

2014

THUNDERSNOW

Krista DeBehnke
Eastern Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.ewu.edu/theses>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeBehnke, Krista, "THUNDERSNOW" (2014). *EWU Masters Thesis Collection*. 201.
<https://dc.ewu.edu/theses/201>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Creative Works at EWU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in EWU Masters Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of EWU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jotto@ewu.edu.

THUNDERSNOW

A Thesis
Presented To
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Masters of Fine Arts

By
Krista Marie DeBehnke
Spring 2014

MASTER'S THESIS

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Eastern Washington University, I agree that the JFK Library shall make copies freely available for inspection. I further agree that copying of this project in whole or in part is allowable only for scholarly purposes. It is understood, however, that any copying or publication of this thesis for commercial purposes, or for financial gain, shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature _____

Date _____

Thundersnow

Poems by Krista Marie DeBehnke

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Jonathan Johnson and Christopher Howell for the knowledge, support, wisdom and patience they've showed me throughout my time in this program. I also want to thank my colleagues Lindsey Jones, Casey Guerin, Megan Charles and Joanna King-Yost for their unwavering encouragement to keep writing.

Thank you to my family. This thesis would not have been possible without you.

Contents

I.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| I Break Hearts like a Tornado | 2 |
| Tornado in Menomonee Falls, WI, 1997 | 3 |
| Tornado in Oshkosh, WI, 1974 | 4 |
| Tornado Face | 5 |
| We Were Rolling Stones | 6 |
| The Eye of the Storm | 7 |
| Watching for TORNADOS | 8 |
| First Snow | 9 |
| Thundersnow | 10 |

II.

| | |
|---|----|
| Endings | 12 |
| The Cold Shoulder | 13 |
| Bee Problem | 14 |
| Arugula | 15 |
| Narrow Escapes | 17 |
| The Weight | 18 |
| The Day You Said You Wanted to Leave and I Swear I Felt Absolute Zero | 19 |
| Flight | 20 |
| When You Said You Would Never Write Again | 21 |
| Nomad Story | 22 |
| Haunted | 23 |
| Meeting Again | 24 |

| | |
|---|----|
| After College | 25 |
| III. | |
| Train Girls | 27 |
| Ring Finger | 28 |
| Morning Fog | 29 |
| The Sound of Silence | 30 |
| Divorce | 31 |
| Entertain Solitude | 32 |
| IV. | |
| Myth | 34 |
| Innocent Trees | 35 |
| Song to the Thing with Feathers | 36 |
| Poet's Sun Salutation | 37 |
| Life Lines | 38 |
| Grievances of an Antipode | 39 |
| Writer's Block | 40 |
| Insomnia | 41 |
| Ballerinas | 42 |
| V. | |
| Thirteen Ways of Looking at Beer | 44 |
| Thoughts on How Milwaukee Would Survive an Apocalypse | 46 |
| The Return | 47 |

| | |
|---|----|
| On Smoking | 48 |
| The Last Dreamer in Farmington, Wisconsin | 49 |
| Graduation | 50 |
| The Holy Table | 51 |
| Assisted Living | 52 |
| Hartland, Wisconsin | 53 |
| The Neighborhood League | 54 |

I

I Break Hearts like a Tornado

You arrived aerial,
a heap of a white Ford barreling into view,
a cumulonimbus darkening,
a bottle of whiskey, a few cans of beer
and my low-pressure *goodbye*.
Somewhere between driveway
and clouds at 110 miles per hour broke every window
you held open and raged
for seventeen miles of contempt.

I hope you find something useful
in the wreckage. In time, I'll be that small glitch
in the perfect summer sky, that little terror
you thought would kill you.

Tornado in Menomonee Falls, WI, 1997

Evenings came like watercolor paintings. We sat with popcorn bowls resting on our little legs crossed Indian style, waiting for the moms to bring scratched plastic plates of chicken nuggets and cooked carrots. We cared only about *The Wizard of Oz* that flickered its way through the television. Watercolor dripped everywhere—Dorothy's dress, the storm clouds saturated in gray and blue, the front lawn illuminated with each gulp of rain. How I wished the tornado would hike up the house and take us to castles of emerald, fields of golden corn or a terrible forest with impending adventure beneath its spiny branches. But as the moms stormed in like soldiers, scooping us two to each hip, the sky turned black. We slept on blankets pressed on concrete basement floors as the moms guarded us. Our forever protectors. Storms are funny like that. They kindle our urgency. How I wish in all moments of darkness, as I sit here years and miles away with only a fraction of my watercolor hues left over from memory, someone might rush in. They might say, *I just had this feeling*. They might say, *I just needed to know you were safe*.

