

Fall 2017

You Don't Talk About It

Brittany Lee Cheak

Western Kentucky University, misscheakious@live.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cheak, Brittany Lee, "You Don't Talk About It" (2017). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 2054.
<https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/2054>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

YOU DON'T TALK ABOUT IT

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
Leigh Cheak

December 2017

YOU DON'T TALK ABOUT IT

Date Recommended 11-03-2017

Tom C. Hunley
Tom C. Hunley, Director of Thesis

Mary Ellen Miller
Mary Ellen Miller

Rebecca Brown
Rebecca Brown

[Signature] 11/10/17
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

This thesis is dedicated to the phenomenal women in my life:

My mother, Debra Cheak, who has always been my guiding compass.

My little sister, Lauren Feroze, who shares my wounds.

My granny, Peggy Cheak, whom I see in all the hummingbirds.

Finally, to my mentors, Dr. Tom C. Hunley & Professor Mary Ellen Miller. Both have always believed in me & worked to sculpt me into the poet I have become.

Thanks will never be enough.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go to the editors & personnel of the following journals & anthologies, in which some poems from this book, sometimes in earlier versions, first appeared:

A Narrow Fellow: “Black Widow”, “Goddess”, & “She Became a Sun”

Beecher’s Magazine: “My Mother Dreamed I Was Born in a Burning City—What a Strange Notion”

Crow Hollow 19: “Little Girl Likes Lingerie”

Harpoon Review: “To the Daughter I Do Not Have (You Are the Ocean)”

The McNeese Review: “My Mother on Painkillers” & “These Trees Are So Familiar”

Voicemail Poems: “You Don’t Talk about It”

The Windhover: “Hosanna”

Wildflower Press: Wild Voices Anthology: “Tell Me Something Good”

PREFACE

I had a nebulous idea of this manuscript before I was offered an invitation to join the first Western Kentucky University Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing cohort. I knew I wanted to create a body of poems that was relatable, feminist, and emotionally powerful. I came in with the working title, *Fantastic Beast* set on proving just how magnificent women are. The finalized manuscript has, of course, evolved from that point—instead of keeping the scope broad and trying to define all of womanhood, the poems here revolve around a personal locus: the people who have touched me, and my obsessions.

In his essay “Finding, Unifying, and Revising the Body of Our Work,” Robert Miltner writes that we have topics which live within us as obsessions, and that these impulse topics can easily become the locus around which our manuscript revolves (21). I have always written poems about my relationships with my mother and father, and continued that tradition. But I also branched out and began writing poems about the different personae I created for myself. This led to “Black Widow,” and other poems about what it means to be a woman—the different faces that I wore. Then I found myself obsessing over children—the intense need to bear one of my own, which became the locus of the section “Hear Yourself Ring Hollow.” By exploring my obsessions, I found that the poems formed without much effort on my part, though the arrangement of the manuscript took more work. The poems called to one another, forming a natural cohesion and leading me to write new poems that fit within the body of work. I worried that perhaps the poems sounded too similar, but I enjoyed how each poem resonated with others—it forged a sense of belonging. Miltner writes that we should be familiar with our

voice and style, and I think that it is because I write with a distinct voice and style that the poems sound similar (21). But I think each poem feels unique and fresh. These poems weave my voice with specific images, working with how the words feel and sound in the mouth and in the ear. In this way, they are carefully crafted as a reflection of what is important to me.

Through these relationships and thoughts, the poems still speak to feminism and feel relatable, but I hope they are anchored and meaningful instead of abstract reachings. I can't speak for all women, but I can speak for myself. And through my voice, I hope to reach other women who may not know how to say the things they want to say.

This idea led to the new title, *You Don't Talk about It*, which calls to the confessional nature of the poems. My work deals with some of the things most people don't feel comfortable talking about: childhood traumas, the ugly side of love, undesirable feelings. Each section contains poems around a typical poetic theme. "Universes Beyond How Deep We Can Swim" includes childhood memories and complicated family relationships. "Sleeping Naked" is a collection of body poems. "Love Knots" is a nod to Anne Sexton's *Love Poems*—a complex view of the joys and woes of love. "You Flew in Like She Wasn't the Spider" is a nature poem section, moving from flowers to insects and beyond. The manuscript ends with "Hear Yourself Ring Hollow," a series of poems regarding my desire for motherhood.

Each section works to achieve unity in its own body, but each section comes together with the others to form a unified whole—an overarching poem. Bonnie Jacobson calls this the "mega-poem" in her essay, "Best Foot Forward: Arranging a Poetry Manuscript." The mega-poem is the poem formed by the completion of the manuscript. It

is the ultimate poem created by linking each individual poem, the supreme poem “that in some way comments on all the others, or at least takes the poet and the reader a distance from where both began” (Jacobson 5). My mega-poem is the compilation of things we don’t talk about: the things that make us human. Complex relationships. Different personas we assume. Our obsessions. The things that catch our attention. The things that make us vulnerable.

This manuscript is meant to reach beyond the “pocket audience” of poets and other writers and touch the lives of those who do not have a relationship with poetry. Too often I hear people say that they don’t “get” poetry. It feels too lofty for them to understand, so they don’t bother with it. I know that poets tend to write for the pocket audience because it is the market for poetry, but my hope is that the emotions, images, and language of my poems will transcend that gap and invite new readers into poetry.

Walt Whitman is sometimes referred to as the “people’s poet” because of his desire to reach a working-class audience with his poetry (May 2). With these poems, I try to continue his tradition. I credit Whitman as a major influence, as his use of free-verse gave me the confidence to follow suit and tell many of my truths. He is also well-known for his use of anaphora and lengthy, story-telling poems, which I found influential. His foundation gave me the courage to write poems like “To the Daughter I Do Not Have (Some Days)” and “Body of Water.” You’ll find some allusions to Whitman scattered throughout this manuscript.

Many poems found structure by stretching traditional forms as well as free verse. *You Don’t Talk about It* includes a couple of villanelles, sestinas, prose poems, and a pantoum. I’ve also included a few poems that are a stretched version of a ghazal, which I

appropriated from Jane Olmsted. I found the form in her book, *Seeking the Other Side*, and thought the threading of lines with end-words worked quite like a sestina in shifting the words' meanings while also offering repetition. "Counseling Session" came from the "Twenty Little Poetry Projects" exercise created by Jim Simmerman, though not all twenty projects made it to the final version of the poem. "The Truth All Poets Know" is a variation of a "Golden Shovel" form, where I took a quote from a favorite poet instead of a line of poetry.

In order to break rules, we must first know the rules well. I began using forms with this idea in mind—I wanted to prove I knew the rules. But I found that form offered a structure to cling to, versus making my own, which often worked better than a free verse poem with the same ideas. When form works, it is powerful. I enjoyed playing with forms, and hope that the resulting poems also resonate with my intended audience. I particularly enjoyed writing sestinas and pantoums, which did not vary much, if at all, from the original rules.

Some forms, such as villanelles, are practically impossible to make work well in their full forms (my exceptions are Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" and Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song"). Elizabeth Bishop takes some liberty in her villanelle, "One Art," varying one of the refrains throughout the poem. I decided to make my own modifications. "If I Come Back" drops the rhyme scheme; it only makes use of the two refrains and the stanza structure. "My Mother Dreamed I Was Born in a Burning City—What a Strange Notion" is more true to form, but the title acts as the first line of the poem. Also, both poems abandon the meter, instead playing with longer line lengths and sound variations.

I scattered my forms among the sections, mostly because they were thematically different, but also because I didn't want them to be clustered together. I followed Wanda Coleman's advice from her essay, "Poetic Dynamics & the Meta-Lingo of the Manuscript." Coleman discusses how the arrangement impacts the dynamics of the manuscript—each piece's placement is important. She says she likes to "[view] poems in terms of level of excitement, highs and lows, and [think] of their arrangement as a distribution of energy. The order in which [she] prefer[s] to place [her] poems often resembles a wave" (Coleman 32). Forms have similar energy, in my opinion, and I couldn't arrange them too close together. Likewise, because my other poems had different levels of excitement, I couldn't put too many poems of a similar level together. Putting too many high poems next to one another would read with too much energy, and become exhausting. Likewise, too many low poems would become depressing and meaningless. Choosing a dynamic rhythm, a series of waves, makes the manuscript much more interesting and emotionally true. Life is a series of highs and lows, not a vector leading to happiness or despair.

I considered Coleman's advice when placing my poems into their order within each section—I wanted to keep the manuscript dynamic and wave-like. Dividing the nature poems from the love poems was mostly straightforward, but deciding the order of each poem in each section took more effort. I considered the energy in each poem, and also the imagery and overall feel of the poem. Once I decided which poems went together and which needed space, I then focused on which poems needed to come first and last in the sections so they would resonate with the previous and following sections, giving them cohesion. While arranging, I came to the knowledge that my title poem, "You Don't Talk

about It,” didn’t fit into any of the sections. Rather, it loudly announced that it needed a place of its own. It became the frontice poem, setting the tone for the manuscript. While it’s a little more blunt than many of the other poems, I think it withstands the pressure of being both title poem and frontice because it is powerful and speaks to the nature of the manuscript. The sections themselves are arranged in a rather chronological order, starting with childhood memories and ending with future fantasies.

The manuscript is a wave, much like those of the ocean. It makes me think of lines in Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach:” “begin, and cease, and then again begin, / With tremulous cadence slow...” (12-13). The manuscript starts strong, builds, retreats, and builds again. But this manuscript is not tremulous; it stays strong—even in doubt.

The strength from this manuscript comes from writing as a reader. Before I began working towards receiving my MFA, I’ll admit I didn’t read much poetry—I identified with the audience that I’m now pursuing. But I read quite a bit in other genres—classics like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, contemporary fiction like J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman, and even my mother’s smutty romance novels. I loved the fantastical, the moments of fancy. I loved the voices that pulled me into their stories. That voice led my writing—I focus on writing poems that are easily accessible and meaningful, led by a unifying voice.

Of course, it is through reading poetry that I honed that voice. While I had been exposed to Whitman and Dickinson, it wasn’t until I read Tania Runyan’s *How to Read a Poem* that I started paying more attention to how to fully read poetry. Using Billy Collins’ poem, “Introduction to Poetry,” Runyan guides readers through Collins’

depiction of multiple levels of poetry, encouraging us to look at the poem as if it were a sculpture—from multiple angles and sides, in various lightings. Each stanza gives a different viewpoint from which to look:

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. (Runyan 12-13)

Instead of beating the poem for it for what it *means*, Collins wants us to engage with the poem in different ways. I think people tend to get caught up in looking for meaning; they forget that poetry is art—meant to be appreciated and interpreted by the reader. I believe this is what separates poetry from a larger audience of readers—they think that they need to readily grasp the author's intended meaning. Because we make meaning based on what

we experience, they worry that their meaning isn't "correct." But Collins reminds us that "meaning" isn't what is important—it's the experience and the engagement that matters.

