





# Obit

VICTORIA CHANG



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Thank you. We hope you enjoy these poems.

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*For my mother and my children.*

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Special Thanks



# OBIT

# I

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak  
wispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.*

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

My Father's Frontal Lobe—died unpeacefully of a stroke on June 24, 2009 at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego, California. Born January 20, 1940, the frontal lobe enjoyed a good life. The frontal lobe loved being the boss. It tried to talk again but someone put a bag over it. When the frontal lobe died, it sucked in its lips like a window pulled shut. At the funeral for his words, my father wouldn't stop talking and his love passed through me, fell onto the ground that wasn't there. I could hear someone stomping their feet. The body is as confusing as language—was the frontal lobe having a tantrum or dancing? When I took my father's phone away, his words died in the plastic coffin. At the funeral for his words, we argued about my miscarriage. *It's not really a baby*, he said. I ran out of words, stomped out to shake the dead baby awake. I thought of the tech who put the wand down, quietly left the room when she couldn't find the heartbeat. I understood then that darkness is falling without an end. That darkness is not the absorption of color but the absorption of language.

My Mother—died unpeacefully on August 3, 2015 in her room at Walnut Village Assisted Living in Anaheim, California of pulmonary fibrosis. The room was born on July 3, 2012. The Village wasn't really a village. No walnut trees. Just cut flowers. Days before, the hospice nurse silently slid the stethoscope on top of my mother's lung and waited for it to inflate. The way waiting becomes an injury. The way the nurse breathed in, closed his eyes, breathed out, and said *I'm sorry*. Did the blood rush to my face or to my fingertips? Did he reopen his eyes before or after he said *I'm sorry*? The way memory is the ringing after a gunshot. The way we try to remember the gunshot but can't. The way memory gets up after someone has died and starts walking.

Victoria Chang—died unknowingly on June 24, 2009 on the I-405 freeway. Born in the Motor City, it is fitting she died on a freeway. When her mother called about her father's heart attack, she was living an indented life, a swallow that didn't dip. This was not her first death. All her deaths had creases except this one. It didn't matter that her mother was wrong (it was a stroke) but that Victoria Chang had to ask whether she should drive to see the frontal lobe. When her mother said yes, Victoria Chang had the feeling of not wanting to. Someone heard that feeling. Because he did not die but all of his words did. At the hospital, Victoria Chang cried when her father no longer made sense. This was before she understood the cruelty of his disease. It would be the last time she cried in front of it. She switched places with her shadow because suffering changes shape and happens secretly.

Victoria Chang—died unwillingly on April 21, 2017 on a cool day in Seal Beach, California, on her way back from the facility named Sunrise, which she often mistakenly called *Sunset*. Her father's problems now her problems, nailed to her frontal lobe. Like a typist, she tried to translate his problems, carry the words back in a pony carriage one by one. When the pony moved, the letters strung together to form sentences. But when the pony refused to move, the carriage disappeared. The letters tagged her and ran into the cornfields. The police came and shined their lights onto the field, started shooting the letters even though they had their hands up. Sometimes, they shot the letters twice, just to make sure. Sometimes, they shot them in the back. When we shoot a letter once, it's called *typing*. Twice, *engraving*. When someone dies, letters are always engraved. When someone dies, there is a constant feeling of wanting to speak to someone, but the plane with all the words is crossing the sky.

Voice Mail—died on June 24, 2009, the voice mail from my father said *Transcription Beta (low confidence), Hello hi um I may be able to find somebody to reduce the size of the car OK I love you.* The Transcription Beta had low self-esteem. It wandered into the river squinting and came back blind. The Transcription Beta could not transcribe dementia. My father really said, *I'll fold the juice*, not *I love you*. Is language the broom or what's being swept? When I first read *I love you*, some hand spun a fine thread around my lungs and tightened. Because my father had never said that to me before. In the seconds before realization of the error, I didn't feel love, but panic. We read to inherit the words, but something is always between us and the words. Until death, when comprehension and disappearance happen simultaneously.

Language—died, brilliant and beautiful on August 1, 2009 at 2:46 p.m. Lover of raising his hand, language lived a full life of questioning. His favorite was twisting what others said. His favorite was to write the world in black and white and then watch people try and read the words in color. Letters used to skim my father's brain before they let go. Now his words are blind. Are pleated. Are the dispatcher, the dispatches, and the receiver. When my mother was dying, I made everyone stand around the bed for what would be the last group photo. Some of us even smiled. Because dying lasts forever until it stops. Someone said, *Take a few*. Someone said, *Say cheese*. Someone said, *Thank you*. Language fails us. In the way that *breaking an arm* means an arm's bone can break but the arm itself can't break off unless sawed or cut. My mother couldn't speak but her eyes were the only ones that were wide open.



## Tankas

My children, children,  
there's applesauce everywhere  
but it's not for you.  
It is strange to help someone  
grow while helping someone die.

\*

Each time I write *hope*,  
the letters fray and scatter.  
The hopeful poets  
never seem to have my dreams,  
never seem to have children.

Language—died again on August 3, 2015 at 7:09 a.m. I heard about my mother's difficult nights. I hired a night person. By the time I got there, she was always gone. The night person had a name but was like a ghost who left letters on my lips. *Couldn't breathe, 2:33 a.m. Screaming, 3:30 a.m. Calm, 4:24 a.m.* I got on all fours, tried to pick up the letters like a child at an egg hunt without a basket. But for every letter I picked up, another fell down, as if protesting the oversimplification of my mother's dying. I wanted the night person to write in a language I could understand. *Breathing unfolding, 2:33. Breathing in blades, 3:30. Breathing like an evening gown, 4:24.* But maybe I am wrong, how death is simply death, each slightly different from the next but the final strike all the same. How the skin responds to a wedding dress in the same way it responds to rain.

Victoria Chang—died on June 24, 2011, at the age of 41. Her imagination lived beyond that day though. It weighed two pounds and could be lifted like weights. Once she brought her father to the arcade. He found the basketball machine and shot one after another. As if he were visiting his past self in prison, touching the clear glass at his own likeness. On the other side of the glass, words like *embankment*, *unsightly*, and *heterogeneous* lived. He tried to ask his former self for help but the guards wouldn't allow him to pass notes. When the ball machine buzzed, he stopped, eyes deformed and wild. He called my dead mother over to see his score, hand waving at me. What happens when the shadow is attached to the wrong object but refuses to let go? I walked over because I wanted to believe him.

The Future—died on June 24, 2009. A pioneering figure in the past, the future was the president of the present. You are sitting. But the future wants your chair. She is demanding. She is not interested in the spine but what it holds up. She is interested in award ceremonies. She is interested in fallen petals that look like medals. She is interested in anything with the word *track* in it, tenure track, deer tracks, tracksuit, but she doesn't want you to get sidetracked or to backtrack. The future can be thrown away by the privileged. But sometimes she just suddenly dies. The way the second person dies when a mother dies, reborn as third person as *my mother*. The way grief is really about future absence. The way the future closes its offices when a mother dies. What's left: a hole in the ground the size of violence.

Civility—died on June 24, 2009, at the age of 68. Murdered by a stroke whose paintings were recently featured in a museum, two square canvases painted white, black scissors in the middle of each, open, pointing at each other. After my father's stroke, my mother no longer spoke in full sentences. Fragments of codfish, the language of savages, each syllable a mechanical dart from her mouth to my father's holes. Maybe this is what happens when language fails, a last breath inward but no breath outward. A state of holding one's breath forever but not dying. When her lungs began their failing, she could still say *you* but not *thank*. *You don't know what it's like*, she said when I told her to stop yelling at my father. She was right. When language leaves, all you have left is tone, all you have left are smoke signals. I didn't know she was using her own body as wood.

My Mother's Lungs—began their dying sometime in the past. Doctors talked around tombstones. About the hedges near the tombstones, the font. The obituary writer said the obituary is the moment when someone becomes history. What if my mother never told me stories about the war or about her childhood? Does that mean none of it happened? No one sits next to my mother's small rectangular tombstone, flush to the earth. The stone is meant to be read from above. What if I'm in space and can't read it? Does that mean she didn't die? She died at 7:07 a.m. PST. It is three hours earlier in Hawaii. Does that mean in Hawaii she hasn't died yet? But the plane ride to Hawaii is five hours long. This time gap can never be overcome. The difference is called grieving.

