

Summer of Ladybugs (2011)

The first summer, after your father died,
a swarm of ladybugs—not pure divinity

red, but a color closer to dried blood—
clustered on the blackberry bushes
he'd seeded at the edge of our lawn.

The bugs rusted the leaves and stems,
stained the ground beneath. You and I

sat in the damp grass, mother and daughter
worrying over what had happened, wondering
at its meaning, our bare knees touching.

This plague of beetles, the strange storms
descending into our world—

not the end of it, but something close.
Everything that year, topsy-turvy.
Blizzards with thunder; spring monsoons

that matted the grass so it was impossible
for me to mow.

Remember—your biology class raised
monarchs; you fed milkweed to the caterpillars,
watched each one morph into its green chrysalis.

But you toyed with nature, and the butterflies
emerged in weather too cold for migration.

We took them south to VMI, freed them at halftime,
an orange storm of leaves rising on an updraft.
Like gravity reversing, they fell to the sky,

hung there for a single breath, then
redirected themselves homeward.

Starlight Barn (2011)

We walk into dimness, eyes adjusting
in the sudden silence, noses wakened
by scents of cedar and dust, the motion above
of birds leaving nests. Hundreds
of knotholes riddle the walls,
and daylight finds its way through,
shafts of light cast white halos
onto the wide-planked floor.

It's the wall itself that reminds me
of a night sky, of distant suns
you could wish upon. A constellation-
flash above us like that day at the planetarium.
We stumbled upon that, too, after hours
of exploring the museum, after
the picnic in our room, shared
laughter over a spoiled bottle of red
you brought home from Deidesheim.
And from the hotel's bedside window,
the green glow of the Chrysler Building.

I never paid much mind
to phases of the moon, to formations
and movement of the stars. Now,
in this Appalachian barn, I see an alignment
of what could be Ursa Minor, its five named stars,
Polaris at its stem. I think back to that day in New York,
the way you took my hand, guided my finger, said
There, at the base, the North Star. In the plush
darkness of the theatre, that illuminating
joy of you beside me. And now, again.

Fragments (2012)

this poem dusty box from a closet
my brother always in black

and white freeze-framed
always half out of the shot

here he is head down shuffling
through the living room

face puffed from cortisone
friends mocking Look at Porky Pig

me not rising to his defense
his nine year-old hand in mine curled
like a question mark

his death years later sandwiched between
our father's/our mother's a history

of disappearances women he wanted
to love his comfort in Happy Hour

holes opening beneath his feet
his hand grasping for mine

his life a piss-stained mattress
in the attic guest room our father's gun

me left with nothing
but a cut-off line