and forth  
reading maps, reading the legends:  
'city of peace' 'gate of the gods'

Standing knee deep in the mud  
of an untilled field  
a rogue bull amid the red dirge

Hub of bricks on the flood plain  
submerged save for its fame  
Re-upped, streets radial from the gardens

Called again to prayer:  
land of marshes and sand  
looted and forced, and forced once more

Bone chips rattling  
arms gone to a roadside bomb  
Meat cold in the bowl

## Ember Days

The almanac's laconic whistle  
passes a millennium at last grown  
nonfungible. Day breaks up the where-were-

you party. Feet wander concrete platforms  
lit with radiance weak and discomfited  
from two bare bulbs, stilled double-naughts.

Mobiles dry-rattle beneath posters for stewpots  
and holiday sales, the forecast troubled music:  
history, or at least cold wind of a startling event.

A cricket's chirrup slows to intermittent pipe.  
Hooves break the dried railside bramble. Auburn  
summer coats thickened gray, the fawns cluck.

*Notre Dame Review* 41 (2016)

AUDIO available on the *NDR* website

AUDIO also available on <https://marygilliland.com/?cat=2>

## Addiction

In the slack apron pocket it's a long search  
to find the utility knife. The cans to be  
stacked have red and green labels  
with fruit at the center, sprouting  
yellow heraldic motifs. As the  
stockboy wheels his dolly of  
cartons to the next aisle  
of shelves, I glance  
each way. I steer  
slowly and sound-  
lessly into his vacated spot.

When my hand tweaks the base of the pyramid  
I learn to breathe through the mummified  
arc of its toppling, through the oversized  
eight year old at the checkout scratching  
shoulder and neck as he chooses one  
candy, through the two-hour sling of the snarled  
expressway, the baseball-capped mowers who lazily care  
for the grass, the dead in their tombs' cool interiors  
through the evening report of the perilous stall  
in the allied position, the friend's call about  
the job held by a woman who decided not  
to terminate her pregnancy who  
doesn't know she is being  
terminated  
through the lack  
of alarm with which I'll  
greet tomorrow, a seamless  
gauze wrapping me in perpetuity  
ribs stacking one on  
the next.

beguile — flatter

sapient — wise

—spitting backward the scallop moves forward—  
a barnacle anchors the back of its neck  
loses most of its head      spends life kicking  
food into its mouth—

She drifts off mid-page.  
The horizon is mute carbon paper,  
what's left of the night.

Has she stolen the shore?

The sack on her shoulder  
holds place-cards from presidents' luncheons,  
bills for books and activities  
with their blank checks, their smiles, her bows,  
the way she can please them.

How many words a day?

porous as pumice                  her memory grows  
neophyte — novice                pariah — outcast  
—yet tomorrow brings more of that rhythmic beating—

*Stand* 198: 11, 2 (2012)

Cain

Angst has never been other than sweet  
atop tumuli worn with eons of rains'  
gravity bundling the hours.

How birds homed in that first time  
from every direction. An unhurried mist  
cracked the tumult of branch.

The taste has not changed. I leave him  
unburied wherever he lists. Lance this  
stripling wind. Unsheathe the blast.

*Stand* 198: 11, 2 (2012)

Can You

\_\_\_\_ ranks  
\_\_\_\_ even

\_\_\_\_ a twenty at the office a fiddle at the fire silence at the sea

It's life: the story ----s  
the glass globe as it snows  
the surface as it sticks

\_\_\_\_ the news: It's death  
(in the desert) a leg, camp, cover  
down, in, off, up (in the garden)

caps of patriots in the land of milk and honey  
in the cradle of civilization the cradle  
(Behind the door a voice ----ing with emotion)

We'll take a commercial ----  
(ninety seconds of paradise: slim hints of  
orange distance  
ghost sunset  
lapping water:  
a four-color flyer in junk mail)

The law of the sword The cycle of plague and revenge Fire----- at the border  
(a circuit breaker!)