I endeavored to keep Collins' advice in mind while writing and arranging these poems. As a confessional poet, I know that each poem is infused with my own intentions and meanings, and want to convey an accurate portrayal of my truths. But I also let the poems exist outside of my purposes—I left them open to interpretations from my readers.

The first stanza asks the reader to look at the words and the images in the poem—don't focus on meaning, but rather "enter it, live with it, and make it part of us," (Runyan 14). My poems have reoccurring images: water, Degas paintings, flowers, birds, spiders, etc. But as Saussure tells us, what I imagined will likely never be the same as what my audience sees. I readily accepted that, but strove to create a moment where the audience still felt grounded. Every reader brings their own baggage to the page, and by including specific images, such as the beach, the toddler, or Cinderella's carriage in "One Interpretation of Your Silence," the reader is able to fit into the space left in the poem. The speaker in these poems is at once a version of myself and an imagined character, open for readers to assume to varying degrees.

Collin's second stanza advises listening to the hum of the poem—encouraging readers to read it aloud. Poetry started as an auditory art, and Collins reminds us that how a poem sounds is just as important as how it reads on the page. I show attention to sound through rhyme and alliteration, such as in the opening stanza of "The Fly Knows before We Do:"

First, she was a **buzz**—
the **fuzz** of radio static
tuning in as she flew
toward my ear. She **tangled**

in my temple hair, made me
shrug my **sh**oulder to my ear
and **sh**iver

I love the sound echo and how the rhyme replicates the sound of a fly buzzing. Having so many like sounds close together also reminds me of swiping at a persistent fly.

But rhyme and alliteration aren't the only important carriers of sound. As I've said, I love being captured by a voice. Poems like "Body of Water" and "Some Days I Am a Bottle of Wine" are meant to be read aloud because they sound like Scheherazade's storytelling. The cadence of the spoken words is meant to pull the reader in.

Collins' next stanza involves a mouse scurrying through the poem. Runyan explains that this is a metaphor—the reader must become the mouse and wander over the lines and white space of the poem. For this collection, I didn't focus on white space as more than a lengthy breath. But line breaks and lengths were very important. In "The Addition of Every Day," the lines gradually decrease in length, acting as a visual representation of how every day brings us closer to death. The poem was inspired by my boyfriend's mother, whose mind is not as clear as it once was. Every day we know she's closer to dying, and so the form of the poem echoes the feeling of running out of time and space. "Ashtray in the Mouth" uses indention and various line lengths to represent the dizziness of drunkenness. The lines trip and fall. The break after "I might have been afraid" leaves the reader in suspense: what is there to fear? The next line clarifies the speaker is afraid of throwing up, but there's also a niggle of doubt about what else drunk women have to fear. It's uneasy and unsettling.

Next, Collins moves to finding the "switch" in a poem that illuminates the room. Runyan quickly clarifies that this does not mean finding the meaning, but rather finding a

moment of connection to the poem. She quotes poet and editor Marci Rae Johnson: “*Seeing the light* is not a moment of completely understanding meaning, but a moment when you connect with a poem and fall in love with it” (Runyan 64). For some, that moment comes with unusual language, or perhaps vivid images. Others connect with moments of hard truth or resonating emotions. I tried to keep these things in mind when writing my poems. I think that “aha!” moment can come when someone completely resonates with the speaker of the poem so much that they feel the poem represents their experience. For me, that moment comes in several of the poems in “Hear Yourself Ring Hollow.”

Another method of engaging a poem is to “waterski across [its] surface,” or to simply enjoy the lines without looking for allusions or background knowledge. If the reader knows about Degas’ ballerinas, then it will certainly add more clarity to the image. But I purposefully made the poems strong enough to stand without that knowledge. Some poets, like Richard Jackson, thread allusions through their work so heavily that the reader almost needs to Google somewhere in every poem. I intentionally crafted my poems with easy access—they don’t depend on outside knowledge to reach the reader. Most of my material and images are readily available.

Collins also instructs us to wave at the author’s name, to acknowledge the author, but not to get caught up in their history or invite them into your perusal of the poem. This stanza calls to Historical Criticism, which calls the reader to look up author information and background information about the time period the piece was written in. While those things can certainly add to a poem, Collins reminds us that a poem should be enjoyable without those things, which smacks of New Criticism. The author doesn’t matter—the

poem is the important thing. Because I am an emerging poet, it's likely that my audience has no clue as to who I am or where I come from. A quick Google search won't tell them much; there isn't much associated with my name for them to bring to the poems.

It is my hope that because my poems are open and relatable, readers—even those outside the pocket audience—will readily engage in my poems and abandon looking for one intended meaning. I created layers of meaning in each poem, so that a quick read will leave the reader feeling something meaningful, and that an in-depth search will also reveal treasure. That's what makes poetry something worth revisiting. That's what makes it cling to a reader. And that's what I intended to create with each piece.

I pray that you enjoy this manuscript, and leaves you feeling like you can continue the conversation of things we can, and should, talk about.

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation, 2016. Web. 28 July. 2017.
- Coleman, Wanda. "Poetic Dynamics & the Meta-Lingo of the Manuscript." *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*. Ed. Susan Grimm. Cleveland: Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 2006. 29-33. Print. Imagination Ser. #11.
- Jacobson, Bonnie. "Best Foot Forward: Arranging a Poetry Manuscript." *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*. Ed. Susan Grimm. Cleveland: Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 2006. 1-7. Print. Imagination Ser. #11.
- May, Lori A. *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship & the Writing Life*. Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.
- Miltner, Robert. "Finding, Unifying, and Revising the Body of Our Work." *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*. Ed. Susan Grimm. Cleveland: Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 2006. 21-27. Print. Imagination Ser. #11.
- Olmsted, Jane. *Seeking the Other Side: Poems*. Louisville: Fleur-de-lis Press, 2015. Print.
- Runyan, Tania. *How to Read a Poem*. New York: T.S. Poetry Press, 2014. Print. :FG Field Guide Ser.
- Sexton, Anne. *Love Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969. Print.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | iv |
| Preface | v |
| | |
| You Don't Talk about It | 1 |
| | |
| <i>Universes Beyond How Deep We Can Swim</i> | |
| One Interpretation of Your Silence | 3 |
| I Was a Ballerina | 4 |
| It Happened the Summer I Went to VBS | 5 |
| Dead Things | 6 |
| My Grandmother Walks through the Shadowed Valley to Heaven | 7 |
| Four Summers After | 8 |
| My Stepsister & My Dad Communicate Like This | 9 |
| My Relationship with Oranges | 10 |
| My Niece's Nightmares | 11 |
| Amber, Imagined as a Mirror | 12 |
| Heather, As a Flower | 13 |
| Social Means Something Different Now | 14 |
| Body of Salt | 15 |
| Springtime | 16 |
| Poynter's Andromeda (1869) | 17 |
| My Mother on Painkillers | 18 |
| Letter to Peggy | 19 |
| Lost Girl Sestina | 20 |
| If They Touch Me While I'm Sleeping | 21 |
| Little Girl Likes Lingerie | 22 |
| This Day Is a Version of the Last Until It Isn't | 23 |
| | |
| <i>Sleeping Naked</i> | |
| Hosanna | 25 |
| Like a Blade of Iris, My Body | 26 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Some Days I Am a Bottle of Wine | 27 |
| Ashtray in the Mouth | 28 |
| Down | 29 |
| She Became a Sun | 30 |
| Self-Portrait in the Rain | 31 |
| Bones | 32 |
| Image in a Looking Glass | 33 |
| Southern & the City | 34 |
| Degas, Through a Keyhole | 35 |
| Counseling Session | 36 |
| | |
| <i>Love Knots</i> | |
| Knot Ghazal | 38 |
| Black Widow | 39 |
| Left Unsaid | 40 |
| Spell for Curing Loneliness | 41 |
| The One Where Two People Walk into a Bar | 42 |
| About-Face | 43 |
| Modern Love | 44 |
| Ugly Sleeper | 45 |
| What I Want to Know | 46 |
| The Truth All Poets Know | 48 |
| Potion No. 9 | 49 |
| Goddess | 50 |
| What Happens on TV | 51 |
| When He Looks at Her | 52 |
| I Pray But | 53 |
| Bedtime Rituals and Dreaming | 54 |
| Before Him, I Never Had Nightmares | 55 |
| Blank Stare, Green Light | 56 |
| Degrees Celsius | 57 |

| | |
|--|----|
| If We Break Up | 58 |
| Through Photo Frames | 59 |
| The Addition of Every Day | 60 |
| <i>You Flew in Like She Wasn't the Spider</i> | |
| If I Come Back | 62 |
| Oh Please, Let It Be Lightning | 63 |
| Persimmon, Crushed | 64 |
| Watercolor Wanderlust | 65 |
| Lies about Sea Creatures | 66 |
| This Is Not a Poem about a Whale | 67 |
| Drinking in Costa Rica | 68 |
| Playa Tamarindo at Sunset | 69 |
| Some Thoughts on Faith | 70 |
| These Trees Are So Familiar | 71 |
| I Meet the Pacific | 72 |
| Mercurial | 73 |
| The Fly Knows before We Do | 74 |
| Legacy of a Wolf Spider | 75 |
| <i>Hear Yourself Ring Hollow</i> | |
| To the Daughter I Do Not Have (I Write Your Name) | 77 |
| Body of Water | 78 |
| To the Daughter I Do Not Have (Daydream at Santa Monica) | 79 |
| My Mother Dreamed I Was Born in a Burning City—What a Strange Notion | 81 |
| Sestina for Rainy Days and Empty Mornings | 82 |
| Tell Me Something Good | 83 |
| To the Daughter I Do Not Have (Some Days) | 84 |
| Little Ocean | 85 |
| To the Daughter I Do Not Have (You Are the Ocean) | 86 |
| Emilianna's Poem | 87 |

YOU DON'T TALK ABOUT IT

Leigh Cheak

December 2017

87 Pages

Directed by: Tom C. Hunley, Mary Ellen Miller, and Rebecca Brown

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

I am a poet. As an undergraduate, I explored the other genres of writing—I wrote short stories, attempted a novel-length piece, and crafted essays. While I found plays interesting, I could not write one satisfactorily. But poetry fit like an extension of myself. I could fuse my voice and my ideas in stanzas and images, and I found myself weighing words and sounds as I constructed the lines. It was only natural that I pursue mastery in poetry when I returned for my Masters of Fine Arts.

The material presented in this document is the culmination of two years of specialized study in how to craft poetry. In those two years, I have maintained the idea that this collection be relatable, feminist, and emotionally powerful. While the poetry has certainly evolved over that two-year span, the ideas kept each piece connected to my envisioned whole.

The poems revolve around different obsessions I harbored while writing. I meditate on various relationships, personal experiences, and striking images and feelings I felt deserved attention. Of course, this collection is intensely personal, but I believe that it is through the personal that we can reach the general, which is what makes these poems accessible.

I also used this manuscript as a device for exploration and play. Some poems follow strict formal guidelines, and others meander to their destination. Some are short and concise, others long and nebulous. But each is refined and given exceptional thought.

