The Lottery of Miracles

Amelia A. Cook

University of New Orleans, aacook@uno.edu

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The Lottery of Miracles

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Poetry

by

Amelia Cook

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I first discovered the silver-colored charms called *milagros* outside of the Cathedral of San Miguel de Arcángel in Tegucigalpa’s main square while living in Honduras as a volunteer. On a piece of velvet near the cathedral entrance, pinned and hung by bits of red ribbon and string, they looked made by hand and perfectly imperfect. The woman selling them was old and weathered. She looked like she lived a hard life. By the way she received my coins in her hand it seemed more like I was making a donation than buying something. I left with a few dime-sized milagros in my hand—a moon, a heart, a hand.

I’ve continued to collect milagros since then. I’ve found them in the dusty side street shops of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and bought them from street vendors in Ecuador. I’ve bid for a shiny lot of them on eBay. Now, they sit—all mixed together—in a silver dish on my dresser. I’m still drawn to their rough-hewn beauty, even though I don’t always understand the mystery they hold.

When I happened upon a Lotería game in a Latino shop in Chicago, I was equally captivated. I recognized the colorful images from my trips to Mexico and found their bright colors and vintage aesthetics appealing. I bought the game without a distinct reason. I simply liked it and wanted it. I think it cost about four dollars. Once home, it slid into the small space between the tops of books on a shelf and gathered dust.
Fascinated and delighted by these treasures—the milagros and the lotería game—I’ve held on to them. When I acquired them, I wasn’t sure what I would ever do with them, but I knew I needed them for something. They felt magical to me.

This collection—The Lottery of Miracles—is that something.

Part one is “Lotería.” Literally “lottery” in English, lotería is a bingo game played in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries. Instead of letters and numbers, this game uses colorful images drawn from a deck of 54 cards. The images are simple, painted in brilliant primary colors, and full of symbolism.

Outlined in black and filled by watercolor-like paint, the images on the lotería cards are inspired by both the everyday and the extraordinary. Some are drawn from the objects of daily life—the bottle, pot, boot, and umbrella, for instance. Others represent natural presences: the sun, the moon, the world, and the star. There are animals (deer and bird) and fruits (pear, watermelon, and melon). People, too, appear: a lady in her snappy blue suit, the stiff soldier, a stumbling drunk. Several cards portray more menacing images: the skull, death, and the devil. These cards especially have endless religious and cultural symbolic possibilities.

The name of each lotería card marches boldly below the card’s image in capital letters in a Helvetica-like font. Each also bears a number. The card with a painted image of a bottle of rum—LA BOTELLA—is number 8. On the reverse is a riddle. On LA BOTELLA appears “La herramienta del borracho.” The tool of the drunk. This riddle is answered by the image on the other side: in this case, the bottle of rum.
For the “Lotería” poems, I played the game in my own way. I first drew a card at random and translated the riddle on the back from Spanish into English. Sometimes the riddles were straightforward and easy to translate. Others, like LA MUERTE—“death”—were nearly impossible to translate. Many of them incorporate rhymes and puns that disappear in the English translation. As a non-native speaker of Spanish, my translations are based on my own interpretations; they are not definitive English versions. My own imperfect proficiency in Spanish was part of the game and, therefore, part of the poems here.

The poems in “Lotería” are acrostics. The translated riddle serves as a connective line for the poetry; it acts as the spine of the poem. For example, the poem written for LA BOTELLA is a five-line poem. Each line begins with the words of the riddle in order: the, tool, of, the, and drunk.

This constraint challenged me by forcing me to abandon some of my own rules about poetry. My palette now included “boring” words I’d have preferred not to use; “the,” “of,” and “he” appear quite often. What’s more, I had to begin lines with these no-no words. This affected my content choices, resulted in line breaks: ones that often fell outside of my poetic comfort zone. It also put unexpected words at the start and end of lines, some of them those boring words that felt undesirable to me.

Mary Oliver—a poet I’ve loved for many years for her down-to-earth meditations on physical and spiritual life—writes in A Poetry Handbook, “The most important point in the line is the end of the line. The second most important part of the line is the beginning of it.” With lines in “Lotería” often beginning in a way that
was completely out of my control, I had to shrug off Oliver's wise words the way a rebellious daughter ignores her well-intentioned mom.

