
Senior Projects Spring 2024

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Aviary

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Bard College

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Aviary

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Madelyn Oprica

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024



AVIARY

*for my sisters,
Adele, Audrey, and Morgan*

A very special thanks to Ann Lauterbach, my advisor.

“Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I’m martyr to a motion not my own;
What’s freedom for? To know eternity.”

- Theodore Roethke, *I Knew a Woman*

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Prologue

*This spoken story
leaves paper cuts,
from the east coast suburbs
to the grassland of the west.*

*Walking around towns,
I can't feel my feet hitting the ground,
but I can feel the wind in the air
soft on my head, on my bare arms
tender like petals,
or bitter, bitter
blowing the car offroad—*

I can feel the wind.



1.
EXHALE

Ebenezer Congregational Church, Sidney, Montana.

My winters now are spent in the plains
where the coursing winds
teach me what it means
to be suffocated
by open air.

I wish I could be moved by crows and squirrels
maybe then I could inhabit
this empty land
keeping my body and mind next to you
not turning to face the summer
where we catch tiny wetland frogs
and the early evening light
spills through my window
like peaches from a crate,
and the cicadas are in a rush to get their sound out
while they can still sing.

I too was in a rush
to tell you how wrong you are
before I give up and I will give up.

On Christmas Eve I went to church willingly

the pastor was crying,
we were sitting in a circle in a basement,
polished concrete flooring, dark wood-paneled walls,
they passed out candles,
they stood up and sat back down and sang and prayed,
they had wine-drenched bread off the same spoon,
I didn't do one thing I was supposed to,
I studied everyone's faces

and the dim basement was better
than the deathly cold outside.



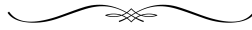
It takes thirty hours travel to reach Montana from Connecticut
so when I get to my mother and father's house
they will already be a day older
when the gray emptiness of east Montana
ages them quickly enough—

I had never thought the gap between us
would also age

I hear it creaking like an ice pond.

My mother chose my ordinary name, the one that I nearly dislike.
Since a child she wanted to name a daughter *Madelyn*.

I worry
that I may be her only living girlhood dream.



And there are no trees, no mountains in Montana's eastern plain
no lost versions of self lingering in branches

if you bleed you bleed forever
when you forget you forget forever.



Miles out in the grassland, running
into streaks of lost sound
I'm looking back in the direction of the town
most of the children don't even dream of leaving—

a wild laugh
the swingset creaks
a rancher's whistle
wind

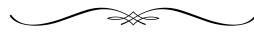
—what is there to hold onto?

Two little girls and two more
the twine between us— links
beads on a string

I said goodbye to the full house
before I left for work
and came home to a hollow—

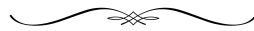
I remember how it felt for the bracelet
to break and scatter

like shooting a bird of paradise clean out of the sky.



Twine under the sun
with the toughness of a dandelion root
sundown on the harbor
sundown on the house and the shedding of rope

how it flakes apart.



In the miles laid out before the horizon

a solitary figure

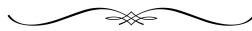
the pump jack on the oil well

it keeps moving, a silent, iron groaning,

it keeps pace, toils

like a man

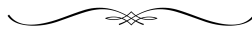
alone beneath the astral plane.



My mother ran into her student on the sidewalk. He was wearing a leather jacket. She was wearing two sweaters, a full-length parka, mittens, and a ski mask. “Aren’t you cold?” she inquired. He said, “we don’t get cold like that.”

She told it like it was a funny, peculiar story. I wondered how much louder he could have said it. *I am meant for this land and you are not.*

The lady next door told my parents when they first arrived that the winters are bearable *so long as you stay inside*. The ranchers’ mansions have indoor pools and tennis courts.



This land was crafted by the glaciers.
The slow turn of the turbine,
the slow turn of a head
to look across the oil plains
how they have carved this place open,
changed the terrain
as if *they* were glaciers.

It took millions of lifetimes to find the shale.
It took ten years to drain the shale dry.

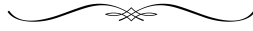
Now the exhale of defeat hovers above Sidney, Montana
hovers and sinks
onto the cracked sidewalks and sheets of ice.
In this oil town, most of them didn't get rich.

To live here now is to live as a leftover
where the only future is a weakened past.
Tomorrow is for remembering yesterday,
when life and the land was bountiful.

How long will the cattle-keepers linger?

To live with conviction—
we came here for freedom my father says,
but it is too cold to even leave the house.

To live here now is to fail to admit
that it is better to go.



