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2024

## North Oakdale

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NORTH OAKDALE

by

JOHN GALLAGHER

ADAM VINES COMMITTEE CHAIR

KYLE GRIMES

KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Alabama at Birmingham,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2024

NORTH OAKDALE

JOHN GALLAGHER

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

North Oakdale is a collection of poems about a family, a woman, a man, and their daughter, coping during the first fifteen months of the Covid-19 pandemic. The family experiences an upheaval when they are not able to work due to the lockdown. The dynamics between the man and the woman alter. The family decides to plant a garden and vegetable patch. The woman, as a journalist, tries to freelance but to no avail. The man decides to wait it out and spends most of his time watching their daughter and gardening. As the months pass, the woman withdraws from the family and slides into depression. The man does his best to take care of the woman and raise their daughter, but the daughter prefers the woman. The family tries to find the right balance in their lives, but they temper that balance with the possibility of leaving the house in a several months. During the second spring of the pandemic, they begin to find their new sense of normalcy.

Keywords: family, depression, gardening, child-rearing.

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I.

1.

I flipped the switch on. The midday darkness  
Had clouded the kitchen. I pulled a box from  
The freezer, cut open the packet, and  
Microwaved. Then I recalled the email.

They wrote to inform me of their recent  
Financial difficulties due to  
The ongoing pandemic. Their budget could  
No longer provide for all of their staff.

I had planned not to think of that email again,  
Once you picked up our daughter from the school,  
But I forgot my life and turned around  
And went into the short hallway leading

To my office. Well, y'all were my life.  
Just as the timer went off, I opened  
The microwave and poured the packet in  
A bowl and set out. I just meant my career,

That I had worked hard for. I plodded up the front  
Hallway and lapped the dining room, running  
A hand on the eight-top, opening and closing  
The dish-display cabinet. People bought

Us these things and we never used them.  
You were the cook around here. Then I paced  
Around the living room and curled all up in  
Your reading chair. Our state was going to

Close up over the weekend. You and our  
Daughter were going to be here all day  
Everyday. Then I flicked a little rice  
Off my chin and heaped it with the trash and

Grabbed a dish cloth. I was not working so  
Family time became all of my time,  
Like before when I did not have a job.  
I set down my meal and forgot myself.

With the world closing up, I had stories.  
I could freelance for a bit and be all right,  
Since I bought fewer clothes these years. I had no  
Friends who noticed if I repeated outfits.

Then I stowed my phone on the mantle.  
Stains freckled the center of my blouse.  
I hurtled upstairs and changed into a tee and  
Leggings because nice clothes were not required.

I returned to the kitchen and washed and  
Replaced the bowl and spoon and twirled around.  
I thought we should family and told you that  
I wanted to go to the park before we

Could never leave the house again, for  
You to ask her and to just meet me there.  
I might get a coffee before I headed  
Over, since I was not headed back out again.



2.

I waited for you inside our room. But  
You had neither glided past the landing's thud,  
Nor creaked upon the lower steps, nor ran your hands

Along the wall because the railing wobbled.  
I waited for you across the hall and  
Noted our height marks on our daughter's doorframe.

Two years ago, you had a short-lived growth spurt.  
On that day, you started a full-time job.  
And she had picked out your outfit without

You changing. So she permitted you this once  
To keep your shoes on, for us to celebrate,  
To remember your achievement after

So many years of freelancing and stringing.  
I waited for you atop the stairwell.  
No murmur emitted from your office.

The door was closed. Or you had your earbuds in  
If you watched at all. An owl hooted nearby.  
But I never saw it through the window.

In her nightlights, downstairs was bound,  
Cast with deep orange. You rested on your loveseat.  
But you were not asleep. It took too long.

When she was an infant, you took the first watch  
And lulled her back to sleep in her rocking chair.  
Most often, after that, she made it through the night.

And I slept well through the second watch.  
I waited for you no longer and returned  
To our room and sprawled across the middle.

Sometimes, you pressed me over but kept yourself  
Curled up near the edge. Then you brought in  
Your own comforter, the one you used downstairs.

I told you that the guest room could be your bedroom,  
That your office should just be your office.  
But your head remained upon the loveseat.

I waited for you no longer and rose  
And unfurled our comforter and went to my side  
Because the first watch needed to be near the door.

3.

So, on an actual weekend morning,  
We dug up most of the front yard to plant  
Shrubs and trees with flowers throughout

And grass paths to run in-between. The holes  
Were much deeper than I realized, but  
Rocks were put at the bottom for drainage.

Our daughter called out front the grassy-knoll planet.  
But I disagreed and was tired of playing  
J.F.K., though we had not played since Thanksgiving.

So I requested that we make some changes.  
Cherry blossoms and marigolds I preferred  
With a shrub-line along the street. I was

Tired of people walking deep in our yard  
To speak with us. Though, they may approach down  
The drive. We could cross that Rubicon later.

Then we were running late because I let you go  
With us to the garden shop and they stopped  
To talk to you about your current jobs,

Of which there were none. But no work did not  
Halt them from carrying on about your  
Fall prospects. Like we might get out a bit more.

We had lunch before we finished working.  
Sandwiches were made because she thought  
That was what you ate at your job sites.

The truck bed brimmed with trees, potted plants, and shrubs.  
You assigned her to watering duties  
Because dropping or tumping the whole can

Was what was actually needed. I got  
The spade. You brought over the first tree and  
Stood it in place, and I added in the dirt,

And you picked up a spade, and we leveled off.  
She, of course, tumped the water can over  
And raised her hands, but you were laughing.

I followed you to the water pipe and told you,  
“My office was quite lovely at night, you know.”  
But you wondered why I was living in there.

4.

