Summer 8-13-2014

The Music of Turbulence

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The Music of Turbulence

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
Traci J. Rosenbaum
B.A. University of Great Falls, 2011
May 2014
For Austin, whose love
forced me to steal other people’s tragedy
if I wanted any in my poems.
# Table of Contents

Warming Up: A Preface ................................................................................................................... 1

I.

Deluge .......................................................................................................................................... 9
Limiting Out ................................................................................................................................ 10
Until the Creek Runs Out of Trout .............................................................................................. 11
Florescence .................................................................................................................................. 12
First Time Flying ......................................................................................................................... 13
Gibson Park ................................................................................................................................. 14
Forgive Me ................................................................................................................................... 15

II.

The Last Time I Went to Church ................................................................................................. 17
Mourning Strangers ...................................................................................................................... 18
Chrysalis ....................................................................................................................................... 19
On His Son’s Birthday .................................................................................................................. 20
How I Imagine Him Leaving This Town ..................................................................................... 21
FOR SALE ................................................................................................................................... 22
The First Night After You Left Me ............................................................................................. 23
Ten Anniversaries Ago ................................................................................................................ 24

III.

As Half-Awakened ....................................................................................................................... 26
The Prisoner of *Legacy Preserved* ........................................................................................... 27
Untouchable .................................................................................................................................. 28
Dorsoduro .................................................................................................................................... 29
On a Jack the Ripper Tour ........................................................................................................... 30
Eidolon in Plaster .......................................................................................................................... 31

IV.

Lessons in Potential Difference ................................................................................................... 33
Paris Gibson Square ..................................................................................................................... 34
On Dearborn Rocks ..................................................................................................................... 35
Apache ......................................................................................................................................... 37
One for the Go, One for Last ......................................................................................................... 38
Stealing Syringa .......................................................................................................................... 39
Five Years Since .......................................................................................................................... 40

Vita .............................................................................................................................................. 41
Warming Up: A Preface

Teachers often tell beginning writers, “Write what you know.” And I did. I wrote about my life, about places that were dear to me and people I was close to. I had maybe a dozen poems to my name when something happened. I ran out of things to write about that my young brain deemed “poem-worthy.” Langston Hughes had a lifetime of segregation and prejudice to give purpose to his work. Poe had his darkness, his mental instability, his failure. Sylvia Plath, Charles Baudelaire, Anne Sexton, William Shakespeare: at the time, it seemed to me that in order to be a great poet, one had to endure great hardships. My life to that point had not been very long, nor did I have any personal tragedies I could deal with using poetry. As many budding writers do, I was stuck on the stubborn notion that poetry had to be about something weighty and profound. I forgot that every one of the poets on my list of tragic heroes did not find inspiration exclusively in their sufferings.

Looking for new ideas, I started re-reading Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town* because it was the only book I owned on the craft of poetry. The pages were heavily highlighted in a variety of colors—souvenirs from my first workshop course as an undergraduate, taught by a long-haired, pipe-smoking throwback of a professor who took one look at the first fiction piece I turned in and told me, “You know, you really ought to write poetry.” Hugo talks a lot about inspiration—what he calls “triggers.” He draws a clear distinction between the trigger of a poem and what the poem is actually about, and he advocates moving away from the trigger to realize the poem’s true subject. Revisiting *The Triggering Town* was my first big step forward as a writer. I started to see triggers everywhere. I stopped worrying so much about what my poems were trying to say and concentrated more on sound, language, and the act of writing. I rediscovered that a poem’s surface subject—its trigger—can be anything at all and does not
necessarily have to delve into anything more weighty than the way the water in my favorite river 
throws sunlight in my eyes or the arc of a swing after a child jumps from its seat. Hugo also 
encouraged me to explore different ways to express my poetry. I didn’t want to write about only 
certain subjects or from only one point of view. Since then, I have tried on styles and themes the 
way a shopaholic tries on clothes. Some of them have hung in the closet for years with the tags 
still on them. Others I have kept and wear often, mixing and matching until readers never know 
quite what to expect. I never wanted anyone to pigeonhole me as someone who exclusively 
writes nature poems, or angry poems, or love poems, or sad poems.

