ALTERNATE LIFE

by

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## CONTENTS

*PIERIS RAPAE (WHITE CABBAGE BUTTERFLY)*  
**I. GHOST HORSES**  
FIRST HOMESTEAD IN SARTO, NOW DESERTED  
NEW YEAR’S EVE, 1992  
GHOST HORSES  
MY MOTHER  
TAKING CARE OF MOLLY  
BRIEF STORY  
HOMING INSTINCT  
ON RECOVERING THE BODY OF JESUS  
MY PARENTS  
GOOSE  

**II. THE MAN WHO WINDS THE CLOCKS**  
THE MAN WHO WINDS THE CLOCKS  
WHITE PINE  
MANITOBA  
DREAM  
PROTEST  
ATTACK PLANT  
THE BABYSITTER  
A MEMORY OF HAPPINESS  

**III. DEALING WITH THE LIBRARY**  
CHILDHOOD  
ON A LECTURE BY VLADAMIR VOINOVICH  
THREE WEEKS AFTER YOU LEFT  
LIFE COUNTED IN SEASONS  
ASSIGNMENT  
ECHO AND NARCISSUS  
EXPEDITION  
INSIDE MY HEAD  
DEALING WITH THE LIBRARY  
A MORNING  
ESPIONAGE  
THE STORY  
OCTOBER  

**IV. TRAVELING**  
OREGON  
REPROACH  
THE PONY  
GRASSLAND  
LIVING IN A SINGLE ROOM  
PARABLE  
DEPRESSION  
WHAT MY PARENTS WANTED FOR US  
TRAVELING  
REFUGEE  
DARKENED HOUSE  
LOVING RAIN  
NIGHT-SWIMMING IN NOVEMBER  

*page*
THANKS TO LOUISE GLYCK AND J.D. HO
Now, the butterflies start to die,  
a week after eclosing.  
For the sake of the experiment  
they must eat and breed.  
You ink-mark the males’ wings,  
recording their movements.

You have sunk their sugar-water  
in imitation flowers. They ignore it,  
settling at the edges of their screens  
on the sides facing the window.

You are days in front of those cages  
watching them die. This cannot continue:  
you must pluck them one by one  
from their stubborn corners.  
They will struggle at the pin in your hand  
unrolling their curved mouthparts.

Then the thin tongues touch the nectar  
and tasting, they go still.

It was partly cruelty which allowed you  
to save them. What you cage  
you must rescue, though it hardens you.
I. GHOST HORSES
FIRST HOMESTEAD IN SARTO, NOW DESERTED

The crumbly grey house
in that buckwheat field

is the old Dybok place.
Back before the barn
and the outhouse collapsed

it grew spiky, waist-prodding grass
that hid prairie birds
and broken glass.

Fox tunnels
lead down to the basement.

The bottom rooms store last year’s grain
so you’ll have to scale the front
as I do when someone nails the house shut.

In the hired man’s cubby above the door
my brown/orange caterpillars
cocoon in nail-punctured coffee tins.
I keep them because I can’t trust them

out of jars. I ignore the other rooms,
with floor grit too dry. Dust,
not loam like wormy field dirt;

more like the dead pile after a burn,
ashes flaking in eye-sockets and throats.
“The food is no good here,” she told us when we arrived.
“I know a place just down the street.”
She’s forgotten that she’s in Winnipeg, in her daughter-in-law’s living room, not in her own Toronto apartment or in Denmark, Copenhagen, where once she met the king.

Thora’s lively tonight: she’s told her story six times already. We nod at the details, the gleams of brass, the small-talk, Thora, young then, standing at King Christian’s stirrup. “I was prettier than my sister Irene,” she tells us. “My hair was blonder than hers.”

Outside the window, snow falls as it has fallen throughout the night. Thora gathers herself to speak. We wait on her.
GHOST HORSES

1.
The generation that farmed this land by hand
has not yet died. They live for a few years more
among the towns and small cities
in the TV rooms of rest homes.
Outside, flowers in squares on the lawn.
The prairie waits at the towns’ borders.

This place is young, still filled
with remnants of the first farms, faded boards
grown into the sod.
The scrub bush creeps over it all.

2.
I watch the old woman,
who calls loudly
as though it is suddenly
urgent that she speak.

She takes my mother’s hand.
Helen, she says, have you
forgotten the horses again?
Have you let them escape?

You must find them,
close the gate behind them.
Helen, to draw
the eyes of my mother,
who is named Ruth.

Go back to the farm, she tells us.

3.
The old place across the road
shifts at night, in the wind.
Animals, pawing the earth behind the house
where the barn sinks into the grass.

I imagine us driving
the dust roads. How far could we go
before we found their hoofprints
weaving in and out of the veins of clay

and we got out of the car,
continued on foot, searching?
When she was twenty-two, with my father out among the lakes and the shallow forests, she began a solitary life. They never again stayed in one place: not in Winnipeg or New Liskard or Sarto, nor in any of the American cities. There was to be for her no slow maturing of associations, no incidental companions.

Her children were not suited to her, the youngest whiny, the oldest sullen, the middle child having failed to learn when to be silent, when not.

Understand, my parents were the best of parents. I lived in a world of drama, my mind wound up in old trees, pasturelands, dirt paths through the woods.

I have learned: when I recognize tragedy, I swallow it quickly. I cannot speak of my parents as though they were normal people, for whom the world moves lightly across the mind’s eye, past hurts and joys slowly fading. We were happy, I would say at times unreasonably so. But we knew we lived at the edge of disaster.

My mother raised me gently. We read books in the golden sunlight of our living room.
Corny has mowed around the garden all summer, not touching it. He dug it up last spring without explanation, at the same time taking away the tree that fell in the winter, the balsam fir with the scraggy top, and throwing the split pieces into the basement.