Our daughter stumbled across to the third bed  
And watched the scarecrow. Then she squealed and sprinted off.  
The scarecrow was just hemp bags and straw  
And not so scary. Our daughter enjoyed

Jumping and shrieking and pointing toward it.  
Then we were on about where we should plant since  
We had oaks along the edges. The rotation  
Decided what went where, but I shied away

From such a discussion. Lockdown might end.  
We were decided on the staple vegetables:  
Zucchini, yellow squash, cucumbers,  
Tomatoes, sweet potatoes, broccoli, and green beans.

These were what our daughter would eat. Then we added  
Spring lettuce, carrots, and radishes.  
You had created menus for each meal  
And dabbled with courses or table buffet.

I suggested we plant some fruits as well:  
Muscadines, strawberries, and blueberries.  
We did not have the yard for apples  
And must bake them. Lemon and lime we could plant,

Or I might plant one afternoon during her nap.  
Our daughter shrieked and twirled around the second bed.  
You asked about other vegetables,  
Eggplants and the like. We had four beds to plant.

I reminded you that we could plant what we liked  
And brought up the rotation and what certain  
Plants required of the soil. You squatted  
And eased a hand over the dirt and rocks.

Our daughter kept herself from screaming out.  
I worked out that our daughter waited for us  
Not to be doing something before  
She gave us the fright. In the first bed,

Our daughter pointed at herself. Then your arms  
Went akimbo and your eyes un-wove myself.  
Then she said, "You know, I like eating food  
Off the ground. Now, can we play spaceship?"

5.

This morning, like most mornings, our daughter  
Took over your reading chair beside  
The window and the fireplace. She had  
Told us that summer was starting early.

Her wand rose and she said, "It is time to visit  
Another planet." So we had to go outside.  
Her wand lighted on your shoulder and stomach,  
But you feigned sleeping and snored and chortled.

"I guess we can leave him on the spaceship,"  
She told us, "Wait, mommy, if you kiss him,  
He wakes up. He is like your sleeping beauty."  
I replied, "Let's leave him on the spaceship."

And I jumped up and chased her out the front door.  
You watched her during the day while I worked,  
While I told you that I was working,  
When I was writing and sending proposals.

That counted as work, I told myself.  
She circled around the circular space.  
My years of work were lines on a resumé.  
And no one was reading resumé's just now.

I circled around the circular space.  
She turned into the cherry blossoms.  
You had finished building a house and told me  
That you were riding the next year out. You were not

Concerned but you ran a business and I did not.  
You stared out the front window and followed where  
She went. So I doubled back and said she was  
Near the vegetable beds and expressed my

Dismay that she was not where I thought she was.  
You said we could get to know our daughter.  
Soon enough she might not be speaking to us  
And would not live here unless we needed care.

I told you that was besides the point.  
I went back along the straight path and  
Turned around and hid at the corner  
And waited. The lights were off in my office.

I did not feel like being in there today.  
You stood in the back doorway with your arms crossed.  
So I called out, "There's someone in our spaceship."  
You walked across the deck and toward the shed.

She said, "Mommy, no one's on the spaceship."  
She knocked on the back door and jumped off the deck.  
"Mommy, look out," she called. I went back around  
And down the middle and swooped her into my arms.

She pointed down toward the backyard wind chimes:  
Peached skein mangled, wooden discs shattered,  
Un-cylindereed masses razor sharp,  
Four half-chimes as horror-show turnstile.



6.

I drowsed off in the living room, and the book  
I read was written a century ago and  
Could wait for me to finish it. Our daughter

Slept in your spot on the sofa. She had  
Suggested we build a blanket fort, but  
You thought we could another time. I said that

She could stay up with us, though, and made her  
A little pallet on the sofa. Then  
You withdrew after she was asleep

For the night. I entered your office,  
Hand on the doorframe as I careened in.  
On your loveseat, you were wrapped up in

Your camping blanket, laptop on your cushion,  
Your earbuds in. It was the one about  
The people in the place and no one got along

And no one left even though nothing kept them there.  
Then I asked you about the art film you were watching,  
Since you understood what was happening. Instead,

You jumped and whispered, "Questions and answers  
Will be fielded after the film concludes."  
You placed your laptop on the coffee table

And connected my headphones. In the floor  
I rested my head on your loveseat  
And saw the images and read the subtitles,

So I thought. You were back to freelancing,  
Which you never preferred, but pandemics did not  
Happen so often. This time next year we would

Be back to normal. Then, during a night scene,  
I noticed how you were fast asleep and closed  
Your laptop and returned to my reading chair

And turned on the television and watched  
A movie, a group banding together  
To save the planet from a disgruntled person,

With car chases and stand-offs and running.  
Then a few characters had romances  
That were well established and had to work through them.

II.

1.

I had a book, notebook, laptop, and smartphone  
Along with my tote and you and our daughter, but  
We were waiting on you and a courtesy flush.  
She started reading a book, so I stepped into

My office. Today was the café's final day.  
I had to go, she had to nap, and  
You remained behind, watching her, gardening.  
Well, that was what I told you after I had

Invited both of you, but she wanted cookies.  
She was peeking around and her fingers  
Wrapped upon the doorframe. Then she hopped  
Back giggling, so I did not see her.

Then I stopped myself from texting my old friend,  
To invite her, to even ask about her.  
In the ancient times, I went out by myself,  
Since our old friend group responded in

A few days or not at all. Nighttime events  
Were for groups, so I found the daytime  
Was when I was on my own. The café  
Became the place I could be for a bit.

I took a book and a notebook along.  
Our daughter sat and leaned and propped herself up  
As if on the other side of the threshold  
My floor was the sea. Her fingers scampered back.

After we went to your art museums, I brought you  
To the café. Then my friends walked past us  
And went inside or back up the street.  
Then I recited my old ghost stories.