Tornado in Oshkosh, WI, 1974

How long before trauma becomes little anecdotes
we tell to our family with a smile years later?
Is it measured in relief, shards of glass, and sighs that say
I'm so glad nothing happened?

I wonder if the dog saw the sky saturate in green
and darken before he got sucked up
and some good samaritan found him
days later, two streets away. Maybe he ran.
My mother says the dog was never quite right after.
In those moments before the tornado touched down
my grandmother hung homemade lace curtains
in her living room windows, and I wonder why she didn't
run too, before the storm trespassed through glass
but she said she never looked up, felt safe in her home
until the blast of wreckage awakened her from that Midwest
calm. Her head spun, thinking
where is the dog and
the kids are at the bowling alley

Tornado Face

In the Kansas plains and the farm towns of Mississippi
they talk about a tornado
like it comes for revenge, they think
that finger of God knows something we don't.
They say, *look at that twister! It sure is angry*
as if it has any choice.

I must be lucky that tornado alley has to stretch its fingers
to touch me here, but I know chaos is beauty from far away,
especially when I gaze up from the garage in July
to the sick yellow-green of the sky
as if it moans, *I don't feel well, something's not right*
and it spits out the angry wind-soul that has sucked up
all of the uttered woe from the people's breath below.

The silver spoon, the cracked locket
and the blue front door found in the lawn
don't mean anything.

We Were Rolling Stones

For Sarah

Somewhere in Alabama, I gasped while she laughed
at the tornado forming on the side of the highway.

The great, black funnel lurked while thousands of raindrops impaled the car
with every intent to stop us. She said it wouldn't get us

I'm gonna fade away

and sped faster, laughed harder, gripped the wheel tighter

A storm is threatening my very life today

and the boys slept in the backseat,
their mouths lolling open with each swerve of the Corolla.

She turned to me but I couldn't return the smile, I was done for, this was it,
our feeble attempts to outrun adulthood caught us; we couldn't postpone
growing up

by thawing our Wisconsin bodies in the Florida sun.

She said she couldn't see anything and laughed again,

I'm gonna fade away

and I closed my eyes,

hearing nothing but "Gimme Shelter", clouds colliding and her humming.

If we made it, I don't know. I won't open my eyes
to see how close the tornado is, if there's time left
if we just sped a little faster,

If I don't get some shelter

I'm gonna fade away

It'll be okay

it's just a shot away

it's just a shot away

someone's got the wheel.

The Eye of the Storm

The television was forgotten pictures
after the satellite went out,
and I was the eye of the storm
as the movers took my father's desk
and books and loaded them onto a truck
headed to some upstairs apartment
a lady with six cats rented to him
on short notice. *You have to know how hard this is
for me*, he said and I nodded *it's fine, it's fine*
until the rain was too impatient
and the trees bent to sweep him around the block.

Watching for Tornados

We're on the couch again
under the weight of the summer's chardonnay
and the plants are drowning with their roots toe-up
from the flood of rain, green with water gluttony.
Green like Mother's dress,
and we should get in the basement
because Waukesha County issued a tornado watch
and her voice is small, the violent wind
and all its life forced through the small crack
under the door that fills the empty rooms of our home,
the melancholy howl drowning all noise
as she asks what we should do.

First Snow

Silent, a nighttime visitor,
it's been waiting as you pour your morning coffee
to notice today is a little bright brighter,
a little colder. Pull out sweaters
and boots that somehow survived; don't complain
about wet ankles and eyelashes, stray wind
in your coat, a frozen steering wheel.

Don't forget to thank it. When sidewalks become
slush footprint massacres and driveways fill up
as soon as you turn away, thank it. Once,
it made you stop. Once, it made you
want to be the same: silent, determined,
beautiful.

Thundersnow

I trekked through slush, a carnage
of footprints leading to and from bus stops and taverns,
the wind pushed me inside as he tried to tune the radio
but it was just the dead voices of white noise.