Fort Union Trading Post was built
by the local fur company of the upper Missouri River in 1828.
It has a red roof; it still stands.
It isn't warm inside but the walls stunt the winds.
It still stands, I can go in
and imagine I am trading with the tribes of the Northern Plains—
they give me robes of buffalo fur
hand-harvested and hand-made.
I give them guns.

Scattered on the dusty wood are beads
shaded like the prairie sunset
and cobalt in the wash of the river.

The floor creaks
as I bend down to pick them up
one by one.



I drive my sister, Morgan, out to the Little Missouri National Grassland.
Everywhere we go is a place
I feel I may not return from—

*The breath that I take walking through snowfall, cold dips in a kettle pond,
the weight of my joints undone, fog upon the bus stop,
being close to the earth at the edge of the field, the edge of the forest, drawings
in window condensation, saving a chrysalis, a fish tank, a music box,
the sound of you, my sister, sleeping in my room.*

There is a sound of glitter in the collective dream space.

I was talking to my sister, Adele,

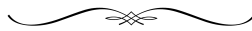
Could she see me there?

I have lost so many things—

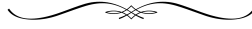
I have lost so many things
there were no borders to keep them in.
I told her
it is like the Little Missouri National Grassland,
full of wind and simply open, where anything you let go of
cannot be found again—
what you forget, you forget forever.

The old man, a stranger, at hotel breakfast told me

*This place may not be the edge of the world,
but you can see the edge of the world from here.*



I dreamt of Audrey sitting in the yard with the dog, not speaking.
Her friend was moving out of town.
I thought she would want to see her off.



As if someone has pinched the atmosphere,
I walk to the next place with a limp
perplexed at whether I am half asleep or
failing again—

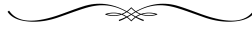
time keeps folding in on itself—
all my memories are equidistant.
I remember my mother driving me to ballet class,
I remember her calling me last week.

And perhaps I could sense things more clearly if my mind
didn't feel closely encased in glass.
I toddle around, fumbling for a light switch.

I think about tapping and shattering the glass
with a tiny heavy hammer—

winter is gray in every state,
but nowhere is it this cold—

vitality
slips from my bloodstream like a minnow.



My mother and father
can instantly crumble my poise, they
punch straight to my spirit,
they are raising my sisters wrong,
they revere a god I don't believe in.
They are forgiven unconditionally,
they keep borrowing my money.

Yet it is only shame that keeps me
from staying forever nestled
in this gap on their living room couch
like the smell of smoke upon clothes,
my weight a little slug in the palm of a hand.

I thought I would want to leave

my ambition has depleted itself
but I have patience in abundance.

I fear I belong to this category of time
4 o'clock in the afternoon, midweek,
the days between Christmas and New Year's Day
the commute home from my night shift at the gas station—

my grandfather has left the porch light on—

this category of time
when I only have to do nothing and

settle invisibly into these gaps.

On the couch
for an hour or so, no one
is speaking pain into existence
when we find something to laugh about
or try to choose a film,
 the cage of these moments—
I am as helpless as
overstretched elastic.



Audrey says she is scared when we all watch cartoons together at night. Though my brother and other two sisters laugh, I exclaim that I know exactly what she is speaking of. *Somehow, it makes you too aware of your mortality, right?*

If I could speak spontaneously
as wisely as I think retrospectively
I would have comforted Audrey
I would say *I believe,*
in Earth's final twilight, she
will put forth all her birds.

I would like to see Earth's last act
the cracked open sunset
or, after nightfall,
the speckled glow of lamplight
on a snowbank.



People here die in snow storms,
but when we were trapped in the car,
my brother, my sister, and I,
I never believed we would die—

God sent the ranchers who found you
everyone who knows the story says.

I invoke the higher power that is
the hull of a ship
plunging through midnight swells
the thrust and rush of a night train
where I can sit inside, vibrant and surrendered,
the bus rounding a corner
passengers mindless and swaying in unison.

O' Lord if there is one
O' Lord if there isn't one, it would explain
why there's no transportation
in the eastern plain
where the citizens fester
like foam on the riverbank
bacteria in a puddle
a landlocked state
stranded and stationary
like a child soaking in cold bathwater.

Move a little I'd like to tell them,
or at least look up.



2. NATIONAL PARKS

I want to see all things as I see them when I'm leaving,
to see my family the way I see them as I'm leaving,
look at everything like I'm seeing it for the last time.



The last time I was in Montana, my flight out was at an hour
when they were all at school.

I said goodbye in the morning
but I left a note too
so I could say things that I couldn't
had they been in the room:

I really enjoyed my stay

I can't wait to see you again, in gentler weather

I am saying it all with love

I drew a little plant sprout in the bottom corner

- *Maddie.*

They have my heart,
my throat.