Privacy—died on December 4, 2015. My child brought a balloon that said *Get Well Soon* to the gravesite. This time Peter Manning lay next to my mother. A stranger so close to her. Before this other stone appeared, my mother's stone was still my mother because of the absence around her. The appearance of the new stone and the likeness to her stone implied my mother was a stone too, that my mother was buried under the stone too. On the day of the burial, I hired a Chinese priest. I couldn't understand many of his words because they were not about food. The men who had dug up the dirt stood with their shovels and waited. I looked at their eyes for any sign of drowning. Then I noticed that one man's body didn't have a shadow. And when he walked away, the grass didn't flatten. His shovel was clean. I suddenly recognized this man as love.

My Mother's Teeth—died twice, once in 1965, all pulled out from gum disease. Once again on August 3, 2015. The fake teeth sit in a box in the garage. When she died, I touched them, smelled them, thought I heard a whimper. I shoved the teeth into my mouth. But having two sets of teeth only made me hungrier. When my mother died, I saw myself in the mirror, her words around my mouth, like powder from a donut. Her last words were in English. She asked for a Sprite. I wonder whether her last thought was in Chinese. I wonder what her last thought was. I used to think that a dead person's words die with them. Now I know that they scatter, looking for meaning to attach to like a scent. My mother used to collect orange blossoms in a small shallow bowl. I pass the tree each spring. I always knew that grief was something I could smell. But I didn't know that it's not actually a noun but a verb. That it moves.



I tell my children  
that hope is like a blue skirt,  
it can twirl and twirl,  
that men like to open it,  
take it apart, and wound it.

\*

I tell my children  
that sometimes I too can hope,  
that sometimes nothing  
moves but my love for someone,  
and the light from the dead star.

Friendships—died June 24, 2009, once beloved but not consistently beloved. The mirror won the battle. I am now imprisoned in the mirror. All my selves spread out like a deck of cards. It's true, the grieving speak a different language. I am separated from my friends by gauze. I will drive myself to my own house for the party. I will make small talk with myself, spill a drink on myself. When it's over, I will drive myself back to my own house. My conversations with other parents about children pass me on the way up the staircase and repeat on the way down. Before my mother's death, I sat anywhere. Now I look for the image of the empty chair near the image of the empty table. An image is a kind of distance. An image of me sits down. Depression is a glove over the heart. Depression is an image of a glove over the image of a heart.

Gait—my father’s gait died on March 14, 2011. Once erect, light, flat-footed. Magnificent. Now, his gait shuffles like sandpaper. Once my father erected a basketball net, mounted it onto a wooden pole from the lumberyard to save money. With each shot, the pole moved a little, invisible to the eye, until I had to shoot from the side of the driveway. Now I avoid semicolons. I look for statues whose eyes don’t move with me. The kind of people who stand in place and lights can be strung on. The problem is, my father’s brain won’t stop walking, and my dead mother is everywhere.

Logic—my father’s logic died on June 24, 2009 in bright daylight. Murdered in the afternoon. I hung up Missing Person posters of myself and listened for the sound of a tree falling. The sound of the wind through trees is called *psithurism*. There’s no word for the translator of wind. If the wind is words, the trees are exclamation points. The spears of moonlight, question marks. My father doesn’t realize his words always end in prepositions. *I have a problem with [the moon], there is a problem between [the moon and me], the problem is on [the moon]*. What if he can no longer find what is being modified, in the way snow would fall forever if there were no lip to die on.

Optimism—died on August 3, 2015, a slow death into a pavement. At what point does a raindrop accept its falling? The moment the cloud begins to buckle under it or the moment the ground pierces it and breaks its shape? In December, my mother had her helper prepare a Chinese hot-pot feast. My mother said it would probably be her last Christmas. I laughed at her. She yelled at my father all night. I put a fish ball in my mouth. My optimism covered the whole ball as if the fish had never died, had never been gutted and rolled into a humiliating shape. To acknowledge death is to acknowledge that we must take another shape.

Ambition—died on August 3, 2015, a sudden death. I buried ambition in the forest, next to distress. They used to take walks together until ambition pushed distress off the embankment. Now, they put a bracelet around my father's ankle. The alarm rings when he gets too close to the door. His ambitious nature makes him walk to the door a lot. When the alarm rings, he gets distressed. He remembers that he wants to find my house. He thinks he can find my house. His fingerprints have long vanished from my house. Some criminals put their fingers on electric coils of a stove to erase their fingerprints. But it only makes them easier to find. They found my father in the middle of the road last month, still like a bulbless lamp, unable to recall its function, confused like the moon. At the zoo, a great bald eagle sits in a small cage because of a missing wing. Its remaining wing is grief. Above the eagle, a bird flying is the eagle's memory, and its prey, the future.

Chair—my mother’s green chair died on August 3, 2015. We arrange chairs in rows facing the same direction to represent reverence. In a circle to represent sharing. Stacked to represent completion. Hanging from the ceiling to represent art. In front of a desk to represent work. Before my mother died, I routed all her mail to my house. Her catalogues still come every day. I imagine her sitting in her chair flipping through them for more shirts that look the same. I understand now, only the living change clothes. Last week, I took my father pants-shopping. I heard him quarreling with the pants. He came out of the dressing room with his pants on backwards. Two pockets facing forward, like my mother’s eyes mocking me, as if to say, *I told you so*. He was angry, pointing and cursing at the *chairs* that no longer fit. I entered the men’s dressing room and picked up all the pants on the floor because one of them had to be my missing father.

Do you smell my cries?  
They come from another place.  
The cry comes from you.  
Now everything comes from you.  
To be empty and so full.

\*

I tell my children  
that they can wake anything,  
that they are not yet  
dying. But what do I know?  
I know that a mother dies.



Tears—died on August 3, 2016. Once we stopped at a Vons to pick up flowers and pinwheels on our way to the graveyard. It had been a year and death no longer glittered. My ten-year-old putting the flowers perfectly in the small narrow hole in front of the stone. How she somehow knew what the hole was for, that my mother wasn't really on the other side. Suddenly, our sobbing. How many times have I looked into the sky for some kind of message, only to find content but no form. She ran back to the car. The way grief takes many forms, as tears or pinwheels. The way the word *haystack* never conjures up the same image twice. The way we assume all tears taste the same. The way our sadness is plural, but grief is singular.

Memory—died August 3, 2015. The death was not sudden but slowly over a decade. I wonder if, when people die, they hear a bell. Or if they taste something sweet, or if they feel a knife cutting them in half, dragging through the flesh like sheet cake. The caretaker who witnessed my mother's death quit. She holds the memory and images and now they are gone. For the rest of her life, the memories are hers. She said my mother couldn't breathe, then took her last breath twenty seconds later. The way I have imagined a kiss with many men I have never kissed. My memory of my mother's death can't be a memory but is an imagination, each time the wind blows, leaves unfurl a little differently.

Language—died on March 4, 2017. It wanted to live as long as possible in its form, an icicle on the edge of a roof. I lifted the roof off my father's head and found the balcony to stand on. I spoke loudly and slowly about the Guggenheim. Two women at the table across from us with plates of all-you-can-eat snow crab legs, their fourth each. I repeated myself again and again. The women kept getting up for more, their sucking noises like eating an overripe peach. My father finally said that he would like to *see a copy of the pamphlet*. This year they sent a spacecraft on a suicide mission between Saturn and its rings. If I could get between my father and his brain, would I too be committing suicide? If someone is directing the spacecraft, isn't it murder? The pictures sent back are silent. A picture represents a moment that has died. Then every photo is a crime scene. When we remember the dead, at some point, we are remembering the picture, not the moment.

Tomas Tranströmer—died on March 26, 2015, at the age of 83. He wrote: *I am carried in my shadow / like a violin / in its black case. // The only thing I want to say / glitters out of reach / like the silver / in a pawnbroker's.* My father couldn't have written those words before or after his stroke. I wonder if his daughters disliked visiting him as much as I dislike visiting my father. The way his fists stay shut, the way his mind is always out of earshot. The way his words abandon his mouth and each day I pick them up, put them back in, screw the lid on tighter. Sometimes when he complains and no one can understand, I think of all the places I hid as a child. All the times I have silenced someone by covering their mouth with mine.