I believe that readers will clearly see how much study was necessary to write these poems; it is through reading the works of the great poets before me that I was able to come to them. My influences show, not only in allusions, but in the choices I've made and the structure of the poems themselves.

I submit this manuscript as the culmination of my work, in partial fulfilment of a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing.

You Don't Talk About It.

You've probably read *Fight Club*,
so you know the first rule, & the second.
I get a pass because I'm a woman
and not a member.
But every woman has a degree
of violence in her make-up.

Some days, I imagine knocking
the air from my boss's lungs until
her chest is a vacuum.
I resist the urge to break my father's ribs.
I want to hit my lover as hard as I can.
My fingers curl into balls of brass,
and I want to go ape-shit on a stranger's nose.
But this is not because of something I read.
I'm a kettle keeping steam & I don't have
a whistle hole to keep the pressure low.
This is my life, & it's ending one minute at a time.

If you've read *Fight Club*, you know the story
was never about *Fight Club*.
Fight Club just sort-of happened.
It taught us men weren't meant to be caged,
or coddled, or comfortable. Men were made
to work, & sweat, & swear, & fight.
There is no in-between.
Fathers are gods & most men never had either.
Women are invisible or Marla Singer.

Sometimes, you have to make things explode.
Sometimes, you are the thing that explodes.

Universes Beyond How Deep We Can Swim

One Interpretation of Your Silence.

I assume you turned the light out on me
because I called you an asshole, loudly,
on the phone. & I said more,
things a daughter should never say

to her father, but I don't remember what.
At some point I buried it,
believing the sand could cover it
as easily as shells & footprints disappear

on a beach. Cursing tasted good on my tongue,
and getting away with it emboldened me
enough to repeat. I should have known that sin
is the high of a moment, but leaves

scars carved in skin. I'm sorry
I wasn't the Friday night or steak dinner
you expected. I'm sorry I wasn't the
cheeky baby, head full of fine, dark hair,

bubbles of laughter & spit-up popping
off my lips. I'm sorry I wasn't
the toddler you tucked into bed
with a kiss & a bedtime story.

Imagine my surprise when my reliable carriage
turned into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight.
You split when you hit the ground, leaving me
with a torn dress, a missing shoe, & no way home.

I Was a Ballerina.

I got my chance when I was seven:
my yellow tutu, ribboned
tambourine in hand
while the violin played
“Sunrise, Sunset”
from Fiddler on the Roof.
My toes pointed, right leg lifted
like a crane,
those toes skimming
my left calf. Then leg unfolded
like a courtesan fan,
lowered back to stage.
A chorus of girls dancing in-time.
One & a two & a three, fall.

I remember the lights.

I have one photo: me in teal-sequined leotard,
shoes spray-painted gold,
the comb with yellow forget-me-nots
in hair French-braided with ribbons.
Arms lifted, chest peacocked.
One leg planted below me,
the other, a spike.

I watched the other girls
accept roses from their fathers.

It Happened the Summer I Went to VBS.

I remember
my father, limp-legged
on the couch.

My mother, fist so tight,
knuckles white,
then uncoiled
as her declaration
vomited out—
all that sickness
spitting into the space
between them

and rather than listen
I tapped an impatient foot
to “Family Portrait,”
Pink’s plea for her family
to work it out, avoid divorce.

The song ended before their voices did.

Dead Things.

My sister said we had to save the poor thing,
find a shovel, scoop it up. That was the thing

to do. Turtle drowned in our septic pond;
we could not leave it. That was the kind of thing

adults did. Our father told us not to. *Stay away
from the water*, he said. I wished it was something

more like a pond or a pool, so we wouldn't
have to visit Mamaw's to swim. Anything

would be better than a body of water we
couldn't touch. This turtle, frothing,

choked on murky water. Why did he say
we could not save it? Did he have something

to save us from? He never said, but when
we showed him the retrieved body, the thing

he didn't want us to touch, he raised his voice,
called me *gullible*. & that's the thing

that haunts me—his voice a slap on my cheek,
the shame of it. Not the dead thing.

My Grandmother Walks through the Shadowed Valley to Heaven.

-for Peggy

Her paper-thin feet tread on clover
dappled with wildflowers.
Honeysuckle & lavender sway.
Hidden sun rising.

I watch her age backwards:
her skin rebukes
crow's feet & accordion lines.
I see the woman in her photo book
through a Vaseline lens:
young, in white—
perhaps the only time she smiled.

Nearby, a scorpion arches
its tail & climbs down
from its rock. I watch it
stalk through crabgrass,
poised to meet her naked foot.
She doesn't see it.

I want to scream,
to turn her head with my hands,
but I am only a voyeur in this dream.

When the scorpion touches her
I notice the venom bulb—
absent. Sting-less scorpion.
How did she know it would not hurt?

Four Summers After.

-For my grandmother, Peggy

I find the key inside
the faded garden frog.
You told me to look
there my first summer
at your river house,
when Papaw took the boat
for leisure floats to the lock
and we two stayed &
played double's solitaire.

Now, I finger-paint the even dust
on your counters. Your stovetop
heaped with Pyrex dishes.
Moisture seeped into the walls;
mold moved in.

You kept the feeders tucked under the sink
next to your sugar formula. It cakes
the can like old Kool-Aid.
I scoop some out & add water
(Papaw still pays the bill from Florida).
Shake it until it glows ruby
like the breasts of your favorite birds
and brightens the grey room.

I take the feeder outside,
hang it in its place in front
of your kitchen window
where your bushes have grown wild.
The jade birds come, hum,
and sip from faded plastic flowers.

My Stepsister & Her Dad Communicate Like This.

After hollering her throat hoarse,
she comes downstairs tear-streaked.
My step-father slams his door closed
and slouches into bed.

I put the kettle on, search
the baker's rack for the honey bear.
At the kettle-whistle, I pour
steaming water over mint tea bags
settled in ceramic mugs.
I stir honey in to soothe her throat.

That's a lie—
I keep busy making tea for me
so I won't catch her eye when she walks out.

My Relationship with Oranges.

I like to peel the skin & tear the pre-packaged slices in half to pluck each little sack of juice. I roll them between my fingers & around my tongue & press them against the roof of my mouth until they give. It takes me an hour per orange.

I think of my father when I'm peeling oranges. How he cradled one in the palm of his hand & sliced into the rind. His thumb would dig into the center and push. I think of my father when I'm eating oranges. When he finished with the neon sheath, he would split it between us. We'd lick the juice from our fingers and he'd start peeling another orange to share.

My Niece's Nightmares.

“The song of doing nothing is much quieter...”

-Bob Hicok

When my niece wakes up crying her mother doesn't hear it;
Mommy sleeps behind iron bars.

Mommy speaks to her through a telephone cord.
They touch hands through glass.

My niece brings drawings of her red-head mommy
to the jailhouse, sings her ABC's to the guard.

Mommy smiles & her gums are dark,
her eyes raccooned without makeup.

My niece thinks her father died from a heart-attack,
and maybe he did. As a result of overdose.

My mother wakes & tells my niece to *shhhhh*. says,
it was just a dream, even though they both know better.

Amber, Imagined as a Mirror.

She is a modern recreation of a Victorian frame,
made of plastic, painted hot pink. She's fallen
off the wall so many times, we've lost count.
But you could count the cracks in the ivy
vine-work, touched up with fingernail paint.

I huffed on her cool surface, hid my reflection
so I wouldn't see myself looking back from inside
her. My step-sister thinks she's a piece of art,
and maybe she was, once. She's the kind
I would pick from a thrift store, paint white.
The mirror glass, a little too fun-house, needs replacing.

I like to rebuild broken things in my image—
see them come back so new we don't remember
what they were before. I can do that with the chairs
I find on the side of the street, the frames I bought
second-hand. I can even do it with an entertainment
system I claimed from my Grandparent's house.
But I can't fix her.

Heather, As a Flower.

There are no bad seeds, just ones that don't flower.
When a seed takes root, burrows up to sunlight,
that first curl of green leaf yawns awake.

It's easy to imagine what she'll look like as a mature
plant, carefully tended by a constant gardener.
Purple-petaled, feathering the stalk. The painting end
of an artist's brush. But hope for her is a thing

with feathers that smacks into windows. My step-sister is
the flower of a false spring, growing straight before frost comes
and bends her back into the ground from which she sprung.

Perhaps she wasn't well-kept, never pruned
by her father's shears. Maybe he cut too much. Maybe
her mother was the wrong soil, or soil used & spent.
Would I have flowered in her place? Nature leaves me with no answer.

“Social” Means Something Different Now.

It’s my aunt’s birthday today. I know,
not because I remember—technology eats
my memory—but because we’re “friends”
and Facebook has sent a reminder.

I find the little box on her “wall” where I type
Happy Birthday
and add a balloon emoticon.

Body of Salt.

I remember feeling like
my father had taken
an ice cream scoop
to my chest, like
he'd reached in
& shoveled.

His absence
stamped salt ring tears
on my stepfather's
blue work shirts.

I filled that emptiness
with throat-hoarse curses
and tears
that dried into a salt pit.

In it, I buried his face—
his dark eyes
and wide nose &
wiry black moustache.

I buried memories of oranges
and brown loafers.
The timbre of his voice.
The caramel way
he used to say my name.

Springtime.

A sparrow rides the air currents above the rooftops. Below, cars line the edges of the strip-shops & the center park. Trees recovering themselves in green. Sleepy tulips poke their heads up around the bases of statues. I think of my mother's peonies, how their buds were the size of softballs & I thought them ugly because they crawled with ants. Those make me think of May days waiting for the warmth to settle into Mamaw's pool. Summer days dripping in the front yard while she made bologna sandwiches. A muddy disk is all that's left of that pool, & this necklace around my neck is all that's left of my mamaw, but that's a sad thought so I focus on the pear blossom trees swaying in the spring breeze. Springtime is best when the magnolia leaves shimmer with sunlight. But I'm used to the rain too, the grey clouds lying down for a nap. I stay inside & light all the candles, remember that the rain is a prelude to flowers.

Poynter's *Andromeda* (1869).

Stripped & chained to rock
wrists red & raw.
Her mother's boast angered Poseidon,
but a girl-child always bears
her parent's punishment.

How did her father ignore her cries?
Her voice cracking his name
as he ordered men to take her.

Naked next to salt water
where the monster
will rise. Wind rough,
whipping waves into frenzy,
a fleeing shawl pinched between her calves.

Her father didn't know
if the sea-beast Cetus
was a whale or a squid.
Didn't know if it would swallow her
whole or rip her apart.
Didn't know if a hero would come
riding a winged horse,
Medusa's head held captive in his fist.

My Mother on Painkillers.

Mama, you are twisting your hands
in the sheets & tossing your head
and looking right past me, shrieking.
I'm just a silhouette by your hospital bed,
and even though I was an accident,
I'm still yours & I'm the one here.

I press the cold cloth to your head,
stroke your hair back because
you've always been so particular
about how you looked to doctors.
You never want anyone to see you
sweat or shake. I file your nails down
so when you thrash you can't claw
yourself or me. I am here, Mama, stroking
your arms & trying to be brave.