When I stood staring into the maw of my first collection, I began to regret my stubborn 
 adherence to diversity. After all, collections should be cohesive. They should have a vision. 
They should “say” something about their author. For the first time since I started writing poetry, 
I began to consider my own poetic voice. I thought at first that I had none—that I could never 
draw such a disparate set of poems together into a unified work. The more immersed I became 
in editing and sorting these pieces, however, the more I noticed the small threads of similarity 
that ran through all of them. Once again, my thoughts returned to Hugo and his triggers. When I 
began to explore how certain subjects, themes, techniques, styles, and works by other poets 
influenced my own writing, my own work took its next big step forward. I learned to tilt my ear 
to the page and listen for my own voice, and I learned that all of the things that fire my writing 
contribute to that voice. “Stealing Syringa” narrates echoes from my childhood when I used to 
steal flowers for my grandmother’s kitchen table. “Eidolon in Plaster” whispers my fascination 
with voids left in Vesuvian ash. “Deluge” sings the music of turbulence that gives the collection 
its title. The inspirations, styles, and themes may differ from poem to poem, but each one speaks 
in a voice drawn from my own experience.
Sifting through my body of work, I discovered that many of my individual poems share similar triggers. Recurring themes of loss, women, abuse, family, and nature appear most often. More specifically, I find images from my childhood creeping into my poetry. It’s a place I go when I need a setting where I feel comfortable but that will allow the poem to grow and develop.

The section titled “Shadow Puppets” represents the most autobiographical poems in this collection. My grandfather, in particular, steals into my poems whether I invite him or not. I often begin poems with other aims only to finish them and find him sitting there in his porch lounger, smoking a cigarette with all the world’s mischief in his eyes. His presence spans my entire poetic career. “On Dearborn Rocks” evolved from my very first poem. I wrote the original while he was still alive, cannibalized it several years later to try out the sestina form, and revised it from that form for this collection. My most recent poem, “Five Years Since,” began as a last-minute class assignment. Out of ideas, I opened with an altercation I’d had with a co-worker that day and ended up next to my grandfather’s deathbed by the time I penned the final lines. As I searched for a title, I glanced at the date in the bottom corner of my screen and realized it was five years almost to the day since he passed away. I’m not certain my poetry will ever allow me to lay my grandpa to rest. I’m not certain I want it to.

Our triggers inspire us to begin, but it is only through exploring those triggers that our work evolves into a polished finished product. *The Music of Turbulence* is a perfect example of that process. It started with a collection of photos. My friend Cory Chylik challenged himself to take one photo per day for a year, posting each photo online as he went along. Around that same time, a very demanding professor of mine required the class to write three poems per week for the entire semester. Finding myself once again in need of inspiration, I downloaded Cory’s photographs to my computer and wrote a poem based on each one. The fusion of my words and
his images provided the majority of the poems in *The Music of Turbulence*. Following Hugo’s advice, I tried to write pieces triggered by each picture but not necessarily *about* that picture’s subject. “The Last Time I Went to Church,” for example, came out of a photo of a wilted sunflower lying against a wooden table. The petals against wood inspired the lines “I wait to glimpse your hair against / satin and mahogany.” A stark shot of an empty bicycle rack against a white brick wall spurred the bleak images of an ill-fated life in “For Sale.”