Approval—died on August 3, 2015 at the age of 44. It died at 7:07 a.m. *How much money will you get* was my mother's response to everything. She used to wrap muffins in a napkin at the buffet and put them in her purse. I never saw the muffins again. What I would do to see those muffins again, the thin moist thread as she pulled the muffin apart. A photo shows my mother holding my hand. I was nine. I never touched her hand again. Until the day before she died. I love so many things I have never touched: the moon, a shiver, my mother's heart. Her fingers felt like rough branches covered with plastic. I trimmed her nails one by one while the morphine kept her asleep. Her nails weren't small moons or golden doors to somewhere, but ten last words I was cutting off.

Sometimes all I have  
are words and to write them means  
they are no longer  
prayers but are now animals.  
Other people can hunt them.

\*

You don't need a thing  
from me, you already have  
everything you need:  
the moon, a wound on the lake,  
our footprints to not follow.

Secrets—died on August 7, 2015 and they were relieved to die. No one at the funeral had known about my mother's illness. No one had known how fiercely my mother and father fought. One Chinese face after another. I told the story. Told it again. Their mouths opened like time. Red sashes with Chinese characters I couldn't read. The stems spoke with their flowers. To look down and see their legs missing. Later, I found a photo of my mother smiling with friends at her home, just the year before. No oxygen tank, no tube in her nose. She must have taken it off, put it in the closet between the beginning of her life and the end of her life. I imagine her panicking inside, waiting for them to leave. The mind and speech assemble and disassemble like geese. Scientists now say that a mind still works after the body has died. That there's a burst of brain energy. Then maybe she heard the geese above disassemble one last time. Then maybe my kiss on her cheek felt like lightning.

Music—died on August 7, 2015. I made a video with old pictures and music for the funeral. I picked “Hallelujah” in a cappella. Because they weren’t really singing, but actually crying. When my children came into the room, I pretended I was writing. Instead, I looked at my mother’s old photos. The fabric patterns on all her shirts. The way she held her hands together at the front of her body. In each picture, the small brown purse that now sits under my desk. At the funeral, my brother-in-law kept turning the music down. When he wasn’t looking, I turned the music up. Because I wanted these people to feel what I felt. When I wasn’t looking, he turned it down again. At the end of the day, someone took the monitor and speakers away. But the music was still there. This was my first understanding of grief.



Appetite—died its final death on Father’s Day, June 21, 2015, peacefully and quietly among family. We dressed my mother, rolled her down in her wheelchair. The oxygen machine breathing like an animal. They were the only Chinese people at the facility. The center table was loud again, was invite-only again. Like always, I filled my mother’s plates with food. Her favorite colored puddings contained in plastic cups. When we got up to leave, her food still there, glistening like worms. No one thought much of it. There are moments that are like brushstrokes, when only much later after the ocean is finished, become the cliff’s edge that they were all along. Death is our common ancestor. It doesn’t care whom we have dined with.

Appetite—died on March 16, 2015. Once, in graduate school, I was the only one to order a drink at the restaurant. My boyfriend did not like this. He dropped me off in the middle of town to walk home. I looked at the children's clothing in the window, the little striped cap, pink dress, and thought about beauty. I spun around to avoid darkness but darkness was the one spinning me. I hid in a bright Taco Bell. The man at the register had a narrow hole for a mouth and a brown mass on his cheek. He was so beautiful that I thought he must be Death. Twenty years later, my mother requested Taco Bell for lunch. I ran out to buy her bags and bags of tacos. No one in line understood my emergency. The man I handed my credit card to had a brown mass on his face. He nodded when he handed me the bag, as if he knew. My mother pressed her lips to the tacos, as if she were kissing someone for the rapturous last time.

Form—died on August 3, 2015. My children sleep with framed photos of my mother. Leaden, angular, metal frames. My ten-year-old puts her frame in the red velvet bag that held the cremation urn and brings it with her on vacation. A photo of my mother sits in the bag that once held a container of her ashes. When we die, we are represented by representations of representations, often in different forms. Memories too are representations of the dead. I go through corridors looking for the original but can't find her. In Palm Springs, the desert fails me. Dust, sand, gravel, bits of dead things everywhere, a speck of someone else's dead mother blows into my eye and I start crying again. The heat is now too optimistic. The pool and its luster like an inquisition. My own breathing, between the splashes and children laughing, no longer a miracle, but simple mathematics.

Optimism—died on August 3, 2015, of monotony. Before my sister would fly home, she and my mother would cry together. The one time my mother cried to me, I said, *The doctor's wrong, you don't know how long—it could be a year or more*. She didn't stop crying. I got up and left the room. Outside, three floors below, behind the building, a family was celebrating something in their yard. Piñatas, music, children momentarily suspended above Earth in a bounce house. That summer, we were not on Earth, but pacing in a building above it. People in a city can spend a lifetime never actually touching the earth once. I was so afraid their happiness would rise up through the window like steam. I could hear the thumping of the sticks on the piñata, once a happy anticipation, altered to the inevitability of the candy dropping. Now I close my eyes and try to remember the optimism of the thumping, the origin of things.

I can't say with faith  
that I would run toward a bus  
to save you from death.  
If a girl is only as  
good as her mother, then what?

\*

To love anyone  
means to admit extinction.  
I tell myself this  
so I never fall in love,  
so that the fire lights just me.

Hands—died on January 13, 2015. My mother's handwriting had become jagged and shaky. Bodies jump out of bed. Feet leap off of bridges. Hands never leap. They flag people down. They gesture to enhance language. They are the last part of hugging, which the body mostly does. They wipe off the tears that the eyes release. They write on paper the things the brain sends. After my mother died, I looked at a photo where she had moved into assisted living from the ER. Her oxygen tube in her nose, my two small children standing on each side. Her hands around their hands pulled tightly to her chest, the chorus of knuckles still housed, white stones, soon to be freed, soon to be splashing.

Oxygen—died on March 12, 2012. At first, it came in heavy green canisters. Then a large rolling machine that pushed air day and night. When my mother changed her clothes, she had to take the tube out of her nose. She stopped to catch her breath, as if breath were constantly in motion, as if it could be chased. I'm not sure when I began to notice her panic without the oxygen, in the way we don't notice a leaf turning red or an empire falling. One day, it just appears, as if it had been there all along. Like the hospice staff with their papers, bags of medicine, their garlands of silence. Like grief, the way it dangles from everything like earrings. The way grief needs oxygen. The way every once in a while, it catches the light and starts smoking. The way my grief will die with me. The way it will cleave and grow like antlers.

Reason—died on June 24, 2009, like make-believe trees that just get taken down and put away. My father's words taken out of his brain and left downstairs. Remote but close, like a wound on your child or a curtain blowing in the other room. This week, he is obsessed with the scheduled walks again. This week he doesn't want to wait for the other much older but sharper residents. The memory of reason is there, of once pulling the ropes. When reason dies, determination does not. As in, my father is determined to walk at 10 a.m. at a certain pace. As in his body is determined to move forward with or without his brain, which is two empty slippers nailed into the ground.



Home—died on January 12, 2013. The first of five moves meant the boxes were still optimistic that they would be opened. They were still stiff, arrogant about their new shape, flatness just a memory. At the new house, my father on one of his obsessive walks found the one old Chinese person, a bony lady with branches for teeth, the kind of woman my mother would normally shun because of her background. She visited my mother every day for a year. She brought oranges, vegetables, a salesperson from a funeral home. My father left them to speak in Chinese as he wandered the neighborhood so he wouldn't die. The lady swore at my father in Chinese. Called him *stupid*. A *fool*. At the funeral, she said, *God brought me here to help your mother*. And it struck me. My father's words were an umbrella that couldn't open. My mother held the umbrella, refused to let the wind take it. And this old woman was the wind.