Mama, I am singing to you, those gospels
you liked that I used to sing
to the whole church before you made me perform
with strep throat. Now I'm croaking
the melody & that's okay because you can't hear me
or won't remember.

The nurses shake their heads
like they know our secrets.

Letter to Peggy.

In the winter, you wore a white sweatshirt
with your grandchildren's names airbrushed
on your chest. I should have bought you another,
so I could see you wear my name too.

Do you remember midnight
pedicures where I dug ingrown skin
from under your nails? Before you died
I soaked your feet one final time
and rounded your nails with a file
to keep them from catching in the sheets.

You used to call me *Sugarfoot*,
which made me imagine candied rabbits' feet
dangling from a key ring—a sweet good luck charm.
I hope you thought the same.

I tried to make your cinnamon glass
last Christmas, but I couldn't find any
cinnamon oil in stores. & I cried because it was
one more thing of yours I couldn't have—
like all your knickknacks molding
in your shut-up house,
your arm chair caked in dust.

Four years & I still hear you humming
and I remember you mixing ruby water for
your feeders. I can't work crossword puzzles
without drawing 3D boxes around the edge.
Yours were geometric, crisp lines. Mine aren't.

Sometimes I pass by your river house,
and the house you kept in town.
Is your Christmas tree still up?
Are there still presents waiting for next year?
I wish I could claim them, give them to the children
I'll someday have, & tell them they're from you,
with love.

Lost Girl Sestina.

There's one thing you should know about my father:

My last image of him—slinking out of the courthouse, his back to me as he got in his car & drove across state lines. My mom thought it was about time he showed me who he really was. I was a crumpled body, a girl done wrong. I try to bury it a little deeper each year, but I'll never get him out. His leaving is something I'll never forgive.

I still don't know much about forgiveness.

A few years ago, *Dad* became *Biological Father*.

I replaced him with my mother's husband. My father ran out, but I missed his reassuring smile & baritone laugh. I wanted him back. I could forget those missing calls, his sudden wedding ring—everything that was wrong in our relationship if he would just give me time.

My father knows what it means to lose—the most significant time was when his parents begged him to call off the wedding & cut ties. Did he forgive them for cutting him out of their family portrait? They said he was wrong to marry outside of their class & religion, to marry someone whose father was white instead of brown. Did he look back and think they were right when my mother asked him to move out?

I don't think so. He married another white woman—couldn't get out of wanting the wrong person. I think he learned that sometimes your happiness comes at the expense of others', & he couldn't give mine back. Maybe he hoped I would forget in his absence, & one day forgive him for failing me. Maybe he thought I deserved a better father because he was too much like his own. Men can be so wrong

when they make decisions for others. I know I felt wronged, but maybe this was his only way out, the only way to reconcile his own issues with his father.

As the cliché goes, some things are only healed with time.

I don't think my father understands attachment, or how to forgive.

When I met my grandfather in his coffin, my father cried. That night, he drove back

to his childhood home. He thought his mother would welcome him back, but she hid inside until he gave up & drove home. She should know how wrong it is to grip disappointment so hard your knuckles turn white & you forget how to forgive. She proved a mother can deny her son when he cries out; my father proved that a man can abandon his child. But I think time has tempered my hurt. Maybe I don't understand attachment. I see him now: my father,

synonymous with disappointment. Maybe time has ripened him. Maybe he knows he was
wrong

to run out. I can't turn back into the little girl & he can't be my daddy anymore, but maybe we can learn to forgive the past. Maybe I can learn to forgive my father.

If They Touch Me While I'm Sleeping.

I remember nights
at my grandparent's home,
sleeping in Papaw's
cotton shirts,
worn thin and sometimes
holey in the armpit.
I climbed onto one side
of Mamaw's California King
spread my arms
marked my space.

My sister's warm skin
grazed mine, but didn't press
closer. My arms retreated,
my hands on my belly.
Touching only myself.

Mamaw turned off the milk lamp
on her bedside table.

I was afraid to let anyone touch me—
I didn't want my dreams to transfer
through my skin, for someone
to see the scenes from R-rated movies
I'd peeked at. The Playboy channel
I discovered at six a.m.
while my parents were sleeping.

I slept untouched,
kept my dreams to myself.

Little Girl Likes Lingerie.

I felt so grown-up
in my hot-
pink nightgown.
It was like
what my mother wore
when she
wanted to be sexy.
Short, sassy
satin, makes a twelve-year-old
mature.

He caught me wearing it
one day.
I changed clothes,
knowing
he shouldn't see me.

That night
they celebrated his presence
with champagne
and they let me have a sip.
Mother acted
like they were serious even though her divorce
wasn't final.

After, she said it was time for bed.
I said goodnight
and put my nightgown on.

He wanted
a hug. Mother encouraged it.
So, I let him
sit me in his lap.
She held
an emptied wineglass by the stem.

I wore
my nightgown in her
boyfriend's house,
and he slipped it off me one night.

This Day Is a Version of the Last Until It Isn't.

I can't keep track of the days
I've lost under the sheets;
they're becoming an endangered species.
This is what happens when nothing drives you.
When purpose vanishes, and rest
seems well-deserved. And it is,
for the first week.
But I need to relearn to swim.

I was a fish in my grandmother's pool.
I was also the child left at the bottom of the hill,
searching for the ball kicked into the tall weeds.
No one waits for anyone—
that's how far away we are from each other.
What remains grows ravenous for friendship,
feels like a starving dog gnawing leather.

Sleeping Naked

Hosanna.

The good news is
that the patches on the window
of my life can be peeled away.

I fell back into water,
a hand over my mouth and
I held my breath and expected
a light show when I came up. I didn't
even wipe my eyes before they opened
and I looked for Him on the altar.
Hand claps faded and I stood
dripping, toweling my hair.

I thought of the museum,
Grecian sculptures standing
like gossips interrupted.
What kind of miracle sends the image
of a body made of stone
into the mind of an artist?
What moves his hands to chisel
a likeness into eternity?

I wished that kind of muse
would unlatch the steel bolt
in my heart, send me music.

And maybe it did.
Maybe the pastors were right
and my body made the water holy.
The good news is that even though
I felt Him dripping off me,
the body risen from the water
was a body of tongues.

Like A Blade of Iris, My Body

bends & dances in the wind.
I bloom for the sun, open
my petals to rain drops,
& bees, & noses.
My nectar sweet succulent.
My scent rises, beckons.
I glisten gold like honey,
like a peony radiant with ants.

Like snakes, my hands
side-wind around my head.
I smear them with honey
to catch mate-less moths
I attract when my body
becomes illuminated,
like a crescent moon in the rain.

Like a teacup, my mouth
with its open O brims
with drink and honey-
words whispered like a
goodnight & a chaste kiss.
Too hot to sip, then tepid,
tea leaves sweep the bottom
before the cup overturns
& the tea's thrown out.

Like a window, my heart
breaks against a river-smooth stone.

Like stained glass, I
reassemble into something beautifully destroyed.

Some Days I Am a Bottle of Wine.

I find myself stoppered,
cork shoved deep.
Someone has stolen
my corkscrew. Or maybe
I only dreamed I had a corkscrew,
only drank myself in dreams.

I have illusions that I am Degas
stippling dancers on canvas.
Each small stroke meaningful,
necessary. My fingertips
could easily be brushes.
They could also be guitar picks,
but only if a long-fingered man held
strings to fretboard. My hands
are too small to stretch—they ring my wrists
only because those, too, are small.

I keep my fingers on my throat
when they are cold,
let the blood pulse heat into them.
Sometimes they meander towards my shoulders,
like they want to brush my shirt aside,
like they want to explore
the other warm places of my body.

My body which is not swan-like,
not made for ballet.
I could never be a Degas dancer,
feet turned out or pointed, stretched
away from hands reaching for an imagined lover.
My body is blown glass, a bottle of wine.
Stoppered, sometimes lacking a corkscrew.

Ashtray in The Mouth.

I remember the slow

spin of drunkenness.

My body would settle, but still swirl end over end
and if I hadn't been pleasantly warm I might have been afraid
of the drink coming up to stain my clothes.

And in the morning, I brushed my teeth twice
to stop my stomach's turning.

I wonder if I blacked out—

friends say I told them things I don't remember saying.

I sometimes miss my tipsy life.

Sometimes I see wine bottles on the shelf
at the grocery store
and I reach for the pink Moscato

catch my hand mid-air
yank it back.

Down.

"We know now we have always been in danger..."

-Adrienne Rich

I'm on a bridge above the Barren River
in the dark—less people.
I lean over the railing,
hack thick phlegm
from the back of my throat
& spit. A ripple indicates impact.
Slick slap echoes back.
The river swallows
& continues its slow crawl.
Next, I drop a rock the size of my fist.
It plummets, plunks.

I climb the railing—
getting over is easy.
There's a column holding the bridge up
with enough room to sit on.
My legs drape over the edge,
my shoe dangles from my toes.
I curl them in; the shoe falls.
It's just a flat, but it still hits
with a splash. I scoot to the edge
of the concrete and lean over,
until I test the balance
too much. Then, I fall,
cannonball
into the shallow river.

She Became a Sun.

I orbit no one.

She said it like
she meant a sun,
her celestial body worshipped
by orbiting chunks of rock.
She said, *no one moves me.*

She sings the body
electric. Like she pointed one finger
to storm clouds and lightning
reached for her, ricocheted
from finger to foot, arced
through each cell and vessel.

The hot hum in her veins
like that gasp of air that shoots
straight through when you break
water after caging your breath.

Did someone vise her throat
and pull her under water?
She doesn't tell me her secrets.

Can you decide to be unmovable?
I've tried. It never held.

Did she practice becoming a sun?
It takes fire—where did she find it?

Self-Portrait in the Rain.

I turn my face up to rain drops,
let them freckle my face.
Sprinkle turns to monsoon—
little rivers run over my cheeks
& chin. The cascade continues
through the valley
between my breasts.

My dress clings to my body
for warmth. She molds
to my skin, but her own body
keeps her from outlining
the junction between my legs.

Soaked, I saunter to the porch
& drip my outline.
This puddle at my feet—
water & oil, flecks of skin,
eyeliner & foundation.
My foot shoves it out to join
the puddles forming in the yard.
In this way, I go back to Mother.

I peel off my dress in warm
bedroom light. The air whispers
to the sheath of water on my body.
I step beneath the false rain in my
bathroom, scrub my face with nails
& soap. I remove the remaining
oil & water, then rope a towel
around my hair & look in the mirror
at what can't be washed away.

Bones.

I wake up and my body says
five more minutes, which really means,
another hour. Let me lie here until I can't
stand it anymore, which really means
I could die here.

But it doesn't, because after long enough,
the bed becomes uncomfortable.
When did this become my morning?

I get up. I brush my teeth. I look at them and see
the shift from yellow to white, smears of coffee-stains.
My teeth have never been perfect,
but I don't remember seeing these before
my last appointment. The dentist says I grind
the night in my teeth. The molars need fill-ins
because they won't rebuild themselves.