Fortunately, Oliver's influence isn't completely lost on this collection. The impact of her work on me as a writer can be seen more clearly in the second part of my collection, “Milagros.” With a less stringent procedure, I was freer to emulate her plainspoken confessions, petitions, and observations.

In my final restriction for “Lotería,” I must admit that I took some comfort, even if feeling guiltily lazy. While the poems were to be written in a random order, the final collection would be re-ordered, using the numbers on the card. The final order—so important to a collection of poems—was completely out of my control.

This offered me a new kind of freedom in writing and taught me a bit of confidence. I was discovering the order of disorder. I've always seen the poet as an adept organizer. Pulling from a wild mess of images and stories, she lovingly and carefully puts them down on the page. She fits them into their proper places: into words, lines, poems, and, ultimately, into a collection. My goal—in both parts of The Lottery of Miracles—was to have poems that could be read in any order, just like the cards that inspired them which could be pulled one by one from a deck. I trusted chance to work in my favor.

The majority of poems found in “Lotería” and “Milagros” were written in poetry workshops led by Bill Lavender, a writer, teacher, editor, and devotee of the procedural process. In his course syllabus, Lavender wrote that while procedures span from forms to schedules to limitations of content or sounds, procedures “always involve a
composition practice, a regular, weekly routine to which you must commit at the beginning and adhere to without fail.” He goes on to say that writer’s block can be blamed on “simply not having our lives arranged so that they are conducive to poetry.”

In other words, I could no longer make excuses. I had to write. Bill Lavender taught me that it’s necessary to “arrange [my] life so that [I] can be productive” as a poet. And using a procedure is one way to do that.

The experiments of Bernadette Mayer and Charles Bernstein are perhaps the most recognized and accessible examples of procedures, but any poem that relies on a restriction or form—from a sonnet to a haiku to an arrangement of found words—benefits from procedural process.

I’ve found using a procedure to be very, very helpful. It helps get the job done. With a procedure, the writing formula is simple. First, the poem must be written. Second, the poet must loosen her grip. Easy, right?

There were two parts to the procedures I used for the poems in both parts of The Lottery of Miracles: a schedule and restrictions. The schedule of a procedure helps a poet produce work on a regular basis by demanding it. It gets the poem written. She has no choice but to write. The restrictions of procedure deceive the poet into opening up. When the poet has less control, small bit of chance (or is it inspiration?) sneaks in. It’s in this small space of uncertainty that unexpected things happen. Unexpected, magic things.

“Milagros,” part two of this collection, also relies on a procedure of schedule and restrictions. My goal here was to explore the intersection of chance and inspiration.
How can we tell the difference between them? What happens when you look at chance through lenses of belief and hope?

The Spanish word “milagro” means “miracle.” Milagros are religious charms that are used throughout Latin America, some parts of Spain, and the Southwestern United States. Sizes and materials vary, though often they are smaller than a thumbnail and made of silver or gold-colored metal.

Closely linked with ritual and religion, milagros are sometimes pinned in shrines and offered to Catholic saints as a form of prayer or an expression of gratitude for answered prayers. Sometimes they are accompanied by a small note written by the petitioner. Milagros can also be used as good luck charms and may appear on jewelry.

Regardless of their use, these little bits of metal represent fervent hopes for miracles. To meet the needs of the hopers and petitioners, milagros are made in a wide variety of shapes. Hearts, body parts, animals, saints, houses, vehicles, plants, sun, moon, and stars are just a few examples of commonly seen milagros.

Many of the shapes found in the milagros overlap with the imagery on lotería cards. The heart, star, hand, bottle, tree, deer, bird, and fish, scorpion, are seen in both parts of *The Lottery of Miracles*. Even within a handful of tiny milagros, images repeat: similarly-shaped, though not identical.

Just as the heart milagro is seen in various iterations—one with an arrow though it, another on fire, one bursting with veins—the symbolism of milagros is not consistent. A milagro may mean different things to different people. For instance, a milagro in the shape of a leg could represent a broken leg or hopes for safe travel. An
eye might refer to a search for wisdom or a literal affliction of the eyes. An ear of corn may symbolize hope for a healthy crop or simply for enough food to feed a family.

To write these poems, I used a procedure complementary to the one used in “Lotería.” Similar to drawing from my lotería deck, each morning I plucked one milagro from half of a dried gourd bowl I had brought back from Mexico. The randomly-chosen milagro was the centerpiece for that day’s poem. I kept it with me all day, pinned inside my pocket or tucked into my purse. I used it as a petition for inspiration: a prayer for a poem. Other than that, I had just a few other restrictions. I would write three poems a week, during my lunch hour at work. The poem had to be short—less than eight lines—so that it could, in theory, be scrawled onto a small piece of paper and pinned to an altar with a milagro.