Memory—died on July 11, 2015. When I returned from a trip, my mother on the edge of the bed, hair mostly white, black dye underneath, like a memory. Sheets off the bed in a corner like crushed birds. The caretaker hadn't come for a week. My father pacing, his hands tried to speak for him. Too much pressure on the hands. No one knew what happened that week but the hands. My mother had soiled herself. It was all over her hair that she had rolled in pink curlers one by one her whole life. She denied the soiling. Yelled at me in Chinese for saying it. My child and I bathed her as she sat on the shower chair, naked, slumped over, a defeated animal. Death was still abstract, it could slip down the drain. Sadness was still indivisible. In twenty-three days, it would detonate and shower us like confetti. The water flattened my mother's hair and began burying her tongue.

## II

*Let the stars  
Plummet to their dark address,*

*Let the mercuric  
Atoms that cripple drip  
Into the terrible well,*

*You are the one  
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.  
You are the baby in the barn.*

—Sylvia Plath, from “Nick and the Candlestick”

**I Am a Miner. The Light Burns Blue.**

A herd of ribs ripped the eggs  
out of us what's left thousands  
of wingless bees that shake in place that no  
longer make goods that no longer think  
clearly drunk stripes collide figures on the TV  
rub like driftwood babies' heads turn  
toward them shapes that have separated from  
their bodies everything is drifting the frames  
of the houses are missing what's left drapes like a  
shirt mothers sit underneath and sew water here  
the pages are turning but no one is reading here  
we are not talented here we are torrential and  
babies are always growing here one light in one  
house on one street beats on in pain

\*

If they say that happiness is water that it  
is always growing then my kind must be the  
lunar crater kind circular in its shape stingy in its flow  
sometimes I cannot control its shedding its rebellion  
other times it flash freezes and I chip away with an  
ice pick until my fingers freeze into an artichoke



a man with a stroller says    it's worth it    but    it feels  
like    hooves on my face    I    cannot    bench-press it  
I want a    fixed income of you    so    I can tell you    I don't  
want    you to stay    I want    to wake    each  
morning and    find    your    cloth figure next    to me  
I want    to prick you and    paw    you    I want to  
be    your inseam    to    tailor you    to    wear  
you to    be    you

\*

If you are    the portobello    we are the    undersides  
of    portobellos    the keyed-in lips    even  
desire is    split    stained glass    divides  
our faces    into    abundance    each day we  
are    redivided    each day we try to    push our  
selves    back together    like grass    each day the night  
detonates    tries to stick    itself to    morning    light  
each day    we are    renamed like a    new    monsoon  
we are sculled    again    and    again as    saline is  
hit by drips    each    strike    different    from  
the next    here    we are    sick but    have no  
symptoms    here the    rain    is always crowded  
here we    always wear    gowns with  
open backs but    don't know    why





\*

An old man pushes up a clavicle of a lime tree  
only the ashes know why they fall from his  
cigarette like asterisks he doesn't look up our bodies  
and strollers overlap fresh cement steams against  
stucco homes and new sod babies' faces reflect on  
storefronts our skin like cactuses we are  
latched to this landscape where trees need  
wooden sticks to stand straight where workers trim  
thistles on the trail each day working their way  
west and back where fields are aerated into  
Chinese checker boards plugs of brown dirt strewn  
like confetti like something to celebrate where  
we try to shed ruin at daylight but by nightfall  
our hands are always wilderness

\*

I am a clubfoot twisted in inverted down I am  
the one in every one thousand sandstorm a man  
said you should be happy look at the child you  
have but if happiness is within the child  
then happiness runs away up the ladder  
through the blue tunnel down the slide



I want straightness unbending I chase my  
other foot like a lottery I search to be the one-in-  
ten-million winner power to my powerball my mega  
of millions my factorial capability factoring in  
the wind the windows and the probability of rain  
what's left in my winnings is always this I want to go  
home now I want my own room forever I want  
what I used to have I want what I have

\*

In the last parking lot in the last city there are  
trees that look like nerve endings scalps of leaves  
thousands of birds in threes somewhere the  
last people have stopped to place white rocks over  
dried volcano Beth loves Jim and someone loves  
Matt at the last party the light lanced onto  
the last baby's face its body still slumping in  
ignorance once while teaching a child how to draw  
a person I learned we are made only of circles and  
rectangles I now know a body must loosen before  
it tightens I now know a body can loosen and  
tighten with many men I now know Earth is a  
hole not a sphere meant to be filled  
with bodies not with thinking



\*

Circular saws grinding gristle tightening time  
I wonder whether time is running away from  
death or toward death I wonder whether  
death sounds this way or whether death has  
no sound the food truck blows its horn the  
sun pushes and pushes nine mothers with  
strollers babies sit upright like kites the statue of  
a woman has a space where the heart should be  
through the space on the other side of the park is  
an American flag a man must have made this statue  
we are always looking through women the men  
are nearly done building the wall stone by  
stone we have wiped drops of milk off of  
lips and entertained the treetops

\*

Yesterday I had my own room with my own  
milkweed but I didn't want to be there  
downstairs a baby rolled across the floor for  
the first time like dawn she laughed clapped  
then cried as she rolled into the couch in gaining  
control she loses control I dreamed that I



could finally leave the house but I had to  
travel through an alley of bees the alley was  
six feet wide the bees were six inches long they  
buzzed in my spine led me north led me to a town  
where everyone worked near apple trees where no one  
made flags where everyone learned how to multiply  
silence how to divide sadness into small parcels  
how to gather colors and give them away

\*

Everyone wanted poems with an emperor a head  
looped inside a rope but this poem is tepid this  
poem is no epic the trail the hedge a man on a  
tractor digging divots out of a field as if the  
field is just a field and not flesh one by  
one the bugs like small beans lift out of the  
grass there is no other way thousands  
of them they recede into balls when kicked  
worm bodies that roll like earth they are voiceless  
but we cannot extinguish their screams a grotesque  
story but not a big story there is war even here  
there is a metal machine there is a senseless task  
there is terror our disregard and billions of  
bodies rushing out like smoked bees





\*

We are disregarding planets again Pluto is no  
longer one they say in a show of hands where  
are the bodies if all the hands go on deck when  
the hands return how do they find their bodies  
all around the earth people spend one year  
chanting hands hands fingers thumbs dum ditty  
dum ditty dum dum dum unlike sharks we  
do not hunt by hearing each other's hearts  
we hunt with our hands how our hands are  
always behind a wheel on a road that divides  
pines into tribes on Saturday someone's  
hand will tighten the noose around another  
man's neck we will write about it with our hands  
that can't however they try remain housed like a heart

\*

The rain is undressed from the sky the soil  
opens takes rain in as if it has the  
answers because the soil has no choice  
because the soil is assaulted too there are  
diamonds deep in the forest of soil  
pustules of God if you heat a diamond at



high temperatures it will dissolve into thin  
air like a woman there are diamonds  
beneath a baby's foot and its soft nail clippings  
here the rain does not have a mouth it is  
more slap than tongue congrats the cards say  
hand wash me your little mouth says  
as it kisses me the raindrops reflect  
my face into millions of yours

\*

If darkness could be combed there would be  
hundreds of knots morning and night  
cross on the concrete a snail flattened  
into the shape of a scream a fish has broken  
from the water its rod of a body flickers on  
the dirt walkers cross over its eye  
somewhere a child tries to wake up by  
thrashing its body somewhere bugs grip thugs  
of dirt and the worms look more beautiful  
dead a bee catches on a stroller's wheel and  
crackles as if its heart can be broken if we  
push the wheel forward we ignore death if  
we walk backwards we repeat death so we  
stand still and try to outlast death



\*

Two life-sized tarp snowmen held still by  
strings bleeding light on a lawn deer with  
moving heads and little bulbs look at him  
climbing up and down the ladder a ladder that  
begins and ends differently the bottom can  
hear the worms coming out of the soil  
the top sees the dust on the underside of a  
moon it is both dust and a metaphor for  
marriage I hate the lawn the snowmen the  
carrot nose the queasy smile the end of nature but  
I know nothing the baby sees the glow the  
snowmen and laughs how can I explain Easter then  
we paint the eggs we hide the eggs we find the eggs  
we put salt on them and we eat them