He says women shouldn’t have to work in the fields. Some do, says Suzy. Afternoons, she keeps him company, standing on the footboard of the tractor while he swathes or bales. She hasn’t planted vegetables this year, not even flowers, has spent the summer tending the collie bitch who dropped her pups halfway through June. Molly isn’t like the old dog, won’t grin and whine. Her only noise is a soft high shriek as she jumps at the sides of her metal cage.

At dusk, the sheep return from the outer pastures, low voices in the heavying air. By nightfall the deer will have come out of the bush after the tenderer grasses.

Suzy waits to put out supper because sometimes Corny wants ketchup on his rice, sometimes milk, and sometimes what he wants he can’t put a word to.

The dog has dug a hole for the puppies under the barn. Every morning she herds them toward it. Then she flings herself again and again against the top part of the pen.

The garden is ruined, the plowed garden has come up in weeds from the sheep, from their rich manure filled with seeds, and the weeds have borne again, tall stalks at seed, taller than weeds get, unwanted.
BRIEF STORY

1. April

You wanted to swim
so I walked to a public changing room
where someone set up outside
was charging 50 pesos for entrance,
and on the way back to the water
passed a string of rental horses
high up on the beach.
I could smell the must off their hides,
not grass and warm breath and manure:
a slight corruption.

The owner stood by collecting money.
It’s important you understand
that I did not condemn him,
because you think of me as unrealistic
in my expectations,
and I want you to know that I accept
these half-wild Mexican horses,
jostling each other, smelling of past exertions.

2. July

We were out in the field for the hailstorm,
sheltering in the undergrowth
at the periphery.

When it ended,
fallen trees rubbed together, mewling.

I searched in the wet grass
for the neighbor’s missing cat,
disappeared with two litters of kittens,
one hers, one stolen while the other mother
hunted beneath the woodpile.

3. August

When we had run all the lines
you stood at the end of the field
with the voltammeter
as I gestured at you from the yard
to indicate that I’d turned on the power.
That night, I walked into the fence, 
three live wires, two ground. 
When I found you in the barn 
you were building gates, 
and did not need my help.

*I walked into the electric fence,* I said.

4. November

Leaving, we passed the horses again. 
You surprised me, asking 
if they seemed mistreated. 
I refused to answer.

Here in Connecticut, 
the beach is decently bare. 
Cold, with grass-covered dunes.
HOMING INSTINCT

Out at camp, overlooking the lake, there's a cliff: iron ore, says my grandfather, who knows these things, also how to fix a motor, although he doesn't know anything else for certain now that he has stopped drinking.

When he took his sons hunting, the oldest, my father, always got lost. At the end of the day they would pick him up at this cliff, because whenever he got lost and tried to find the cabin, this is where he ended up instead, like he had a compass in his head.

My father says this happened only once but I believe my grandfather: he has almost nothing to remember these days and my father has the whole world on his mind.

My mother jokes that he travels so much, he must have a woman at every port to keep him occupied. She believes a thing can be supplanted only by something of like nature. If he spends all his time away from home it must be because he has another wife somewhere, another son, other daughters.

She is mistaken. One day, returning from work, he will cease to recognize familiar landmarks. Waiting to remember the way home he will circle subdivisions or dirt roads, first calmly, then in dismay. When this happens there will be no other family. There will be nowhere for him to go though we will hike the streets calling his name.
ON RECOVERING THE BODY OF JESUS

You ask, what if the bones
were found in a tomb somewhere,
unmistakable signs of normal death,
decay. I will disappoint you,
speaking once again of something
for which I can provide no proof,

of the meadow behind the barn that has survived
longer than is possible, graveyard
of broken sticks, homesteader’s fear:

bare disorder past the sturdy grey structure
held onto for a lifetime, its cows down below,
winter’s hay insulating the high roof.

Jesus had twelve disciples and each lived as we live,
only one dying of the betrayal.
He lived on earth, may have smelled like shaved wood,
that shy pungency.

When I was barely old enough to remember,
a woman, well-dressed, came to the door,
told stories of the creek in spring, how they’d wade to school.
She remembered the building of the road, layering fine
thin jack pine beneath the bed of sand.
We feel them on cold days,
a shuddering under the tires.

The grasses behind the barn were as tall
as my head and I was too young to recognize ghosts,
shadows laid flat on the ground between the cracking barn,
the horizon. Too different—none for me of this prairie
wretchedness of sky and ground: my life would end
elsewhere, in a place charged like the Sea of Galilee,
its fishes filling the low sunlight.

There were nine children in the house
and they walked to town for school,
for the mail, watching their parents,
removed as if by time from the old world.

There were nine children
and an outhouse in back, no neighbors.
They planted the row of firs to keep back the wind,
to protect the air they’d brought with them, warm
as spreading oaks on narrow streets,
straw-roofed houses clustered.
The beams of the barn were hewn by hand.
It took seven men to raise it.

You say it is important that the particular molecules exist: atoms from air he breathed, descendants of the children he blessed.
I tell you: there is betrayal in leaving when your name stays behind,

generations in the same place
after the first, terrible dislocation.

One stayed after it was finished, sleeping in the hayloft.
No one has moved the metal cot near the roof.
MY PARENTS

1977

A man and a woman, planting the rows
of plums and crabapples,
putting in the coarse windbreaks
around the garden, hybrid lilac and chokecherry.

Chickens and marigolds in the front yard
of the flaking white house.
My mother waits on the step, one of my father’s old cars
coming up the driveway.
Cinder blocks line the basement.

She is smiling, waving him towards her.
There are flowers along the edges of the house.
The tilted concrete sidewalk
nestled in pineapple weed
leads to the front door.

My father’s hair is black and wavy,
his shoulders loose. He grins,
one front tooth missing.
He holds her hand
as they walk into the house.

1987

Why does this woman weep,
alone with her children?

Where is the farmhouse, with its airy ceilings?
Where is the slim man in the faded work shirts,
coming home from the fields
in his small tractor,
hair dull with chaff and dust?