A flush resounded. I shouldered my tote.  
Another flush was faint. Through the window,  
The vegetable beds appeared ready  
For you to pick through. You and our daughter

Advanced toward me. She tugged at her mask,  
And you told her she did not have to wear it  
Yet. You asked us if we had everything,  
But I had a book, notebook, laptop, and smartphone.

2.

The truck cranked up in one turn and a rev.  
I had been worried after all these months,  
That I might have to get out the cables

And jump it off and hear how you were right.  
The chirr and gurgle resounded. I rolled down  
All four windows. You might think I was gone,

So I picked up my smartphone, dialed you, and hung up.  
You opened the passenger door, asking  
About where we were headed. The battery

Was working was all. Our daughter wove through  
The muscadines, playing Small Wilderness,  
Which involved weaving through the muscadines

And checking the ground and sometimes avoiding  
The giants who lived in the nearby house.  
Then you reminded me that we had

To put her truck seat back. She liked to  
Ride in that one, even in your car. Her hands ran  
Along the four-by-fours. Then you told me

That I would look dapper in suspenders  
Like they wore in your English gardening shows,  
But I was not that old, yet. Plus, in those shows,

They never wore jeans. Long ago, you tried  
To get me into skinny jeans. I never did.  
Boot cut was just right. Our daughter squatted down

And watched an insect, probably. I cut  
The engine off. Sometimes, you missed the old  
Boho-hipster-chic. Our daughter smacked on

The doors. You got down and helped her in and sat her  
Upfront. She climbed on the console and told us  
She was glad the truck was running, but it was

The summer so I did not have a job site.  
We worked in the garden now. She was ready  
To pick the vegetables, whenever I let her.

Then she told us with the truck working  
We were planning an adventure without her and  
Asked, "Could we go to the park? I brought my mask."

3.

We served our first garden dinner on the deck,  
The splintering deck that required shoes.  
The casserole dishes were being used,

And we found out that the oven did indeed work.  
For this evening, our daughter requested  
We wear fancy dress, which meant real pants and shirts,

Not leggings, sweatpants, tee shirts, or hoodies.  
She wore the floral dress and cowboy boots  
I bought long ago. When I thought she would join me

While I worked, that we would have our little outings,  
The dress had gone so well with her closet.  
On the table were the sweet rolls and butter,

The pitchers of unsweetened tea and  
Lemon-limeade, and the four casseroles:  
Green bean, cucumber, and two other ones,

Squash and broccoli, that I was displeased with.  
Well, the broccoli crust decided to form  
A pale shrubland, not a golden desert.

The squash was a bog with barren islands.  
Also, we made a swirling sweet potato pie:  
Standard orange plus red, purple, yellow, and white,

But we had to layer them and squish them  
Around to get them to bake into a swirl, and  
She was up on the step ladder trying to help.

She said that the moon in the sky was pretty  
And asked me if I was talking to people  
Tomorrow because she would like me to help her



With her homeschool work. I was the smart one.  
No one asked you about the moon at your job site.  
Then you ladled out the squash casserole.

Yet, I was a moon as you chased her around  
One of her planets in the front and back yard.  
Long ago, I chased her around the garden.

Moons had little or no atmosphere,  
So they required spacesuits. She had her style,  
Coat and question mark scarf with a tee and shorts.

Sometimes, she stood in my doorway and looked on  
While I whiled away the hours. She brought her  
School work into the hallway. For good reasons

She thought she was not allowed to work in  
My office. Often, I had to close the door.  
An interview had to be conducted.

She raised and displayed her clean plate and  
Reminded us that this was nice and all  
And we could eat out here again and often.

She was tired of eating on the sofa.  
Then I said that we had a whole room for dining  
And journeyed into the broccoli casserole.

4.

Not repairing the deck, you and I  
Formed a zone defense. Our daughter high-stepped through us  
And looped under the sawhorse, shrilling out,  
And revved her screwdriver, my power drill,

And reminded us that we could not catch her,  
That Doctor Who always talked things through.  
Even after a chase, it always worked out  
Good for everyone. She stopped and pointed out

That Doctor Who was a woman too and in-charge  
Because she had a sonic screwdriver.  
Our daughter forgot I had more power tools  
In the shed. Then she was running and screaming

That her juice box was missing, that the desk  
Was not going nowhere, that the Doctor had no  
Duh-dult, that she didn't have to listen,  
And zigzag-sprinted around front. You rolled

Your head and jettisoned your ponytail.  
I told you that you could get ready for  
Your interview. You had not worked in months.  
Then a news-site had accepted your proposal.

So I told you that we'd work more tomorrow  
After living room television church,  
Or I finished the deck on my own and  
You watched our daughter, like when we mowed the lawn.

Once you left, I settled her in with Bluey  
And made us an early dinner of mac and cheese  
With chicken fingers. Then you called us during  
Your drive back and told her how it went.

She liked to sit up and see you arrive home,  
Liked to talk to you about your work.  
Sometimes she was an on-air reporter  
And her wand turned into a microphone.

Now, you were just going to go on and  
I really had no problems with you going.  
Then she victory-lapped the backyard, juice box  
Aloft, triumphing it as the greatest.

5.

With homeschool tomorrow, and maybe forever,  
Our daughter said that she could sit up with us.  
So I accepted her challenge, but  
You said that this was between me and her.

Though, this was never really a contest.  
She just wanted to spend more time with us.  
The first night she made it through the entire  
Film before she decided it was bedtime.

We had to tuck her in, read her a story each,  
And leave the door open. Then I snuck back down.  
The following night, she barely made it  
An hour into one of her cartoon shows,

The one with the suburban dog family,  
Before she was sound asleep. You brought a blanket  
Over her, and we finished the episode.  
I scooped her up and deposited her

In her bed and returned to the far end  
Of the couch. But you watched a little more and  
Turned in and asked me to sleep upstairs.  
I won because I never fell asleep that quick.