\*

A spider works each day not to make beauty  
but to eat how the human mind is detached  
from the heart at the perfect distance the distance  
is how we don't see everything as beauty  
the difference between the spider and us is we  
can let things live For Sale signs on lawns shadows



rising but sinking once we pass summer has  
wounded the empty beef jerky bag erased  
half of someone's list near the gutter what's  
left *brown umber cottage* the mystery is  
how the list seems placed with such  
care as one might prop a batch of lilacs  
against the roadside and how we know  
the flowers don't represent beauty

\*

I am thinking about happiness again how  
you are in some alternate orthography perhaps you  
are the raised bumps in braille perhaps your presence  
allows me to examine the low pressure area  
the part that often brings rain without the clapping  
and the murmurs that are you how would I see an  
echo as anything other than grieving light is here but  
it is a complement what is the sun but a source of  
light and what is light but a wavelength detectable by  
the eye light is not happiness I seek the underside  
of you the mossy dark follicle side light includes  
everything it is perfectly bound and because perfect  
darkness is impossible to create I seek it as an eye  
seeks the black cavity of another eye





\*

Another morning finally a man is hired to  
drag a metal grid over a dirt path as if dirt too  
needs to be tamed another man is speed  
walking arms beating the photo on his  
lanyard faded his eyes in a truce a woman so thin  
she has no face blank from running marathons  
her body remembers pain in a different way than  
it remembers suffering pain is a sail on a boat  
suffering are many distant sails she passes a baby in  
a stroller reaching for his toes he is practicing how  
to grab a girl how far can a girl run  
into the woods a girl can run halfway  
into the woods from then on she is trying  
to run out of the woods

\*

If a man is earth then a woman is a beaker  
that sits on earth on a stack of other  
beakers in a cabinet in a school if a  
woman is a beaker then a baby is a watch  
glass that covers her evenly that doesn't  
completely seal her so gases can still exchange



if a baby is a watch glass then poetry is  
the moon that tries to slope its light  
through the watch glass into an undividable  
glare graduating down the side like a tassel  
up over the watch glass leaving drops  
that bloom like frost on a shrub  
expanding everything underneath in  
white blaze

\*

The end of running of ambition is a loaf of  
hard white bread unbladed on a wooden table  
I still want to cut the bread to eat the bread but  
it's too late I still want to shake the saltshaker  
pregnant in the shape of a snowman the disfigured  
the hardened the simple the snowman's eyes are not a  
window they are stillborn as paper here there are no  
Greek gods just the spiky cries of a baby and the  
private legend of her birth here success is not having  
a wax figure made of you its mucus spit skin flakes  
kisses turn to rashes rashes ruffle around wrists  
in the end of ambition there is snow shaped like  
faith dice to give away the end of everything  
masculine and vials and vials of joy

### III

*For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.*

—T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Friendships—died a slow death after August 3, 2015. The friends visited my father. They sat in chairs and spoke Chinese. Wore dictionaries for coats. Strange looks between spouses. The friends went home feeling good that they had done their duty, picked up odds and ends of words. Each had memories of offices, of seeing the other side of the sun. The visits lessened and lessened. They were being pursued by their own deaths. I wonder about the leaves and their relationship with fruit. Do the leaves care about the swelling of the fruit? Does the fruit consider the leaves while it expands? Maybe the leaves shade the fruit as it grows and the fruit emits fragrance for the leaves. But eventually, each must face its own falling alone.

Caretakers—died in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, one after another. One didn't show up because her husband was arrested. Most others watched the clock. Time breaks for the living eventually and we can walk out of doors. The handle of time's door is hot for the dying. What use is a door if you can't exit? A door that can't be opened is called a wall. On the other side, glass can bloom. My father is on the other side of the wall. Tomatoes are ripening on the other side. I can see them through the window that also can't be opened. A window that can't be opened is just a see-through wall. Sometimes we're on the inside as on a plane. Most of the time, we're on the outside looking in such as doggie day care. I don't know if the tomatoes are the new form of his language or if they're simply for eating. I can't ask him because on the other side, there are no words. All I can do is stare at the nameless bursting tomatoes and know they have to be enough.

Subject Matter—always dies, what we are left with is architecture, form, sound, all in a room, darkened, a few chairs unarranged. The door is locked from the inside. But still, subject matter breaks in and all the others rise. My mother's death is not her story. My father's stroke is not his story. I am not my mother's story, not my father's story. But there is a meeting place that is hidden, one that holds all the maps toward indifference. Can pain be separated from subject matter? Can subject matter take flight and lose its way, peck on another tree? How do you walk heavily with subject matter on your back, without trampling all the meadows?

Sadness—dies while the man across the street trims the hedges and I can see my children doing cartwheels. Or in the moment I sit quietly and listen to the sky, consider the helicopter or the child's hoarse breathing at night. Time after a death changes shape, it rolls slightly downhill as if it knows to move itself forward without our help. Because after a death, there is no *moving on* despite the people waving us through the broken lights. There is only a stone key that fits into one stone lock. But the dead are holding the key. And the stone is a boulder in a stream. I wave my memories in, beat them with a wooden spoon, just for a moment, to stop the senselessness of time, the merriment, just for a moment to feel the tinsel of death again, its dirty bloody beak.



Empathy—died sometime before January 20, 2017. The gate vanished but we don't know when. The doorbell vanished. The trains stopped moving. Someone stole the North Pole sign. I am you, and you, and you. But there are so many obstacles between us. I can never feel my mother's illness or my father's dementia. The black notes on the score are only representations of sound, the keys must knock certain strings which are made of steel, steel is made of iron and carbon from the earth. Why do we make things like a piano that try to represent beauty or pain? Why must we always draw what we see? *Just copy it*, my mother used to say about drawing. The artist is only visiting pain, imagining it. We praise the artist, not the apple, not the apple's shadow which is murdered slowly. There must be some way of drawing a picture so that it doesn't become an elegy.

The Obituary Writer—can die before the subject. John Wilson died in 2002, before the publication of his obituary on bandleader Artie Shaw who died in 2004. What if I die before my father? I've written his obituary in my head every day since his stroke. My father's brain has died before him. It was surrounded by his beloved skull. What if the hinges on his skull break and the brain falls out? Do I give it back or toss it? What if we call the waiter over and God comes instead? Do we offer Him a seat and a brandy or do we cover our eyes and hope He doesn't see us? My mother spent years knowing she would die. But in her last days, she had no idea. To suffer for so long with knowledge but not to finish what was known. Why do I need her to know in her last moments? Like the people who died in the Oakland warehouse fire, crawling on the floor, trying to sort between a battered organ and a door, between a staircase and a shadow. Death isn't the enemy. Knowledge of death is the enemy.

Do you see the tree?  
Its secrets grow as lemons.  
Sometimes I pretend  
I love my children more than  
words—no one knows this but words.

\*

My children, children,  
today my hands are dreaming  
as they touch your hair.  
Your hair turns into winter.  
When I die, your hair will snow.

The Doctors—died on August 3, 2015, surrounded by all the doctors before them and their eyes that should have been red but weren't. The Russian doctor knew death was near before anyone else, first said the word *hospice*, a word that looks like *hospital* and *spice*. Which is it? To yearn for someone's quick death seems wrong. To go to the hospital cafeteria and hunch over a table of toast, pots of jam, butter glistening seems wrong. To want to extend someone's life who is suffering seems wrong. Do we want the orchid or the swan swimming in the middle of the lake? We can touch the orchid and it doesn't move. The orchid is our understanding of death. But the swan is death.

Yesterday—died at midnight. All gold. Wet handkerchiefs from mourning. John Updike once said, *Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead. So why, one could say, be afraid of death, when death comes all the time?* Updike must not have watched someone slowly suffocating. Our air goes in and out like silk in the folders of the lungs. But breathing is a lucky accident. Updike must not have seen Death bring glasses of water but not speak. He must have never carried time over his shoulders as it bled. I think he would change his mind, now having gone through death. His words might no longer come out as birds, but as bandages. The living seem to be the only ones who hypothesize about death. The only ones who try to lift it up.