We sat in the dark after the power went out
and laughed about the end of the world,
yet still, I wanted to run outside
to the places where thunder met snow,
where the roads and sidewalks were hidden,
where he didn't look at me
like I could save him, a halo
of snow dust still clinging to life in my hair.

It was the moment when soul and body understood each other,
the supernova warning that I was no savior.
I put on his boots and walked until morning
while the sky turned red like all truths
that bled out overnight.

II

Endings

Take me to the time we lay on the air mattress
beneath the curtain-less window until
night bled into morning and we rolled
into each other to avoid the sun avoid
getting burned until we couldn't take the heat
anymore until sweat clung to the roots
of our hair I would pretend to be too tired
so you would drip cold water down my back
and I would turn to see your blazing
morning face

Now your head rests on my legs in the backseat
of a Volkswagen and I can count
the snowflakes still clinging to your hair
and you're telling me
you're damaged you're telling me this song
on the radio is your favorite
and reminds you of her today

The Cold Shoulder

When I catch myself humming
that country croon,
I conjure up imaginary conversations with you.

A mother loves the rough cut edges and colors outside the lines
like you used to think I was funny
when I got mad—

but these little chats sit on my tongue
until they are bitter and become
some things I could never say.

So I light a candle
and as it turns black with soot
I imagine your hands, dirty from working in your yard
or on your car
and I think you're just too busy
thinking of all the things you want
to say to me.

Bee Problem

September is trying to sweat out summer and the bees have gotten in through
the walls,

they buzz between blinds in office cubicles and sunlit strips on the floor.

The one at my desk doesn't want to hurt me, it just wants to get out
just like every boy has said to every girl, time and time again. The wings are tired
from trying to fly away; all the times I watched you drive home are nothing
compared to now. The paper-thin wings carry the bee higher and higher,
and I hope you found what you were looking for—high on a mountainside,
or high on new breath. Too high, I can almost hear it scream
as it catches on a wisp of web—and maybe you screamed, too,
when you realized you were stuck. It's only struggle, struggle, struggle,
as madam spider approaches and cradles it still in her arms.

I can almost see you out there,
middle of nowhere town, thinking you did right by going back,
a sigh of relief like a sunset passing behind the mountains
until the weight of all the things you gave up
consumes you.

Arugula

“Hand me the lettuce,”
you say, only I prefer
arugula because it
sounds like something
decadent, and I pretend
it spills from the bag
like in a commercial
as the fake-eyed-fake-smile
mother — who probably
isn’t even a mother —
acts like it’s the
greatest meal
ever.

Fake like that smile
you sometimes give me
when you lie,
as I’m static at the kitchen table
watching,
and you tilt your head,
back facing me,
but that purple vein
always throbs
in your neck
when you’re nervous.
It’s getting fainter
now.

Can you feel it?
My eyes move
to the back of your head
and I wonder if you notice
as I notice
the way you move your hands
under the cold water
for seconds longer
than necessary.

I grit my teeth
at the expectation—arms
and legs not with nerves—in the
moments before you turn
around, but you don't.
Your back is facing me.
I'm trying to fish the lies
out of my teeth
that I can't swallow
because my body
rejects the poison,
but it's just bits
of arugula,
and you're still
calling it
lettuce.

Narrow Escapes

Your truck was angry,
 or maybe it was the way your hands
 gripped the wheel, the whites of your tendons
 popping up like steam heat in a kettle
 because I didn't apologize.

Mom always said I was old
 beyond my years, yet fifteen
 was too young for twenty-one
 and when your body pinned mine
 against the shed behind your parent's house,
 the paint chips that nipped my thighs
 were breezy compared to your fingertips
 digging at my forearms—
 it was a faint alarm.

The snow was too heavy that afternoon, like your sigh
 when you gave up and drove me home,
 but when the lurch of the truck made me smack
 my forehead into the dash, because a young
 buck appeared, a mirage among the flurries,
 the blood was nothing compared to your eyes,
 and you didn't hesitate to shoot a bullet from your father's
 gun into the eye of the stag, a tangle of antlers in the grill,
 "because it was faster that way," and you said
 it would bleed to death anyway—
 it was a siren.