I stretch and feel my spine lengthen, then recoil.
This body is still full of potential. My bones are
still sturdy. One day it will be difficult, but
today I shift into Downward Dog and push
the center of my body up: an offering, a test.
My hands and feet firmly planted
in the carpet of my living room.

Image in a Looking Glass.

I have mirrors
in my bathroom above
the sink. On the door.
In my closet. Against
my bedroom wall.
Is it vanity?

In them
I see almond-eyes,
not simply brown—there's
a ring of gold. The faint freckle
beneath my left eye. The bow
of my upper lip. The dip

between
rib and hip. Slope
of rounded shoulder,
flap of flesh under breast
when I slouch. How my
thighs meet and dimple.
Skin pimpled with hair
sharpened by last
week's razor.

I like to
inspect myself.

I try not to stare
in public bathrooms
or in mirrors of houses
I visit. Someone might
catch me looking.

Southern & the City.

I'll tell you a secret: I didn't
always wrap my language
around me like a patchwork
quilt. I saw my tongue
like corn husk—shuck it off,
pick out every thread.

I know my twang is a red light.
Northern city people prefer friends
with the same tongue. They aren't
used to Southern syrup—
too sweet for their tart.

Downtown, cars honk
at each other like geese.
City folk don't look
at each other. A girl who smiles
with her eyes is a caution sign.
Mannequin windows
flash sequins & faux
jewels, the language of
millennials. We've got them too.
Some girls wear them with boots,
where I'm from.
Some wear them with heels.

Degas, *Through a Keyhole*.

He's known for watching dancers:
little girls stretching their legs
and arms, arching their backs.

Less known,
he liked to look at women bathing,
liked to watch them towel themselves,
pat dewdrops from heated skin. He said
it was a view we weren't supposed to see—
exposed woman,
alone in her bathing room.

He did not sketch them from the front;
instead, he liked the muscles
of their backs. Some show one cheek
uncovered, one breast in profile.
But it's the valley of spine he loved,
the arch of back, one arm working
the towel or soap, the other tugging hair
over her shoulder and up, casual contortion.

Counseling Session.

She turns the light on and every dirty thought and bad memory projects onto the walls where we play connect-the-dots like they're constellations. *Eridanus. Orion. Andromeda.*

Bird chatter enters through the open window, along with distant mower and the smell of fresh-cut grass. I taste the pollen and the sweat on my lip. The light tinged blue from paint. Rough fabric under my elbows grits with every movement.

Guilt tastes like metal in the mouth—feels like chugging pennies.

Shame is a clamp tightening around your throat, a rusty tourniquet squealing with each turn. Regret, like frozen pins down your spine and the resulting gooseflesh.

Can you hear me from the hallway?

You, Dr. Freud, are you eavesdropping? Are you here to tell me that my memories fall like the apples in Jackson Orchard, and I am the ants dancing in rotting cores?

You're not eavesdropping—I'm being paranoid. I am not ants. I am inside my head in the counselor's office and suddenly it tastes like the walls of hospitals.

I know this because I've seen *Grey's Anatomy* and have worn the paper gowns and waited on paper liners, my legs swinging over the edge of the table.

My head is wonky. I don't need a therapist to tell me that.

She needs an anti-depressant, stat. And maybe some tramadol, I imagine her saying once she's walked me out and returned to the place where therapists lounge and discuss their patients while their patients wait to be seen.

I pass the other waiting-patientlies, some coloring in provided books and some absorbed by their phones.

I picture myself taking their books and their phones and smashing them. They don't need distraction—they need help, and I've seen a therapist enough to replicate.

Dr. Cheak is here to offer her benevolent smile and occasional scribbles and inattentive nods.

She will listen to you and will tell you that your boyfriend problems are fixable as long as you are fixable. She will pat your shoulder when you feel sad. She will ask you questions you've already asked yourself. She will wait for you to answer them.

She will be your unlikely gardener—shears sharpened for pruning.

She will paint her walls teal and steer you to a plush armchair and put on some nice music and maybe even light a candle and make you feel inappropriate.

The Skittles in the candy bowl whisper that I'm lying—that you shouldn't trust me.

After all, I'm just a head-shot lampshade, crazy thoughts spackling the walls like constellations.

Love Knots

Knot Ghazal.

I write poems about the people who tie me up in knots.
I write about the men who lashed me in love knots
that unraveled when I stretched too tight. And other men
kept me riddled, chasing my tail, tripping over the knots
I created—my father, the rabbit who ran from my gun.
His father, sleeping in a linen-lined box, turban knotted
and I took photos of his sleeping face because I'd never
seen him before, never wanted to forget. He knots
me up because those pictures never developed; I lost
them and I lost his face. I've lost my father's too—it's not
where I remember. Is there a collection of lost faces?
Sometimes they reveal themselves to me, knotted
in my sheets and I go looking for them in my dreams.
I write poems in the shapes of his face; I unfurl my knots
and find each pull and tug leads to more—
the string never runs out—maybe I am the knot.
My fingers grow spindly; I become a spider. Take the silk
from my spinnerets, weave my webs with those knots.

Black Widow.

I wore a black dress
 because red is trying too hard.
I wrapped my legs in tights
 that made you think of lace.
That's the subtle art of making love:
 I didn't let you touch me
on the first date, but
 I made sure you wanted to.

I'm the woman you take home
 to your mother.
I make the best alfredo—
 your new favorite dish.
I undo the knots
 in your shoulders.
Before bed, I blow
 out the candles in lace
you can't wait to rip off.
 You worship me
like the fury I am.

What you don't know
 is my kisses are draining.
You'll learn to watch
 the cranberry burst
of my mouth.

Left Unsaid.

Grey birds overhead circle once, drift away. Small specks, then nothing.
Highway 120 stretches to the vanishing point. Around us, cornfields
for miles. Green stalks I can see for a moment before they blur in passing.
The window tints them blue-green. The sky is slightly bluer too.
Around me, everything is stationary and we are hurtling past it.
You clutch the steering wheel so hard your knuckles are big and white.
Your mouth moves and I know you're chewing on the inside of your cheek.
You turned the radio off. You turned the A/C off. The tires vibrate
and the engine hums and that is the only sound besides our breathing.
You locked the windows, so I can't cover your anticipation with whistling.
I look out the window. I pretend the corn stalks are whispering
to me. They do all the talking.
They don't want me to say anything.

Spell for Curing Loneliness.

You will not need colored candles or crystals,
or even a pentagram circle made of salt.

You will dip your spoon into an avocado,
remember what the color green tastes like.
You will fill your thermos with Costa Rican
Tarrazu, which you can order online
or buy at your local grocer. And if you have
your ex's tie-tack, you will use it to anchor
your tea bag, because a good life starts with
Earl Grey or an orange Oolong.

You will dig wool socks from the back
of the drawer and wear them like Tom Cruise.
Slide them over hardwood floors or friction them
against carpet. You will crown your messy bun
with the tiara you kept from prom.

Your cats will think you're crazy—
but they'll rub against the wool of your feet
and purr. They will shed on you. You will
pick them up and they will let you.

You will sink into the couch with a bowl
of ice cream, or a plate of fresh-baked
chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk,
and you will watch that sappy rom-com
that he hated and you loved. And you will
forget that how love plays out in movies
is not how love plays out in our lives.

The One Where Two People Walk into a Bar.

A girl and a professor walk into a college bar. The professor orders a scotch, neat, because he's got an image to maintain, you know. He invites the girl to sit on the seat beside him which looks like leather but really isn't. As soon as she sits she feels moisture seeping through her skirt—the sweat of someone wearing short-shorts or maybe a skirt and imagine how her thighs clung to the seat and the sound of plastic kissing flesh goodbye and leaving a hickey. She's drawn to his bowtie because she's never seen a bowtie before. And he's looking her over because she looks like a young China girl in a Bowie music video, but she passed security so that makes her not jailbait. He could be Bowie if one pupil would stay dilated and he smacked himself in the face with a shovel. She orders a Sex on the Beach, which he tastes and admits is delicious. Orange juice, coconut rum, and grenadine, she says. Tropical. Sexy. She lets her fingers trail over his forearm and grins at the gooseflesh rising. A slow song with a deep bass comes on and she rubs the arch of her foot against his calf in time. He knows where this is going. He's glad he wore boxer briefs today. She smiles a toothy smile, like a fox.

About-Face.

We met at a welcome party where I accosted you
and asked if you'd like to revise with me, make a magazine maybe
and we reeled our selves in, made everything else null, and void.
You turned towards me and blew out the candles of your marriage.
We withdrew from friends, made our bed together in rumpled sheets.
We called it all off, took a running leap from the cliff-face.

We called it all off, didn't take that running leap from the cliff-face.
We made our beds from rumpled sheets and we withdrew
and blew out the candles of our marriage. You turned towards her
and we reeled ourselves in, made everything null and void
and I asked if you'd like to revise with me, make a magazine. Maybe
I shouldn't have accosted you when we met at the welcome party.

Modern Love.

There are dishes in the sink.
Dishes crusted in leftover sauce
and crumbs. Milk dries
at the bottom of five glasses.
The dishwasher, left empty.

He greets me with a kiss that begs
for shedding clothes and twisting sheets,
but I cut it off.

Evidence of his day lies scattered:
the TV flickers—a ship in orbit waits for him
to choose a destination. An empty glass rests
next to the abandoned controller, crusting milk
rims the bottom. His laptop screen stands black,
but I hear the soft hum of mechanical parts.
I hope he's sent more emails,
maybe checked the Classifieds.

He's always home now, in the house he claims
I empty every time I step out the door.
I wish he would at least put water in his glasses.

The glass clinks in the sink and fills with water.
Chips of milk swirl for a moment, then settle.

He hugs me from behind, kisses my neck
before letting go. He takes the rice
from the cabinet and measures two cups;
He knows mine comes out crunchy.

I know the loneliness of unemployment.
I know the guilt of asking a parent for more
than advice. I keep my tongue behind my teeth,
start to scrub the glass clean.
Perhaps he wants to decorate the house
with empties so he is not the only one.

Ugly Sleeper.

Some nights, I curl
into my blankets, but I am a leach
and cannot make warmth.

So when I get you
next to me, I curl into you
and find my toes unfrozen.

I snore, and sometimes whisper,
and you are a light sleeper anyway
so you hear me,

and you are still next to me
in the morning even though I
drooled on your shoulder.

What I Want to Know.

After Oriah Mountain Dreamer

I want to know what holes exist
within you,
and if you'll dare to fill them.

I want to know if you'll risk
dancing with me
at somebody else's wedding.

Will you kiss me full of cake?
Brave the hot-air balloon
to share the view with me?

Have you touched the white-hot
pain of betrayal and come back open?

Have you become a cavern so dark
you'd swear you had no body?
Have you curled into yourself like
a snail's spiral shell?

I need to know if you can take your pain
or mine and keep it, hold onto it when it is
unfixable, unhideable, unknowable.

Can you be careless? Can you forget
the boundaries of your body
and walk to the edge of Natural Bridge,
confident you won't fall?