Risen bread A sunny yolk  
(tines drag oily yellow membrane)

Records breaking at the post office as the weather breaks  
In the chapel, fish breaking water break under questioning daybreak

\_\_\_\_ the chain of command  
XXXXX into tears

XXXXX the news  
XXXXX the news

Break your heart  
Break for lunch

## Migration

Geese knock dry cold in the stubble, clap upward.  
Eve's foot pierces the edge of the garden.

Light is what she needs, not this  
journey through temporal gloam  
on a horse in the dark without reins.

That heady feeling:  
*Come along, come be born—*

Someone's dreaming her now, a whir  
like a buzz saw against time's grain.  
The geese cry out, announce themselves

—*cleave the Making.*

*Hotel Amerika* 13 (2015)

## Nemesis

The burdock no one dug for spring tempura  
or a boast of victory over taproot  
leafs out vast and ribbed. Its stalk  
crests the human head, blossoming magenta.

During August the young burr scratches  
shoulders, teases clothes. Mercy will vanish  
as it dries and the winds whisper  
a pox on the horse's tail, the neat edge of a lawn.

Persistent as shark or cockroach  
burdock remembers ferns high as trees,  
brontosaurus necks lengthening until their pea-heads  
could chew enormous fiddleheads, sharp cold

or claws sudden in the belly bringing them to earth.  
In daylight and darkness throughout nature's  
mammal dreams, burdock heard first the apes  
who walked, sure they would wear the crown.

*Stand 204: 12, 4 (2014)*

## Rosslyn Chapel's Artisans

### 1. The Master

Let there be an upright. Let corbels keep  
the upright wedged, stone perpendiculars  
against its stone, pure shaft and bar, that and  
this: a man is angled, faced; his soul  
form without error, lacking cycle, circlic  
closure. To found a town he plants a cross  
over a mouthless spring, then has a girl  
entice a dragon there: wrathful fire tamed  
heralds agriculture—charms the plants to stay.

Across our landscape appear faces: gods  
that Nature keeps unseen. Just so, the work  
of masons is the absence of our shape.  
One reaches only once within life's time;  
see that you reach far. Pin the dragon  
on the path. Carve a roof—a vaulted  
groin, with roses, leaves and stars.

For the greater glory of our God, let  
your pillar uptake dragons and spew vines.  
Inset between squared corners, from capital  
to base as though a cloth had unrolled of  
itself, a diptych of this pattern:  
Meld cockleshell with fleur-de-lis, and crush.  
Knot round and round a space where they are not.

Let the pillar support child and lovers,  
marksman, builder, planter, pruner. Carve next  
to each the costume that casts out the soul:  
the fleshless bones. Top the whole with angel  
holding spread book, empty page. Your work scribes  
within the stone what appears not there—names  
that keep men going, bring them back. Resist  
the blasted barren mind's soliloquy:  
No one can be saved. No one can be kept.

>>>

## 2. The Mother

Stop rattling my door. I've worked my dusty  
shift within the shop of the divine,  
trued the wheel and dressed the block until it  
worked me doubletime. I haven't energy  
to carve a roast. The kettle's on, fire  
banked, my hammer's misplaced, apron gone.  
Your brisk fist pounds the casing, then thumbs  
worry the lock: my fingers agitate  
with the wounds that tools heft from an untouched  
surface. Upon the pillar's opaque  
capital, you'll want hewn and bound a ram  
and sacrificial boy, bearded father  
with a knife. You'll want a Green Man close by,  
his tongue a vine scrolling the chapel wall,  
lithe serpents twined about the column's base,  
ropes of foliage wound up the shaft.  
Last time I fell in love it tore me so  
I kept it to myself. Reach? Draft someone  
else. I live with a silent chisel, rasp  
and file laid side by side. Tether not this  
dragon, unremarked, unseen——

————As I reach  
the sided stone rounds, topped with openwork.

>>>

### 3. The Apprentice

No template carved this capital: angelic implements unfix—scroll there, here bell or shield. Or it withstands the angels:

ram, fruit, roses are its crown; the cockle shell, the flux of stars patter in rounded rows, pattern unset, the emblems variant.