1985

His children run to greet him.
The prairie sun is low and bright
on the horizon. They hurry along
the grass edge of the driveway,
calling him in to supper.
His arms are black with dirt and sun.
He laughs at them in their grimy
clothes. He slows; they climb
onto the sideboard.
The farmyard is bright with evening, 
gravel and straw, grass to one side. 
My father’s sheep move restlessly 
in the pastures, move in lines 
out to the tall grass 
at the edges of the fields.

In the kitchen, the sun fills the table, 
my mother serving. We smell of hay 
and machinery. The air outside cools 
and the birds in the lilac bushes 
raise the strident voices 
that my father loves.

1989

I have always wanted to think 
that unhappiness was necessarily 
a result of selfishness.

My parents were not selfish, 
yet they were unhappy.

My mother sits in her chair 
with a crossword puzzle, 
face greyed. Her brown hair has faded 
only slightly, around the ears. 
Under light, it still shines red.

Where is the farmhouse? 
Where is the young husband? 
She sits alone in the chair, 
in the empty sun of the new home.
When you saw the shape on the ice
dark against the reeds
you recognized it immediately:
dead, or the inability to fly any longer,
whereas I set off towards it
not understanding how the world
moves into winter, that what is left
must take a different form.
II. THE MAN WHO WINDS THE CLOCKS
THE MAN WHO WINDS THE CLOCKS

He must be dead.
No sign of him for months now
while towards the end, during the time
he put the padlocks on the tower, he was coming
every day, day and a half to check on them,
though the gears take three days to run down.
Someone’s been up there!
he would say to Carl,
descending the narrow ladder.

He took care of the clocks downtown as well,
but they are less delicate.
This clock is touchy.
When he first started complaining
about someone winding it in his absence,
Carl put a padlock on the door for him.
There were only two keys.
After a few weeks, when Carl tried his key,
it didn’t work anymore.
There was someone getting
up there anyway, the man who winds
the clocks told him.

He was quite old. He had no family.
It may be that after a while when he woke up
in the morning it seemed to him always to be the day
the clocks needed to be attended to.
WHITE PINE

Beside the small dock, in the washed-out
sand landing, Grandpa’s boats rock
gently against the plywood.
Netted canvas lines the path to the cabin.

In pictures, my parents stand against the screen door,
arms around each other. In the foreground,
the stump of the huge white pine Grandpa cut down
in anticipation of the storm that would have blown it
onto the roof of the camp.
It was the last pine on this side of the lake,
too close to the water for logging.

Grandma is in the kitchen,
sitting at the plastic table with her tea.
The morning fire in the wood stove has died down.
She calls to her husband in her confident voice.
He answer her: a steady low blur of sound.

She was a pretty girl, nineteen years old,
who fell in love with a Canadian navy man.
What everyone in the family knows: when Grandma
found out she was pregnant with Betty, the youngest girl,
she didn’t speak to Grandpa for weeks.
What we did not know: sometime during those years
she tore up her wedding dress.

My father was the oldest, the only one
to live in the first house, on the edge of the farm property,
crossing to school over the partially
frozen river. That’s the reason Grandma gives
for moving into town: every day Pat had to cross
to school over that river, the ice thinning
towards the center.

He was an absent-minded, happy child
with the same small, capable body as his brothers.
It seems he wasn’t interested in any of the things
that went on back then: hunting and drinking and fixing cars,
except maybe the building of the camp—
digging out the beach in the narrowest part of the bay, laying
boulders for the landing. The first shack barely held them all:
Grandma kept the children outdoors.

My grandparents gave their children
everything that was necessary.
No one went hungry. Everyone had clothes to wear.
After they were all in school, my grandmother took a job at the hospital, cleaning. She liked to bring home the things that otherwise would have been thrown away: scrub brushes, plastic pails, once an industrial-size aluminum sink.

It is evening, the mist rising over the lake. My parents sit near the water, talking quietly. Their shoulders are at a single level, my mother’s broad and skinny, my father’s thick, bending toward her.
1. St. Pierre-Jolys

Yellow leaves filled the gutters, 
feeding toward the broad creek.

I waited for my mother two blocks away 
at the public library, near the bakery 
where the high school students 
on their lunch break bought warm bread 
for the soft centers.

At the north end of town, l’ôcole Ôlômentaire, 
narrow grey brick, level with the horizon. 
In the summer the dry dark soil of the playing fields 
cracked deeply, translucent roots bridging the chasms.

Fall was short, leaves 
blackening underfoot almost immediately.
2. Neighbors

Mrs. Leichinsky had three boys—
big boys—and they had a mean dog.
A few years after we moved here the whole family
drove their truck into our yard and leaned
on the horn until my mother came out.
Some kid on the bus had told the sons
my father would shoot their dog
for going after sheep.
From then on I was forbidden to play
in the section of bush
bordering their place.

At some point Mr. Leichinsky
died. Then the oldest boy
won the lottery and finally
paid off the back taxes.
Afterwards my father tried to buy
part of their land for grazing—the meadow
to the west, the stand of willows
around the cattail marsh.
When he told my mother about the visit
she was irritated, as though he were purposefully
misleading her. It seemed
Mrs. Leichinsky had told him
the land was in the girls’ names now.
There aren’t any girls, my mother said.
My father thinks he may have seen them once
standing in the shadow of the house
long ago, fair-haired and younger
than their brothers.

My mother can’t think how
she wouldn’t have known.
Our hired man believes they exist and that the land
belongs to them, low prairie
flowers in the meadow, sweep
of aspen crowding the barley field.

If I close my eyes
I can see them walking
the road towards their long
driveway, strong girls,
sunlight on their arms and legs.
3. The Friendship

Years later, Lorraine is talking about Kathy Parsons, her old neighbor, the way that woman trained her own family to think of her as helpless. The oldest girl, over playing with Lorraine’s kids, would excuse herself politely to go home and make the gravy for the pot roast: they all knew Kathy couldn’t stand to do it. Kristine, the middle child, was in charge of cleaning the bathrooms.