The following nights, she hardly tried,  
As if there was little else for her past  
Her bed time and you carried her up.  
Then you moved to your reading chair

And read a triple-decker novel. So I watched  
Sci-fi on my laptop. When I returned  
From my office, you were not reading.  
You thought that the tournament was finished.

I had won enough, and she was not in my league.  
Next week, we would not keep her bed time. Instead,  
She would go to bed at her bed time and  
Be read a story, like we had always done.

Then I reminded you that I was winning  
Handily and you did not get to call the match  
With a mercy rule like this was softball.  
You had said this was between me and her.

6.

De-thawing ham slices sizzled and popped  
In the back pan. The bread scorched, and the cheese  
Melted without reaching the crust in the front pan.

Our daughter drummed on the counter and asked me,  
“Why does Mommy get to skip lunch?” We had not  
Told her, nor talked about how we told her and when.

I scooted each ham slice to my spatula  
And plopped each on the cheese bread  
And settled the other bread slice atop.

She headed toward the door, saying, “Can I  
Get to her? I don’t know.” But I called her back,  
“Lunch is almost ready. Have we set the table?”

I brought down two plates and opened the drawer  
For a fork, knife, and napkins. “Do you want  
The crust?” I asked, but she trellised her wand

Toward the hallway. You would get through this, again,  
Like you had after she was born, like when we first  
Got together and your friends became ghosts.

I wielded my spatula, but she cried out,  
“No greasy wand battle, dad. That’s so gross.”  
So I skidded the sandwiches about

The front pan. I thought you would tell me, not leave me  
To notice. Our daughter drummed upon  
The counter. Then the sandwiches were

Flipped over and skidded about. Then your office  
Was another room. The eyes were turned off.  
I plated the sandwiches and left yours

On the counter. Then I bounced and told her,  
“Lunch is ready,” and led her to the living room.  
I pressed myself into the short hall

Leading to your office and handed her  
Plate over and pointed her on. She rebalanced  
And placed her plate by her sofa seat, where you

Went after her bedtime. I picked the far end,  
Or you had, when just two people lived here.  
Our daughter dropped her napkin and picked it up.

III.



1.

The cherry blossoms varnished red. The window  
Scudded up but sunk back before you knew it.  
Our daughter asked, "Why can I not go in there?"

Tonight's gardening episode showed them planting  
A short tree that was watered from the top  
Because the roots also run up the sides.

Blueberries, muscadines, and strawberries  
With yogurt softened into a stew. She asked,  
"When will Mommy join us? I guess you will do."

Taps approached my office and vanished.  
She hummed, "The mermaids were lonely tonight.  
They lived at the bottom of the ocean."

The gnarled oak limbs shadowed across my desk  
In the full moon light. The comforter  
And pillow and you rested on the hardwood.

With her wand circling and her giggles  
Brimming over in the doorway, you entered,  
Saying, "We're going to the store. Can you join us?"

The door rasped hollow and lowed yonder.  
She hummed, "The mermaids swam up to the waves.  
They watched the fish jump and the stars sparkle."

I sat up. The hardwood was bowed and cool.  
In the shade and low sunlight, you dressed  
The scarecrow with a glen plaid flannel shirt.

Zucchini casserole, its corners spooned off,  
Congealed on the coffee table. I leaned  
And gathered the comforter and pillow.

Her hand smacking and thumping her plate,  
She hummed, "The mermaids saw a big fin and dove.  
The whales were at the top of the ocean."

Since the tornado siren test was earlier,  
She stated that homeschool must be conducted  
In the short hallway because it was our safe spot.

The window scraped up and lodged for now.  
The breeze cozied in. The cherry blossoms dewed.  
She told you, "But you can go in there."

2.

On the dining room table, I lobbed  
The adult workbook. I had found our daughter  
In her closet, working on her homeschool work,  
Her toes running up and down the doorframe.

She told me, "It's my office, like mommy's."  
Most of her boxes she moved to her alcove.  
Her school work, pillows, and blankets overran  
The floor. I stepped back and out and stopped

Before your office and went on outside.  
Her costumes, dresses, jeans, blouses, tees,  
All those clothes you thought she would wear out  
When you and she might spend some time together,

Collected dust above her. She told me that  
She would bring her work down, that there was an adult  
Workbook I could prepare from beforehand.  
I spent the summer working with her,

Preparing beforehand, but you had  
Your way. She must like that better, when you taught.  
Or we wanted you to leave your office sometimes.  
Anyway, the cherry blossoms were still living.

We had enough rain for this year. With everything  
Happening, a drought would not have been a surprise.  
We were done mowing the lawn for the year,  
Running the push mower along the paths.

At least we had to walk more than the before times.  
In the shed, the riding lawn mower found  
Its office. Like the riding lawn mower,  
We were brought out, passed through, and were replaced.

Our daughter stood on the front stoop and waved  
Me over. I was not in my reading chair.  
She liked to stand over my shoulder  
While I checked her answers. She hopped down.

Then she asked me why I went in the dining room.  
We never went in there, but my workbook was  
On the table. So we might as well get to it.  
Yet, I had already been over the garden.

3.

My heart thudded and boomed, thudded and boomed.  
Unlit, I lathered my hands and forearms  
And scrubbed around and rinsed. Then I walked

Into the kitchen. You were dressed like we were  
Going somewhere and coffee brewed. You told me that  
You woke at your usual hour still,

Not that you had anywhere else to be.  
Scoffing, I pulled down my sweatshirt sleeves.  
My heart thudded and boomed, thudded and boomed.

I suggested we watch the sunrise and  
Bit into a banana. You brought down  
Your mug and mine. I said that I was good,

But you left my mug on the counter.  
My heart thudded and boomed, thudded and boomed.  
You microwaved a few bran muffins, cooking

Just like me, and poured me a glass of water.  
I reminded you that you did not have  
To try so hard, like this was where we called home.