The following summer, I spent a month in Italy deeply immersed in Ezra Pound. Pound coined the term “Imagism” in 1912, and he came to apply it to a poetic movement that uses a narrow focus on a single image presented as economically as possible. Imagism hooked me and refused to let go. Although I like the precision of Imagism and its faithfulness to concrete description, I often find my poems wanting to stretch beyond the central image. Rather than limiting these pieces by forcing them to adhere to strict Imagist constraints, I included additional details if they seemed necessary for the success of the poem. “Gibson Park,” which portrays the act of a child learning to swing, remains close to its Imagist roots. As Pound does with “In a Station of the Metro,” I tried to present the scene vividly without giving the reader any direction as to how she should feel about it. “On a Jack the Ripper Tour,” on the other hand, began its life as a simple snapshot of zigzag bricks laid in the courtyard of a restored train depot in my hometown. That shot reminded me of one of my own photos of the spot where Jack the Ripper left the corpse of Kate Eddowes. Although it began as a depiction of that place, the piece expanded in revision to include details about the various victims and my own reactions to the famous murders. The expansions to the poem took it beyond the limits of both its initial trigger and its original style and allowed it to find its own truth, a process a writer must be open to if the piece requires it in order to realize its full potential.
The poems based on Cory’s photos and other art pieces represent another unifying thread and common trigger of *The Music of Turbulence*. Ekphrasis, poetically speaking, is the technique of writing poetry based on a piece of art in some other medium. I love ekphrastic inspiration because gives me a place to start. It saves me from the paralysis of the blank page, the blinking cursor. It also grounds my work, giving me something I can return to when I don’t know how to proceed. Cory’s photographs directly inspired fully half the poems assembled here. Several others are ekphrastic works based on various sources. “The Prisoner of Legacy Preserved” came from an art exhibit by Deegan Fox on the entire second floor of our local gallery. Pedestals throughout the room displayed books he had created and made into art using various media (wood, leather, metals, etc.). Collages of sketches covered the walls, depicting the contents of each closed book: runic lettering, riddles written in strange calligraphy, and pencil drawings relating either to the riddle on the page or to the centerpiece of the exhibit. In the middle, a seven foot iron cage held an open book made of copper plates on a bookstand with curling metal legs. A placard next to the cage welcomed viewers to touch the piece and offered a free print to any museum patron who could successfully open the door. Clues to the puzzle, according to another placard, could be found in the rest of the exhibit. I played with that cage for almost a half hour trying to get the door open without success. I think if I had succeeded, the exhibit would have lost something for me. It reminded me so much of what I think a poetry collection should be—something where every part contributes in some way to the whole. Something concrete enough that I can enjoy it at first glance, but with enough depth that every re-visitation brings some new revelation—something new to love. And even if I don’t completely understand every aspect, the beauty of the whole still brings me back again and again.
I love any art that makes me feel the way Deegan Fox’s exhibit made me feel: curious, delighted, admiring, awestruck, jawdropped. The poetry I like to read and the poets I try—with varying degrees of success—to emulate write poems that are truthful and straightforward and disturbing and poignant and funny. Ekphrastics may trigger content, but fellow poets trigger style. Ekphrastics can stimulate my imagination and spur me to write, but every poet I read teaches me something about the kind of writer I want to be. Using ordinary situations, Ted Kooser shows me how to explore issues and themes that simmer beneath the surface of the everyday. In “Father,” his simple but clear details—“the heartbeat / under your necktie, the hand cupped / on the back of my neck, Old Spice / in the air”—capture his father in the same way I strive to capture my family. The mention of lilacs in that same poem also directly inspired “Stealing Syringa,” a poem about my grandmother. I was self-conscious about my preference for the narrative style until Sarah Kay taught me that it’s okay for a poem to be a story. On the surface, her poem “Forest Fires” is about leaving California just in time to avoid a wildfire. Underneath, though, she weaves themes of family, grief, and appreciation for life seamlessly into the poem’s tapestry. Sarah Kay and her fellow slam poets may not have directly inspired specific poems in this collection, but their influence lingers between its lines. Among others, Kelly Tsai, Suheir Hammad, Oscar Brown, Jr, and Gayle Danley taught me to write about things worth caring about. Things worth shouting about. Things worth memorizing and sharing with an audience who can see you as well as hear you. There is nothing too adorned about any of these poets. Even a person with no poetic background can read, listen to, understand, and appreciate their pieces. The more deeply one delves, however, the more layers emerge from such deceptively uncomplicated lines. I marvel at the ability to bury subtle and complex
implications in readily accessible poetry, and that technique is the star I will always reach for in my own work.

