

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH WASHING MACHINE

In those days children slept all over us,
and we were fast and best, but didn't know it,
and sticky and milk-sour, and they were perfect pink mouths
of unknowing, each breath filling theirs with ours.
The children slept, and we slept, and we were happy.
And when we woke we heard about choices we'd been making
when we thought we were putting on our good shoes
(the ones our mothers gave us), or missing the last bus back,
or wondering if we really liked cilantro after all
(its sweet rot smell), or letting a boy show us mountains
from the window of a plane. But no, they were choices,
and here were new small bodies to prove it.
So we slept and woke to stand facing the washing machine
and chose warm, chose cold, chose permanent press
with medium spin express wash normal/casual.
We spun the dial and rinsed where it landed,
and we were happy, and then we slept.
And when we woke we saw figures walking
through the trees in the park across the street. They stopped
(their bodies momentary trunks) and then kept moving,
and we were happy.
And on the parent and child parking signs at the grocery store
we were a tall triangle with a circle head bending down
to a short square with a circle head looking up.
And the children woke to tell us a new age had come
into their bodies, that they could feel it beating,
and we were happy, and we slept. And the children woke,
and we tried to explain the difference
between *country* (was there a wall over the mountains?)
and *city* and *here*, each a shape falling smaller inside another.
And we slept. And the children woke. And we woke.
And we reminded ourselves to wash the strawberries in vinegar
so they wouldn't spoil, and pack the lunches
(choosing the fruit piece by piece into plastic snap-lid boxes),
and hang the clothes to dry, and we were happy,
and we slept, and the thing that
was happy slept too.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS SMALLER MOON

I wasn't looking at her.

Instead, I watched years of tides
dismantle coasts, watched my shadow
paint its pupil on revolving blue, watched haze,
watched birds, watched icecaps spread
and shrivel, but not the line I drew above
or who flew with me.

What is belonging?
I floated in my dust and ore,
collecting light like sympathy
from strangers, and, when it came,
the wind felt this way too—polite intrusion.
Pay attention,

mothers say, *look both ways, don't
follow strangers.* But in that turning,
I forgot. Startled by this one larger—
and so close behind—
I wobbled toward her, heeling
before I knew I moved.

Where does the moon go, mama? I went
to mountains, foothills, craters,
spread myself against the dark back
of this lovely other, burrowed in,
as lighter rocks slipped singly by,
pursuing their own gravity.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH ALTERNATE ENDING

Keep 5:30, perfect June almost evening. Keep forgetting dinner and walking out into the day exhaling sweat, exhaust, and unseen sea like a lost gull. Keep the mile-away bay we head for now, the baby in her stroller, queen at ship's prow, trying her new word—*kitty, kitty*—on every moving thing. Keep *kitty, kitty*. Keep the humped driveway that catches the stroller's wheels, the cracked sidewalk and ragged curb, where we stop to let three boys run past—t-shirts flashing white. They don't turn to see us. Keep the boys as we start out again to cross our street and, *kitty, kitty*, keep three more boys running, not so fast but tracking the first three. They stop for us who have interrupted, we think, their game. The tallest one—his red and white striped shirt, his hand in his pocket. Keep the shirt, keep the hand, not the pocket. Keep the movement of his legs as he again begins to run, keep the neighbor who calls to us as we cross over. Keep the mother who is sitting home with supper, or who is working in a hotel changing other people's sheets, or who is pulling into her driveway and calling to her neighbor *Have you seen him?*—her boy who stops now to take the gun out of his pocket to fire its *pop-pop-pop* at the other boys retreating, their t-shirt flags waving—don't keep this. Or the unsound as it arcs, as it tunnels through the air, or the whirring of the stroller's wheels as our legs unfurl—no wall or open door, but endless pavement and a bullet that is somewhere. Keep it somewhere, somewhere fallen in the grass, where later plainclothes cops will find it, reassure us that we weren't *an intended target*. Take out target. Take out intention. Keep the baby in her stroller singing softer now her *kitty, kitty* as we jolt home, the sky a mask behind us.

REPORT BEFORE

In the split between two boulders
behind the blue and orange playground,

the children are building nests
for when the hurricane comes.

Assembly line, they pass small piles of twigs
and—*Faster!*—last year's leaves,

then climb inside with larger sticks *for rowing.*
April now, and the last storm has redrawn

all the Atlantic flood maps. One more year
until the Cartaret Islands go down in the Pacific—

whole forests of nests past all rowing.
One morning in December,

my friend will go in to wake her 2-year-old son,
and find him.

Causes unknown, the doctors will say—
some stuttered synapse blanking inhale.

What tide could bear this?
She'll write his obituary for the local news.

Is it tomorrow? my son asks at bedtime each night,
and in the morning asks again.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH ARITHMETIC

White 1, yellow 5, red 10—at school,
my daughter's learning math with colored blocks.

She sorts and measures, measures and sorts—
How many ways to make a 10?—rewarding same

with same. On the rug, the children rush to say
that *she is 5 and so is he and she and she...*

all except the boy who's 6
and wonders if he's turned another animal.

At home, my daughter says her skin is pale,
paler than mine, but mine is

*paler than Jasmin, who's paler than Jaziyah, who's paler
than Aniyah, who's paler than Laray, who's darkest of all.*

She pauses.
I watch her adding and subtracting.

Outside, some kids are playing ball.
We hear them, distant, through the window—

the last few leaves gold on their branches,
the sky already softening towards dusk.

How many ways to make a 10.
The light comes in to us translucent, cool.

We sit here, figuring.