While these poems don’t have type-able titles, these are not untitled poems in any way. Rather, they are poems titled with images instead of words. The milagro itself serves as the title of the poem. I maintained this titling convention in “Lotería” which, although it appears first in The Lottery of Miracles, was written one year after the “Milagros” series. In “Lotería,” the titles of poems are the lotería cards themselves.

The poems in both “Milagros” and “Lotería” are situated in an abstract place. They fit into the space we go to in prayer, meditation, or in a dream-filled sleep. These poems reside in locations—real and imagined, literal and abstract—that are part of me, ones that I know intuitively.

Of the two collections, “Milagros” is more outwardly personal. The poems are inspired and rooted in the immediacy of my own life. They capture a specific time
period: one where I was losing some of my faith in God while finding romantic love. They tell the story of a search—for God and for love—and are infused with a rough hope.

I see a connection between “Milagros” and a book I read in my early twenties: Rilke’s *Book of Hours*. Written over 100 years before “Milagros,” the poems in the *Book of Hours* were what Rainer Maria Rilke called “inner dictations.” They were his own sacred poems, deeply personal prayers. Like Rilke’s poems in his *Book of Hours*, the poems in “Milagros” are full of questions, simply-stated hopes, and a complex mix of eagerness and skepticism.

The poems in *The Lottery of Miracles* have been both inspired and affected by chance: a lottery beyond my control. Helped onto the page and rough-carved by my procedures, they aren’t perfect. Revision was intentionally minimal. Like the milagros I bought outside the cathedral in Honduras, they’re a little rough around the edges; they show the marks of being made. It’s also in those imperfections that they hold room for potential change. They leave space for hope and mystery and reflect a paradox of my own life: the interplay of chance and something more deliberate—a lottery of miracles.
Part 1—Lotería
He smokes cigarettes, that boy who I now see on the screen, sings songs on the street for wine, paying Peter to rob Paul. I will not see him again, never see him with a yellow flower. Some sing to remember, write poems to forget. If I’m ever again on that beach, I will gather more shells.
Be careful of the little devil, so
good in his disguise, don't be alone with him,
otherwise he will feed you sweets
the color of cherry skin and cinnamon.

    Devil, stay away you naughty thing, I
    will know you when you ring, I will let you
    take my gold, as long as
    you don't steal my soul.
The windows are filled with dusty fans. A woman pushes her hair back. A girl prances in toothpick grass.

Down the block
the children break the water main. In wet shadows of side streets, men sleep.
Fancy pants, dandy
man, you wear your riches like a carnation
on a black lapel. But let me tell you:
the bearded vet on State
Street is not shaking coins to delight. And she never
wants to twirl her pretzel-dough body over
to your lap, that dancing girl.
Throw your money around some more. Throw it
away, throw it her way,
his way, my way. Peel the gold leaf from your
cane, let us have a flake or two.
For those moments when
the word loses meaning, and
sun becomes black ink
and a river winds a string of letters.
For those moments when
the thing loses its essence, when
rain only exists in ringing rooftops.
Do you remember the ferry to Roatán, not taking Dramamine in time, how we let the ocean take over our bodies, the up and down quaking sea? We were mermaids out of water singing backwards songs, beached on the fiberglass deck. To make a voyage, to cross a wide ocean you need to sink, give in to the dizzy space between shores.
Climb carefully, you would say to me. I didn't like the way each step sunk like ice on a spring lake, changed by my weight. But I climbed every step while you held the ladder still.

You told me once that I was fat. I don't think you meant it, but I want you to know I believed you. To me, it was cruel. Now let me startle you. This was the worst I knew? Forgive yourself.
The rum we drank in Honduras was the color of a tool left in rain. We mixed in the fake flavors of paradise: mango, papaya and passion fruit. The real fruits rotted in the kitchen while we got drunk.
The fresh pasta bulged like work of a sloppy mason, but fell into my hands infused with air. We drank wine with windows open. It was so warm, that March, much more like May, that pleasurable taunt of early spring.