No matter the trigger, the poems assembled here represent the person I have been during their creation: perpetually drawn-and-quartered grad student, thirty-something woman in denial about becoming a grownup, wife of a too-often-neglected husband, eclecticism addict, lover of the underappreciated slam poem, world traveler, bipolar artist. My hope is that the finished product will be a jewel with many sides, each one reflecting a different facet of its creator—a creator who has slowly learned that “write what you know” is rubbish. I write what I want to explore further, whether it’s something I am familiar with or not. I write what I’ve never known but want to. I write what I know of others from my own point of view. I write what I see. I write what I’ve never seen. Above all, I write.
Deluge

Water slips silent,
a translucent marble slab
snaking over stone.

    Then, a precipice.
    Flows fracture into droplets.

Whispers rise to shouts.
What was once so clear dissolves
into froth and fog.

    Inches deep, or miles—
    I jump in without knowing.

I envy the ones
who never ride the currents
who don’t have to fear drowning.

    Torrents fill my ears.
    Can’t keep my feet under me.

Strange how people love
the music of turbulence
when they can watch from the shore.
Limiting Out

A bee-sting means suicide, done at the far end of need. Panflash off the water. Your pole genuflects, Spiderwire tautened by a foot of rainbow. You always bend your barbs, content to stand for hours in the sun. Dead fish on the bank draw wasps. I cast for the ripples, pressing the limits of my license. My eyes paint clouds red in afterimage. The wasp’s stinger is smooth, a weapon with no cost. One circles the other, but a threatened wasp will nettle. The bee only hovers. He waits. He knows his moment.
Until the Creek Runs out of Trout

Cloying blooms clog my coon dog’s nose, and my damn line’s tangled in the underbrush. Again. I could yank it loose. Or walk through tick-infested trees to unravel it. Before I can decide, his sneeze sprays blood-crusted snot across jeans white from too many washings, cuffs frayed where he chewed them as a pup. The hook rips my skin. Shit. His tongue darts across my hand, and I forget. Forget line, jeans, empty net. Drop my knees into the dirt and put my hands up under his ears. Old man, I tell him, don’t worry. Sometimes with people, mad and sad smell the same.
Florescence

Somewhere
in a vernal field,
newborn buds
sway
to wind-music,
brush
against butterfly legs,
quiver
in the rain,
and unfurl:

Starbursts of white against green.

But here,
they are cut
to acceptable lengths,
draped
over a cross,
arranged
against a catafalque,
bundled,
and tossed
into a dumpster:

Starbursts of white against green.
First Time Flying

On a hunk of tire tread
strung between gray links
in Black Eagle Park,

I taught myself to swing.
With no help,
I discovered

the perfect point in the arc
to kick my legs
and throw my head back,

when to tuck my feet,
and one day,
when to jump.

I hung, weightless,
for one half-second
before gravity stole flight

and breath, slammed
my feet into the ground
and folded my knees.

Rolling out of the dirt circle
onto the grass, I watched,
win-spent, as the pendulum

of empty seat
got shorter
and shorter,

and finally
stopped.
Gibson Park

Quills—rain-wet
vestiges cast off
in a lake of ink—
lay against gravel mosaics

*There’s one. Over there.*

A downy whisper
over goose-talk,
and the hollow sound
of basketballs.

As that orange speck
spins along the rim,
ever touching net,
her finger points
at a mallard plume.

The ball tilts away,
bouncing toward the water.
Hunched over her legs,
she tries to pick up the feather,
but it’s stuck under her wheels.