Grief—as I knew it, died many times. It died trying to reunite with other lesser deaths. Each morning I lay out my children’s clothing to cover their grief. The grief remains but is changed by what it is covered with. A picture of oblivion is not the same as oblivion. My grief is not the same as my pain. My mother was a mathematician so I tried to calculate my grief. My father was an engineer so I tried to build a box around my grief, along with a small wooden bed that grief could lie down on. The texts kept interrupting my grief, forcing me to speak about nothing. If you cut out a rectangle of a perfectly blue sky, no clouds, no wind, no birds, frame it with a blue frame, place it faceup on the floor of an empty museum with an open atrium to the sky, that is grief.

Doctors—died on July 16, 2014. Dr. Lynch was supposed to be the best. I researched. I called. I asked. I read. All my schooling had prepared me to help my mother. I was the youngest and most educated child of Death. A hundred people in the waiting room all pulling green oxygen cylinders. I had all the air to myself but I couldn't breathe. We waited two hours. The doctor wore a blue banker shirt, silky red tie that covered his lungs. My mother pointed at me, *I want to live longer so I can spend more time with her*. I think she meant my children, what I represented. The doctor clipped the X-rays to the little box of light. His pen pointed to all the extra dark spots. I was supposed to feel something as he spoke. I looked away because I've never looked at the insides of my mother before. The seeing was the wrong way. I know now that to be loved as a child means to be watched. In high school, I loved when the teacher turned the lights off. A moment to feel loved and unseen at once. I understand now. We can't be loved when the lights are off.

Blame—wants to die but cannot. Its hair is untidy but it's always here. My mother blamed my father. I blamed my father's dementia. My father blamed my mother's lack of exercise. My father is the story, not the storyteller. I eventually blamed my father because the story kept on trying to become the storyteller. Blame has no face. I have walked on its staircase around and around, trying to slap its face but only hitting my own cheeks. When some people suffer, they want to tell everyone about their suffering. When the brush hits a knot, the child cries out loud, makes a noise that is an expression of pain but not the pain itself. I can't feel the child's pain but some echo of her pain, based on my imagination. Blame is just an echo of pain, a veil across the face of the one you blame. I blame God. I want to complain to the boss of God about God. What if the boss of God is rain and the only way to speak to rain is to open your mouth to the sky and drown?



Time—died on August 3, 2015. A week before my mother died, the nurse called and said to *be prepared*. I looked through my purse for the rest of the words. My pockets empty. Prepared for what? Could I prepare if the words were missing? Is a stem with a bud considered a flower? A bud is not a flower but a soon-to-be flower. No word exists for *about to die* but *dying* but even dying lacks time in the same way a bud lacks a timeline. My mother thought it was only an infection. She blamed them for not giving her antibiotics sooner. But time was ahead of her, the wheel already turning. The nurse said after, *I'm surprised she made it through the weekend*. I was surprised she died at all. Time isn't a moment. Time is enlarged, blurry. As in, my ten-year-old wrapped my dead mother's bracelet for her own birthday and said it was a gift.

Today I show you  
the people living in tents.  
If you lean in and  
listen, the lemon makes noise,  
pound your fist and it will fall.

\*

My children, children,  
do you know a dead heart chimes?  
That my breath is an  
image that you will forget,  
you will lift it like a sheet.

Form—died on August 3, 2015. After my mother died, the weather got hotter so gradually we all became blind. Another bird fell out of the ficus, left its eggs. The arm that turned the earth never bothered to stop for the bird and the bird was crushed between the earth and time. After my mother died, my love for her lost all shape. Everything I had disliked about her became fibrous. I let them harden and suffocate. I posted about her last days on an online pulmonary fibrosis board, typing to strangers into the night, the edges of our fingertips touching. That story is still there but I can no longer find it or the people who might be dead. Each letter a small soldier in formation for a new dying person to read, to see how the living might perceive them when they are unconscious. Grief isn't what spills out of a cracked egg. Grief is the row of eggs waiting in the cold to lose their shape.

Control—died on August 3, 2015, along with my mother. Suddenly I was no longer in the middle of the earth. Suddenly I could change the angle of the liquid pen so that the rocket went the other way. And all the children stopped crying. My sister set up the appointment with the neurologist who asked, *What's your name?* My father said, *What what the system is... what*, as he reached into his wallet and gave the doctor his credit card. His finger angrily pointing at me. We left with prescriptions for my father—antidepressants, antianxiety, anger-management pills. My mother hadn't thought to medicate him. So much depends on the questions we ask. *How is he feeling* versus *how are you feeling* is the difference between life and death. I held on to the small white paper as it waved slowly in the wind like a surrender flag. That day dusk didn't arrive. I went into it.

The Situation—died on August 3, 2015, at least part of the situation; my father was the other situation. A situation isn't like a jacket you can just take off the person. The situation is the skin, the body's eggshell, its flowerpot. If you pull the arms off a clock, you still have the clock. Time keeps going because the arms measure time but are not time. To want the situation to die but not the person is like wanting the gallop but not the horse. There are many things I can't put into a box: wind, marvel, time, suffering. I have no answer. I have no more questions. Because *when?* means the situation will be over. My face will carry those of two dead people. And I can finally put down the dictionary.

Memory—died on February 12, 2015. It was a routine. We'd arrive, the children would give my mother a hug, leave the room to watch TV, and I would sit on a small stool ten feet away from the La-Z-Boy chair I had given her. The oxygen machine tired and gurgling, my father pacing in the other room. *Alibaba*, my mother said. *What?* I asked. *Alibaba*, she repeated, *I should buy some*. Again and again she asked me over several weeks as if for the first time. I can still hear her voice, the shrill accented chorus of the *A*, the *li*, then *baba*, the same phrase for father in Chinese. Even as she was dying, she thought the path to God was money. I wonder if she heard coins in her dreams, if when God touched her forehead, His fingertips felt like gold. I bought her the Alibaba shares in March, and it's up 40.64%.

Doctors—died on August 3, 2015. Dr. Lynch, Dr. Chang, Dr. Mahoney, the ER doctors, the nurses, their blank faces as they pulled thin blankets up to my mother's shoulders, the frozen summers. When Dr. Mahoney finally arrived, I forgot all my questions. My heart opened like a tear. He said he was leaving the practice and I wondered why we call groups of doctors a *practice*, as if not yet experts. Maybe because they can't know how to die until they die. When he spoke, I tried not to emit warmth. He wanted to *do something different*, as if saving my mother could be a career option. He talked for twenty minutes. We forgot about my mother in the small bed, just a curtain separating her and the three moaning women. How we go in and out of caring about others. As I returned to my mother's room, I slid down the microscope and felt myself shrinking.

Obsession—born on January 20, 1940, never died after the stroke but grew instead. The stroke gained an oak door, not just hard but impenetrable. The obsessions lived in solitude behind the oak door. After his stroke, the obsession took my father to the gym to walk on the treadmill. He walked as if through a wildfire, he walked so much, he disappeared. His brain now had an accent and no one could understand how to stop him from learning the new language. My mother called and said he fell on the treadmill, hit his head, blood thinners spread his blood like moonlight. They drilled holes in his head, vacuumed out the blood and more words. My father was finally arrested, he turned in the rest of his words, they bound his tongue. And he dreamed in blank paper.



My children, children,  
tonight, during a reading,  
a white writer said:  
*She was a squinty-eyed cunt.*  
My *squinty eyes* remain closed.

\*

My children don't have  
*squinty eyes*, they have breathing.  
Their breathing sends roads  
into the white man's body.  
These roads can lead to starlings.

The Clock—died on June 24, 2009 and it was untimely. How many times my father has failed the *clock test*. Once I heard a scientist with Alzheimer's on the radio, trying to figure out why he could no longer draw a clock. It had to do with the *superposition of three types*. The hours represented by 1 to 12, the minutes where a 1 no longer represents 1 but 5, and a 2 now represents 10, then the second hand that measures 1 to 60. I sat at the stoplight and thought of the clock, its perfect circle and its *superpositions*, all the layers of complication on a plane of thought, yet the healthy read the clock in one single instant without a second thought. I think about my father and his lack of first thoughts, how every thought is a second or third or fourth thought, unable to locate the first most important thought. I wonder about the man on the radio and how far his brain has degenerated since. Marvel at how far our brains allow language to wander without looking back but knowing where the pier is. If you unfold an origami swan, and flatten the paper, is the paper sad because it has seen the shape of the swan or does it aspire toward flatness, a life without creases? My father is the paper. He remembers the swan but can't name it. He no longer knows the paper swan represents an animal swan. His brain is the water the animal swan once swam in, holds everything, but when thawed, all the fish disappear. Most of the words we say have something to do with fish. And when they're gone, they're gone.