He chopped the garlic that ended up brown in butter, ended up changed by what surrounded it, like the way we are shaped by a warm evening, the air soft as an oak barrel and smelling of wet earth.
Cool in the still-dark day, under shade of fading night, water from my can covers the basil, soaks the terracotta. One tiny plant—the one that I grew from a cutting in my window—gets trampled by the flood. I bend near, scoop it up like a fallen robin, tuck roots back into good, wet soil. A miniature tree, its licorice smell on my fingers.
You always had a cantaloupe on the counter, giving off a musty smell that reminded us where it came from: the wet ground of fields. From earth to orange triangles that seemed to me like felt cubes soaked in sugar water or wet cotton candy, slightly effervescent in my mouth.

You always cut it too close to the rind, the green taking me by surprise with icy firmness. It smelled stronger later, thrown away. A whole moon shaved into slivers.
Why run from when you can run at them? So, sharpen away your knives and pencils. Coward and cowering are the same when the one in the corner is you. Blood on your hands doesn't have to mean murder, red is a cut beet, a broken pen, strawberries so good and sweet. Sugar-coated fingers, dagger wrapped inside.
Put every tiny hope into
the organ-pipe tubes of the yellow
bonnet, like drops of nectar.
On waking up from
the dream of another
baby—hair like seaweed
so fragile, spun sugar curls—
we try to keep from shattering.
Don't plan too hard, it's like trying to
 catch a log full of morels in a
cold spring that started so warm.
La muerte means death.  
I cannot translate  
the rest.
Those nuns sing for Sister Joan who died. I hide in the choir loft. Wait for God and you will find him. Despair not, the priest says.
Green hasn't bled into grass, still
white-stained from freeze. The sky is grey
and I walk through ruts with mud on my boots.
Red tulips will march in next month if we're lucky––
the translucent buds exploding into bright
flags, perfectly lined against brick sides
of apartment buildings, bright waves of
soldiers, now reluctant in frozen trenches.
The square fills with mariachi men, children and their games of Simon Says. His tamale is filled with green pork. The band is playing an old song, his song, the one filled with the big dreaminess of mandolin and fallen corn husks.
It is something I almost forget: I grew up with a cello in the living room, pushed up in the corner, denting carpet the color of rust. To get it to school, I hauled it on my back, walked the six blocks shuffling side to side, hoping the sky wouldn't fill with clouds and let loose and that there would be no patches of ice since it was rented from the school and if I broke it my parents would be mad. The curve of it wasn't soft, but like bony fingers poking my knees. A red-haired lady taught songs from the Suzuki on her violin. The fingerings are the same. And wouldn't you know it, I can still play Twinkle Twinkle and even the Wish-I-Had-a-Motorcycle version where you play each note 8 times fast to get really good at moving the bow over the strings, watching rosin become dust on the golden wood. I may have forgotten how to play more, but not a worn place in the carpet where a cello once stood.
On my computer screen I read
the poem by Tennessee Williams. The
other afternoon, I laid at your
side. Through the curtain, the blue
of February, the color of sea glass,
the light that does not stay, the
river that never stops moving.

There's a valentine on
my desk for you. It doesn't matter if
sand wishes to be still. The grains leave but the
bank is always there.

Where we are is no longer yesterday:
my hair in curls, heart-shaped cookies on the table,
honey in your morning tea. Strange thing that never
sits still, but is strangely constant! Tomorrow, I'll be
with you, slurping noodle soup on
a Hallmark holiday, broth running down your
mouth. I will not forget to touch your hair: soft
like things we fold away,