Ducks scatter, but only as far
as their clipped wings will allow.
Forgive Me

Voyeur with spyglass,
I see him—
half made of darkness,
cowl of ebony feathers—
drop earthward.

Thorned branches shiver,
crooked as broken crosses.
Ghosts of Golgotha.
Black talons clutch his barbed perch.

He genuflects
with excruciating grace,
lit from beneath
by reflections on dirt.

This creature
who soars so close to heaven
somehow appears to pray.
My head bows, too,
but only to watch him.
II.
The Last Time I Went to Church

Murmurs disturb the rustle of Sunday dresses.
Uncle Wade—who taught me to cuss
and to stand on my head—slouches in back
like lightning will strike if his ass touches a pew.
But Nana G reigns.

Maria, gratia plena

That song: Ave Maria,
a shitty recording from vinyl
fed through geriatric speakers. That song
was Aunt Caroline’s doing. She leans in
and steers the old woman, whispering.

Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus

In the first row, Aunt DeeDee faces Jesus,
not the two cousins who passed her back and forth
until she was old enough to tell.
Her lips don’t move when Aunt Caroline asks
that we all sing along.

Et benedictus fructus ventris tui

Programs fan faces. The only thing
we can all agree on: it’s too damn hot.
Fifty family members sing the empty
Latin. Is this supposed
to keep our minds off why we're here?

Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Ora, ora pro nobis

Between lily-scented aisles,
we file to the front.
Standing in the column,
I wait to glimpse your hair against
satin and mahogany.

Nunc et in hora mortis

I should be crying, but all I can think
is you always hated that goddamned song.
Mourning Strangers

I like to visit graveyards, but never new ones.

City people lie in parallel rows carpeted in grass.

Deep-etched epigraphs make claims I can’t prove.

Loving Mother

In God’s Keeping

China’s Bo people hang coffins from mountainsides.

Florida’s divers explore a reef of ashes set in concrete.

Greeks in leased crypts get evicted after three years.

But on unmapped roads near towns that aren’t there,

women acquainted with digging rest beside tiny stones placed with their own hands.

The graves, like my path among these markers, neither temporary nor out of reach.
Chrysalis

I emerge from blankets, 
tossing them over 
the blank side of my bed.

As I pull her hair back, 
barrette in my mouth, 
Momma, she asks me, 
can butterflies swim?

My own hair hangs 
like torn wings.

I inhale. My evasion 
tastes like burnt Pop Tarts 
and Johnson’s shampoo.

I hope so, baby, 
I tell her. 
But I can only whisper.
On His Son’s Birthday

If she doesn’t bring him
in the next 20 minutes,
I’ll start picking up the balloons.
Don’t windward balloons
kill birds or dolphins
or some such? Didn’t we
see that on Discovery Channel,
burrowed together, laps
full of popcorn, his eyes
lit by the reflection of the screen?

I’ve sent her checks.

But I forgot to count ahead
one hundred fifty-six
every-other-weekends
from the night he was born
to see if I would be the one
to have him today. Last week
on the phone, she agreed
that six years’ worth of half my pay
was enough to buy just one of her days,
but the driveway is still empty.

Maybe I haven’t paid enough.
How I Imagine Him Leaving this Town

A young man
walks down dirt streets,
swings open the door of the bar,
sets his duffel on a stool.

The air smells used,
like week-old breath
let out of a balloon,
because nothing grows here.

Nothing green enough, anyway,
to scrub clean three thousand
nine hundred forty-five
small-town exhalations:

babies wailing under overturned playpens,
barking dogs chained next to empty bowls,
the snores of able men asleep at noon
in front of too-loud televisions,

women whispering behind their hands
at the neighbor whose card was declined
for eleven dollars’ worth
of diapers and formula.

For two hours, he clutches his ticket
and watches the regulars.
They never order—
the bartender knows.