You were a killer and you didn't know it,
 and I could have been a tangle of limbs
 pinned against that shed door,
 the dead gravity in your eyes, the crosshairs of the scope
 zeroing in on my neck, chest, thighs
 hunted of the hunter.

How lucky the snow was heavy that day,
 and I could be the misfire.

The Weight

I thought it would be easy
to leave this place,
but perched on a rooftop
overlooking a solitary willow,
wind crept around my elbows and knees,
trailing its fingers with the softness of breath.
Yet the pressure of it collided with my bones
rattling that heaviness in my chest like the feeling
I get from that back road turn taken too fast.
As the sun slid into the place that makes it bleed
violets and sunflowers
you said, "you'll be back,"
and so I breathed.

The Day You Said You Wanted to Leave and I Swear I Felt Absolute Zero

I learned once
in a science class
that everything
is not as it seems:
solid—but instead,
constantly moving parts
are held together
in gravity's womb.

The way I held you
today will not
last. I see the way
you yearn for absolute
potential, your hand
slips from my grasp,
molecules of the same carbon
now alien.

Flight

The squirrels have brainstormed the best strategy
to conquer the red birdfeeder. They flash their white bellies
as they leap from the yard's low-hanging maple branch,
offending a nearby cardinal in their feeble attempts
to interrupt her breakfast. Her bright mouth has a song to sing
but I don't hear it from this side of the window, her sounds
are suffocated by your footsteps that make their way to me. The squirrels
circle around the base of the birdfeeder, keen to invade.
You're trying to be sweet as you ask how I slept, but your arm
around my shoulders is too heavy, I wish you had hollow bones;
I wish the cardinal would fly away
and stop standing her ground. Oh, flighty bird,
please teach me a lesson in leaving.

When You Said You Would Never Write Again

You told me once that people can't create
art and still be good. Maybe that is why
you took your notebooks full of your "mistakes",
ripped them in pieces, pages of your life

gone. Maybe it's the way you grew
in shadows of your parents' wishes, trying
to make them proud somehow, now to begin
to pull away from poems and writing,

things that won't put food on tables, and things
that men don't do, you quoted your father
as you sat across from me, and my limbs
knew before you spoke, I knew the answer

to my question: Why are you doing this?
Let go of things you love and you'll be missed.

Nomad Story

I should have known because the tea was cold;
maybe you weren't coming back anymore.
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

From a distance, I watched you paint a wall
in poppies and ivy and you were alone.
I should have known because the tea was cold.

You once told me bruises were an art form,
an ugly reminder to do better.
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

I never asked how you broke into pieces.
You would have shrugged and smeared pain on your hands.
I should have known because the tea was cold.

I waited for you to come the next day,
a mug clutched in my hands, an offering.
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

But you took a Greyhound to Chicago,
leaving me alone with the paints.
I should have known because the tea was cold.
I wonder if you knew I was waiting.

Haunted

I wish you were a stranger
but today you're on the walls in sugar packets
on which you wrote haikus
for me and you're on my desk
in a dried purple flower
I once put in your hair
on the way to the gas station
because I needed the gravity
of smoke in my lungs
and you didn't get mad
and I didn't get mad
when you didn't get that job
and you didn't tell me you were hungry
but I cooked for you anyway
because I like salt on my fingers
fried eggs and the ease
of too much peanut butter
spread on too little bread
eating while overlooking evergreens
that one tree is still you
isolated between abandoned
church and house

Meeting Again

Crows weave around an abandoned lot
and the autumn trees are jealous.
The nights are getting longer and colder
but nature's wise survivors
put on their best faces of red and yellow.

I'll be looking to disappear on the wing
of the closest bird
when I see you again, I'll try
to smile despite the shame,
try to survive one more winter.

After College

In Spokane International Airport,
I carefully seclude myself
in rows of chair islands. Who knew
it would be raining today
as I fly over mountains that separate
me from you?

I picture myself
running into you at some college bar
where we slung back
rail whiskey like rascals
I'd wear my old leather boots

and you might say
so you're a writer now
and I might say
I'm just free-falling
and you might laugh
because poets say those things.

But you won't notice
the way my chest bends, a rubber band
pulled and snapped back
as you walk away—
because you've forgotten me.
I don't blame you
because I'm the kid with a butterfly net
spotting the first monarch of spring
determined to run until its mine,
and you're the kid in the park
with a baseball glove
waiting for a friend to show up.

