


Summer 2018

# Break Us Beautiful

Elizabeth Upshur

Western Kentucky University, [continueddrama@gmail.com](mailto:continueddrama@gmail.com)

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BREAK US BEAUTIFUL:  
A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND CREATIVE NON-FICTION

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  
Elizabeth Upshur

August 2018

BREAK US BEAUTIFUL:  
A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Date Recommended July 16, 2018

Dale Rigby  
Dale Rigby, Director of Specialist Project

Rebecca Brown  
Dr. Rebecca Brown

Cheryl Hopson  
Dr. Cheryl Hopson

Cheryl D. Davro 7/19/18  
Dean, Graduate School Date

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Micah Spence, who lights up a room whenever she enters it. To my Nana, who always believed I'd write a book and couldn't wait to hold it, I miss you.

For my dear friends I've met on this eight-year journey, but especially Regan Gudal, Jenna Campbell, and my cohorts. To my writing sibs Anuradha, Willy, Gionni, Lisa, y'all inspire me on the daily and I can't believe I get to rub shoulders with you sometimes! To all my professors who have showered me with love and sown into my life to make me an exponentially better writer than when I started, I promise to pay it forward to all the curious souls who need it. To my parents and my village, love you all and thanks for your support. I hope you see yourself and a better future in these poems. And since they won't let me get away without naming them: Mom, Dad, Natalie, Chenise, Kyra, Julie, Dominique, Isaiah, Wesley, Stephen, Naomi Jasmine, Darius, EJ, and Ayla Rose.

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Elizabeth Upshur

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72 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Dr. Rebecca Brown, Dr. Cheryl Hopson

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

The problem addressed in this thesis is cultivating an answer to the question: what creates or comprises the sum total of my Blackness as a modern American woman living in our current political climate? I primarily use a read/call and response methodology, responding to both lived and hypothetical experiences that explore or demonstrate the ways that identity, race, gender, sexuality, regionality, religion, and the historical thumbprint intersect. The results are this collection of poems that is at times mythological, at times irreverent, both abstract and formal as it seeks to fit these pieces into a singular mosaic. The conclusion drawn at the end of this thesis is that Black women's lives and stories have intrinsic value, interpretation, and are deserving of further exploration in both bibliotherapy, mainstream, and academic writing.



## INTRODUCTION

### Symbiote

Twinlike, my twenty months younger sister Julie and I walked through life, marched for our diplomas, and headed off to the same community college. I remember feeling like a rabbit outside of my warren, exposed above ground as a prey animal to snakes and hawks as people, dozens and dozens of people, bustled about between classrooms and the lobby area. I had been homeschooled since I was three and demanded an English book for my third birthday, which excited my mother to no end, but now I was mentally orphaned, an undeclared student. I knew I didn't want to major in English, and so I tried out all the things that I'd read about curled up on the floor or in my bed, switching arms as they fell asleep.

First history, because I was obsessed with the English monarchy, the Roman Empire, and wanted to learn more about minority history. Perhaps drama, I wondered as I ate lunch outside the stage, but there were never any classes. Politics introduced me to the terrors of tenured professors who ruled their classes like tyrants, and I'd be hard pressed to tell you I learned anything worthwhile there besides tenacity, but I felt I already had that since I grew up the third of ten children. Then psychology, where I finally had the terminology to self-diagnose all the things that were wrong or different about me and theorize formulas for becoming the perfect woman who understood everything. I think that is what drives my poetry; one person cannot be everything but a storyteller, she can envision whole lives, strifes, joys, and deaths for characters in a story, speakers in a poem, and then return to her own life. I wanted to be a thousand things and people. I wanted to skinwalk outside of myself like the mythological

creatures I read about in Native American and African mythology with far more fervor than my Holy Bible. I wanted, as George Poulet claimed, to be “thinking the thoughts of another... [to be] the subject of thoughts other than my own. My consciousness behave[ing] as though it were the consciousness of another” (44). Rather than isolate me, I think that literature, reading and writing it, is what provides empathy and sympathy, two highly charged emotions that are somewhat lacking but necessary in understanding the pendulum of history that connects 2018 with 1618 and everything in between. So, I fell into English, after I was so determined to run away from it.

#### Author

I was born in California, and perhaps my memories are not *all* gilded after twenty years, but all I remember was a paradise. My family then consisted of my two parents Wayne and Claudette, my two older sisters Chenise and Kyra, myself, and my two younger sisters Julie and DeeDee, and two younger brothers Isaiah and Wesley, as well as our Pitbull Luke. We lived twenty minutes from the ocean, and I remember the grittiness of sand coating my mouth, of hearing my sisters swim with dolphins but being too young to go that far out past the surf. The red anthills on the way to the 7-ELEVEN (sic), the red Slurpees we’d share for cheap that stained our everything, and the canyon beyond our cousin’s house where summer fires would roar through.