a tender flash of the downy
brown feathers of the
heron.
You told me about the meteor shower,
made me stay up late, the cold covering
me like fine mist. But I never saw the
flitter of falling stars. Clouds covered the sky
like curtains. When you ask if there was
a sky full of embers, I will say: I am a
bird who crashes into glass
on instinct. I don’t know what
a reflection is. I take the bird I see from the
branch as flesh and feather.
The hand that we're given, the hand that we're dealt, the hands of time. What is the difference between criminal and culpable?
One cowboy
boot swinging, his lit cigarette, the
same splash of whiskey, alone
as a single word on a line,
the letters like wire barbs. His
other boot, still against her leg.
The lake is a window on a darkened lighthouse. I've been hearing groans of ice in the night lately. We walk through driftwood, those soft and fragile bones, washed in by melt. Broken glass is now stone. Love and water are sometimes the same.
Land no longer exists. Just snow. The sun is a dead parrot, a bright lie. There is ice inside the windows and the truck hasn't moved for days. I don't talk much. We play game after game of Chinese checkers with tiny marbles that slip from our fingers. Winter has caged me, shut me up with cold black cloth.
I don’t go to the bars on State Street, 
can’t stand to feel as old as the back bottle of schnapps, 
put up with the kids in Greek-lettered hats 
up to no good, prowling bleary-eyed girls, 
with condoms in their pockets. Don’t think 
that I haven’t been there: out until the sky glowed, 
drunk on vodka sours. But not 
anymore.
He was called *negrito* by everyone who knew him, except for the Americans he ate *baleadas* with. Brown or white, we're all the color of sugar.
Don't use the word love. Don't miss your bus. Don't call me. Don't call me honey. Don't break my heart. Don't clog it up. Don't tattoo my name next to I LOVE. Don't tell me you will. Don't put sugar in. Don't come home drunk or get back too late. Don't leave the light on. Don't lead me on. Don't go out the door. Don't forget the truck. Don't listen to me. (Good luck.)
His shirt open down to his belly, the fruit seller once was the boss of this town. Full on wine, he will tell you of the difference between water and watermelon.
Don't beat too hard
get out of hand
wrinkled skin
old as land
leather shoes
because they last
I love you still but
want the past
you talk too loud
for me to hear
a doorbell ring or
drum beat clear.
The men at the shop with their boots stained from tide water, teach me how to pop off the heads. One takes my hand in his, pinching my fingers around the top of one, cool and soft. It costs less for head-on shrimp and so I sway into work of women before me who spent afternoons with hands full of the sea, the fall of heads and shells sounding like flashes of rain,
The thorns stick into skin like tiny arrows, hands are full of warm berries, the grass bends underfoot.

Indian mounds disappear into land, now only seen from the tower where tourists with cameras wonder if they're getting the shot right.
The boy wanted to be a musician, writer, artist. Nouns with histories of verbs. Now, his guitar is full of writing, but his plastic sunglasses are mutes in a trumpet, holding him so no more craziness can pour out. The longer he dreams, the less he sleeps. He wants to write down every nightmare, to turn demons into D chords, to play it all out, become empty as a guitar case. For now he wants to become a boy. Sing me Rocky Raccoon one more time.
Stun me. That’s what you did. 
It is no longer you 
with cheeks red from tequila. The 
blows of things I understand—
but can’t tell you—now 
keep your face bone-colored.

It is your fault, I say as you drive away. The web you wove 
from invisible thread has caught me. I brush it off my skin.
One small stone in a mouthful of rice.
Two drops of food coloring
and the dough grows pink.
Three and it's the color of coral.

The little boy becomes a
soldier, but the girl
goes from mountain
to small stone.
The soldiers fill the
barracks like rice in a pot.
The tarp pulled off on a hot night, wind guides the sway of trees, the reluctance of of falling asleep beneath a sky full of stars, like sailors leaving, their last glimpse of green.
I pull out the pots, the ones we
don't use much, the ones that
pay the price of luxury with wages of dust.

Much of our lives are spent hidden, our
attention drawn inside like curtains pulled
to keep winter secret from a warm kitchen.

You fill the pots. Inside them, water and grain become beer.
The song went: he's got the whole
world in his hands. But earth
is a sloshy mess, slippery like
a hot potato, the bean bag or
ball, so heavy in small hands.

And how come we didn't worry he'd drop
us to scratch an itch, or slap
a mosquito? Singing, we were the
fool. Crying, we were the wise.
So
many choices surround me like
thugs, squinty-eyed
with melting tattoos,
pants hung low. Mean
and wearing steel-toed boots. I’m in
sandals and a sundress.
Which of us loves the other more? everyone wonders. I worry he will start to notice my spines when his skin is stretched smooth against me.