This is the same force that brought my mother and Lorraine together. We were at Kathy’s for tea when a winter storm struck. Scared to drive home in the blowing snow, she knew it was out of the question to spend the night at Kathy’s: the prospect of disruption of routine on such a large scale would have been incomprehensible.

Pretending to leave for home, we snuck next door to Lorraine’s. We were taken into the extra beds, fed in the morning, and sent back to school, my mother driving the clear roads home.
4. Account

All through the fields, finches
too small to resist the wind
plunder the blooms
of the August thistles.

The younger of the two ponies
has died. The other grazes,
tall-backed among the sheep.

The mother cat with the lame back leg
stalks the grain bin.
Her gummy-eyed kittens are everywhere,
light as dust on their black feet.
Each year, another litter.

At the edge of the bush pasture,
the remains of a ewe dead in the winter.
Her skin stretches tight and black
over her ribs, wool fallen into a bed
around her. Clover grows up
in the opening of her belly.

The sheep have a favorite place
to breach the fence. Wool spins around the wire
where they have ducked beneath.
For a moment they wait patiently
by the hollowed-out spot, heads bent together.
The first dips under. Others follow.
 Everywhere, sheep begin to call.

The tips of the pasture grasses show gold.
In seven weeks there will be snow.
Low water in the creek, skimmed over with dust.

Days of heat.
The expected winds arrive,
reviving the rough trees.
No sign of rain, though clouds gather
above the line of the horizon.
5. Towards the end of the day

I was telling you how my poems are: straight-forward, saying little. That moment, for example:
we were walking down the road, you slightly bent over, 
watching the sand around your feet.
Had I taken the leash off the dog
she would have run ahead out of reach.

Now you write to tell me about your drive home,
that it was beautiful, the sky darkening along the horizon
all the way through North Dakota, but that somewhere on the highway
you killed a bird, impact on the wind-shield,
that the only other bird you’d ever killed
was a sick seagull in Long Beach, which you had run
over slowly, waiting for it to fly away.

This evening I walked through the meadow in back, which you said
you’d been taught to call immoral—grass with seeds showing.
There were four species of willow and a purple
fringed wildflower in a square head.
Most of the grasses I couldn’t identify.
Near the marsh, a trail of bent reeds,
deer nests hollowed out in the brush,
so recent I found them by smell.
DREAM

The field is filled with sorrel mares
and foals with pale, pale manes.
A man walks among them; they part
in waves. Behind him, the horizon
moves slowly to the west. Suddenly
he is the father of one of my friends,
looking around in confusion.
He thinks this field belongs to him
so he cannot understand
where the young spruce have gone
that he planned to sell as Christmas trees.

He is surrounded by rows of piled brush,
the scrubby bush that was cleared
to make these fields, to open the flat land
on which he built his house. In the distance
he sees his children playing together
in the sunlight beneath the remaining trees. Wait!
he calls. He wants to remind them
of something important he has learned.
Before he can reach them, they are gone.

The man realizes it is only he and his wife
who remain among the piles of brush;
then he remembers it is peat moss
inside these piles, that the tractors clearing the land
have dug up the surface of the earth,
the peat has been turned over and is burning.
He calls to his wife. He wants to tell her that everything
will be all right, that despite it all,
things will work out just as they had planned,
and that whatever happens
they will still be together, but then he wakes up,

separates dream and reality. The woman
beside him has set her face carefully toward the wall
because she has learned that in any situation
she can function unaided: his presence does not matter
as she once thought it did.

When the man goes outside he realizes
that his fields are still burning, have been
for seventeen years without his attending to them,
branches smouldering, trunks settling into the piles of peat.
He walks the long rows, breathing
wisps of smoke, wondering what
he is to do, so suddenly alone in this land
of his own, not in South Dakota
in his father’s fields full of chestnut horses,
but in his own life, among the artifacts
of his children’s childhoods, a man living
among flower gardens tended by his wife
for her own pleasure, among the spruce trees
he planted as a young man
in love, fleeing a war.
You are sitting in front of a stone building
with pillars, and you are chained to the door.
You are reading a newspaper.
The students around you,
wrapped in sleeping bags,
are smoking and playing guitars.
They are singing songs about moral uncertainty.

You are here only because you couldn't be at home.
You saw the chains in the garage
when you were getting into the car
to drive to campus and you picked them up
without thinking, as if you had borrowed them
from someone and were now returning them.
You thought about that while driving.
Instead of about what you were going to do,
you thought about returning the chains
to their imaginary owner.
You glanced down driveways,
looking for familiar garages.

The students came because they saw you,
bringing what they needed with them.
They are quiet but in high spirits.
They think this is sexy,
this refusing to back down.
A few walk in circles to keep warm.

This is why you are chained
to the building: not because you care,
but because accidentally you found out what was going on
and as you were hearing it
you knew already that this would happen,
that you would end up chained to a wall,
leaving your wife alone at home,
maybe forever.

The students move slowly
under the lamplight.
I can’t remember anymore
what you protested against.
As though no one had been there at all.
ATTACK PLANT

This morning I noticed
that my spiky-leafed plant
had grown an appendage,
an arm or a long tongue
thrusting toward the window.
The end was segmented, like bones in a foot.

You stop by to say
that you’re not unhappy
overall, it’s more not understanding
why things turned out the way they did
that gets to you.

In the days that follow
I test the soil for moisture, move the plant
from window to window.
I watch it sharply for flowers.

My fault was in pursuing too far
the capacity for change
that is in each one of us.
You persist in blaming me
for the opposite.

I have shorn off
the segmented end.
At the base of the stem, the plant bristles
with new shoots.

What you wanted was not possible.
Out the window, smooth sidewalk, ivy
climbing the edges of buildings.
A few strands grope
for the lip of the roof,
then align themselves, squaring off
the corner. Likewise,
here in my room, everything
is in order. The plants whisper
among themselves: what does she know,
what does she know.
THE BABYSITTER

When winter came
and sunset approached sunrise,
the girl looked pale
each time they returned home.
Once it was dark at 5 PM
she told them she couldn’t watch us
anymore, so far out in the country.