One long neck with wings, eight dragons set their tail in mouth, a base that firms the pillar, a cross-stitch for a column

ribbed like a fall of frozen water,  
an artery of ironed hair. But see  
the four strands in relief that writhe it:

stranded curves of fruitless foliage,  
double spirals, differing like the mismatch  
in the germ on which matching depends.

On which the universe depends, the dance  
that splices dancers. Why does one helix  
fold another in its spin? Plasm, eyeless

gropes toward its new fate. The way a trampled  
dragon might meet a wounded saint.

*Stand* 198: 11, 2 (2012)

#### NOTE:

Rosslyn Chapel was built in Midlothian, Scotland in the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Faces of the apprentice, his mother, and his master are carved in the ceiling. In esoteric masonry, three pillars toward the front of the chapel are known as Strength, Wisdom and Beauty. The first is attributed to a master mason, the third to his apprentice who (like Talos, the pupil of Daedalus whose work excelled his teacher's) was said to have been slain in a jealous rage. The middle pillar is unattributed. Questioned on site, the chapel staff responded, "The plain one? No one seems to mention that." Of the chapel's 16 pillars it is the only one not described in several centuries of detailed guidebooks.

## Stirrings

She spends nights on her feet  
tipping pills into throats of the aged,  
swabbing their bedsores, chucking wet linen,  
the rotator cuff hurling pain's metal  
the length of her arm.

At midshift, at three, at the gooseneck lamp  
lighting her station, she writes up the charts.

In the mornings, sleepheavy,  
she wheedles her daughter's pressed thumbs  
from the abdomen under the nightie,  
guides them to the pitcher's handle,  
slides the cereal under the milk  
and with luck holds her tongue at bodily  
nonsense, the girl nine years old.

She takes off her nurse's uniform  
and slides into bed, the man turning his back,  
hands balled in the clamp of his knees.

*Stone Canoe 5 (2011)*

## Winter in the Garden

When I squat to the spade base, the handle does the lifting  
so I see the yellowed body in cascades of loosened earth.

With the blind human movement toward the future  
my pointer finger tucks the damp sack of her belly.

A webbed foot rests on clods of grubs  
and buried eggs whose hatch will wake her.

With the half-mew of a cat moved from an easy chair  
the toad rebukes me in her dreaming.

*AGNI* 69 (2009)

## Your Mouth On Me

~for Chuck Dockham~

Six clean stitched blue molded inches cover  
pelvic bone to crotch. You drop by, see  
me dress, in shorts nearly fabricless—  
no cuffs or back pockets. Gypsy slips  
into the summer. In a handspan's  
denim, I walk along beside you  
down the trail to frame a neighbor's window.

We'll elude at parties the stunned mates that  
we arrive with, ditch bonfire for woods....  
Vapor rises from my sturdy forearms to  
the mountain air; aureoles meander from  
soaked hair as I step from an outdoor sauna.  
If it were fired up there would be others  
there, communal Sundays. I am  
alone, sponge-rinsed and nearly dry  
when you come looking for an extra hand.

I am a woman who frames windows, hoists  
a maul, whose waist stays small. Your lathe  
smoothes the rings of crosscut antler  
when I marry. As your eight-year-old sits  
in the back, your palm slides from the stick shift  
to me. He's not to know about the moment  
you and I....the openwork of metal eyes  
clasps the denim's nickel-sized front buttons.

If I leave the shorts draped on the sauna  
rack, if I stay behind the door when  
you call Anybody here?...I don't. I step and  
stand there naked as a burnished violin.  
I slip the short shorts up my thighs.  
When the window's framed you slowly take apart  
the halter top, a backless slip of red  
that covers less of me than my long hair.

I pass along the shorts to my trim painter  
a month after you die though as I stuff  
them in her kit I do not know you have.  
She inherits twenty-something years of

paint splats, wear marks, tears, hard gobs of roof  
cement, top button etched with Wrangler.  
She is riveted, well toned, two months  
from her due date. Then they'll fit.  
When I give something away I see it.

*Stand* 204: 12, 4 (2014)