I want to know if you can live
with our failures. Will you see
the beauty of an orchid fully bloomed
once petals fall from stalk?

I want to know what you can make,
what you can build with your hands
and with your mouth.

And I want to know if you can get up
when your body feels like a yellowed bruise.

Will you touch my sharpest edges knowing
your fingers might get sheared?

I want to know that if my flame goes out,
you'll strike your match to bring me back.

The Truth All Poets Know.

Inspired by Tom C. Hunley

After two hours on the road, we
pulled into my parents' driveway, all
sore in the hip. But they had just
gone out, left a note on the door: "have

a seat—don't do anything we wouldn't." To
which I thought, *why didn't they text?* But they live
where cell phones don't connect, where deer fall with
bullets shot out of my dad's old RV. Outside, the

poplar tree shivers in the spring wind. In fact,
it's raining now. Some people think that
rain is God crying, and I wonder if we
look up, does He see our faces? Could He suck

in the sky through His pursed mouth? Compared
to Him, we are dust motes hanging on to
sunlight. We sing of ourselves, like Walt,
but the body electric belongs to Whitman.

Potion No. 9.

My mother says the secret
is a drop of Lavender siphoned
from a shallow silver bowl.

I mix Copaiba,
lime, and Vanilla
crushed from beans
of white flowers.

Spicy floral
from the tropics,
I say.

Dash in Cedarwood
gathered through steam.
Ocotea, the sourwood
tree some know is sweet.

Now spin it
end over end—
don't shake the vial.
Lift it against the light
where it sparkles—
prism of amber glass.

Dot it on your wrists
to remind him of his mother—
homey scent of her dress,
her hair pinned prim
behind her ear.

Dab it on your neck
and close your eyes.
What do you see?

I always see the same
path between trees,
shadow of a wolf's tail
or a squirrel zipping,
the sound of water
slipping from rock.

Goddess.

She is

the doe stags clash for
the air ruffling rows of cherry blossoms
the red poppy, face up for the sun
conqueror of ant hills

She

sips from rocky mountain springs
overflows with beeswax and honey
made trees whistle a lullaby
drips opiates
shakes squirrels from their nests
shifts bedrock
causes earthquakes

She

stung you
 when you swatted her wasps
flashed monarch eyes
 but you ignored them

 and you flew in like she wasn't the spider

What Happens on TV.

The sun moved in the morning and the moon moved in the evening and then the sun moved in the morning and the moon moved in the evening and where were you in all that time? I was here, on the couch, eyes fixed on the lives in the television that are much more interesting than my life. They're so beautiful—they don't show ugly people on television, even on reality shows. My life is not a reality show—I see ugly people all around me and in the mirror which is why I'm here, on the couch, eyes fixed on the lives in the television. I learned from my dad that the only way to feel better is to watch Jerry Springer, which airs at eleven. The people on his show aren't beautiful, but their lives are much more interesting than mine. This girl slept with her best friend's man, and he says he wants to leave his woman but she wants to fight, and then it's bleeps and weave pom-poms and censored blocks where one girl rips the other's top down. And let me tell you, it's so much better when you're watching these other people make complete fools of themselves for love and pride than when you do it yourself, live.

When He Looks at Her.

When the doors open,
I watch the groom's eyes dart
to the woman in white.
The other attendees turn
to the sparkling bride,
swathed in silk & crystal,
but I see his face illuminate
like the moment between flicking
the switch & adjusting to the sudden
brilliance of my living room.

Everything I own waiting
patiently for my return—
the priceless tea set
my mother gave me,
that her grandmother gave her,
arranged with each painted dragon visible;
a hidden Geisha girl molded
into the bottom; the wicker wingback
& sequined pillow; the bookshelf
filled with wrinkled spines;
the bicycle clock I painted.
I see them every time I step through
the doorway. Their willingness to stay
where I put them reminds me
that I am safe in the nest I built
with tenderness so I would never
feel the poke of broken glass while I slept.

Lucky bride—
he looks at her like that.

I Pray But

It rises in me

like a war

cry

The slide of skin

ribbon unraveled

Open-mouthed

kisses

on lips, chest, hips

The curves of

his muscled arm

beg

my tongue

to taste more

My body

the alabaster altar

I pray

for guidance

It captures me

a crown of thorns

I'm a screaming horse, mane on fire.

Bedtime Rituals and Dreaming.

Last night I slunk into bed half-dead.
Drunken voices silent—few stay
up late on Mondays in a college town.
My kittens chose their corners.
Cotton comforter confettied
in cat-hair, warm around me.

I snuggled backward into the big spoon of my lover.
His lips pressed against my neck,
his arm over my ribs banished the voices saying
So much work to do.
My toes sought his, curled over them to say goodnight.
He reached back and turned the switch.

In sleep, he twitches. His dreams are nightmares
he can't remember. Sometimes his breath gets trapped
and he gasps awake. I wish he could see the empty dark
of my sleep. I wish I knew what he saw when asleep—

but dreams don't escape our sleeping bodies.
Dreams disappear only when we open our eyes
and notice our bladders are full
and we are hungry
and the sunlight is so bright
and there's so much to do
and what was I dreaming?

Before Him, I Never Had Nightmares.

He curls around me & my mind falls backward into dark places
where it unfurls. I feel tendrils of terror reach for me.
His nightmares find their way into my dreams,
become my nightmares. His body
sweats beside mine.

In my nightmares
His body is gone.
I am adrift
in an ocean of sheets,
no buoy or man
to cling to, seawater
in my throat.
Sharks circle me.
Teeth take chunks of flesh
but do not kill me.
Water thickens with blood
but I do not die.
Each scream chokes
on seawater.
It does not end

until I wake up
& feel his body
beside mine, sweating—
the harbor I am secured to.
He pulls me closer, nuzzles into
the curls at my neck. He anchors me.

In my dreams, I tap glass under the shark tank
& it breaks & I am a mermaid with hair swaying
like seaweed & the sharks are pet hounds playing fetch.
Now the city bus fills with water & I breathe like I have gills. I float,
watch bubbles meander up & buildings wave hello-goodbye in the windows.

When he cries out
at his own nightmares,
I inch my back closer to his chest &
pray that I am his harbor, that he'll come back
to me. That his breath will slow & match mine, & he'll
follow me to the place where the sharks are pets, or maybe to a new
dream where our bodies follow the rhythmic up & down of ocean waves,
where the tide cannot pull us out to drown, where we sleep secured to harbor.

Blank Stare, Green Light.

“The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.”

-from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

I thought my life was ending
when my father’s Infinity got swallowed up
by gravel dust. Like the nebulous world
was constricting, sucked up by a cosmic vacuum.

But that emptiness feels so small and imaginary
against the painting of my lover’s melancholy
life. A marriage where the wife left to fuck
another man and came home wrapped in his cologne,
wearing it like expensive perfume and saying
doesn’t that smell so much better than yours?

But that is the outline sketch, the first layer
of acidic onion peeled back to expose his tender bulb.
I shatter at his story: the woman he loved—
imaginary sphinx, and the fabric of their lives
made of polyester, fake cotton. Her ravenous destruction,
her teeth tearing at his throat.

My mind becomes a chaotic menagerie
at the words she used to pierce him.

He’s still there, the memories slashed into his brain.
Each night I find another claw buried in his skin.

Degrees Celsius.

There's a slight chance that our love will fall
like cloudburst—sudden break
with no drizzle.

The air between us supersaturated with what I want to hear and what you can't say.
I'm afraid I am the hammer at your window
instead of a muggy handprint left in steam.

Some nights my body sweats against yours,
my face cold from the brisk you blow.
I can't regulate my temperature.

Soon I'll be a turbulent jet stream
knocking your plane out of the air.

If we measured out movement in knots,
if we became maritime sailors, do you think
we'd ever find the doldrums where
the sea is calm and the wind is calm and we are calm?
Cirrus clouds feather the sky,
milky sun bobbing on gentle waves.

We might get bored there.

If We Break Up

I'll still have
gerber daisies in spring bouquets
 with eucalyptus and baby's breath
the full moon when the lights go out
 when the night is warm

that first photograph you saw of me

chocolate-chip cookies dipped in milk
cell phone service on Dale Hollow lake
 where I don't contort to catch it

the cedar box your mother gave us
 when she left her house

the last shimmered flame before the candle smokes out
the store that stays open
 until its scheduled closing time

the dew-dripped morning breath of Earth
the last caramel brownie, still warm
re-runs of wedding reality shows

your deliberate introduction,
 when you popped into my life.

Through Photo Frames.

I bought them on sale. I liked the vintage shape,
the lace detail. Romantic ones painted an empty

blue. I placed them in groups on my mantle, on
top of the bookcase—which has never been empty.

The picture frames found homes, but are unfilled;
I took the samples out. I'd rather see an empty

frame than see a mother behind her daughter,
both smiling with their teeth. Arms not empty.

Or a tall man with his hand on his young wife's
cheek, leaning in, promise fulfilled. Their empty

marital memory box will fill with money cards
and Polaroids. Their frames won't be left empty.

The Addition of Every Day.

For Patsy

Because the sun will fade to invisibility in a billion years I want to memorize your
reflection
in the toaster while you push the bread down to brown. There are fewer stars in the sky
every night, and how many people notice? Just like I never noticed new freckles
on your body or new knick-knacks on the bookshelf until I realized the
missing empty space. Your face is different in the mirror today than
it was two years ago, your eyes slowly sinking into your skull
and I wonder how those dips in the staircase are suddenly
there—where did they come from? Today the carpet is
soaked with bath overflow, squashing underfoot and
smelling of milk and honey. You reach for the
closet light pull with gnarled hands, snap
shaking barrettes to hold your hair
back. Tonight, you'll wake me
from the floor—a beetle
rocking on her back.
The lamp overturned.
A star crashing
to Earth.

You Flew in Like She Wasn't the Spider

If I Come Back.

If there is no Heaven & I come back, make me an aurora,
waves of light arcing through nights stippled with stars.
Blend me into Borealis, my body broken, a million magnetic atoms.

Let me decorate the polar dark, swim in the midnight sun.
Let me Impression the arctic sky in shades of yellow, green, blue.
If there is no Heaven & I come back, make me an aurora.

Tell the sun to charge me, make me rise like ocean tides.
Drip me like tinted ink into crystal waters, like a curl of smoke wakes up.
Blend me into Borealis, my body broken, a million magnetic atoms.

If you love me, send a storm through space. I'll be a streamer
teased & pulled—a curtain of color turning pirouettes.
If there is no Heaven & I come back, make me an aurora.

Send me a solar flare, a gust of wind. I'll open my arms and rotate
like a spun galaxy, like a Degas dancer balanced on her toes.
Blend me into Borealis, my body broken, a million magnetic atoms.

Let me send the light back; let me spotlight the edge of Your earth.
Make me watercolored ribbon spinning off the spool, an electric hum.
If there is no Heaven & I come back, make me an aurora;
blend me into Borealis, my body broken, a million magnetic atoms.

Oh Please, Let it Be Lightning.