You had no friends, just me and our daughter.  
My heart thudded and boomed, thudded and boomed.  
We gave you someones to care for, to refill

A glass for, to stay up through the night for,  
That you enjoyed a life beyond work. Before me,  
It was like the indigestion. You were

Full and empty, passing through on your way out.  
But you had something and unwrapped a muffin.  
My heart thudded and boomed, thudded and boomed.

On the deck, we sat at the table.  
Your coffee remained past my arm's reach.  
I broke my muffin apart. This new batch

Went better, but baking was never  
Becoming my next career nor yours.  
The navy above was washing out blue.

We were having a family day  
Unless our daughter wanted her quiet time.  
I gulped down some water. My heart thudded.

4.

I weeded around the muscadines,  
Short branched shrubs with green wires running to  
Little posts on each triangle's corner  
Because our daughter requested other

Polygons than squares and rectangles.  
So we doted. Mulch went around the  
Muscadines. The grass stayed in the paths, but  
Little nettles popped up. I piddled through the grounds

Most mornings before y'all woke and afternoons  
When you worked your half days and our daughter napped,  
After I made us lunch, made three lunches, and  
I asked you to eat with us so we could

Family. Sometimes, I imagined you  
Entertained me with planting a garden,  
At such a scale, to get me out of the house.  
In the before times, you were alone during

The day at the house. I pulled a nettle up  
But the root stayed down and I dropped to a knee  
And used my trowel and took a knee and scanned  
Along the row and over the beds. The beds had

To shift over to winter. Cabbage, chard,  
Potatoes, onions, carrots, and beets, and a few  
Others, we planned on, and I planted in the beds,  
Plus bluegrass in one bed, which we could let grow blue,

If we were going leave one fallow.  
We were not zoned for agriculture.  
I rose and stretched out my hip and moved to the end  
Of the row. The sun was behind an oak.

In several months we were back to how we were.  
I was at my job site, and she was at school,  
And you were still in your office. We passed  
In-between, the few hours of the day

And evening when we were together. I looked  
Toward your office window and the lemon and lime  
And turned and started up the center row  
And dug up a nettle and kneaded my hip.



5.

My trowel burst from the flower bed. Our daughter's eyes  
Were amazed at the cascade of dirt and compost.  
Noticing her, I swallowed my mean words, raised  
Myself up, and rested my hands on my knees.

Give me a walkup down the street from a  
Bodega and a coffeeshop. That was me,  
Not all of this driving around and parking  
And owning a house. But I went on a date with you.

Then she was touching me and held my  
Fingers, avoiding the small cuts that  
Needed no bandages. Her little  
Fingers spidered on the back of my hands.

Give me a last minute text and a subway ride  
To some hipster dive bar where the poetry  
Reading started past my current bed time.  
But my old friends never texted me anymore.

You jogged over from the vegetable beds.  
What grew in winter was a mystery to me.  
The leaves fell off and it was cold, so I thought.  
But I brushed you off like it was going

Out of style. And she looked to you, like she  
Always did. You left me and she joined you.  
I was trying to learn the names of the flowers,  
Trees, bushes, grasses, and shrubs, so I did not

Have to pretend to care since she would notice.  
But it was difficult. There were apps that told me  
The names while I gardened. Then I had to take off  
My gloves and have my phone, and I didn't want to.

After I stood myself back up like  
I was too old to do so, I wandered over.  
You were building for carrots. She asked, "Why  
Are you using sand?" You told her that the soil

Needed to be soft so the carrots grew straight.  
Then she asked you, "Why does mommy get to  
Use mean words?" But you told her to bring the dirt.  
She dragged the bag and groaned. I helped her.

6.

A bluejay landed on the shed. I squatted down  
And ran my hands over the dirt near the lemons.  
Then the front door slammed and our daughter

Skipped over and told me that she found you upstairs,  
In the guest room, and you let her walk in,  
Let her help you while you made the twin bed.

So we walked up the driveway and stood on the deck  
And looked up, but the curtains were drawn.  
So I asked her about what she told me.

She had found you upstairs, in the guest room.  
You let her walk in, let her sit in  
Your reading chair, that saffron skyscraper.

Then she helped you make up the bed.  
You brought a sheet over her. Then you folded up  
The comforter and placed it at the foot.

She foisted off the sheet and tossed it on the bed.  
You finished making the bed and sat with her.  
Then she found her way outside to me, to tell me.

So I could go up in a bit, set your meal  
On the nightstand, read a book, and our daughter  
Played long spaceship voyage in her room.

The bluejay flew along the driveway into  
The pines across the street. We moved to the front yard.  
Nearer the street, shrubs and bushes ran along.

Most of the garden I planted for myself  
With a few flowers and trees that you mentioned.  
I stepped around the shrubs and checked

The cherry blossoms. The soil was well enough.  
Over the past many years, the rains had been less  
Than what was needed. Then our daughter was

Poking me and brought a rose stem up in her hand  
And said the musk rose stunk like my job sites.  
Then our daughter waved me toward the front stoop.

She had found you upstairs, in the guest room,  
And you let her walk in, let her sit on the bed.  
You told her to tell me, to go and find me.

IV.

1.

Our daughter frittered the work book pages and  
Fiddled with the dining room chair and flittered  
Along the table grains. I tapped the workbook.

My phone screen showed the oh-ache hour because  
Starting her lessons at this time made sense.  
Well, it was her lessons or binging Doctor Who.

Yet, I had texted my old friend about  
How to homeschool over the holidays  
Like it was a real break or we studied on.

The old friend and I were barely speaking again.  
Late in Advent, just last year, we happened to sit  
In a pew beside her and her family.

For years, they had gone to the early mass,  
But, on this morning, they were running late.  
And you got to talking like you would. So

The old friend had a daughter in the same grade as  
Our daughter, but her daughter was homeschooled,  
Not that at the time it mattered about school.