He's got to say it first for me to say it back lately. The wait is bitter, but I still eat each word like a sugared blossom.
Bites of pineapple, fiery with tartness, sting my mouth like a scorpion's tail.
Rose is what she chose, that little girl with no middle name, rose like wilted flowers, rosy as her cheeks in winter.
Walking to the square through cool adobe shadows, past the hidden courtyards, past the cemetery with graves like tables, I smell the steamed sweet potatoes, find the man selling them, pouring a can of condensed milk the color of a skull, over soft orange.
The parts of a bell are named for the body: a head and a waist, a shoulder, lip. To ring it you must bend down, crawl underneath, into its mouth.
The surface of milk in a pitcher. Stone goes wet in humid air. Rivers run to hot, green places. The miracle of water is all around.
The hunters speed by in pickup trucks, dead deer hung over the beds. An eye that no longer sees looks at me, nothing.
The night is cold, your blanket made of scraps, sewn of thrown away things. But the day is warm. Being poor means having even less.
The queen wears a cap of black, a thick wig of cloth. Here, only kings wear crowns.
Row, row,
row your boat we sing
sitting up front, baby
in back, screaming. He's
your baby, just yours now. This
little car is a sinking
boat.
Fresh watermelon, not as sweet as it looks, smelling of sun and pines and the sweat of machetes. Beautiful, dirty hands at the table reaching for it all open and ready for better times, a swallow of cold fruit.
Here, we
climb pine trees since it's true
that there are no
palm trees in Wisconsin, only stories about the
tree, how it was imported from somewhere else.
And I remember misty London, the
pluck of palmettos that grew there, surprising
me with their resilience. I don't know where it's from, really,
a palm tree, but I've lived under their branches, slept in
good shade, drank water from a
cococonut from a plastic bag on a hot bus.
He catches the perch and is the one who must peel skin, rip bones, while it dies on a slab of plastic—fingertips covered by scales like sequins or the miniscule petals of a flower—while a mouth waters in the other room.
If they close the borders,
you're still there inside,
born in the place you died,
a cypress tree in a clay
pot, a swallow in a glass shot.

You heard the song lyrics wrong—
will you still love the song? It
never gets better, a flowerpot cannot
leave. But they're ready:
the shoes set in the brick
hallway, an extra set of keys.
My muscles are taut as piano strings. I told you our mother's secret and now in this steakhouse, it's become one of those laws that aren't obeyed, old fashioned novelties. I am staring, heavy as a harp, at your mouth, crescendoing the word no in my head. You can't keep silent any longer, but I still can tell you what it's like to be holding an instrument that cannot be played.
What a day to be reading a list of symptoms. Don't jump to conclusions or off your apartment's roof. Your sister told your secret and it took a day to get pissed. Once upon a time, there was a princess. Seeing the information on the Mayo Clinic website, you feel green (but not with envy) as a frog and cold—very, very cold.
Part 2—Milagros
I've tried
to keep them close
as skin, rebuild each one
in poem. These are the
darkest prayers
I own.
I am touching the burner to find out if it’s hot, plotting another pour as I hold a full, cold glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

I am searching for a book of poems in the hardware store, reading personal ads from faraway cities, and hearing the only song I ever wanted to hear as I drive away from the concert.
This morning,
looking for a barrette—
the one Allison brought me from New Orleans—
I found a key that had been my grandfather’s.
I don’t know if it opened a door,
or a box, or a piano.
There’s no way to know anymore.
The silver wing fell from my hands.
I plucked it back from the carpet.

Who would have found it?
Would they have found it a miracle?
These things were once carried,
once loved the way you love things
you know you must leave behind.

They are not alive, but they are not dead.
How do I explain the in-between-ness of everything?
Everyone is fading from me, 
dissolving like cubes of sugar in hot tea. 
My sister lurks around the house, 
darkness tinges her shoulders.
How is it that sometimes I have plenty of friends, phone messages and emails sprouting up all at once like mushrooms in spring.

And other days, when my phone’s ring is a shout in a foreign language, I have too few?
It comes flashing pincers
swerving tail from folds
of sheets salty with life
still damp shoes
hidden by shadows
of the ceiling fan
light dark light
dark light
dark
Let me look more people in the eye, closer, close enough to see the line of black that rings the color the way ash falls from a dropped coal.
If I owned a hatchet,
which kind of person
would I be?

Would I smell of fire,
wear my hair long,
plant sunflowers in the yard?

Or would the chickens fear me?
There’s a song I’ve been listening to. One of the lines is about a mother keeping her baby as warm as a hen.

We pull the ones we love into nests made of scraps, surround them with hot, damp feathers.

What is warmth?
What is suffocation?
I grew up among waves,
tides of seasons,
the crashing of wind
against dried stalks,
yellowing pearls of kernels,
and cornsilk the mermaids would covet.

I loved the ocean before I knew it.
I shipped all my books from Tybee Island to Wisconsin. One box at a time from the little post office. But do you remember the day I left for good? Drove away in my Mazda, windows filled with things, so I could not look back.
In Honduras,
I woke up to find a loose horse outside my door.