We never saw her again.
She must have finished high school
and moved away.
But I heard her mother speak of it one day,
the way the past is recalled
through its incidental moments,
in this case our front living room,
the bay window with no curtains
and the farmyard, the shade trees, the night sky
just outside, bold shapes.

She was a good girl, hard-working,
not boy-crazy. I imagine the darkness
becoming for her first richer as she sat
waiting for my parents to come home,
and then progressively more frightening,
as she realized its potential, cold stars and snow reflecting
back at her, a suffocating expanse of things.

Not just the ordinary
nightmares—escaped criminals
and drunken neighbors—but a larger terror:
out there was a world of which she knew
almost nothing. In the complete darkness
she recognized this and was overwhelmed.
A MEMORY OF HAPPINESS

Summer, my father and I walking along
the border of the highway,
just about to reach town,
a strip of gravel and some specks
of broken glass dividing the road
from the grass of the steep ditch.
The heat of the pavement
in our nostrils, we look northwest
to the deep black till
of the Chornoboy fields.
The sun is level in the sky,
the air has the clarity of late afternoon.
I am trying to get him to explain to me
this incongruity: the fields near town
so fertile, dark and gleaming,
while, on our side of the creek,
only sand run through with clay, water sinking
quickly away from the surface
and each particle of soil receding
from the others.

This was once the shore
of a huge lake, he tells me.
Think of our land as what you feel
beneath your feet as you are wading
out to the point where the rocks begin.

The onion-steeples
of the first church are in sight
above the trees. A car passes, loud,
close to our faces. There are bottle caps
among the pebbles at the side of the road.
At the store he buys me an ice cream bar,
we pick up the mail. Then we are walking
back along the highway to the first gravel road,
toward the land which was once
the shallow part of a great lake,
where the smallest
fish swam, close to the light, where frogs
buried their eggs next to the fronds and stems
of the primitive plants,
and the warm lake water tapped at the shore,
each day for ten thousand years,
lapping attentively against the sand shore.
III. DEALING WITH THE LIBRARY
CHILDHOOD

There is a brilliant white pony
grazing the lawn, nose
skimming the broad shadow
of the house.

The dog—enormous—appears,
anxious for trouble. Chickens scatter.
My first memories are of chickens, their narrow
red beaks and throats.
Of chickens and of grass,
the way, laid over itself,
it softens the earth
and how, when cut, it prickles:
hard hollow ends.

I know these for original
memories because in them
I am small enough that crouched
in the grass I am invisible,
hidden between the thick
hummocks in a soft, sheep-made hollow,
flecks of wool and the spherical
black droppings under me as I squat
in the dust, watching through
the waving stalks at my parents
arguing in the yard,
voices raised like flags.
ON A LECTURE BY VLADAMIR VOINOVICH

How much more calmly we work
when we are unhappy.
Otherwise, the constant battle of desires, the one voice
urging on the hands, the brain, the other disconsolate:

*Anything but this ceaseless
refocusing of the concentration! For once
let us do something without goading.*

In Russia and China, during the political suppressions,
some continued to write, accepting each day’s uncertain
security or, as Solzhenizen, sending their voices thinly outward
despite the guards at their doors, writing a page, memorizing
it, swallowing the scrap of paper.

It was partly not a difficult choice,
everything of the alternate life already lost.
THREE WEEKS AFTER YOU LEFT

Waking from the nightmares
to a greater dread
the air filled
with the building’s cocky
electrical hum:

The rat, roused, moved tensely
around the cage.

I located
potential comforts, testing the effects
of certain thoughts.
Nothing.
The air grew louder.

The rat was tapping
at the glass
with her nails.

I pushed open the windows.

Nowhere to walk.
Nothing restored to me.
LIFE COUNTED IN SEASONS

1. Summers

The wide maple in the center of the square:
here I sat peeling leaves off branches,
weighing the piles I made at my feet.

The sidewalks: bleached by heat,
smooth and empty.

I kept to the shadows,
The workday was ended,
the year’s data almost complete.

2. Autumns

The lit windows of the library at night,
bright couches inside, fluorescent lamps
shining painfully on the shelves.
Four stories up. The library, motionless,
like a living thing contemplating its next move.

3. Springs

Cold evenings, biking the wet grass.
Paths leading to the various doors. Comfort:
smell of hallways, key in the lock.

4. Winters

I wake early: the sky is quiet and heavy.
No pain yet, nothing left uncompleted.

Streets at night, flakes of snow like breaks
in the darkness. Footsteps echo off the brick faces
of buildings. Inside of me, a small cleared space:
something impossible has been made possible.
I dreamt, as I always dream, 
of the ocean, chest-high, 
rank and dangerous, 
pulling strongly to the west.

A disequilibrium, as is usual in sleep:
suddenly facing shore after so long looking instead 
from land toward ocean, orienting toward the water 
as though toward the only possibility 
of escape, the feeling you get 
driving to San Diego through the naval reserve, 
where the cliffs are bare of houses 
and rainwater flows down the sand marshes 
through the sharp salt grass.

The wet air on the beaches 
pulling down the clouds 
relieves the ocean from that heat 
which on streets smells of cars and dust.

We do not walk 
but sit in houses, climb the cement walls of our yards 
to watch the smog sunsets.

The evenings are gentle here, as everywhere: 
cats along the rooftops 
of the vast bungalow-fields, rat-faced possums 
creeping up the driveways.
The houses crouch like sea-tortoises 
among their beds of wet flowers. 
When the earth moves, they do not tremble.
ECHO AND NARCISSUS

1.
His face,
still as water,
reflecting—heart-stoppingly,
it seemed to him—the gleam
of daylight after a first
snowfall, the way the light
in the room, when he woke
that morning, had changed
its texture, crisp
against the wood
floorboards.

Entering, she was captivated
by the light wiping his face
clean, aligning his features:
anchored by eyebrows and lips,
the eyes seemed prescient.