III

Train Girls

A girl with fire-blonde hair grew up next to train tracks
so it messed with her hearing. She told me the quaking house
and the propelling whistle filling every room of the ranch-style
home wove into the fibers of her dream world
and never tried to interrupt. Across town,
I tried to let the sound lead my eyes to sleep.
I could always depend on the steady beat and the soft, distant echo
of the whistle to be some kind of comfort
and pull me back down from out-of-control insomnia
to my bedroom above the kitchen.
After dark we sometimes put pennies on the tracks
and thought we were brave to stand on the rocks behind Nixon Park
to scream as the train screamed with us
because it was always going to be there
and we didn't understand how the monotonous
will always long to break free from ritual.
Now, at twenty-two, I lay in bed and hear the train from across town,
I think about how it was different, and my father
still lived at home, and I wasn't visiting from across the country,
and that distant train whistle was comfort
instead of loss.

Ring Finger

My mother's hands have always been smaller than mine,
and when I reached out to catch her hand
to admire the row of diamonds
swimming in gold, a constellation on her skinny finger,
she paused between kneads of sourdough,
standing in the kitchen that was once
 pumpkin spice orange
and said *it'll be yours when I die.*

But now I picture it bleeding in a box,
as if a knife-wielding surgeon who drank
too many chardonnays at lunch
tried to fix it, puncturing the skin one too many times—
It's counterpart, a gold band, a single North Star
on my father's hand, disappeared
two cities west.

Now when I hold my mother's hand
and feel the blank space on her finger,
invisible scar tissue, we laugh
about selling that old thing, taking a plane to Mexico
or anywhere with a beach.

Morning Fog

I cannot remember a more perfect fog,
a kind rain strokes its fingers
down my window as I burry my head
deeper in blankets while little puffs
of feathers wake from their warm
sleep and swirl on the edges of my skin.

I remember cold March mornings
like this, when the Midwest
could never be anything but mine.
The house would stir below, clockwork—
Mother and Father arranged dishes
in their perfect routine and poured
coffee in the usual mugs worn with stains
and sat in their matching plaid chairs.

I would finally peel away blankets
and wander silently into the kitchen
because I didn't want to break their space.
Even the fog was tired of the monotony
and slipped away quietly with the sun.

Now when I wake alone in my own
apartment, I know the coffee is mine
and won't grow tired of my favorite mug.
But mostly, I'm glad I won't wake
to find it pressed to another strange man's mouth
as I know is happening somewhere back in the Midwest
while my mother puts away dishes
and sits in that plaid chair,
trying to make mornings as normal as they can be.

The Sound of Silence

The last time I heard it was

After summer

After sleep

After father and stepfather passed each other
on the driveway

After hiding photo albums that were
land mines

After answers stopped being excuses

After the white hot buzz of anger
turned into a lull of rain

that pushed one hell-Summer out

to welcome Autumn's chill

to kill every memory

I didn't want to survive.

Divorce

A flash of light dissolved in night,
gray stones submerged
and forgotten by a stranger who lovingly
skipped them one summer ago.

A catatonic winter approaches like a plague,
an echo, A hunger for the release of water
rushing around rock, a prayer for too-thin ice,
for anything to burst through the surface, for anything
to call forth life.

Entertain Solitude

I entertain solitude like a scientist,
I study the refrigerator full
of too much food
just like my mother
who cooked for a family of four
long after us kids left for college
and my father walked out.

I studied my mantra
people leave people constantly
with no conclusion, no analysis,

I wanted her to be like me
and my walnut heart
but she's always been a beam of light
feeling into blind corners of empty rooms
while I remain an echo in a cave
made by someone searching for another
who is long gone.

IV

Myth

Holiness is a silver hook in the lip
of a bleary-eyed walleye caught
while I sit in a canoe
as August closes its blinds on the sun.
Holiness is air thick with mosquitos
that wither in the bonfire's smoke offering
to the sky. Holiness is the echo of thunder
in a log cabin built by someone's
great-great-grandfather. Holy is a place
we believe in, existing behind April's blood-moon,
out of sight, but waiting
for the right time, month, year
to show its face.