Leaving our daughter for a moment, I returned  
My phone to my office. I saw you through  
The window and waved, but you tried to dance.

As I turned my back on you, I caught myself in  
A picture. My old friend and I visited  
The mountains. I had put that on my wall.

Then I ran back and started to jump through  
The doorway, but our daughter was working.  
So I resumed preparing the next lesson.

The homeschool group had meetings for the kids and  
Took day trips, but we were just homeschooling to keep  
Her at home. It sounded too much like real school.

One of the nuns recommended the group,  
So maybe they were all right. Our daughter  
Tapped her pencil on her workbook, so I asked if

She was finished. Her tables were just about complete.  
She asked me if you were fixing to make  
Lunch, but I tapped her workbook and she worked on.

2.

Her plate and utensils our daughter placed  
In the sink, and she skipped off. I supervised the  
Broccoli casserole. You started on  
Scrubbing the baking dishes. I washed and dried.

The water coursed through the walls. I shut the tap.  
Our daughter was taking a shower and  
Getting ready for bed without us.  
You shook a pan and I continued.

One day, in a decade, this was each night.  
She lived on her own, had a job, and went to school  
And visited when she found the time,  
Which might not be as often as we liked,

Unless another downturn gripped us like  
When we first got together, but we found work  
And a place because we had no where else.  
Then her life might not work out and she needed

To live with us. She never found enough work.  
She never made friends. She never met her person.  
You shook a casserole dish at me,  
And I swooshed my sponge through the air and took

The dish, and you returned to the stovetop.  
I heard your mumblings, how you directed them  
At yourself. The steel wool clawed upon the dish  
And unsettled the crust. These worries might

Never occur in a decade. She was upstairs  
Getting ready for bed on her own without us.  
The water no longer coursed through the wall.  
Then I had only your mumblings. I thought,



Once everything reopened, you recovered  
In a few years, before she began middle school.  
Like the last time, you would be all right for  
A long while. It took an once-in-a-century

Event to bring the depression back.  
You joined me at the sink, drying and shelving,  
And flung your dish towel at my face.  
I nodded it down into my hands.

3.

Cushions padded the gabled overhang.  
Settled into the arm chair with her workbooks,  
Our daughter hummed, "The fox went past the hedge."

Still, I lay there, like all of my dreams  
I had woken up from and there was your face  
And she patted me because I had worked

Super late again. Now we were gardeners  
And the sun decided our hours, no more late nights,  
And not much happened when it was cold out.

Two blankets and a comforter encased me.  
Still, she was wearing her ugly sweater  
And hummed, "The fox found another forest."

I missed going to my café and working  
When I was at my lowest. In a few months,  
We might venture out. In a few months, I might feel.

My office was not that place, nor was the guest room,  
But I dreamed and woke up and forgot.  
In the old days, we never would have gardened.

We rode the lawn mower over the lawn.  
We each had our turn because someone must  
Play keep our daughter inside the house.

A sheet covered the mirror. Dust covered the chest  
Of drawers. She hummed, "Wolves ran through the forest."  
Her workbook see-sawed on the armrest.

Well, I just took her to the park and to shop  
For clothes and toys and to get cookies  
And hot chocolate while I had a cappuccino.

You finished the lawn and did whatever  
It was that you did in the old days.  
The ceiling fan swiveled and careened and whooshed.

But I used the same words to describe  
The same situation I had been through  
Before when I had ghost stories to tell.

The lamp light shorn off the bottom end of  
The mattress with the bedrail. Her feet touched the floor.  
She hummed, "The wolves became the fox's friend."

4.

Our daughter and I waited out front.  
The two of us had decided on a walk  
And put on our shoes before we told you.

Then you said that sounded nice and would join us  
In a moment. You needed to get your shoes.  
The sun set early, but we waited on.

A gust let off and we warmed in the stillness.  
She hunched over and pointed out a line  
Of black ants trailing through the grass path.

We were undecided about which way  
We should turn. There were hills either way, but  
Flat when we set out. She stopped and started

Around a bare cherry blossom. Through our window,  
I did not see you. You must be changing  
Into walking clothes, unlike me and our daughter.

She was walking around the lemons.  
So I stood and looked back and went around  
The cherry blossoms and the flowers.

I tried so hard to pick ones you would like,  
Perennials, that way we did not have  
To replant as much each spring, or I did not.

Though, you were never one for flowers, even  
When, long ago, I bought them for you, but you kept  
Them in a box that we lost when we moved here.

You slammed the front door and joined us, stating,  
“We can go.” Regular clothes you still wore  
With your walking shoes. You asked if we had

Chosen which way to walk, but we had been  
Too busy looking at the flowers and the trees.  
She and I tried a few walks and they were just wrong.

You took the lead and turned around at the end.  
We needed to decide which way we were headed.  
“Does anyone have any ideas?” You asked.

She hugged my leg and twirled and thought that we  
Should set off and walk both ways because  
What else was there to do anymore.

5.

Our daughter peered around the doorframe. Instead,  
I waved her over. She climbed into my lap  
And hugged my neck and hopped down and whirled about.  
None of her toys or books were left in here.

Then she jumped on the loveseat and told me,  
“I did the dip.” She hugged the small throw pillow  
And careened into the cushions, saying,  
“I did the dip.” I swiveled around and asked,

“You did what now?” She dumped the pillow on  
The floor and rose to her feet and stated,  
“I did the dip. I ate all of the cheese dip.  
It was good.” I locked my screen and clawed at her

And plopped on the floor, saying, “Yeah, no, that’s not how  
Doing the dip works, but sure.” She shook her head.  
Your bare-feet hit the floor like steel toe boots.  
You had made me a meal and sent her to me.

I climbed on the loveseat and put her in my lap  
And told her, “You know, when someone does the dip,  
They leave for good.” She scrambled up and asked,  
“If they never return, how is that good?”