My memories are a series of GIFS, some cobbled from photos, some from relatives reminiscing, most half remembered and blurry with my poor eyesight but vibrantly encapsulating a moment. I see my father, wearing snow boots from Philly to stomp a rattlesnake to death on the hill in our backyard, I remember how a scaly lizard’s tail felt still twisting and thrashing in-between my fingers as I held it like a taco

between a dry leaf because I was too scared to touch the bare skin of it. Those memories are literally golden, drenched in sunshine, years indecipherable from one another because what difference is being four from six, a summer season from the spring season?

My family moved to Whites Creek, Tennessee in 1999, in one of the coldest winters the state had had in thirty years. I'd never owned a winter coat, or heard the word "y'all", or its plural, "all y'all", but as my family grew (adding two boys, a girl, and numerous pets), I had several coats and the Southern dialect permeated not only my speech but my English teacher mother's as well. Snakes were different, so many different types and colors, and none of them rattled like the ones back home. The only constant was the steady stream of books I read. When I was maybe nine or ten, after homeschooling we'd have quiet time while the babies slept, and I asked my sister Kyra what I should do because I was bored. She told me to go read a book, and I've never been bored since. I read all the books from the floor to the third shelf, the Great Illustrated Classics, tomes of history and mythology, the Bible, scholarly concordances, traced my fingers over my mother's Castilian Spanish dictionary, the spelling books, but mostly I read Trixie Belden books, a series of schoolgirl shamus mysteries. Then, before we'd go to sleep, we'd tell stories about the characters. They call that fan fiction now, and that's where I learned to be a storyteller, speaking into silence, conjuring names and people into the darkness of our bunkbed fitted room as we staved off slumber.

To Be Born

I didn't know that I'd only been viewing a third of the world because I was nearsighted until I was nine years old. My sisters and I were playing a game of cards, and I had to keep leaning over until my nose touched them to make out what the numbers were. Getting glasses, grey clunky metal things that immediately suited me, it was a miracle. It made me greedy for more, to see more, to feel more, to be thrilled at the brightness of color and put that down in words. I could see squirrels now. I could see all the road signs, I could see our house from far away. Even my memories are fuzzy before my glasses, which has always been a quiet observation on how perception and reality are two completely different things. As a quasi-twin, I understood the concept of two different things being treated the same. I had a quiet irritation at this, half of one identity was not the self that I envisioned for myself. But in many ways, I loved it, because Julie and I shared a journal for a while, shared being storytellers, shared the same color palette, the same grade, and read off each other's library cards, maxing them out to get 50 books every three weeks. But between every book I read, there was the book I wanted to write.

I would call it Gardenias after the white flower, and it would be perfect. It would win a Nobel Prize like my favorite book, *The Good Earth*, and it would be made into a movie, but most importantly, it would come to me in a dream and I would write it from start to finish when I was thirteen years old. It can't be said that I lacked ambition in my dreams. I moved the year up every year, but the perfect novel that ended with the girl in a white dress jumping off the balcony railing of a marble castle never came to me. It still hasn't. Perfection is the thief of all happiness, and, in my case, motivation. I was already attempting to recreate myself like a spider creating a silken web, since I

had discovered that I couldn't be a medical doctor as I'd planned when I was six years old back in California with my dad.

I was nebulous, waiting for a story that didn't come, feeling like a failure for not pursuing medicine when I headed off to college. Of course, it was there that I understood what was missing, that to be born, to become the woman I was meant to be I needed to face an unattractive possibility. That I am just as much my father as I am my mother, and it was English that I was meant to study. After reading over a thousand books I don't know how it could surprise me to realize that I was going to start writing them and reading them professionally but it did. (Thankfully, the subject of English is large enough for both of us, all of us really. Julie likes editing, my mother only wanted to teach and write, and me, well I wanted to lose myself in literature and then remake it from the thousand pieces that inspired me. I'd read Beowulf, and the language stirred up all the summers I'd read mythology books over and over again, every single one in our library.

Now I knew what skin I was walking in. I was a girl who would swim in words for the rest of her life, shaping worlds as a writer, a mentor, an educator. It was with this confidence that I transferred to Austin Peay State University, where my sister had transferred a year before. I accepted her ready-made circle of friends and connections with the English faculty, but instead of confining myself I reveled in the alchemy of changing from shy girl to the golden girl. I was a successful student, hard work as I worked part time as an R.A., racked up minors in Spanish, theatre, international studies, and creative writing.

It was in pageantry, in training physically for a year for the now defunct swimsuit portion of the competition that I feel that I was born, solidified into a fully realized person. In part because of the essay requirement wherein I argued for my platform, putting my entire life down in words and interrogating the self I was becoming, which is the entire purpose of composition: to investigate and think critically, but also to understand how you think critically about yourself and the world.