Hope—died on October 15, 2014 when the FDA approved two drugs, Esbriet and Ofev for pulmonary fibrosis. I did what I was trained to do, researched, read, asked questions. I taped to my wall articles that now look like tombstones. Hope is the wildest bird, the one that flies so fast it will either disappear or burst into flames. My mug from Japan says *Enjoy the Happiness Time*. As if it knows happiness is attached to time somehow. The drugs could slow down the disease but not reverse it. We chose hospice. In my child's homework: *Which of the following happens eventually? a) You are born, b) You die, c) A long winter comes to an end, d) Practice makes perfect.* I no longer know how to answer this.

The Head—died on August 3, 2015. When the two men finally came, they rolled a gurney into the other room, hushed talking and noises, then the tip of the gurney came out like a cruise ship. They were worried about dinging the walls. My mother's whole body covered with a blanket. Her head gone. Her face gone. Rilke was wrong. The body is nothing without the head. My mother, now covered, was no longer my mother. A covered apple is no longer an apple. A sketch of a person isn't the person. Somewhere, in the morning, my mother had become the sketch. And I would spend the rest of my life trying to shade her back in.

The Blue Dress—died on August 6, 2015, along with the little blue flowers, all silent. Once the petals looked up. Now small pieces of dust. I wonder whether they burned the dress or just the body? I wonder who lifted her up into the fire? I wonder if her hair brushed his cheek before it grew into a bonfire? I wonder what sound the body made as it burned? They dyed her hair for the funeral, too black. She looked like a comic character. I waited for the next comic panel, to see the speech bubble and what she might say. But her words never came and we were left with the stillness of blown glass. The irreversibility of rain. And millions of little blue flowers. Imagination is having to live in a dead person's future. Grief is wearing a dead person's dress forever.

Hindsight—never existed until August 3, 2015. Someone had painted over hindsight. But if you paint over something, it still exists. On some nights, while the children brush their teeth, I hide under their blankets and jump out when they return. I try to make myself as flat as possible, try not to move as if I have died. Every time, I run out of air. Every time, I realize I don't want to die. Every time, I realize death doesn't care what I want. Sometimes, a child screams, but most of the time, they see my shape or my foot and know I am alive. I wish I had known exactly when my mother would die. As in an appointment. Then I would have moved my feelings earlier. I wouldn't have painted over her mouth. I wouldn't have painted over my heart. Now that it's over, I know the heart doesn't really shatter, but I also can no longer feel it.

The Priest—died on August 3, 2015. As he died, he cursed. When the priest first started coming, he left a watermark on the door. As time passed, my mother's door was riddled with bullets from his fist. He started sending me prayers with his eyes. I didn't want his prayers. I had too many selves for God to save. None of my selves knew how to say sorry. None of my selves knew each other. I wonder if my mother took God in toward the end? The way she had once cared for her fifty bonsai plants each morning, snipping gently, adjusting tiny sprinklers, beckoning them with her breath. The bonsai barely responded, had never asked to be limited. She said the priest was *weird*, would look at her in a creepy way. As if he knew she was not a believer but a refugee. When she arrived in this country, they painted over her skin. Her fungal toes only looked like roots.

I put on a shirt,  
put on a pair of work pants  
because I will die.  
How the snow falls to its death,  
how snow is just dressed-up rain.

\*

Where do they find hope?  
Sometimes the city has pleats,  
sometimes the body  
rings with joy shaped like violets,  
sometimes the night wind tingles.



The Car—it was difficult work to take away. It died on March 13, 2015. Before my mother died, my father studied for six months for the DMV test, as if it were an entrance exam to heaven. My mother found him old tests in Chinese. He sat at the table, hand to his head, mumbling, walking so many times to my mother's chair a small river formed under him. 2. *God suddenly cuts in front of you creating a hazard. Which of these actions should you take first? a) Honk and step on the brake firmly, b) Take your foot off the gas, c) Swerve into the lane next to you. Is there a choice d? Accelerate and run God over.*

My Mother's Favorite Potted Tree—died in 2016, a slow death. The day I looked up, the pink blossoms gone, the branches shabby opium pipes. The pot the only thing recognizable. I had moved the tree here and it had died too. My neighbor insisted it was still living as if insisting could make it bloom again. His parents were still alive so I let him believe. One morning, small black sprinklers in the pot. I had forgotten about the hope of others. I had forgotten about others. I only had one friend left—Death. That year, I quit my job. When I brushed my children's hair, birds flew out from underneath. My mother would not have approved. I can see her face as I tell her the wrong story. As time passes, my memories of her are like a night animal racing across the roof. I know it is an animal, but I will never be able to see it or know when it will come again.

Similes—died on August 3, 2015. There was nothing like death, just death. Nothing like grief, just grief. How the shadow of a chain-link fence can look like a fish's scales but never be. Once my mother called late at night because she was constipated. The streetlamps still looked like things with their long arched arms. I sat on her bed in the dark. The glow from the bathroom light still like everything. I filled and emptied the plastic sitz bath that looked like something. Her two elbows still able to make small bowls on her knees. I gave her instructions and said nothing more. If only words could represent thought in the way a microphone represents words.

Affection—died on November 12, 1978, the last picture I see of my mother's arms around me. At the funeral, I never touched my sister. When the room was finally empty, she sat in the front row with her spouse. I watched his arm lift and fall onto her shoulder. When my spouse's parents died, both times, he burst into tears, inextinguishable tears that quickly extinguished. The first time, he hugged me and not his family. The second time, he hugged no one. When the nurse called, she said, *I'm sorry, but your mother passed away this morning*. When I told my children, the three of us hugged in a circle, burst *into* tears. As if the tears were already there crying on their own and we, the newly bereaved, exploded into them. In the returning out of the tears, the first person *I* dissolves a little more each time.

Home—died sometime around 1960 when my mother left Taiwan. Home died again on August 3, 2015. Home's fingertips trimmed off each time. New stubs became conscious, became heads of state, just shorter and fatter. Now home is a looking glass called Rose Hills Memorial Park. How far she has traveled from Beijing to Taiwan to New York to Pennsylvania to Michigan to California to Rose Hills. When a white writer has a character call another a *squinty-eyed cunt*, I search for my mother. I call her name but I can't remember her voice. I think it is squinty. She would have said, *Don't listen to lao mei, we all end up in the same place*. But where is that place? Are there doors there? Cattails? Now there are barbed wires in her throat, her words are stillbirth. All the new flat tombstones since my last visit, little stretchers on the lawn. I lie down next to her stone, close my eyes. I know many things now. Even with my eyes closed, I know a bird passes over me. In hangman, the body forms while it is being hung. As in, we grow as we are dying.

When a mother dies,  
a house becomes a forest.  
My children, children,  
know that I am in the trees.  
True love means you won't find me.

\*

My children, children,  
remember to let me go,  
delete my number,  
save the number of the trees.  
Remember, the lemons speak.

The Bees—268 million years old from the Philippines, passed away on April 26, 2217 in Nome, Alaska. The detaching icebergs crushed the bees who used to fly over conference rooms. Once I nearly died in a small plane with a CEO, CFO, and COO during their IPO. On the ground, the CEO glared at me, as if I had caused the storm. As if the yellow lights had come from my mind. As if the buzzing had come from my shaking. As if the lightning were a box I had tripped over. Maybe he was right. Maybe I had become estranged from a part of myself that wanted to stay alive. That wanted them to remain alive. In the same way I had become estranged from my mother forever, but not from her death.

Victoria Chang—died on August 3, 2015, the one who never used to weep when other people's parents died. Now I ask questions, I bring glasses. I shake the trees in my dreams so I can tremble with others tomorrow. Only one of six siblings came to the funeral, the oldest uncle. A few called and cried or asked questions. This uncle said he knew something had happened because the morning my mother died he felt someone kick him, certain it was her. Now I know others found my mother difficult too. But she was not his mother. She was mine, all mine. Therefore anger toward her was mine. All mine. Anger after someone has died is a cake on a table, fully risen. A knife housed in glass.