Then she was squishing and patting my cheeks  
And poking them, but I reminded her,  
“It may or may not be. But they are gone.”  
She shushed me, asking, “Will you join us for supper?”

Then I placed her on the other seat and told her,  
“Yes, but, you have not finished your lessons.”  
Her befuddled face glared at me.  
You leaned on the hallway wall and tilted your head.

Then I explained the inverted pyramid,  
Telling her, "What is important goes upfront  
So someone can dip out without missing  
Something. When you don't do that, the reader

Does the dip early on." She scrunched her face up  
And stared at me and hopped down and said that  
She wanted to sit facing the front windows.  
She never ate facing the windows.

6.

The oven was heating up, and our daughter  
Asked us if this was a good idea.  
We thought that making our own cookies  
Would be more fun. On the stovetop sat

The cookie-sheet, filled with chocolate chip dough.  
We had become better at making food from scratch.  
The stirring had taken us awhile and she dipped out.  
Then she helped to make the cookies be the size

That she wanted. Most were normal size.  
A few were larger. None of them were circles.  
They looked more like islands on a map.  
She was pleased with her work. That was what mattered.

A cloud cleared off and the kitchen brightened.  
We planned on eating a cookie because  
It was low sugar. You held a spatula,  
But we were far removed from it being used.

She had her wand at the ready because  
She might be needed on a planet  
To help out as she must. I was empty handed,  
Having set my water glass on the counter.

Then she wondered why we no longer purchased  
Food from the store. We told her that we did  
Make some purchases but not that many,  
Flour, olive oil, spices, and the like.

On the dining room wall, our pantry stood  
With the shelves mostly full. Her favorite meal  
We kept in the freezer, and she told us that  
We never made the best meal anymore.



You thought she liked the garden meals. She said  
She did like them, but she had real likes.  
The oven dinged, at last. I had a mitt and placed  
The cookie-sheet in and gave you the mitt.

Then she wondered about the packaged cookies,  
The small ones, that she could twist in half,  
Eat the filling, and dunk the cookie halves.  
The pandemic must have put them out of work too.

V.

1.

The orioles dotted and hopped in the side yard.  
Our daughter hefted herself on to the deck  
Railing. I stopped sweeping and joined her.

Then she asked me, "Why does mommy like  
Those films?" I was perplexed by what she meant,  
So I asked her, "Is she watching one of her

Art films?" You liked art films, found them to be  
Thought provoking, and nestled into them.  
She told me that it was the one with the

Piano and the house in the country  
And it got cold early in the year there  
And the orioles would not return until

Midsummer at that place. I knew the film  
Because it was a classic choice of yours,  
Especially when we first got together,

But I never liked watching it late  
In the evening. So the story went:  
A mother visited her daughter for

The weekend. The mother was a concert  
Pianist but had such a tense bond with  
Her daughter due to how the mother raised her.

Was it your mother's birthday? You liked to watch  
That one on her birthday since she passed away  
And, sure, you enjoyed the film long before that.

The cherry blossoms were still too short for nests.  
She asked me, "Does mommy speak the language?"  
I told her that you read the subtitles,

Though you might speak Swedish and never said.  
Then she said, "It will run to my bedtime.  
Does she get to skip dinner once again?"

Our daughter could not watch the film and was  
Most likely looking to watch sci-fi with  
You. I told her that the film was short and

You would watch sci-fi with us shortly. Then  
She fidgeted and asked me, "What happens  
If I do not like sci-fi anymore?"

2.

Then the polygon went away. We were all clear.  
Thankfully, no tornado formed. In the short hallway,  
You removed your helmet. Our daughter climbed over  
And called for her spot on the sofa, and you followed.

Then I took off my helmet and scoffed  
And opened my office door. I needed  
To work. With the world reopening, I should  
Be able to find better work. I doubted that.

I found myself in the kitchen, refilling  
My water bottle. In a few months,  
We went back to how we were. I cooked with  
The microwave, but tonight we made her

Favorite. Tornado days were rollercoasters.  
My index finger throbbed and was numb.  
Tonight was my night to cook. Recently, I found  
Ways to use all the fruit because I had

Nothing to do with my life. Over the summer,  
I found a job or went back to school.  
Then our daughter went back to school.  
I opened up the cabinet and took down

My mug and made us decaf black tea.  
I went to work and we went back to how  
We were long ago, not around each other.  
I should make us a salad instead

Or make you cook. We were getting on in years  
And watching the heart was what old folks did.  
In the before times, the house was a building  
We occupied without living in. Except now,

We had a garden and a vegetable patch.  
The dining room was never in use.  
We had not chosen seats. No one mentioned it.  
We needed to clear out some food in the frig.

Or that food could be frozen. I closed the door.  
Then we left our daughter to learn from others  
During the day. We were nights and weekends.  
A tingling wrapped upon my shoulders,

Rippled out, and ceased. I placed the mugs and  
Kettle and milk on a tray and brought them  
Around and set them on the coffee table  
And saw our daughter asleep. I threw up my hands.

3.

Treading upon the four-by-fours, our daughter  
Noted how the bluegrass was blue, unlike you  
Who happened to be depressed, because blue was

The sky. When the sun was out, everyone  
Felt joy at how nice it was. Then people said  
Blue was for sadness. They must be inside

Too much. Then, when it was cloudy, no one  
Wanted to be outside and they were upset.  
So grey was the sad color, not blue.

I had taken a large lead, but she watched  
The oaks. The orioles were nested there.  
Anyway, we had to walk on the four-by-fours

All the way around, front and center, to win,  
But, when we played her games, no one won.  
She meant that we could move on after this.