The storm announces its arrival by dipping the degree down. The wind cool against your face. The hairs on your body raise. There's a crackle in the air—the promise of lightning.

Maybe it will strike a telephone pole, knock out all the power to show who really has it. Maybe it will smack sand and twist glass. Let it be lightning striking like a match—rapid explosion.

I like an inspired storm. The kind that wakes me to the hush after rolling thunder. Rain drips over glass, pounds the pavement. Lightning crash.

Persimmon, Crushed.

Skeletal persimmon tree
of my first remembered house,
fruit decorating grass beneath,
squashed between my toes.

That fruit inedible—sick
on my tongue
and in the caldron
of an unused flower pot
where I mixed water, leaves,
and whole persimmons
and left them for days.

I was a child playing
potion mistress,
discovering rot.

That bitter-sick smell lingers
in my throat.

Watercolor Wanderlust.

I painted invisible first, dragging water
across the porous paper surface.
Then I dipped my brush into dusty blue
& dripped paint, watched it unfurl
like a flower. I drizzled mountains
onto the page, then walked away to let them dry.
Paint pigment in a drop of water swirls
& saturates. I returned to a hazy silhouette,
misty mountain morning. I worked
brown onto my brush & drew skinny trees,
then dipped bristles in green & feathered leaves.

I wanted to paint the rainforest, but I was green,
I wanted to paint the ocean, colors blending
seamless from green to blue. Neptune's garden
topaz, jewel of the sun. I wanted to paint golden
sand pyramids, desert oasis, each grain of sand
detailed like a diamond. I wanted to paint Paris
& Rome, London & Rio. But I start simple—
morning mountains. Savannah sunset.
I paint the mountains cradling San Jose;
I imagine them waking up. Next time, I'll paint
the mountains before bed, with window lights
like fireflies dancing around the base.

Lies about Sea Creatures.

They are playful dolphins, forgetful fish.
An octopus with three hearts beating.
Colorful clowns and petite damsels,
striped lionfish. Smiling ghost-face of a ray.

You know the starfish, but do you know
she washed up on the baking beach, suicidal
or uprooted and left to crust in the sun?
Do you know the stiff coral skeletons
in your hand? And what about the octopus
with her tentacles, how she suctions her prey
to her beak, snapping shut, snapping bone.
You know the shark bites in the bay,
the surfer girl who lost her arm to a tiger
hunting. Body armored by her board,
tender limb exposed in ocean. Remarkable
resemblance to a loggerhead, or a leatherback.

In truth, the ocean is always dying.

We forget the dead in the water and the dead
on the beach. We lay our towels on the sand,
build our castles, take our children out
on floats to rock-a-bye in the waves.

The jellies washed ashore can be poked
by driftwood, but never fingers. And they will
sting you if you find them in the water.

All the other things don't exist in shallows.

When children ask about the sharks, we say
that they are elsewhere, but keep an eye
on the surface, watch for the slicing fin,
the rows of jagged teeth swimming in that water,
the beasts watching our bodies flounder.

This Is Not a Poem about a Whale.

52 Hertz—

the frequency

the lone whale

sings as he swims

across the ocean

looking for a mate.

But she cannot hear

him. His voice is the

lowest note of a tuba,

but still too high to make

sense to any other whale.

He makes slow sweeps across

the ocean; constant, languid motion.

He dives down, sings, and tries to

overcome motorboat engines.

Deep cold. Dark water.

No reply.

The sun is the smallest

disc of white, wobbling

overhead. He ascends to surface,

breaches with a geyser of breath.

drags in air and submerges, down

again to sing.

Drinking in Costa Rica.

I want you to close your eyes and pretend
is a line that many poems and boyfriends have used
unsuccessfully. But this time,
I want you to try, because the only way
to think you're somewhere else
is if you get rid of where you really are.

You could palm your eyes,
but lids are quicker and safe
if you have long fingernails
like the woman who wore a thong bikini
even though she was wading in the kiddie pool.

See? Now you're closing your eyes
and distancing yourself enough to see her
voluptuous bosom and hips in that green zebra number,
and how she sort-of covered her ass
with a see-through sarong
so the kids wouldn't touch her
if they swam without looking.

This is what happens when you go on vacation in a foreign
country.
The little pepper looks bland but the heat blossoms
in your mouth. The ocean is pulling at your knees.
There are teeth floating in that water.
Lava rocks wash up on shore instead of sea shells;
they don't crunch when you step on them,
and when you have flat feet you just give up
on going without shoes at night.

I sat at a beach bar for a long time
looking at fake purple lighting up the waves
and I thought it was moonlight.
I saw you looking at me over the rim
of your margarita and you thought the world was so grand.
You didn't see the couple dancing behind the band,
how they skipped in the waves and closed their eyes
and just pretended.
We were like that once.

Playa Tamarindo at Sunset.

Starfish crust under sun—
points curl inward—withering retreat.
I imagine them furling in my palms,
little spines like antennae, but dying.

I want to lift them from the sand,
but I am afraid. Spines taste the salt
on my palms like a tickle.
I will drop it if it moves.

Instead, I remove my black flip-flop
& wedge the heel in the sand,
distant enough so I do not dismember the sea star.
The shoe digs through sand saturated with salt
& ocean, like gritty pancake batter. I lift
& carry it to the water,
the starfish seated on its liter.

I kneel, ocean waves caress my knees.
I submerge the shoe, slow, so the starfish
has time to remember what breathing ocean feels like.
To remember the ebb & flow of water surrounding her.
To stretch her limbs again & slide between the wet.

She is sluggish, like breathing is hard. Like maybe
she is dreaming & it's not the ocean around her.
What is this salty syrup? it tastes like water.
Movement strained. *Am I dead?* She may ask,
as her limbs unfurl & I shake her
from my shoe. *Not yet,* I answer. *Not this sunset.*

I hope she crawls across the ocean floor, at least
past the peninsula of rock where I perch to watch
the ocean swallow the sun—I won't be here
tomorrow to save her if she washes up again.

Some Thoughts on Faith.

Sometimes the spirit
enters my chest
and I'm not sure
if He's massaging my heart
with his thumb
like it's a baby bird,

or if He's tightening his fist
to pulverize it.

These Trees Are So Familiar

my fingers left a signature
in their bark. The marks
hang low, where I ripped bark trying
to hoist myself up into branches
and reach the motorcycle someone parked
years ago over a young tree
and left. My bare feet know
this bluegrass intimately—I
ran from my sister in those woods,
sure-footed, calloused
against the prickles of wild lettuce.

I've jumped into the Kentucky
and never met muddy bottom,
but I've moved with that river
and against it.
Summers at the river house
always led to swimming and boating
and nighttime games
where we would hide in the trees
and in the rusty hull
of a boat that drowned in a flood.

I shuck my shoes and wiggle
my toes in the green
beneath the poplar tree in my
parent's front yard.
Blades of grass fold under my feet,
tickle my skin, root me home.

I Meet the Pacific.

The sea rushes in towards me.
The crash, that rhythmic rush

& fall back. Here, on the
West Coast: Santa Monica, close

to the pier. Ferris wheel churning—
a trap. I dig my bare toes into the sand

like little clams washed ashore.
The sun melts over my skin,

caramelizes. The sea pulls back,
rushes in. Ships sail against the sky.

The water between sand grains rises
to meet my feet & seep into my jeans.

I have always thought the beach
an obstacle to my ocean.

The space where water meets sand
dwindles. The sea sparkles, dances.

I watch her. She draws nearer, each new wave
reaching. She'll seize me & I'll let her.

Mercurial.

The air is damp
with the promise of rain,
the sky the color of erased paper.

Days like this make spidercracked
mercury globes cool to touch,
get them lost in the reflection
of mulch and the green.

On days when the clouds are high
and the sun warm,
the sphere glitters, bejeweled.
Exotic orb—envy of your neighbors.

If you've ever held a mercury globe,
you know the skin is so thin
you could shatter it
between your palms.

The Fly Knows before We Do.

First, she was a buzz—
the fuzz of radio static
tuning in as she flew
toward my ear. She tangled
in my temple hair, made me
shrug my shoulder to my ear
and shiver.

I should have known she
was the messenger. A harbinger
attracted by my rot.

I have no carpenter claim,
no experience in building something
comfortable, like a lover's bed.

The bed I made is hard, a box
held together with crooked nails
and shoddy cotton.

Legacy of a Wolf Spider.

When born, she rides on her mother's
back with her sisters. She's not the kind to spin
webs—she's a wanderer.

Her mother teaches her patience, how to lie
in wait for a cricket. How to stalk a moth.
How to chase a grasshopper that cannot fly long.

When she feels ready, she sends her silk out like a kite
and balloons into the wind, surrenders to Zephyrus.

She lands and readies for her first hunt. She senses
prey through seismic vibrations.
She closes in. She makes the kill. An aphid
cradled in her palps, pierced
by her fangs, injected with venom.
Its insides liquefy and she drinks it in.

She crafts a burrow in the sweltering summer.
A stink bug crawls nearby; the tremors
tell her timing. She pops out from the trap door,
seizes the bug, drags him under.

The male is smaller, easy prey; he knows it.
He is careful to approach, but she invites him
to mount her, to insert his sperm.
She can feel him tense; he springs up once he's done
—to run—but she catches him, penetrates him
with her fangs. Consumes him.

She spins a sac for her eggs and carries it
like a pinched handkerchief.
Soon her spiderlings will emerge.
Ride on her back. Send out their silk
and balloon. Find mates to eat.
Spin a sac for their own spiderlings.

Sometimes this spider dreams.
She spins herself a silken cocoon
and emerges with stained-glass wings.

Hear Yourself Ring Hollow

To the Daughter I Do Not Have (I Write Your Name).

I see your face,
round & appled.
hazel-brown eyes,
almost-black curls in bows,
feet bare so you can wiggle
your toes in the green.

When I think of you
my heart
& womb
 are tethered.

They command me—
body,
brain,
 hands.
They say, *write her name*.
In cursive,
 deliberate print,
 in the hybrid
of my own speed-writing.

Emilianna.

I write your name
in the margins of my notebooks,
on napkins while I wait
 for drinks & dinner.

Emilianna.

Right now, this is the only way
you can live outside of me.

Body of Water.

I heard somewhere that the body is ninety-eight percent water,
but when I looked it up I learned they were wrong—we are just over half.
I prefer the lie. When I sink into the lake, I believe she reclaims me.
Mother welcomes me back into her body. The air above the surface hums

with chatter, even though sound travels faster, farther, under. I dunk my head
& I can hear the engines churning in the marina. I know I am not water
when my body balloons up; if I were water, I would stay down. But I am not,
& neither are you. We are not fish, able to filter air through water, no matter how

easily we may slide between the quadrillion gallons of water that make up
Lake Superior. I've never been there, but I know she is thirteen-hundred
feet at her deepest. I know she surrounds Isle Royale, a strip of land
only nine miles wide & forty-five long. Little girl, we could live on that island,

could build a nest at the edge of the lake. When the cold starts to bite, we'll fly
south with an arrow of geese, winter near the Gulf where the water is all salt.
Out there, the Mariana Trench is deeper than Everest is tall, & really,
that just means that there are universes beyond how deep we can swim

before the water becomes a vise. To be honest, I like the ocean best
when she is a small child reaching for me to pick her up & hold her close,
when she is shallow & doesn't have the strength to pull me down.
You will love the ocean. You will beg me to sail you on a float & I will do it.