Not the boy’s beauty,
but the snow, which reflected
on his face and hers equally
clean lines of white and dark,
the fine eye-lashes
strokes of a sharp ink.

2.
He watched dust
shift in the beams of cold
light, in which not the shape
and melody of an argument
but some straight measure
of soundness drives the mind
in its castings:

after a moment, his hand resting
on her hair moved down
with thumb and forefinger
to the muscle between her neck
and the socket of her shoulder
She shrugged to loosen
the grip, like an animal
hunching against constraint.

3.
She was brought
to the low round
of a riverbed, sunk
into roots, and her voice,
a moment before
silent at the boy’s hard
clasping of her shoulder,
leapt out, calling no,
no, it was not
what I wanted:
I meant to be him.
EXPEDITION

When the British set out for the arctic seaways of the new world,
they outfitted themselves according to regulation: blue wool, tinned meat.
When the men of the first wreck left their landing point, they marched fifty miles in search of civilization.

At the end of the second day, they dropped their sets of heavy silverware engraved with the ship’s insignia. The spoons and knives were distributed across the snow as though the decision had arisen gradually, without consultation of superiors.

The abandoned supplies connect the time of leaving and the time of dying. Do not fault their determination. They stepped off their ships carrying the essentials. We cannot say so much that they should have chosen those items differently, more carefully.

They should have abandoned everything and set out as lost men. But if they had done so, would anyone have believed them? The life we lead here is not a full life. Where we are going there are new sets of necessities.

This was a place entirely new, absent even from the dimmest corners of their memories. Their boots were not lined with fur; nor were their coats made from the skins of seals.
INSIDE MY HEAD

1. Why can’t I be happy?
   You are happy.
   All I ever think about is eating and sleeping.
   I want to think about politics and literature
   and the personal lives
   of people I see walking by.
   There’s nothing stopping you.
   What if I start thinking about those things,
   and I’m not able to go back to the others?

2. I was happy as a child.
   I used to run out into the woods
   to bring the sheep back home for my father.
   Sometimes I sat in the dark under the bristly firs
   and no one could find me.
   At school the other kids made fun of you.
   The teacher made you stay inside
   during recess to practice your penmanship.

3. Why aren’t you happy?
   I am happy.
   Happier than you’ve ever been?
DEALING WITH THE LIBRARY

An unknown person has once again
thrown open my window
in some excess of vitality:
the restless wind has blown over
my books, scattering
papers I had tUCKed into the frame.

Who is this person?
I already have the other window
to contend with: its broken clasp,
the slinking wind encouraging a slow
wakefulness of the hinges.

There is only one screw holding the handle in place
along the bottom of the good window.
The other window I have fastened
with duct tape. All afternoon as I work
the wind pries it gently loose.

Something has to be done to restore
my peace of mind. I will not be persuaded
again by the darkened garden, searching for herbs
among the stone gates. The days are shortening:
I have other things to attend to.
A MORNING

The armies had come together,
paired off in combat, though at first
each seemed instead to be dragging something—
a crumb, a morsel of dirt,
or, if you looked closely, an individual
of the opposite species,
as though gathering the wounded in.

Those that emerged from the leftmost crack
in the cleft of the stone stair
were black, their heads clearly
defined. The smaller red ants
appeared to be winning.

We sat along the stairs
tying on our boots.
Someone passed around
a water bottle. We divided our supplies
among the packs.

What can be expected
from a day like this?
If it were the best of all possible days:
two or three rare plants in flower.

Close beneath us, the tide
might have been turning
toward the black ants,
but was not. I don’t remember
if we set out happy.
The ground could have been deep
and stable beneath us,
or only a pack of leaves
loose against the phyllite shelves.
But when we returned
the stairs were unmarked,
just as, after feeling
we could never again
accept level ground
we would climb up off the slopes,
at the end of each day,
hike the ridge, forgetful,
strangely remiss.
As is to be expected, you have been dreaming of being pursued through the streets of a dark city. You have grenades in your pockets or a cleverly concealed handgun. In one dream, you are a prisoner among a crowd of prisoners, listening for your name in roll call. You want to resist, but all you can think to do is somehow demonstrate mechanical ability, get yourself moved to the technical division of the work camp where you would conduct furtive sabotage of weaponry.

You say you don’t know what your dreams tell you. Where you are living there are no helicopters, not even paved streets, running water. You have always had these same dreams.

Sometimes in my dreams I drive through an unfamiliar city. Though I find it tiring to keep my eyes open, I maneuver all the urban difficulties: freeways, swift lane conversions. I am looking for someone—my parents, my sister, a close friend from high school. Where the streets narrow, the tall, bent trees remind me of Winnipeg.

At other times, I dream thematically. Limes, for example: like lemons but not like lemons. I wake up feeling that I understand something deeply.

We used to wake in the middle of the night, you telling me your dreams, then me telling you mine. We were here together, you told me once, only it wasn’t this room, it was a new place. In the dark, your fingers touched my lips as though to verify my identity. By morning you seemed vague, like a person waking to find he has dreamed of nothing.

I dreamt of boulders, I told you, of rivers, of blue-green algae. I dreamt I watched grass growing.
THE STORY

I’m surprised that what you meant to give her was a quilt. You seem unlike that, voice level on the telephone as you refer to her as your ex-wife, though to me, even before I knew who she was, you used her first name. The other week your son asked someday could you and he and his sister live at the end of a dirt road, with woods in the backyard, but you know the stakes, the daughter and mother whom it would kill to be apart versus the son, who is a tough kid.

You explain the ways in which it is your fault, the long summers she spent alone, et cetera; you tell me you would know if she had left you for another man, that the children would let on. You mention the gift briefly, that it was a secret, that you made it slowly while working on your dissertation.

I have seen you together when she brings you the children, the way you speak, like a man alone on an island who finds a strange woman washed up on the beach,

stops to investigate. Then realizes he has forgotten the person he was before.
OCTOBER

Lily’s baby did not spook
when I stopped by the broodmare stall
to watch her.
Were you to finger my face only
or my hands
I would stay that still.