Diesel clouds
dilute the light from the windows.
A greyhound silhouette
peers through filthy panes.

He steps outside. This time,
the door opens easier.
He passes the sign at town limits,
correcting it in his mind.

*Three thousand nine hundred forty-four.*
FOR SALE

BRONZE BABY SHOES, SCUFFED he was pulled from me too early—didn’t walk right until he was four TWO VINTAGE CAPGUNs, CAPS & GUNBELT INCLUDED shot his brother, got whupped with that belt COIN COLLECTION, INCOMPLETE given to him on Christmas, never another penny put in it DIE-CAST MODELS, MOST BROKEN the summer he found them black cat fireworks METAL KEEP OUT SIGN on his bedroom door the day he turned fifteen DIRT BIKE: BENT FRAME, NO BACK TIRE busted leg, fifty stitches SIZE SMALL BLACK LEATHER JACKET: SEVERAL HOLES IN BACK, PATCHED punctured lung, two busted ribs SWITCHBLADE KNIFE, RUSTED started carrying it to school ARMY FOOT LOCKER & FATIGUES, BOTH USED ONCE told drill sergeant to go fuck himself CRIB SET, STILL IN BOX he never approved that abortion DIAMOND ENGAGEMENT RING, NEVER WORN begged me for the money to buy it TABLE AND FOUR CHAIRS, ONE WITH SCUFFED SEAT never could keep his feet off the furniture AND ONE LENGTH OF ROPE, GOOD CONDITION six feet missing—he was pulled from me too early
The First Night After You Left Me

He didn't cruise me.
I cruised him--bought shots
until picking him up was
easier than picking up
a suitcase off the floor.

His hands
less careful than yours
but still more careful than
I wanted.
*Hurt me*, I whispered
into his kiss.

*I'm not into that*,
he lied. So I bit him. Hard.
He jerked away.
But two backhanded slaps
made him the man I needed.

*Bitch*,
he called me, voice husky
with whiskey and sex.
That's all he would say--
*Bitch. You*
*Bitch. You fucking*
*Bitch.*
Litany for our hate-love.

He fucked me like he meant it.
Like I wanted you to mean it.
I can’t do this anymore, 
you said, laid 
fifteen hundred dollars 
on my bedside table, 

buying me 
out of your life 
for the price of a ’69 
Chevy pickup. 

We bought that truck 
for me—planned 
to restore it together, 
one panel at a time, 

you on the Creeper 
and me cross-legged 
on the shop floor 
handing you tools. 

You came back, knocked 
at my apartment door 
after circling the block 
for half an hour 

and never left again, 
but a decade later, 
that damn truck still sits 
in pieces, rusting. 

Every day, 
squeezing past it in the garage 
and brushing its dust 
from my jeans reminds me. 

How dare you assume I wouldn’t want it 
if you couldn’t build it for me?
III.
As Half-Awakened

*Body parts, you say, All I saw was body parts.* Seven time zones away, I choke. A lane change—ten feet of asphalt between you and the ones you watched die. Overhead, wings in the rafters. *There was a bat in the croft last night,* they’ll say in the morning. They’ll wonder how it got in. Words circle my head. *A bat.* Trapped. *In the croft.* Forgot to shut the window. *Last night.* I wouldn't buy back those lives with yours. *Wingbeats in the black.* I press a hand to my mouth as the bat skitters the walls. Letting it out would wake the house.
The Prisoner of *Legacy Preserved*¹

Someone has closed the books. Even locked some of them. Leather and glue. Tooled belts with silver buckles. Rivets blacksmithed into their covers and hasps shackling their chapters. Every one at least twice-bound. But they have come unfastened before. Escaped pages flutter the walls like moths against a pane. Only one lies open, unlocked yet still caged. Copperplate pages gaze upward, their gleam split by wrought iron. The original. The one from which all others were spawned. Lonely tome, do you starve for want of fingers on your spine?

Gibbeted beauty, so do I.