Innocent Trees

I set fire to the trees sucked dry from August's thirst,
their skeleton hands clawed up to the sky and reached
for one last raindrop. I watched to see if a little chaos
might make them sing,

but their patience is much too great for vengeance
and stood rooted where I wanted them to fall, cracking
down their spines and silently clutching down
into their earthy home.

These trees don't remind me of Christmas,
full and heavy with pine needles, they can't hold me up
in blizzards and ten-below,

and once the storm shows its fangs, a crack in the wind,
a ghostly creep of dusk,
I could see myself on the next plane south—

running away has always been easy for me.

Song to the Thing with Feathers
after Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing that beckons—
no matter how many times we’ve yelled
into night when daytime hauntings
can’t be quiet any longer,

it comes invisible, sudden
on the wing of a sparrow
perched in a shady grove
keen to bask its body in approaching light—

it says come, stand with me,
it’s coming, we’ve all seen the sun,
who’s to say
it won’t come again today?

Poet's Sun Salutation

In the library,
he might as well be stone
the way white fists
ball up under his chin, his body
hunched forward in The Thinker's pose—
aching contemplation, a thought—
and he slowly lifts his back
into a yogi's mountain.

As the light settles in his eye,
pencil paused at his lips,
his mind's isolation thaws in the sun—
ready to write some kind of truth,
whatever truth seems worthy
of the paper.

Life Lines

The chained marks on my hand
begin between thumb and index—
they are strong, wild and intersecting at will
as if they own that space
and descend to the center of my palm
losing momentum, narrowing, straightening
as if the effects of age have beaten out all
spontaneity. An inch later, the lines disappear
into faintness and flatness,
melting into the waxy surface
of my palm, into another line's path.

A palm reader says you can see
a person's future in this line.
Somewhere beyond atmosphere,
these lines reflect some unknown
constellation in the sky. I lift my palm
to the sky to collect rain.

Are you a warning?
Don't tell me.

Grievances of an Antipode

Somewhere between Antarctica and South Africa
lives my antipode, existing only because of distance.
We orbit in a dance, two poles of a magnet
knowing the other is always there
but will never touch
because we have to understand the unreachable.
Theoretically, I understand the science.
I understand the fullness of the Earth
like the fullness of my hands
reaching for something I can't have.
Would it be so terrible
if antipodes wouldn't be so lonely for once
and could exist for something
besides knowing they're only there
because a land more important
is furthest from where they stand?

Writer's Block

I sometimes think about jumping trains;
my father told me his friend from school
did once, but drowned in a boxcar of coal.

In this café, a train passing a block up
looks friendly, maybe my words bought tickets
to some far-off city
and forgot to tell me—

I hope they're not drowning too.

How hot is the metal of the fire
escape across the street
and could I climb it to wait for my words
to pass by, see them playing cards
and laughing about the disaster
they avoided by leaving me?

It's easier to leave
when a place gets desolate—

A small bird on the sidewalk
eats the leftover crusts of my sandwich
blown over by the wind
and it must be hard to rummage
for scraps in this hollow body.

I think my words were hungry—
I hope they find what they were looking for.

Insomnia

That night I was thirteen and didn't read *Island of the Blue Dolphins*
for school I smelled him before I heard him,
a sour reek of regret as his gravelly voice spelled out
everything about to go wrong. He's always here
to tell me my bank account balance
or how I forgot to buy milk for cereal in the morning,
and just as I'm drifting into something resembling rest, he's there
next to me with rough hands hard enough to get under my skin
so my arms and legs twitch with exhaustion. I'll tell him
I need a glass of water and detour to the couch, but he's there
waiting to replay my failed relationships and memories of dead friends
and he'll smile and turn on the television
until the sun blinks into the room
and I'm stale like food left out overnight.

Ballerinas

Their toes press into little wooden coffins,
perhaps bloodied, their tangled feet
bound in pink satin bandages.

Oh, how they bend in a backwards
half-moon hunch, arms spread like birds of prey
or an angel, their chests rising
and falling, heaven's heartbeat—

and this must be why poetry is written.

V

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Beer

I.

Eastbound on highway 94,
yeast wafts through the open window
from Miller's brewing paradise.

II.

"Poetry is like beer," he said.
"It fills you up
and makes you warm."

III.

Alone
I am lonely,
Alone with beer
I am perfectly lonely.

IV.

A man sipping a Riverwest Stein
looks to the bartender
who may as well be a prophet
in his beer haze.