I had forgotten
foals have such whiskers
that do not quiver with breath.
Such calm.
But if you touched me,
too easy to shatter.

In the cold mornings, the horses
on their way out to pasture
go stiff-legged, tails flagged.
It does not matter,
you grasp my arm
instead: the ground is not frozen but
grass is stiff and tattered by hooves.
IV. TRAVELING
OREGON

There were whales
blowing out among the reefs.
Sharon and I talked quietly
near the edge of the water.
Jen was huddled with Jonathan
on the beach below the soft cliffs.

There with them,
I considered that it might not be, as I had thought,
that we write in order to live,
but rather that we live
in order to have something to write about.

The sand poured down the cliffs
in streams, the hills fighting the wind.
I went to see you
to talk about competition, purely
adversarial, because I felt I lacked
something, some anger. But I’d forgotten

that we couldn’t talk anymore.
Luckily, you discussed ordinary things,
you said, “Amy, you have control over your life.”

Today, the geese rise loudly off the pond,
mist crowding at the hills.
Fall passes; we see each other sometimes
in the mornings and the evenings.
We do not speak.

People tell you things and you think
they aren’t true,
that they don’t even
apply to you. But they do.
THE PONY

Toward the end the hair grew incessantly, until beneath his jaw and below his ankles it trailed in pale strands.

He belonged to the girl's brother. The girl had wanted the brown pony not the white but her parents had told her they were giving her the nicer pet, a girl, like her.

Because the boy was older he lost interest more quickly. Sometimes his friends would want to ride but usually they could not catch either of the ponies.

At the end of her freshman year of college the girl took the train to New Jersey to see her brother, who was graduating. On the first day he took her on a tour of his campus. Thereafter he ignored her, not because he had nothing to say but because he always refrained from starting conversations.

The girl thought about swimming at the reservoir, how they'd climb secretly to the top of the dam and slide down the concrete barrier into the river, slick with algae. Each time, she had known two things: she would be killed and she could say nothing to him.

It had been a bad-tempered pony, bossy towards the other horses, so when it died the father joked about how much it would be missed. The girl thought about how, in the last summer, the pony's winter coat had never loosened and she had pulled it out handful by handful from the belly and from beside the tail.

She wanted to remember the pony well, because for most of her life he had existed quietly at the front of her mind. She could recall only a few events: the time the white mare had been taken away to be bred and the pony had dashed around the paddock, calling. There had been no way to reassure him.

In the damp coolness of summer evenings she had sometimes taken the three horses from their pen to the taller grass of the ditches. Their noses dipping in and out of the green
they would wind gently around her
at the limits of their lines.
She had not tried to draw them in
but sitting in the darkening air among the mosquitoes
had followed their movements, weaving the ropes over her head.
GRASSLAND

1. Drought

It turned cold in the night
just before the rains came.
Almost ahead of the sunrise,
the grazed-down pastures
began to green again.

The new-dead ewe
in the wiry bluegrass
could have been a rock
left by a glacier and not removed
by three generations of farmers.
Herron drove the truck out to pick her up.
She was thin around the backbone
where meat should sit.

2. Excess

Digging into the sod with our hands
we checked for waste,
the year’s uneaten growth
laid down and rotting away.

The small upper fields were still thick
with clover, but these swept past us
consumed by bluegrass and fescue,
yellow-stalked where it aged too fast.

3. Confession

Everywhere, mountains the same colour as the fields
may be not mountains at all
but a long, low plain.

In the woods of North Carolina
a biologist has discovered prairie,
setting fires on faith.

This is how I would like
to wound you. I want what is inside:
the loneliness, the burning grass.
LIVING IN A SINGLE ROOM

Everyone around here wants something different.
The rat wants out of her cage.
She wants to run around the room.
If she cannot be let out of the cage then she wants food.

We all must go without the things we want. The rat does not understand
what it means to live here as I live, alone with my books. This is no place for frivolity.
The plants must be watered, the computer turned on and off, connected and disconnected
from the telephone cable. The door must be locked at night, the clothing worn and taken off.

I like the rat. When I get home from work, I check to make sure that she is still alive.

At night I lie quietly, staring at the ceiling. Only silence from the room next door. These are necessities: the animals in their cages, the curtains shut. My dreams are of gardens, of shepherds and their dogs, of falling great distances, small hands against my hands.
PARABLE

Not mentioned in Matthew,
the man who built his house
upon a parking lot,
and though it neither crumbled
beneath him nor was washed away
by waters flooding toward the sea,
neither was it built on the rock
that was spoken of, where soil collects
in cracks and depressions
and rain trailing off eaves
seeps into the ground.
When the day of judgment came
the Lord said to this man,
though you chose your dwelling-place
prudently while on earth, nothing
you possessed ever lost to you
through neglect, your feet never muddy,
no strange dogs defecating
on the edges of your lawn,
yet you have erred.
Has grass ever grown untended
at the base of your window and, blooming,
shed seed on the acreages of your neighbors?
Said the man to God, I never lived
but as you had instructed
me: upright, no task
undertaken half-heartedly, my actions
fashioned according to your commands. Said God:
it would have been better for you
to have thrust your roots into the shifting
dunes of the ocean shore and from there,
as the wind tunneled away at you, cried out to me, spare
my weak parts, left dry while the sand
that cushioned them fills the air.
Then I would have made you strong;
you would have spread underground, holding the sand
in dense grip that would have endured
as nothing of yours will
ever endure, you man who built your house
upon a parking lot.
DEPRESSION

1.
You tell me that left to yourself
you would not decorate
any room you lived in.
After a few months
you would begin to hate
the bareness, but would alter nothing.

This angers me.
Why do you interact at all
with the world? As far as I can see,
not out of any compulsion to participate.
You must do it for some perverse other reason.

