

## Abandon

Breakers peel white as they see  
the end coming. Days of dip  
and slouch in the wind

all the way from Sheboygan,  
deep blue, no salt, a lurch  
as the current shifts. Wave-head

tosses back its hair, nods  
to the muscled shore. Then  
beach—like this one.

You can't think of anything  
to say. Feet sink in. A green  
itch of weeds at the top of the dune

and downwind absence.  
It should be grill and cold Molson,  
Frisbee caught in the updraft,

creek dodging crooked rocks,  
boots in the ashes of a wood fire.  
Instead, broken water

and this sky of mine, hung  
on a bare-branched oak.

## Sloth

If I write a villanelle today, it's got  
to lift the leaves and find its own  
sad rhymes. It's raining out. It's cold. I'm not

about to poke around in this bare plot,  
hoping I might spoon up a bleached-out bone,  
some Saxon thing the villanelle forgot.

Plenty of rhymes—*shot, jot, apricot*.  
My part is listening for a certain tone  
underneath the iambs' teeter-tot.

No one pays me to stir this formal pot  
and other things are waiting to be done.  
But the villanelle recalls what I forgot,

that words are watching for a six-winged thought,  
newly hatched, airborne, not a clone.  
It could be hovering right above this spot,

an insect with translucent wings, a knot  
of overlapping lines, patterns known  
to merge with night like oil of bergamot.  
Yes, villanelle, that's what I forgot.

## Viola

I like the feel of fingers  
and the bow. I get the notes right, not too much  
vibrato. On stage, the violin

nods, strokes, and we're off,  
strange entanglements that Mozart sewed in there.  
Now she rises

right off the score, surges, circles  
the room catching a scrap of sunlight in her hair.  
I repeat, I comment

down here in the shade. Then the cello  
steps off a pier, stretches long strokes into the waves,  
dives, comes back up,

raises his arms to celebrate the wind,  
then dives again. Meanwhile, someone has to  
row the boat,

be there to lift him out of the surf.

Julia Elsas, “untitled 2009,” fabric, thread

Seen close, it’s a forest of vertical  
strings, darker or lighter. Stepping back,

it becomes a swooping lower lip, shadowed  
below, then a hollow with a glimpse

of tongue and teeth, dark upper lip  
nipped in at the middle, fabric

stitched to breath and words.

## Malachite

We meet at a picnic table in November sun.  
She has good subjects—Arizona heat,  
a lost friend, hard years up north,

father spotting a fox in the orchard,  
unmentionable suicides in someone's  
father's family. Tone is managed well,

a range of voices, all convincing.  
She has an eye for structure.  
Some suggestions: More details, images.

If you switch from *ing*'s to real verbs,  
the sentences will march. The pared-down  
passages are best. And metaphors—

more of those? A little fixing and the poems  
will shine. That afternoon, it seeps in.  
Those suicides—the person letting

no one speak of them. The seamy men  
up there in Grayling. Blue scraps  
in the eyes of the lost best friend.

The tunnel, the scorching sun,  
malachite of a Michigan winter—  
I'm editing a life.

## Novelist at Night

Enough plot and character—the lean belly  
wants to dance. Small waves  
shimmy up

from hips to shoulders, murmuring  
their Nile-born syllables.  
Snake arms

threaten and withdraw, a silk  
veil rustles over breasts  
and shoulders,

then opens to a belly smoothly buttoned.  
Her hips enjoy the pelvic sea-surge,  
what they call

the Dolphin. She's not on stage, she's here,  
her back to the fireplace,  
before a room

of writers, composers, artists who let  
their pens and brushes slide  
back into the drawer

when her live flesh answers to the lifts  
and twists, the low-down  
undulations

of the oud and dumbek. We lean in,  
think up some images: hips  
left and right

are the crossing signal stopping  
traffic while the train  
roars through.

No, her moves stay close to home,  
joints and muscles trading  
their quiet gravity.

Still, we look—wondering what subtle  
engine might be weaving  
down that track.

## Spotted Sandpiper

looks out  
over the Lake

to see what  
might be waiting.

A freighter inching  
toward the Soo,

two gulls on a rock,  
a flock of yellowlegs,

heads down, tails up,  
nabbing a meal.