He didn’t notice me,
just the spot of sweet grass and the wind
that smelled of fire and pine.
Last night hail fell,
an army pounding on the roof,
coming to take me, desperate
for my capture.
Everything shook.
I saved two pieces in the freezer.
They are perfect
full moons: round and cold.
I am eating spaghetti with meat sauce when I find a bit of bone. It’s the color of the sky today, a sky that hints of snow.

We all are made of meat and bone, but we hide it beneath glowing skin, eyes like the first raindrops still carrying the heaviness of winter.
Soapy in the shower,
I am slick as a newborn.
Stretching my arms wide,
I am strong as a tree.

Let me love my body.
Let me find beauty in its soft heft,
the tornado of my bellybutton
swirls into my core.
The scars
underneath my breasts
are not stigmata,
they are not
wounds from war.

It’s just that sometimes
miracles
leave
marks.
I've been
pretending to be unhappy
for everyone else's sake.

I hold my joy inside,
in the darkness between
muscles, organs, pulsing veins.

My skin is starting
to ache.
There are lots of poems about birds, but this one is not about a bird.

(Don’t tell anyone, but I haven’t yet discovered what this poem is about.

I do know that I am learning to love the white sky of the page.)
Deep footsteps lead
from my door through the snow
that swallowed my house
all through the night.
She comes to the poor, the low—
baby shadowed in her robes,
roses at her feet.

I do not always stand tall, I am not rich—
but am I low enough,
poor enough?

I pray that I do not fall
into the darkness of the middle.
I’ve reeled in large-mouth bass
in northern Wisconsin.
In Honduras, eaten ones fried whole,
with eyes that stared at me judgmentally.
Slurped fish soup in Ecuador,
piles of squeezed limes filling the table.

I am not sure if I believe in god anymore.
On State St. they sell bars of soap with the word FAITH molded in all caps. And faith gets washed away, the letters sink, but you get clean in the process.
Can you pray
if you do not believe?

Can you believe
if you do not pray?

Is it too late for either?
Copal incense, snow in April,
if these aren’t miracles,
what are?
But Jesus on an underpass,
burned into a pan?

My mom asks if he’s a
Christian. I wonder if
I am. I just want to tell
her about all the miracles.
The valentines are kept in boxes, precious and painful as shards of diamond.

This year, may all the boxes break, be smashed open, so that paper hearts fall all over the place.
Before I began it, I knew
this poem would be about you.

But if you asked to see it, could
I show you? Or would

I hide it away like the cloves in my purse?
The small bottles in the back of the cupboard?

I want all my poems to be about you,
even when I am not sure who you are.
He’s been writing about Barzun, Kahlo, Equiano, trying to answer his own questions.

But I want answers to my questions: the ones that sit untouched like painted eggs, too delicate to crack.
You show me the loose connection on my iPod and all I can think about are hands. Our hands. And how when I was sixteen and in love for the very first time skin became magnets and I marveled over the science of it in a van after midnight parked two blocks from my house. And how I’d forgotten those tiny beams of energy until right this very minute.
We watched hawks circle over the lake.
The sun was out. You called it August
in April. We spread ourselves under the
sky like stretching cats. We walked through
the trees, stared up at pyramids of falling
rocks. I asked for this day and received.
I haven’t told you
how grateful I am
for you

for the way you
see a car that looks like
mine and think of me.
When you drive up
I hope I stand out
in the train station
crowd like Pound’s
wet petal on black.
The lighthouse keeper longs for a ship. Sailors dream of land.

May I be content with what I am and what I am not.

And may I be filled with hope—like light in a lighthouse, overflowing onto the sea—for what I will be.
I look up to see the sky
filled not with clouds,
but with birds, black on
gray, darkened pixels.

We are going home,
we are always going home.
It’s becoming clear now: anything that can be locked can also be made to open.
I go to bed tonight
dreaming of miracles.

I’m certain they exist.

I am just learning
to recognize them.
A question:

How long does it take to write a poem?

The answer:

My poems take my whole life.
Vita

Amelia Cook was born in Appleton, Wisconsin and earned her Bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Minnesota. After spending her twenties exploring warmer places like Honduras, Ecuador, and Tybee Island, she returned north and is settling in to her third decade of life in her home state. She is pleased to have been able to pursue her long-neglected love of poetry as part of the University of New Orleans’ low-residency MFA program.