2.
You and I are filled with impulses
we refuse to acknowledge.
We don’t want to have to provide for them.

On the narrow rocks of a hilltop,
the space which it is permissible
for us to occupy
clearly defined: we, looking
down at the valley,
need not even speak to each other.

We don’t have the energy for much,
only the essentials: ennui and fear of failure,
one for you, one for me.
WHAT MY PARENTS WANTED FOR US

I don’t know what my father wanted
for my brother, but I should have become a veterinarian.
I would then have been both a scientist and a farmer:

everyone knew from the beginning
I would be the farmer, the one sitting
on the fence with the record book
as my father clipped on ear tags and with the searing
shears cut off the tails, tossing them out of the pen.
One hit my face: I wiped the blood.
My mother, behind us—we hadn’t
seen her—walked right back to the house.

My brother always did well in science.
He drove the tractor. I threw straw down from the loft
to bed the lambing pens and watered the ewes,
the cold metal rim of the hose soaking
through my gloves. My sister wandered the farmyard
in rubber boots and her coat
with the fur lining. She watched
everything; she knew each of the cats
by a particular name.

When my brother failed his engineering
classes, I realized I would never become a veterinarian.
That summer, because my father was away,
I brought the bloated feeder lambs in to town
and watched the autopsies, the way the stomachs
sighed when the knife released them.
Later, in the back pasture with the breeding ewes,
I found a ram with forehead swollen from butting.
Where the left nub of horn should have been,
a white pack of maggots rising to the surface.

My brother would do whatever
was asked of him.
He didn’t wince at needles
going into his arm for blood.

I was building my fierceness on his.
Standing over the ram’s shoulders
to clean out the cavity, covering his eyes
with my hands as I sprayed insecticide.

My brother sits downstairs, reading.
I want to show him
what I have accomplished in my imitation,
but he is somehow changed.

If I think of my family I remember the early spring,
my mother in faded jeans and nylon jacket
carrying my sister across the yard
toward the front porch, spines of snow
running along the wind lines where the drifts
had been piled, the pale grass stretching out.
If I were to walk away would I first have to abandon
memories, like kittens, eyes glued shut?
TRAVELING

We paused in the road,  
the hills behind us, the sun  
lighting the valley once again.  
You were searching for something  
in my eye—a blackfly. You didn’t touch me  
but gave instructions for removal:  
sweep toward the corner.  
It was late summer.  
We had just come out of the woods.  
Shall we go on? you asked.

I took my rest where I could,  
as though preparing to walk forever.

When we reached the crest  
and the level trail, my legs trembled:  
I slid into mud-puddles  
like shadows against the rocks.  
Later, on the dry footing, you slowed, as though tired,  
or suddenly aware of something.  
The air was beginning to thicken. To the side,  
dim firepits lined with stones.

In front of me, you moved in and out of moonlight.  
We were nearing the place where trees are pruned by the wind.  
For several miles I talked softly to stay awake,  
my fingers from time to time  
brushing against your back.
REFUGEE

At times I feel that any place
is sufficient, what I own
bundled on my back.
I must only advance from day to day,
give an appearance of alertness.

I crouch on the floor with notebook
and pencil, my stash of food:
misshapen carrots, flatbread with raisins.

There is nothing wrong with this life.
Nights are peaceful, possessions nestled
around me. My tasks are simple: drink, eat, observe.
When the air turns still and cold, I sleep.
When I am bored, I draw on the walls.
Alone in the kitchen, drops
hitting the metal sink
like the steps of a person coming
up the path from the front gate.

Small sounds: the too-tall
poplars creaking in the wind.
Under the table, Buster nurses
his empty cans of cat food.

Sometimes you hear a root
snap. Sounds like a person,
cautious at the door:
the dogs knocking their tails
gently against the kitchen tile.

The mirror in the hallway
frames the face of who enters.
Signs of other places: postcards
pasted along the cabinet hinge.

All subject to the cold
moon, shining in
through the high windows.

The sheep mill slowly in the yard,
waiting for the morning,
for the master, bearer of corn.
With his sharp shovel he breaks trough ice.
LOVING RAIN

Not like Lisa,
dancing barefoot in the yard
with Suzy, curious, watching
from the window. Rather as I value
each of the discomforts I can endure.

Like a person walking up a dark
hill, winter rain channeling
the mud, slope steepening.
NIGHT-SWIMMING IN NOVEMBER

You went first, quickly, while
I turned in a circle, covering my eyes
because I didn’t want to see you naked,
so that I seemed to be hesitating
and you reached back. I swam hard toward the center,
then was tangled in a branch or vine.
My legs numbed: I scrambled to the bank.
The moon was full. There was some sort of a street lamp
shining out across the water from the other shore.
You had put on a pair of shorts and were jumping
around to stay warm. My clothes were wet,
the skirt tied up around my legs. In the distance,
across the bridge, we could see figures
on the back deck of a restaurant
looking out over the river.
I remembered standing there with you
at the end of the summer, watching an otter in the little rapids
slide downstream, as though overtaken,
then climb back up the rocks to the headwaters, then
let himself be carried once again.
Live Another Life provides an alternative means to start the game for those who do not wish to go through the lengthy intro sequence at Helgen. You will be given the opportunity to choose your race and then choose a new life for your character to lead. A wide variety of choices will be available. Death Alternative - Alternate Start Addon - Various options to start as a slave and/or captive. Salmon Shack - LAL Version - Start option utilizing MannyGT’s Salmon Shack. We’ve all heard of the core Alternate Start - Live Another Life mod, which offers a wide variety of different places you can choose to start your Skyrim adventure other than Helgen. It’s a great mod that has inspired other mod authors to include compatibility patches for Alternate Start options in their own separate mods. What I’d like to do is put together a comprehensive list of other mods that offer an Alternate Start - Live Another Life component in order to let people know what other options are out there. Modification of live Another Life allows you to start the game in an alternative way. It is designed for those who do not want to go through a long entry and execution in Helgene. You will be given the opportunity to choose a race, and then a new life for your character. Many options are available.