

Nana Says  
Dubai, UAE

Nana presents two apricot jam jars,  
    real honey with comb, Nescafé and tea.  
She gives like she  
    is falling      which wouldn't be too hard  
    close to the ground and delicate  
as an eggshell broken  
    by a slim beak of light.

Nana fills the fridge and cabinets  
like the apocalypse is upon us so we might  
    eat from her hands      her clay colored plates.  
It still must feel like home  
    though this never will be      not really.  
                                    (not enough life left  
                                    to spend it dreaming  
                                    of the scent  
                                    of Syrian jasmine)

Nana says my father is like the maestro  
    making sure it all      goes and goes.  
Her back hurts but she rocks to the swill  
    of his careful comfort song.

Nana smiles as she proclaims      *life is difficult*  
    her dark eyes disappearing beneath  
practiced skin,  
    staring out  
        at a dusk pink sun  
            setting,  
            sinking.

Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans (Small Dancer of Fourteen Years)

*After viewing the statue by Edgar Degas at the Musée D'Orsay*

Ballet skirts mesh  
and meld back stage like smoke  
as a train leaves the station.  
Degas saw through this tulle  
which I see now, old and stained,  
the skirt of the petite danseuse  
is a bruise her body a study  
of what is worst about bodies—  
those wing-like shoulders,  
knees like large pomegranates  
and the bodice buttons curving  
too much over a supple  
but weak spine. He knows  
she will be used by her own body  
until it is raw. Ballet is the beginning  
but there is more darkness emerging  
a darkness of which she stole  
a peek on that pedestal—  
Why did he choose her?  
The subtle unformed body  
of fourteen already held desire  
in the spaces above her clavicle.  
There ran rivers of bodily wrong  
of yearning for pleasure  
and for glory. The certainty  
of his hands certainly captured her  
before she knew herself—  
a deformed mesh of skin tilting  
unbiblical.

## Woman

*For Debbie Morrissey McHale, 1951-2016*

My Great Aunt Debbie leads  
my older sister and me up a path  
on the Rocky Mountains.  
She is our magical adventure guide  
from Loveland, hard gardening  
hands of Larimer Park.  
I watch her legs like oak tree stumps,  
her strength like a horse  
pulsing through her calves.  
I have never seen a beautiful woman  
with such sturdy legs.  
My ears pop and Debbie  
gives me spearmint gum.  
She knows the mountains.  
My dad is on the phone,  
my mother stays in the car.  
We laugh, we race, we turn  
our small red faces up  
to the peaks capped with white.  
Our legs tire, our shoes are too weak  
but we bask in the geography  
of Grandma's sister like girls  
discovering the word "woman"  
has different definitions—  
not mother or sister,  
dainty or delicate or dancer  
or dreamer, not silent or obedient,  
not product of father.  
She contained power and strength,  
with maps grafted to her soul  
and guidebooks in her eyes.  
The higher we climbed  
the further we were from what we knew.  
She picked me up in one easy swipe  
to show me what she could see.

## (dis)solution

This morning, I receive a message from my father as I go  
down the stairs, out of my apartment and onto the train.  
I have been here before, floundering in this word—  
*separation*—an empty room with circles on the carpet

where furniture was, rectangles of whiter wall  
where picture frames hung. I wonder who will keep  
the photos, those silent photos of us fading in closet coffins.  
My mother and father are dying in the corner of each other's eyes.

Long ago, we grew permanent in our damage. This court order  
is just the officiation of an already experienced breakage.  
Today's sadness begins in my stomach like hunger then goes  
upwards, spreading like cotton in my throat.

I cannot stop violently arriving in myself. I cannot stop  
inhabiting my terrible, irrevocable body made of them  
for long enough to turn back and watch the ways  
my family shattered like a vase on an unused dining table,

to face that this time when we shatter we turn to dust.  
My father says a judge has approved the dissolution  
of their marriage but this is no surprise to me—when I was born,  
we had already dissolved, mother's dragon fruit womb

pulsing with the severe mixture of her own Piscean water,  
my father a stream of headstrong blood, me the oblong  
girlchild solution. I get off the train to engage in the useless  
motion of the day, while the rubble of their parting

collects in my body's inevitable cathexes.

## The Shapes We Make

*“When that which is and that which was  
Apart, intrinsic, stand  
And this brief tragedy of flesh  
Is shifted like a sand”*  
—Emily Dickinson

Our black cat on the windowsill perches,  
her back curved like a bowler hat. I stretch  
heavy as a watermelon on a vine, burrow  
into the regular quiet of us and watch you write,  
your back also curved in that morning figure,  
a branch drooping with the season’s last gala apples,  
your curls the fluttering leaves at the top.  
You blink and the red bulbs of words unfurl  
onto pages.

You have watched my hair grow longer,  
held me when it was terrible to inhabit my body.  
I have learned to trim your wayward curls,  
read page after page when your art felt sullen.  
We have become architects of dome-shaped sleep  
and of temporary bookshelves to stack Kundera  
and Brecht like the tops of Chicago buildings  
just to watch our kitten knock them down.

The people in other apartment windows feel  
the shapes we’re making—the coffee careening  
into a clean, white cup, the head tilted  
to the page, you and I colliding, dispersing.  
You look up at me, stories still cathecting  
behind your teeth and ask if I want more coffee.  
I realize the brief tragedy of flesh  
is shifted to a warm and furnished place.