We could play Small Wilderness in one of  
The side yards. So often, when we played her games,  
The fruits we ignored. We had not made a pie

Or tart in a bit. That would be nice  
Like the sky. Blueberry was what we should make.  
I reached the outer side. She had stopped.

We added okra to the vegetable beds  
Since you set a goal of learning to use  
The stovetop. She requested we find new

Recipes. We kept making those fruit meals  
Instead of deserts. She never understood why,  
But she thought she had the selective hearing.

You searched for ways to clear out the freezer.  
We made muscadine popsicles, a few times,  
But when I went to the freezer for them,

She asked if I was making chicken fingers.  
She always went to the frig and ate handfuls  
Of fruit and reminded me that she did not

Need meals this way, like you. But you had lost  
Your appetite. I reached the front four-by-fours  
And stepped off. She began another lap.



4.

I booted the spade down and lifted up the clod.  
My shirt chaffed the new scabs on my back  
And pulled off like dry plaster from a cast.  
Then our daughter's eyes widened and she ran to me.

Our daughter stated that I needed bandages.  
I had scrapes and gashes. She asked me if I was  
All right, but I was just fine. I told her that  
She could go and help you, if she wanted.

She told me that she loved me and that she  
Wanted me to feel better and that she would  
Leave me to the nettles if I wanted.  
Then she sprinted inside. I scowled at a nettle.

It was difficult since all the feelings were still  
Drained from me, but I made myself get up, made  
Myself change my clothes, and made myself eat a meal,  
Though sometimes a few feelings shined through.

Then I looked to you and asked, "Are you really  
Going to let her patch my back up?"  
You were more than emphatic about how  
She was going to patch me back up with your

Supervision. Besides, she liked helping me out.  
Besides, I just needed bandages, not stitches.  
Then I was off in a place you never found.  
No directions were given. There I was.

Then you added, "I mean you already  
Taught her how to cuss." I chuckled and rolled my head  
Down so you never saw me chuckling, but you poked  
My leg with the rake because you had indeed heard.

Then she jogged back with the first aid kit  
Aloft and a blouse on her shoulder.  
I seated myself upon the grass and  
She opened the first aid kit and grinned and clapped.

You knelt down and I unbuttoned my shirt.  
The light denim was blotched like the stonewash  
Had faded in the sun. She said, "It's a lot."  
Her little fingers swabbed with the alcohol strips

And pressed down the large bandages  
And smoothed out the edges. Then she asked if  
One gash needed stitches and told me,  
"Don't worry mommy. You do not need stitches."

5.

I pulled up and parked in my spot. Then  
Our daughter sprinted from the back door, and  
You followed her. I had a few more days of  
Mudding and sanding before I was finished.

Then I made a green bean casserole and  
Suggested we decipher one of your art films.  
I fell asleep on the sofa, but she woke me  
When it was time for her, and me, to go to bed.

She opened her door, groggily, and  
Leapt up and yelled with the sudden rush  
Of having not seen me since the night before.  
Then you peaked your head around and shrugged.

Tonight, she ate a salad, saying,  
“I’m all grown up now.” She brought in the step ladder  
And washed out her bowl. Later, you told me  
She had practiced after breakfast and lunch.

After I woke you, we drank decaf on the deck.  
Then she smacked her window and ran down and  
Asked me to stay for breakfast. I loaded  
The truck up and told y’all to go back to bed.

In the mud room, I peeled off my boots and jeans  
And button down and left them to soak.  
Then you had made a squash casserole, which had  
A golden crust. Our daughter said she supervised.

You rolled to your side and pulled the comforter up  
And told me to go on. She knocked on the door  
And walked me down. Then she asked if she could  
Go back to sleep in the saffron skyscraper.

I parked in my spot. You and she were picking at  
The vegetables beds. I asked if you wanted  
Help. She said if I was playing then I needed  
To catch up. Her basket was almost full.

On the deck, in the redness, I told you  
That after I finished up we could go somewhere.  
She had been wanting cookies, and you would like  
To find a new coffeeshop. We could go look.

6.

We had our shears and put on our gloves.  
Small shrubs hemmed in each tree from the grass paths.  
The cherry blossoms had bloomed about

The color wheel of flowers. Mostly I liked  
Their prettiness, how they shaped their petals  
And displayed the color. You had told me

Their names, the regular and the Latin,  
But last spring was many years ago.  
I wore my English gardening clothes,

Twill blouse and trousers because I watched  
English gardening shows and they dressed well.  
But you wore your work button down and jeans.

Then I called to our daughter, “Are you  
Supervising or giving us a hand?”  
Earlier, I held her scarf and coat and asked her

If these items were good for gardening in.  
She shrugged her shoulders. Then she picked up what  
I had laid out, overalls and a grey

Long sleeved tee. I told her that these clothes were  
Going to get dirty and smell something fierce.  
She told me that she was quitting the garden

After the summer and going back to the school.  
She missed the nuns and promised to wear her mask. Well,  
These gardening clothes were another uniform.

After her first day of school ever, when she got  
In the truck, she told us that she was glad she could  
Take off her uniform and be home tomorrow.

I had to remind her that she had to  
Go to school on weekdays and wear the uniform.  
Then she told me to step out. She asked me if

The dining room could remain her homework room.  
I agreed, as long as we cleared the table for  
Supper. I closed her door and went down the stairs.

Through the back window, I saw you near the shed  
With your back turned and knocked on a pane.  
She told me that she was as ready as she

Could be, but she had her arms crossed, and she  
Waited for me to exit before her. Then  
She made jazz hands into the front yard

And had the rake and picked up the cuttings.  
You dragged the wheelbarrow closer to us,  
When it was too heavy for her to pull

On her own, which happened early and often.  
Mostly, I wanted to handsaw a tree branch  
Because I had learned how to from the shows.

But none of the cherry blossoms and oaks needed  
To be trimmed back. And I would have to climb a tree.  
So I pruned along the top of the shrubs.