Clothes—died on August 10, 2015. We stuffed them into lawn bags to donate. Shirt after shirt, button-down after button-down, dress after dress, limb after limb. A few leapt out to me like the flame from a nightmare, the kind of flame that almost seems human in its gestures. I kept those. I kept the hundreds of pencils. I am writing with a pencil from my mother's drawer. It says *Detroit Public Schools*, where she taught. Each sentence fights me. Once we rolled her downstairs, played croquet and putt-putt golf. She sat and watched, her vacant eyes not seeing anything we saw. As if she were looking beyond us, beyond the sun. The days of August already made a certain way that she could see and we couldn't. I left her in the sun too long. One child doing cartwheels on the grass as my mother looked on, wearing the white blouse with the small pink flowers swirling in a pattern. I kept the stare. I kept the flowers. And I donated the vacant shirt.

Guilt—never died on August 3, 2017. I hired a hit man to use a missile. But guilt still lies in a heap on my chest at night like a pile of frozen pigeons. Last month, my father fell again and I walked through him for the third time. They told me he was trying to run away and tripped. Another brain bleed. We moved him upstairs to memory care, as if strangers could somehow care for his memory. When I visited, no one could find him. We opened one door after another, the square-tipped smells of each person rushed out. We found him in someone else's bed, hair buzzing. He handed me his glasses and said, *Here's my future*. And all I could think was, *What would my dead mother do?* I went from room to room looking for her. All I found were dismembered shadows and bodies in C shapes, heads emptied out. I could hear all of the hearts beating in the dark. The problem was they all sounded the same. My own heart slowed. Guilt had turned into a heart too, mixed in the pile, breeding with all the other hearts.

The Ocean—died on August 21, 2017, when I didn't jump from the ship. Instead, I dragged the door shut and pulled up the safety latch. The water in my body wanted to pour into the ocean and I imagined myself being washed by the water, my body separating into the droplets it always was. I could feel the salt on my neck for days. A woman I once knew leapt out of a window to her death. The difference was she was being chased. Some scientists say the ocean is warming. Some say the ocean has hypoxic areas with no oxygen. Even water has hierarchy. A child's death is worse than a woman's death unless the woman who died was the mother of the child and the only parent. If the woman who died was the mother of an adult, it is merely *a part of life*. If both mother and daughter die together, it is *a shame*. If a whole family dies, it is *a catastrophe*. What will we call a whole ocean's death? *Peace*.

The Face—died on August 3, 2015, along with the body, particles of gray dust and small white bones. The face represents a personhood, the part we show to others the most. Could I identify my mother by her hands? Her feet? On the way to JFK, an old cemetery, headstones all different sizes, tilted. The headstone represents a person's face, not in the same way a photo represents a face. A horn means something. It makes us look up and out at the train. When the train leaves, the tracks represent an absence but also imply a train once existed. Imply a hope, a return. Maybe there are no beginnings. Maybe nothing is an elegy, in the way rain from indoors is neither a beginning nor an end.

My children say *no*,  
I say *yes* because I know.  
I tell them they can.  
But today, people were shot.  
We walk into a blender.

\*

Have you ever looked  
so closely at a child's face  
that you could see God,  
see the small hairs that you know  
will lift with each new shooting?

## IV

*The canopy of civilisation is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whale-bone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn. There is a stir of some sort—sparrows on plane trees somewhere chirping.*

—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

America—died on February 14, 2018, and my dead mother doesn't know. Since her death, America has died a series of small deaths, each one less precise than the next. My tears are now shaped like hooks but my heart is damp still. If it is lucky, it is in the middle of its beats. The unlucky dead children hold telegrams they must hand to a woman at a desk. The woman will collect their belongings and shadows. My dead mother asks each of these children if they know me, have seen me, how tall my children are now. They will tell her that they once lived in Florida, not California. She will see the child with the hole in his head. She will blow the dreams out of the hole like dust. I used to think death was a kind of anesthesia. Now I imagine long lines, my mother taking in all the children. I imagine her touching their hair. How she might tickle their knees to make them laugh. The dead hold the other half of our ticket. The dead are an image of wind. And when they comb their hair, our trees rustle.

I am ready to  
admit I love my children.  
To admit this is  
to admit that they will die.  
Die: no one knows this but words.

\*

My children, children,  
this poem will not end because  
I am trying to  
end this poem with hope hope hope,  
see how the mouth stays open?



## Notes

During the process of writing the *Obit* poems, I referenced Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and plucked out occasional words to spark my imagination.

Only after I had written "My Mother's Lungs" did I read *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion and find that she had a similar thought about time change and death.

"I am a miner. The light burns blue." is the first line of Sylvia Plath's poem "Nick and the Candlestick."

The phrase "Imagination is having to live in a dead person's future" in the poem "The Blue Dress" is inspired by Richard Siken's line "I live in someone else's future" from his book *War of the Foxes*.

The phrase "in the way rain from indoors is neither a beginning nor an end" in the poem "The Face" is inspired by Brian Teare's line "the way from indoors the sound of rain is both figure and ground" from his book *The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven*.

## About the Author

Victoria Chang's prior books are *Barbie Chang*, *The Boss*, *Salvinia Molesta*, and *Circle*. Her children's picture book, *Is Mommy?*, was illustrated by Marla Frazee and published by Beach Lane Books/Simon & Schuster. It was named a Notable Book by the *New York Times*. Her middle grade novel, *Love, Love*, was published by Sterling Publishing. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Sustainable Arts Foundation Fellowship, the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, a Pushcart Prize, a Lannan Residency Fellowship, and a MacDowell Colony Fellowship. She lives in Los Angeles and is the program chair of Antioch's low-residency MFA program.

## **Also by Victoria Chang**

*Barbie Chang*

*The Boss*

*Salvinia Molesta*

*Circle*

*Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* (editor)

*Is Mommy?* (for children, with Marla Frazee)

*Love, Love* (for children)

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AGNI: “Control” and “Optimism—died of monotony”

*Alaska Quarterly Review*: “Hindsight” and “Reason”

*The American Poetry Review*: “Empathy,” “Language—It wanted to live,” and “Time”

*At Length*: “Doctors—Dr. Lynch was supposed to,” “Friendships—died a slow death,” “Home—died sometime around 1960,” “Memory—It was a routine” (as “Money”), “Subject Matter,” and “Yesterday”

*Blackbird*: “Hope” “Victoria Chang—died unknowingly,” and “Voice Mail”

*The Georgia Review*: “Approval” “Language—died again,” “The Priest,” and “Victoria Chang—the one who never used to weep”

*Guernica*: “The Future”

*Kenyon Review*: “Affection” “The Clock,” “Clothes,” “Friendships—died once beloved,” “The Ocean,” and “Optimism—died a slow death into a pavement”

*Michigan Quarterly Review*: “Appetite—Once, in graduate school,” “Form—my children sleep,” “Hands,” “Memory—When I returned,” and “Secrets”

*Mississippi Review*: “Privacy” and “Tears”

*Narrative*: “Appetite—died its final death,” “Doctors—Dr. Lynch, Dr. Chang, Dr. Mahoney,” “My Mother,” “Oxygen,” “The Situation,” and “Tankas,” published together as a group

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*The Normal School*: “The Head—died on August 3” and “Home—died on January 12, 2013”

*Ploughshares*: “Civility” and “Logic”

*Poetry*: “Caretakers” and “My Mother’s Teeth”

*Poetry London*: “Victoria Chang—died unwillingly” and “The Car”

*A Public Space*: “The Face”

*Shenandoah*: “Gait” and “My Mother’s Lungs”

[Terrain.org](#): “America”

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“Affection,” “The Clock,” “Clothes,” “Friendships—died once beloved,” “The Ocean,” and “Optimism—died a slow death into a pavement”—all poems published in the *Kenyon Review*—also appeared in *Best American Poetry 2019*, selected by Major Jackson and published by Scribner.

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