I won't forget the sultan's two-hundred-&-eighty concubines smothered in this water
long ago, or the others who went into the water & did not resurface.
I won't tell you that you will lose your water—almost a cup each month—
when you become a woman. Someday, it will leave you feeling like it's all gone

& you'll never get it back. You'll be the moon—smash satellites into your surface
& hear yourself ring hollow. You will submerge yourself in Epsom-salt bathwater.
In man-made lakes. In chlorinated pools. In shark-infested oceans. You will sink
into that water & try to pull it all back inside, but you will float up, still filled with air.

One day you will feel water swell within you, take shape & become something alien
yet intimate. You'll sing her lullabies & rub your skin raw in your effort
to touch her. She will make you so full you didn't know you could be so taut,
like you swallowed the world & it expanded inside of you. & you'll know it did.

To the Daughter I Do Not Have (Daydream at Santa Monica).

I see you in the misty blur
where sky becomes ocean,
in the gulls overhead, the grains
of sand against my palms & feet.

Salt wind tousles my fly-away hair—
your fingers brush it back before
pudgy hands drift over my cheeks,
push them together. Your toothy grin,

bubble of laughter like the cry of a gull,
like the echo of blood rushing & waves dancing
inside a shell held to my ear; like the slap
of water against rock farther along the shore.

One gull, suspended in a breeze, squeaks,
touches down nearby, eager
for scraps of hotdogs or funnel cakes.
I have nothing to give.

Woman-girl, sandcastle built and
rebuilt to be worn by wind or dismantled
by waves or crushed beneath beach-comber feet.
I am beach grass, amber & supple in the wind.

I let the breeze carry those thoughts away,
return to you. Beautiful mirage.
A big wave crashes; I think it collapsed
on top of you. I wait for you to break the surface,

splashing & laughing, voice sharp
when the ocean dulls all other noise.
The sun makes diamonds on the water—
none as brilliant as you.

But you don't surface & I imagine undertow
catching you by the ankles & pulling
down, down, air bubbles spiraling out of you,
hand reaching towards the sun wobbling overhead.

& me running, diving, searching, coming up
empty. *Too late*. Mother took you back
& left me here without you.
A sob chokes my chest & I turn

to the forest of mighty legs under the pier.
You're there now, braiding
between them, giggling, & I can hear it.
White dress & curls caught in the wind.

Bare feet flinging sand behind you. Arms out
like a pelican flying low. You trip over a shell
& tumble into the sand. Instead of crying,
you put the shell's tip against your lips like a horn.

Dark eyes light up when they find me
watching. You make me shake my head—amazed.
I see you so clearly in the distant haze.
I blink & think I missed you;

you hide behind a stalk of pier, unafraid
of the dark or the moaning wood above you.
We play a familiar game—
the one where you wait for me to come find you.

My Mother Dreamed I Was Born in a Burning City—What a Strange Notion.

She woke & found her water broken, but her body wouldn't open—it feared the pain.
I dream you are a moonlit mermaid in the ocean.

My mother is a sea gull diving for fish, always in motion.
I see myself more like a lake bird—a swan or crane.
My mother dreamed I was born in a burning city—what a strange notion.

She lathered her skin in oil to tan, & mine with sunblock lotion,
& when the storm came we slept together through the hurricane.
I dream you are a moonlit mermaid in the ocean.

When she saw other women's letters & photos, she showed devotion
to my father. But neither of us could weather him long; we broke the chain.
My mother dreamed I was born in a burning city—what a strange notion.

I imagine when you become real you will cause a whirlwind commotion.
You'll make me think I'll drown in all the rain.
I dream you are a moonlit mermaid in the ocean.

My mother woke from her epidural dream filled with emotion
even stronger than what I feel just thinking of you—more than I can entertain.
My mother dreamed I was born in a burning city—what a strange notion.
I dream you are a moonlit mermaid in the ocean.

Sestina for Rainy Days & Empty Mornings.

Some days the missing, the empty, is a bristle-bush thorn I can't pick out. Some days I can't decide if it's the man I'm missing or my mother's phone call & I'm not sure if I want to call her back—it's raining & the last thing I want is for her to say my name so sweetly & I feel like I'm in bed again, five again, & she shares a bowl of chicken soup with me to chase away the chill

because these days all I feel is the goose-bump chill of waking up empty & something is missing & some days I see my niece on Facebook & the gap in her front teeth & I don't share the image because I want to bury. I'm not her mother. I'll tell you something personal: I write my daughter's name everywhere & she changes, mercurial, like how rain

falls in Kentucky—sprinkle to downpour back to drizzle rain— & I can't make up my mind what she looks like & that chill raises the hairs on my arms & legs & I've forgotten her name for a moment & how is that possible? Some days I open & shut the blinds on repeat before I finally call my mother & tell her everything is fine; but she knows better, she just doesn't share

that information with me—Mama knows that I don't share the knots tangling inside my head & clinging to my rib cage. Rain seeps into my skin & settles like a weight. My mother fought this seasonality too—she hid her head under a pillow to avoid the chill & the migraines that come from a marriage full of night fights & some days she didn't wake up & make dinner, but she mouthed *I love you* & my name

& it was enough but I don't ever want you to eat your name for dinner because I couldn't fight through the drowning & roll out of bed. Chere, you deserve the woman I am in my head, when the sun is out & some days I worry that the sun won't be enough—we need rain to prevent drought & maybe this is a metaphor & I need to embrace the wind-chill & accept the impossibility of perfect motherhood

but when it comes to imagining myself as a mother I'm struck with awe & now it's easy to collect your name from my thoughts but then I imagine you slipping through my arms & it chills me to think how delicate, how easily broken you are & how can I share this world with you when there are always dreary rain days when I want to bury my head in concrete. I forget most days

feel warm & that nameless man I was missing will come home & share his days with me. Some days I visit my mother. Some days the sun stays out in the rain & I go out & join them & get soaked but don't get chills & I desperately love those days.

Tell Me Something Good.

Before bed, Mother traced words
into my back. She wrote
Beautiful. Brave. Baby. Love.
I tried to guess them & was usually wrong,
so she voiced them to me,
low & resonant—
lullabies sung to me
before I existed outside of her.

To the Daughter I Do Not Have (Some Days).

Some days I challenge my alarm.
Some days I don't even brush my teeth.
I wake up after hitting snooze for an hour & shuffle into the kitchen,
 scoop coffee into the filter,
 press start.
Some days I don't get out of bed.
Most days I think of you & my cheeks ache from smiling.
Some days I don't shower.
Some days it rains, or snows,
 & it's not stormy—there's energy in a storm, electric drizzle,
 bass-drop thunder, & rain like nails tossed at windows.
These days are dreary,
 like fog rolled in & said *nap-time*.
 I close the blinds—make it darker.
These days I'll take any kind of daydream.
Some days I don't bother with breakfast.
These days drag like the blanket wrapped around me,
 collecting cat-hair & dust.
Some days the sink stays cluttered with dishes
 & I leave them there so something can be full.
Some days I think I feel you under my palms
 & they start to itch & sweat & when
 did I have my last period &—Oh my gosh
 surely I had it recently, or will soon & calm down
 because nothing is certain, not even that blue cross.
Most days I bet you'll have my smile.
Some days I wonder what will change if you're a boy.
Some days I remember abortion is an option,
 but I rip that idea out & crush its skull.
Some days I picture myself in a hospital bed even though I want a tub of warm water.
 When you decide to emerge,
 I want you to slide into another embrace,
 not the sterile hands of a surgeon.
Most days I write your name somewhere.
Some days I close my fingers around your
 imaginary hand & it's so small
 & real even though it's not.
Some days I think my hugs will crush you.
I imagine your limp body dangling
 from my arms & I know I destroyed you.

Little Ocean.

Air bubble pop proves clams dig into the sand.
The wave retreats,
then rushes in to recover.
Waves like arms reach to hold you,
to pull you deeper in love,
to bring you past the shallows, where you can look down & see
the coral & the colorful fish,
to the deep where water is everywhere around you &
caressing your thighs & elbows &
you could lie back
& float, hair like seaweed swaying,
sky so big, so blue, so beautiful.
Gauzy clouds stretch to cover the sun.
Water is warm syrup.
You could cup it in your palms
& carry it to your mouth
& drink it in,
where it becomes part of your body
like you are part of the ocean's body. When you enter,
she makes room for you.
When you leave, she mourns the loss.
Body that was once in her body, outside now.
A lighthouse
farther down the beach winks—
you can see it because the sun went skinny-dipping.
Cotton towel
around your waist, the ends
of your hair gather moisture before droplets fall
to your skin & down the valley
of your chest to the loops of thread that take water in
& hold it prisoner.
Come back & wade in.
Kick the waves.
Laugh at the spray. Let the wind carry your hair
wildly around your face,
let the water lick at your calves,
let your feet trip,
let your body become a wave crest,
let it fall.
Hold your hands out to your side,
look up & twirl
like you are five again,
little princess again,
& let it all go.

To the Daughter I Do Not Have (You Are the Ocean).

Little ocean swelling inside me,
my watercolor drip, unfurling,
spread throughout my body, tinting me teal
like the light that surrounds a shipwreck.

My watercolor drip—you unfurl
like a pearl from the oyster's mouth—
shine like the moon above a shipwreck.
Each wave crest outlined silver becomes your Christening gown.

Emilianna, the pearl from this oyster's mouth,
you are an ocean I could dive into & never reach bottom.
Each wave crest outlined silver becomes your Christening gown.
I cup saltwater in my palm & take a sip, stay thirsty.

You are the ocean I dive into & never reach bottom in —fathomless.
Each day you become deeper, & I can never
slake my thirst—sipping saltwater from my palm—
because you make me salty, make me buoyant.

Each day the anchor of you drops deeper, & I could never
break that chain, even if I wanted to, because I am a ship
& you make me salty, make me buoyant.
& I have set sail, done what ships were made to do.

How would I ever want to break that chain? I am a ship
& you spread throughout my body, tinting me teal.
I have done what ships were made to do—I've hoisted my sails—
& this little ocean swells inside me.

Emilianna's Poem.

I am already half-made,
Mama, & I hear you
through the folds
of your skin
& organs.

I love when you sing—
especially when you
try-on harmonies
like new shoes
& some don't fit
& some look even better
on you than they did
in the window.

I wish I could become
a boat & circulate
through your body,
experience something
more than this stagnant
state of waiting.

I know when
you rest your palms
over your ovaries—
they leech heat.
I try to press back,
to mirror
your palm with mine,
through that thin
skin barrier, but

I am a tadpole coiled
in an oyster shell,
waiting for you
to unlock me.