---

¹ Exhibit by Deegan Fox
Untouchable
For Robert “Yummy” Sandifer

Sleeping boy in a five-foot box. Stuffed tiger surrounded by stuffed tigers. Too-big suit over constellations of scars and two tattoos. Cigarette burns or chicken pox? BDN III on one arm, I love mommy on the other. If he was alone, he was sweet as jelly. Group homes, jail, the local amusement park: must be this tall to ride. Mother after mother hoists her son to look at his still face. Can you imagine falling into a coffin? A frog sings from a bucket in the corner: hope y’all down there shining, Yummy.

Hope y’all down there shining.
Dorsoduro

An ancient tiger, peeled, drapes over the banister in a floating parlor. A woman stares at her grandson’s blue face as weak tisane cools in her cup, never sipped. A man she doesn’t know brings it each day. Outside on the Giudecca, children turn their eyes to the Salute’s stone apostles, chase red balloons. A naked boy, his skin cameo-white, stands on the Punta della Dogana holding a frog by one leg. Spends years showing it to the passing boats.
On a Jack the Ripper Tour

In my American shoes
on a street paved
with the same cobblestones

that drank a whore’s blood
and cradled a butcher’s knees,
I wander Whitechapel alleys

behind a guide
who paints old London
in rounded Cockney:

*The last place Miss Polly ever slept rough.*
   Rebuilt into low-rent housing.

*Number 29, where Dark Annie entertained*
  *a shabby-genteel gentleman, is skipped.*
  The way buildings skip the 13th floor.

*Long Liz was found, still warm, under this arch.*
  Now a playground where children play Oranges and Lemons.

*No one heeded Mary Jane’s cries when the knife took her face.*
  A car park guarded by metal shutters.

*But in Mitre Square, the police drawing shows*
  *exactly where he gutted Kate Eddowes.*
  The guide’s voice echoes against wrought iron and brick.

*Earlier in the night*
  *when her jailer asked her name,*
  *she said it was Nothing.*
Eidolon in Plaster

The dogs knew.
They scented sulfur
hours before the first vase overturned,
spinning on their chains
when Pliny wouldn't leave his tub.

You spun, too,
in the midday sunset light,
but it took the sound
of white pumice on your roof
to raise your face from the loom
when the wind caught fire.

I see you
silhouetted against that poison
cloud, watching
as the slab-window opened
and curtains of flame
bellowed
on the far side of the city.

When the ceilings
began to collapse with heat
you must have shut the door.
Still, the ground-hugging avalanche
fused your hands to your face.

A glass-clad pedestal
now raises you
from where you hunched
beneath a window.
Outside, knotted ivy
creeps over the walls.

How it has regrown.
IV.
Lessons in Potential Difference

You wake
to the feel of wind
on your cheeks raising
the hair from your scalp like

the van de graaff
generator in freshman
physics the first
time I held your hand

across laquered
lab tables,
one palm
on the silver ball

and the other clasped
by yours—
the same hand
that now hangs

limp and sleepy
out our car window,
The other,
since we hit the highway,

has stretched
across the console,
fingers laced through
mine, keeping me

from shifting.
Paris Gibson Square

The sun still loves you, 
place where my mom went to school.

She tells me of your halls 
once strode by nuns 
so ruler-straight, as if 
their rosaries weighed nothing.

For almost eighty years, your walls 
steeped in the yellow smell 
of old pencil shavings, echoing 
choir notes and Westminster chimes.

Your tower lasted twenty years 
under the weight of that clock. 
They knew it was too heavy, 
but they put it in anyway.

Today, you’re a museum—
a relic full of relics—
whole only in her memory 
and a scene in the movie Telefon.

Every time it comes on 
and we watch together, 
she points out the explosion 
that severed your left wing.

They sold it to Hollywood 
to dodge the cost of demolition.
On Dearborn Rocks

My first bikini rarely saw a city pool where bronzed bimbos went "swimming" but never got wet. Instead, I wore it thin on Dearborn rocks.