When I return it will probably be as if I never left
and when I leave it's like I was never there.

the sound of fighting

on the other side of a wall

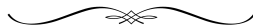
I wake up on the plane flying away from them.
I am free, the way a bird in an aviary is free.



Standing with Adele at the edge
of a dark winter forest,
I see only into not through it
I say, *there's a lot of birdsong for January*
but I don't say, *perhaps it's a signifier of the dying world.*

The sun slips behind the mountain
a new springtime chill
I live another day.

I fold my laundry,
brush my hair and clip it back.
I hear the sound of people talking to me.
I dream of another planet
liberation from gravity
and water streaming over purple rock formations
then wake up lying on my back.



What I really need is to get out of my body
so I get out of my house
and into the aisles of a grocery store—
for pink soap bars, cold desserts, and something to make for dinner,
for background music and smiling at strangers.
I walk home from the store along a bike path.
The smell of pavement—warm, damp, and clean.

In the woods today there was a rift in the ground,
a small canyon that I leapt across.
Unlike the other earthly contours of the forest,
carved out by streams,
this one was made
by a tree uprooted,
felled by the wind—

longing for gentler climates
knocking structures, but cradling seeds
leaving me with this cavernous absence
what is the will of the wind?

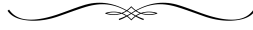


My mother,
I see her sometimes
like plankton in the tide of our desires—
I wish she could swim harder,
I wish we didn't pull her.

I don't know if she wants the temperate shoreline
or the full farside of the sea.

I wander along the shallow cliffside waters, looking
for air bubbles
for tiny life
in the tide pools of the cove.

The word 'plankton' comes from the Greek word *planktos*, which means “drifter.”



I planted some wildflower seeds in the front yard of our old house
that never grew—

their lack echoes
in hallowed caverns
the sun casting across glacial lakes
the worn-soft stone of the sea, wise and wild,
pulled from the edge of the world.

They cry, *this was all here without you*
and long after you

and yet here at my feet
in the cup of a daffodil
salvation exists.

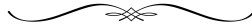
The cry of a peregrine falcon
reflecting off limestone
and the limestone, miles of it, is an earthen god.

A few summers ago
my mother took us to the caverns by Shenandoah.

I can't remember why my father wasn't on the trip.

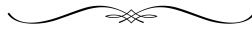
The air in the caverns was cool
and carried echoes—
I tried to look at it all in wonder
but my only impression was that it felt fake.

I admit I am afraid
that sometimes when I look at a sunset,
even alone,
my small exhale of amazement is forced.



Lost in Theodore Roosevelt National Park
we follow the buffalo tracks
and end up at a road by the sky,
one direction leads nowhere,
the other direction leads home—

we walk gingerly down the gravel slant.



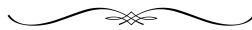
Outside the window,
wild clouded mountains
the dust of this construction site
in the foreground.

I wake up tense and looking at my wall calendar.
I am nearly two weeks late to flipping the month.

The dust
has the mountains by the throat
the forest between them
has given in
to death by winter.

I meant to call my mother months ago,
I meant to grant my brother the favor he asked me,
even though I said I wouldn't.
I wrote a story for my sister
and I meant to send it to her.

The one good thing in this picture
is the air at the tops of the mountains.



I've heard that, in this corner of the world,
south facing windows are best
for the mind and spirit.
My window faces west.
It's true the only time of day
the sun shines towards me,
it is blinding.

But right now it is the hour of tinting,
before the sun rises,
first the blue
lightens, and since my window faces west,
blue is all I see.



Later, I dance in a room where
the windows at last face south.

I hear music with my body
and see the room with my eyes closed.
This day could be sacred.

I feel chilly
and so I move to the sun in the room.

When the music stops someone asks,

What fills silence?

What does silence fill?

I write down words

grass, grassland, bundles, bowls, clocks.



I do not yet belong to Montana,

but I already belong to the silence in its grassland.



After dancing with my eyes closed, these places appear.

Here are my entries:

February 20

*Today I felt the music, not internally,
but as if it were sunlight on my skin.
The light I could see from the windows,
through my eyelids was a guiding rhythm.
So easy to dance in this way. It was such
a simple point of inspiration but it
made the movement effortless— all dependent on,
at different points, how soft I felt the light was,
how warm, and how much of my body
felt touched by it.*

(The melody was Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15, Opus 132. The third movement. Translated from German, it is titled,

"Song of Thanksgiving to God from a convalescent in the Lydian mode."