V.

Somewhere, someone dreams
of drinking every type of brew
to replace mind & body's problems
with barley and hops.

VI.

Poetry is like beer--
we swallow bitterness
for the buzz.

VII.

At twenty-one in July
we never felt more alive

than when we sat on the living room floor
after spending our last dollars
on a twelve-pack of PBR.

VIII.

In Milwaukee, someone collects a pound of empty cans
found between frat houses after a night
of binging
to collect five dollars
to eat for the week.

IX.

Beer is like poetry,
it can numb
or twist the knife deeper.

X.

The beer bottle that fell and broke
when I leaned over on the hood
to touch your arm
was silent beneath roars of plane engines
we watched overhead
at Mitchell International Airport.

XI.

We connect in pints, on dark benches
in some Irish pub
where we've said so many honest things
they must be etched on the walls somewhere.

XII.

Beer is the body's ocean
sloshing in our stomachs
like a wave's break.

XIII.

When I drank too much
I felt poetry's hunger.

Thoughts on How Milwaukee Would Survive an Apocalypse

Sometimes I see apocalypse in a fresh pour
of Miller Lite, the foam peaks are smoke
after the brewery was lit on fire,
the yeast rises into the air, a signal,
but the people in this city are resilient,
they take their blue collars, their white collars
and stand at the Milwaukee River as one,
they watch it rise to meet the cobblestones of the Historic Third Ward,
they know the city is falling, but they still have their
Schlitz, Pabst, Miller,
and when I drain my glass, it's the last light on Earth
disappearing, but Frederick Miller's granddaughter,
the Girl on the Moon, is perched in the sky, she raises her glass—
the High Life—champagne of beers—and smiles,
saluting.

The Return

After my friend tosses my suitcase into the backseat
and we've left Mitchell International, she'll say something like
God, I need a drink

because that's Milwaukee's language. We unite in pints,
on dark benches and under dim lights of an Irish pub
where we've said so many honest things,
they must be etched on the walls somewhere.

In the anticipation
when crossing over Home Bridge,
I see Lake Michigan on the right—it feels like an ocean
and my skin rings, a magnet passing over metal.

How could I belong anywhere else,
and are we allowed to belong anywhere else?

But really, my friend will say
God, I need a drink, but I've got to work early
and I'll be sitting in the corner
of some Irish pub waiting for a pint,
contemplating time and when 2 am
stopped being an existential experience.

And some wise bartender will say—
but he won't say it
because I've known it all along—

*You can love a place to death
but it can still live on without you.*

On Smoking

At sixteen, I would steal cigarettes
and roll down the windows of the family Mitsubishi
as I drove down I-94 and pray Mother wouldn't smell it
through sticks of spearmint gum. A frown, then a long blink.
Fingers pressed to her nose and a small hiss *why?*
The danger was almost as good as the high,
but now it's bad advice whispered in my ear,
stolen breaths and a nicotine hitch-hike.

Between pursed lips I draw it in,
feel it carousel around teeth
and gain speed until it lurks
with my throat—a cough if I'm unlucky,
a numbness in limbs, a head rush
if I get it right. Smoke, I used to love you.
I used to love the way
my grandmother snuck out the back door on holidays
for a mouthful of Virginia Slim smoke. Everyone says
I remind them of her, but especially
the twist and jab of the cigarette into the ashtray
and the way we both watch its last breath spiral up
and catch a ride on the wind.

The Last Dreamer in Farmington, Wisconsin

A small girl decorates the rusted train tracks
with penny buttons while an overgrown willow stretches
its arm overhead, yawning to the mundane March evening.
A rock skims across gravel
and sends a torrent of crows into the sky.
Blacker shades of shadow catch her eye
on the bark of the tree and she presses her fingers
against two lovers' names, carved summers ago.
The last streetlamp flicks on, her mother calls
dinner, she turns up the unpaved drive,
past a rusted truck. The mother drops her gas station uniform
over the armchair from two marriages ago.
The mother asks what she learned today. Charcoal drawings.
She dumps macaroni
into a scratched plastic bowl.

Graduation

We sat sipping bottom-shelf whiskey
feeling young, feeling good in what we said there,
we were visible to the city
but home still had our backs.

