I Begin and Begin

a sonnet

I

My mother wants to know how I know.
I tell her I remember playing house with
a neighbor girl at age four and wanting
to be the father. There was a plastic pipe,
blue and white, and I put it in my mouth.
Why would you want to do that? my mother asks.
What part of being a woman do you enjoy?
And I want to say, all of it. And I want to say,
the part where I smoke a blue plastic pipe.

II

In my childhood bedroom there is a closet. Inside this closet is another closet where I
kept my books. This is the place I went to cry, to read, to think of and write about the
women. And still this was not enough to make me understand.

III

Following Rachel up the stairs, I look at her
long golden hair and gray dress and think,
When did she become 17 again?

IV

A closet is a small inner room.
V

To look inside her is first to see
an intricate system of muscle
stretched over tender white bone,
and to look further is to see
the spidery yellow nerves—
much more delicate than hair—
spread throughout her like lines
on a highway map, and to look
even further is to see chains
of axons holding hands,
linked by gulfs and chasms,
doing what they must to set her on fire
when another woman touches her.

VI

Stacked in the childhood closet are nine hardbound black journals with the names and
sketched faces of at least five women. I consider presenting these to my mother as
evidence.

VII

Dozens of men had loved Rachel, some successfully, some not, by the time she left for
college.

VIII

In the childhood closet I wrote songs of
my first boyfriend for $75. He threw the weep
"I'm losing what I never had," and it was
except as suspiciously close friends. I
have him?

IX

Rachel's first girlfriend also worked at the
er coming to work there, I said it was
The next year, the head of the YMCA for
parents said they would have molested
would get a dog or a cat, and how man

X

A colleague asks: When do you feel inspired?
In the shower, I say. In the shower, I feel
The British call the shower a water close
In the closet of water I am naked.

XI

Rachel's father used to joke with me that
a daughter from Korea so I was his four
from Kentucky so I am the fifth daughter
including Rachel.
VIII

In the childhood closet I wrote songs on a black electric Washburn purchased from my first boyfriend for $75. He threw the whammy bar in for free. The refrain of my first song: “I’m losing what I never had,” and it was true that I never had any of the five women, except as suspiciously close friends. And now I wonder: by writing about them, do I now have them?

IX

Rachel’s first girlfriend also worked at the summer camp with us. When she mentioned her coming to work there, I said it was a great idea, and then she became Rachel’s first. The next year, the head of the YMCA found out about them and they were let go. The parents said they would have molested the children. The children asked them if they would get a dog or a cat, and how many kids.

X

A colleague asks: When do you feel inspired?
In the shower, I say. In the shower, I feel inspired.
The British call the shower a water closet.
In the closet of water I am naked.

XI

Rachel’s father used to joke with me that I was his third daughter and then they adopted a daughter from Korea so I was his fourth daughter and then they adopted a daughter from Kentucky so I am the fifth daughter, though I am the oldest of all of their children, including Rachel.
XII

A teacher once told me poetry is wanting always to close itself, so you must constantly begin anew, over and over again—you must create whole new worlds every time you write.

XIII

And now I am here in the closet and I am naked and I am writing.

XIV

One day it was so hot at camp that we ran into the murky red river with all our clothes on—just left the kids in their military-file lines near the changing tent and plunged into the scalded lake all in one jump, and she laughed and laughed and we felt so relieved and we were sticky drying all day long.

A Poem about

Only ever what I need at any given time, as if to take a jewel and put it in a box, as if to take a stone and polish it and put it on a shelf. You, your face in my hands, bones of your cheek and jaw between my fingers.

Shoebox of a studio apartment, all the space in the world between love and love, the slats of the boardwalk, between the hem of your shorts and the hem of your skin, all the space between the night between toast and French fries.

That night on the boardwalk, Cyndi in my arms. Until it ends, there is no end. Sometimes when I’m drunk I understand a song lyric I could never make. Like breathing, second nature, nature.

The problem is I needed to be a drummer. The problem is I needed to play piano. The problem is I needed a rhythm guitar. Until Randy. Until Tony. Until Marcos.