A kestrel drops  
to take him,

but the piper  
goes for the water,

dives, swims the seaweed  
like a fish. Hawk gone,

he flies straight up,  
water to air. All

the elements but fire,  
he owns them.

## Garlic Mustard

It's up, an early riser, stretching,  
unrolling its leaves under the bare  
trunks of the hickories, ashes, oaks.  
All the March air lacks

is a pinch of garlic, and the mustard  
has it, just the scent to bring  
the bare woods back for an April  
feast. We all admire

the innovators, the Japanese  
who plant their Prius out on the hybrid  
road all by itself. That's garlic  
mustard dancing, scattering

seeds, while the staid dandelion  
roots down, lays out its leaves,  
issues again its standard bloom.  
Garlic finds a new

continent, deep shade, oak leaves  
where annuals have never hoisted  
green flags before. *Invasive*, we say.  
Dutifully, I pull up

handfuls of slim stems and pitch  
them in handful after handful,  
until the dumpster's full. The garlic  
exits gracefully.

Its roots are shallow, letting go,  
nodding to my zeal, which,  
it knows, will wane. Yes, pull  
the roots, it says.

You've left some rich, moist soil  
loosened up. My seeds  
are sleeping there.

## Juice in the Pan

Grandmother grips the rooster's legs,  
lays his neck  
on the bloody stump,

and lifts the axe. Strikes. She tosses  
the bird. It runs  
in the yard looking for

its head. Not here? Maybe over here?  
Then where?  
Once around, it drops.

She dips him in scalding water, gets down  
to meat, pitches  
feathers and feet, takes

the rest inside. An hour gone. Then  
out of the oven,  
breast, wings, thighs—

newborn, greased and golden, steaming,  
juice in the pan.  
I wish the hens could see

their man. They'd circle,  
spreading their wings.

## Divertimento 563

The second movement has had its say.  
Time to close it up. Mozart  
lets the chords fall in place, they know

their way . . . but no, a detour, a ripple up  
then down, backing off  
for another stretch of melody

then circling again. He knows  
it has to end,  
but not till he ornaments

that phrase from the viola, lets the cello  
meditate a while  
to digest what's just been said—

or at least recall some triplets, some  
five-noters, a crooked run  
to ease the ear into the sad silence

that will follow. A long-held  
chord, the violin  
reluctant, wavering. Another

movement's waiting. Mozart steps up  
a half note  
into a new world and listens.

## VOWS

The neighbors' rhododendron  
seems to have forgotten  
how to bloom:

plates of polished leaves  
and, in the center,  
upright buds,

wrapped, muscular, not  
going anyplace, like  
high school

linemen, tall on the field,  
who never graduate.  
Across the road,

those rhododendrons wave their  
Kleenex-white diplomas  
right on schedule.

Then, one opens here, midnight red.  
Those buds weren't linemen,  
they were nuns,

closing their hands around  
the rosary, renouncing  
everything

until those beads murmured  
their way out, velvety,  
baroque, a color

stolen from a Spanish church  
in Cuernavaca, more lush  
for waiting,

passion stored in curving sepals  
to let it ripen. What vows  
do they intend

to keep? The cloister's open now,  
tongues and palms and petals  
all unfolded,

inviting anything with wings.

## *Lie and Lay*

*for Marion*

You hear it even in the villanelle—  
the subtle elbowing of *lie* and *lay*.  
They both go down to bed—so who can tell?

But neither one will wish the other well.  
“No transitives in here,” cool *lie* will say,  
stretched on her sofa in the villanelle.

*Lay* points out what couples know full well  
that *lie* implies some distance—there, away—  
when two go down to bed, in parallel.

All seems quiet in stanza four until  
*lay* lets two sensuous voices have their say,  
active and passive, nuzzling in the villanelle.

Let’s have them both, *lie*, the asphodel  
that littered the Elysian Fields, and *lay*,  
the drooping blooms of fuchsia on the sill,

each offering its high-tongued syllable  
as you and I lie waiting in the hay.  
Together they invite the villanelle  
to sing, to pass the savory muscatel.