We let night fill us
and built a grave of cigarette butts
next to an empty bottle that exhaled a sigh,
exhausted from our firefly bodies,
all buzz and glow.

I could survive on smoke and whiskey breath
and I would for just one more summer
before we all dropped off like eyelashes—
silent in our need to go
and be people we didn't understand yet.

Home isn't where the heart is,
but a monument turned to a chess piece
small enough to put in my pocket
and place on a shelf in a new city,
easy to pair with a story
to tell to someone new.

The Holy Table

In 1945, my grandfather lay here,
his ten-year-old face covered in a cloth of ether
as his father cut out his tonsils with a pair of scissors
I can still find in the garage out back. Years later, here,
he said goodbye to his uncle who asked to hide his car
in the garage for the next six months, the same uncle
who changed his name from *Harnitz* to *Harn*—
fit for a role to play as a getaway driver in Chicago
for Al Capone. Here,
my mother sewed clothes to match clothes
a plumber's and teacher's salary couldn't afford.
And here I sat eating my great-grandmother's German dumplings
while humming a song from my own ten-year-old mouth.
Hello again, table, scarred with years and fingerprints, constant
upon the linoleum,
live on, live on.

Assisted Living

They are oxidized pennies.
I enter the kitchen
that shakes with a man's sobs
as I smile, he cries into glasses
of milk, he knows somewhere
he sacrificed happiness
for a family's peace-of-mind.

I want Grandmother to say *Granddaughter*
but she forces *family* from her mouth.

Down the hall, a woman pulls defeat
to her chest alone in her bed,
a blank calendar on the wall mocks
as Grandmother and I shuffle
to the porch with a pack of Virginia Slims.

Today, she remembers how to smoke
as she learned when she was fourteen
so I say
I made your famous spaghetti, the one with the green olives
But she frowns
I don't think I'd ever make something like that.

Hartland, Wisconsin

I remember the August air was sticky,
and clung to our skin like nylon.

We tried to escape it, weaving
through corn fields and barns
off County Road H, stopping only
to look skyward and feel the quiet
I have not felt since.

I wonder what made us so
restless. Moving to cities
where we expected something better
never arrived when I traded cottage doors
for elevators in the city. Sirens at night
were once horror, now mundane,
and I worry because the worst
had always been a coyote near the dogs
in the yard. Maybe I could breathe easy
if I saw you in those jeans with the hole
in the knee, and I wonder if you feel the pull,
the weight, the constant needle-prick memory —
reminder that you're not where you should be.

That night when we stood
with bare feet on grass,

I should have memorized the lines
on your knuckles, the distance between
our shoulders side by side, the sound
of your voice as evening inched
into morning.

The Neighborhood League

On Stonefield road you could find us kids
in a baseball trance,
only wanting to make it home
to the pink Frisbee dented
with Charlie-the-neighbor-dog's teeth.

We paused at a series of rocks that were
first, second, third one, two, three, smack
the wiffle bat was the spark
that told our bodies to run.

We sacrificed our knees to gravel
and our skin rippled up like waves,
the blood didn't faze us until
the sky began to exhale
and night crept in to welcome streetlamps.

One-by-one the mothers called us in,
and mine would sit my brother and I on the edge
of the bathtub and scrub our knees and feet
until they were so clean they felt tight with soap
under cotton sheets.

And maybe she read a story or two
but the hum of summer cicadas
lulled us into dreaming only baseball dreams.

VITA

Author: Krista Marie DeBehnke

Place of Birth: Dayton, Ohio

Undergraduate Schools Attended: University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Arts, 2012, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee

Honors and Awards: Managing Editor, *InRoads Anthology*, 2012-2013, Eastern Washington University

Graduate Assistantship, Writers in the Community at the Inland Northwest Center for Writers, 2013-2014, Eastern Washington University

Arugula published by Dead Flowers: A Poetry Rag, Volume 2 Issue 1 in August 2013

Hartland, Wisconsin published by Up the Staircase Quarterly, Issue 22 in September 2013

The Day You Said You Wanted to Leave and I Swear I Felt Absolute Zero published by Portland Review, Winter 2014 issue

I Break Hearts like a Tornado forthcoming in Rock & Sling, Spring 2014 issue

Professional Experience: Internship in Teaching; North Central High School, The Community School and Jefferson Elementary; Spokane, Washington; 2012-2014