Beethoven thought he might die, and when he didn't, he composed that song.)

February 27

Today I had a bit of a headache. I felt I could get dizzy easily. I felt like a piece of straw or like a stalk of wheat still rooted to the ground. There was no sunlight from the windows today, but there was a slight draft. I let that move me. The changing currents of warmth and cool created spirals. I felt like a weathervane.

March 5

Again, no light from the windows, at least none I could see through my eyelids. A thicker than usual atmosphere, but one still easy to move through. Like fog. Or like the scent of lavender. Or stage lights. I felt much more like a performer today.

Like the one I often picture myself as: a coy figure on a staircase after the show. She walks down slowly to the person she is meeting.

I thought of the bouquet I might receive. What flowers could I earn from dancing, and how many?

I thought of my sister, too. Yesterday, she turned sixteen.

March 7

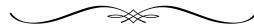
*Every time, I fear the session won't be meaningful.
Before the music starts I am already worried I will
have nothing to write. Every time, I end up finding
something. Today I found, when I opened my eyes,
suddenly dancing was no longer a personal
experience. In fact, I could barely process it.
Dancing was one piece of a complicated collective landscape.*

March 28

*The whole time I was trying to sort my body out.
I felt I hadn't danced in a while, I hadn't even
acknowledged my body in a while. There was a dull
pain on the right side of the back of my skull
I kept leaning away from it, twisting gently against it,
trying to position it in the perfect place.
I found that place once then abandoned my attention.
I think my dancing became much better after that.*

April 2

*Today I imagined that the room had a chandelier;
every one of my movements was based on that.
The room felt bigger, too, but I noticed that
regardless, I seem to always be drawn to the spot
by the windows. The dance today was light, dizzying, and
despite my energy levels, easier than I thought it would be.
I felt the motion of others today even when my
eyes were closed.*



When it's gone, I will miss this corporeal existence.

I will miss the dance.



3. STAINED GLASS

All Saints Orthodox Church,
West Hartford, Connecticut.
My sister at my hip, slipping
beneath the musk of incense
and lacquered wood, her giggles
at the level of the prayer kneeler
slipping out to find
sunspots on water—

holding paper cups of apple juice
slipping behind the tablecloth curtain
to tell me her secrets
delicate as mermaid scales.



Out on the collective landscape,
I harvest shards of plastic
from beneath scattered branches on the beach.
Brambles hang low all around.
The trees will look alive
in a month or two.

The train is not far from here
but the viewpoint to see it is closer:
a clearance between trees, a rock jetty,
unbloomed periwinkle sprouts
that line the way,
and water chestnut piles.

Certain things have been pulled from the water
or have washed themselves ashore:
a blunted pickaxe,
three barrels, sealed, unopened,
one shoe
and another shoe, from a different pair,
a capped empty bottle,
the wood, the branches,
one piece of green sea glass—
river glass—
a similar piece of glass, white,
the water chestnuts,
sycamore leaves, dead but intact.

A place like this one,
I imagine, is where my love for my family lies,
sacred because it is unspoken.

*out of the muddy thicket
and into peace and grace
and a vast clean lawn*

*the sprinklers are ticking
the light meets their mist*

Night drive
in the Connecticut suburbs
pulling up to an intersection
when it is dark and late
and the intersection is empty.
I stop within the quiet
because the light is red.
Stillness, while everyone is far from me
there is solace in the springtime maples,
in the salamander peeking
behind the cool round of the curb,
and a cardstock invitation
in the tin echo of a mailbox,
none of which I can see,
not in the dark.
I cannot seem to locate the Big Dipper these days,
but there is, somewhere, a wild and trusted wayfinder.
Frogs are christening in the evening marsh
where a paper boat floats.

Alone at the intersection,
I run the red light.

I am not a sinner
I am trying to cross the threshold
into a life unbound.

*on the shoreline
limestone alternates with shale*

*praise the vacant sky
this, too, is peace.*

On the other side of the traffic light,
I hope to find new color
and myself, just louder
on that side of the light where
I will have the energy to shout
my love for my friends, my sisters,
for night walks in August, for coins in fountains,
and for things that float.

I will lay out a picnic blanket, laughing.
I can feel the hairs on my arms,
wind through a field of lupine,

I will say *thank you*.
I have always believed deeply
in the artisans that craft stained glass
in the sound of voices joined in song.
On the other side of the traffic light,
I hope to see their faces.

from my place on the shore
I see off the last
of the Canada goose migration

gold, frankincense, and myrrh
what do I have to offer in this life?