We crawled downhill in 4-low and bare feet, like we’d seen in grandma’s pictures of summers in the cabin on the river.

My grandpa forded that river in jeans and bare chest against springtime runoff, working years from his life hauling every board, every shingle across Missouri currents and up Dearborn banks. It’s where his mind lived when he forgot. It’s where he should have died. Every picture I have of him is tinted the color of Dearborn rocks.

My mom dove from those rocks, mountain water sluicing the touch of her cousin’s hands from her skin.

At home, pictures of him still smiled from the mantel years after the family knew. But she found safety on Dearborn rocks.

I can never get back there enough. Back to the cabin grandpa built from bare land. Back to the river where mom found a way to bear an album full of false pictures. I could live in that valley where cottonwood branches rock.
in perfect counterpoint to the river

in its restless bed, where
unwelcome hands never trespass,
where old men never wade lost
through familiar waters.

I could fling flat stones sidearm
against river currents, splashing pictures
of my family against those rocks
like cave-paint pictographs drawn

where centuries of river could never
erase them, where a teenager
still wears bare her bikini
against Dearborn rocks.
Apache

For twenty winters
and twenty-one summers, it
sat on four flat shoes.

_No good for nothin’ but scrap._
_Melt the thing down and be done._

Took two come-alongs
and a towtruck winch to yank
it up Dearborn Hill.

_Glass’ll cost more than she’s worth._
_Ain’t started since ’85._

Restoration’s slow
with no one to hold the light
or hand me my tools.

But when the key finally turns,
when all eight spark plugs
fire in the order you taught me,

_1, 8, 4, 3, 6, 5, 7, 2_

I’ll shift it into low and drive
back down Dearborn Hill
to the bank where we scattered your ashes.

_You done a damn fine job, son._
_Don’t take the corners too fast._
One for the Go, One for Last

He taught me to play
in bubbles of distilled light from Coleman lanterns,
moths casting shadow puppets,
my hands sticky with marshmallow and campfire dirt.

We counted cards
and moved man-shaped pegs
around the board he’d made in our garage,
blowing the sawdust from each hole as he drilled it.

Down the road,
a dog barked at darkness, answered
by coyote-squeals, crickets,
and the crack of another beer can.

Never okay with losing,
he’d squint at his hand,
 crushing his smoke and curse his luck,
playing like he’d never forget the rules.
Stealing Syringa

Although my grandmother delighted in fistfuls of dandelions, I would swipe scissors and walk Black Eagle alleys cutting neighbors’ lilac bushes until I had enough for a vase on the kitchen table—

one from the unkempt yard of a vacant trailer,

two from wild branches hung over a splintered fence,

three from the woman who ran me off with a broom screaming in broken Croatian.

When I visit my mother’s mother in her granite garden, I won’t carry a bouquet arranged by a florist who never met her.

I will gather random blooms from her neighbors, mixing them with dandelions and lilacs and just like back then, she won’t care if they don’t quite match.
Five Years Since

You can go.
Says my twenty-something coworker, pissed because

I didn’t help him count
the cash after closing.
And those words—

three words—
glue my feet
to the rubber floormat

and wire my jaw shut
against a quiver.
Because once,

leaning over a blanketed bed,
I said those same words
to an old man

as the spaces
between monitor beeps
and ratcheting breaths

stretched too long for him to sustain.
And every time
this happens—

every time
his ghost
suckerpunches me in the gut—

I repeat
those words
because even though he died

he didn’t listen.
Traci Rosenbaum travels the world when she can, but her home will always be in Montana. She received her undergraduate degrees from the University of Great Falls and her M.F.A. in poetry from the University of New Orleans. Traci has been an editor for *MO: Writings from the River* and *Bayou Magazine* as well as assistant editor for *Front Range: A Review of Literature and Art.*