The white noise of the car engine is gentle,
so is the air inside.
I drive past the gas station I used to work at.
I head home, as I planned
I don't feel very different—

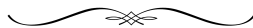
this, too, is peace.

After all of it,
let me come back here as a strong-hearted runner,
one who buries roadkill
and believes in the spiritual closure that follows.

O' thousand-eyed Angel,
hear this prayer,
let me come back here

to this rainy pavement
by the bog of peepers,

a small chorus frog—
good climbers, they spend
most of their time on the ground,
rarely seen, but often heard.



Stubby piano keys and flat scoops of cantaloupe in a bowl.

I lift my gaze

I have nothing to say

I chew on the fruit—

I can't find it

a buildup of mud and grasses at the mouth of a stream

I can't find it.

I write my name in cursive over and over in my notebook,
saving an empty page.

When I find the answer,

I will write it there—

the water still moves, slowly

it combs over the grass

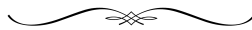
glass eels in a bucket

moving in and out of freedom—

release me where the current is gentler.

tears feel heavy on the throat

like honey at the bottom of a teacup



In the dimmed heart of home, I can
picture Christmas candles across from me
on the mantle.

On the sofa,
lying on my right side,
my mother's hand on my hair,
she is whispering something to me,
I wish I knew now what it was.



I can picture Christmas candles of the church,
each one special, but I can't quite remember—
the white candle signifies peace
the blue candle signifies hope
the green candle signifies trust
or the white candle signified hope
or if trust was one of the words at all,
it must have been faith,
and was there a red candle for love?
Whose love and in which direction?
The white candle signified peace, definitely
the blue was surely hope and now I think
there was also a gold candle.

At the front of the church
my sisters and I in matching dresses recite it.
Our brother is with us—
is he dressed as an altar boy or not?
Was he an altar boy for months or years, I can't remember,
but I was jealous of him,
of all the altar boys,
mixing the wine,
cutting cubes of fresh bread,
going up the wide, red carpeted steps
past the Crucifix
and behind the muraled doors
into a sacred realm,
holding gold chalices,
gold spoons,
witnesses to a space of great allure
on the other side of the twinkling incense smoke—

a space I could never
perforate the borders of,
a space that held answers,
that I was sure would have changed me
had I entered it,
but I was not allowed.

I equated the space with heaven.

My sister passes me the microphone
the white candle signifies peace.

I light the candle,
I believe in what I am saying,
I believe in color and light
and the little reflective pools of hot wax.

My siblings are close to me,
we had practiced,
huddled outside the entrance, nervous
to speak the words and handle flames
but here we are
and we pulled it off
people clap for us—

I am sure now that there was a purple candle.



Tears feel heavy on the throat
like honey at the bottom of a teacup.

I really used to pray, imagine

a glacier plows across a continent

speaking to the creator of the universe

carving the lands

please, make me beautiful

a broken piece melts and nestles:

a kettle pond

keep everyone I know alive

hollowing out the valley,

opening the fjords

let my parents have more money

spilling the riches, glacial till

together, out loud, before each meal

let us thank him for our food

permafrost.

Who commands glaciers?

There, the icon, on a wooden plaque,
painted with a coat of glaze—
they have long brown hair like mine
but they are a man

who might have I become
if the One they told me would save me
was a woman,

if Her miracles could be more than childbirth,
the water into wine, the blind seeing,
moved to tears, offering to Her
gold, frankincense, and myrrh

what might the world be?

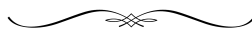
*Glaciers move through deformation
of the ice itself and motion at the
glacier base—*

I ask still:

How can I not be put off by unwanted love from a man?

He loves you God loves you Jesus loves you

I thought *he doesn't know me*
and I never asked him to die for my sins.



Though I do not regret it for myself,
I will not try to shatter my parents' world
as I have shattered mine.

As tiles crumbled and the siding fell off
I found truth.
Least I can say
it is steady out here where I am,
like the plains.

I never believed you or myself to be inherent sinners
I only wanted to be the most well-behaved girl,
your best behaved child.

Too concerned with the ends of things,
I have missed every autumn and spring equinox.
It happened just last week,
the most perfectly average day of the year.

It's all dwindling down here,
having soup in a café with my friend,
years away from the dinner my father is making me on the stove
at home, the glimmer on the broth.
Noise is surrounding me.
In the house I hear my friend say *remember when?*
In the café I hear my father say *dinner is ready.*

I stand out on the little porch.

If I say the truth here,

will my words, like an albatross,

carry on the wind?

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Image 4 (page 29)- the baptism of Audrey Oprica, All Saints Orthodox Church,
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