To me, pageantry is the most brutally honest microcosm of our society. It is crooked like politics in its backdoor dealings, but straight in its full-throated support of a singular feminism. It champions a blonde, beautiful girl who has goals, but not too big. She must parade in a swimsuit, answer a question that has stumped the best minds in our country in thirty seconds, perform a talent that brings the audience to their feet, and command a room like a bride. Like anything, pageantry is what you make of it. I made scholarships out of it, a vested interest in pageants, and a better understanding of how the world has and will continue to view me. How the world will judge me. In pageantry I said, this is one way to look at me, as an artficed object, one of the ways that I can be distilled from my singular essence.

Pageantry, although it bubbles beneath the surface, acknowledged in stanzas or peripheral to how I comment on Black natural hair in “Naturalista” or “Nappy” or “Black Girl Magic”, is a throughline because it remains my subconscious template for division of self, is it cerebral like a pageant interview, political like a pageant onstage question, a formal, beautiful poem like evening gown, something taboo and sexual like swimsuit, am I playing with language or white space as the major statement of the piece proving my talent, or working on some level to subvert the obvious category it should

be placed in? With a sense of morality, an understanding of my life's purpose, and enough history to make me curious, I consider myself "born" at 23 years old, the indirect of a thousand books and linguistic experiences coming to bear something greater than the sum of the lightning bolt lines and images that stood out in each of those pieces. A mosaic.

### To Be Black

It was after being born that I became proud of my roots, and simultaneously realized that to be Black in America, in a colorized and colonized nation, is neither safe nor a celebrated fact. The barrage of shootings, the curl of the Korean shop owner's mouth when we entered her store, being followed in Kmart or Ross by the security guard, hearing my father tell me about how much worse it was when he was younger and how his grandfather was the son of sharecroppers, I hated it. I hated the history that was dark and gnarled like tree roots, but I loved the self of me that was Black. Reconciling these two ideas took time, time and writing as I questioned the books I read, responding and arguing, allowing myself to integrate Norman Holland's assertion that "interpretation as a function of identity" on a very primary level, defining myself through my responses and structuring of my arguments, my moral judgements of good versus bad versus gray with all the dialects and languages I have been given and chased after, my spiritual inheritance from my religious grandparents and parents (124).

The intersectionality of my Black girlhood and self-formation has been the bulk of my writing because it is what I'm seeking to understand. I place it in mythical contexts at times, like in my piece "Gorgon" where I respond to Malcolm X's statement

that black women are the most disrespected and unprotected and neglected (Malcolm X). Malcolm, June Jordan, Hortense Spillers, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, so many great authors that I have had the privilege of reading in my classes opened my eyes to the possibilities of writing as a way of acceptance of our past, charging our future with a fiery passion to be better, to be worth the cost of suffering. Reading these authors has been like an electric shock, and layering modern authors like Danez Smith, Ta-Nahesi Coates, J. Brooks, and Vivee Francis has given me permission to explore the taboo in a public setting, consuming and creating the language to pin down what needs to be said, respectability politics be damned.

Several of my poems are magical realistic in nature even though the subject is Black intersectionality, a testament to the amazing Latinx poets and writers who have influenced me both as a writer and a person. When I say magical realism I mean a spectrum, stylistically or in subject matter, with an approach that venerates and plays with language as nonnative speakers are wont to make accidental and purposeful poetry with it. My pieces also play with what I call language power, linguistically surface like “Poder” which breaks down the Spanish verb and one of the few places where I translate codeswitching, or my creation pieces where I revel in the idea that it is the word that brings life, that language can literally create, not just evocative images on the page, but the very world around us. Identifying that language confines and elasticizes our respective worlds is so important to me, because lacking language impoverishes all of us.

To Be Bad



Poetry isn't all meadows and sonnets and frolicking lambs. And creative nonfiction didn't have to be country reflections. Reading Roxanne Gay, David Sedaris, and the plethora of brevities for class confirmed that. Navigating between poetry and CNF for me isn't about the subject but rather about the tone and style. With poetry, my tone varies, it can be pithy or formal, but with CNF my tone is typically angrier as I attempt to articulate rage over a topic and how it makes me feel vulnerable or powerless, a concept I thought ended when I was born but am learning is actually part of the ongoing process of identity and adulting. Because my CNF is so self-involved it cannot be divorced from its righteous anger or its melancholy observations, something I learned to embrace as I read Danez Smith's *Insert Boy* and Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Theoretically there is no difference in what can be accomplished with the different genres, but for me, I conceptualize them as expressions of different emotions because anger, while it can be encapsulated in a poem, typically needs more space and personal intervention to say or ask the reader to view a subject like race differently.

#### Arcane

My thesis title had been rattling around in my head ever since I came to WKU. Initially I thought it was for a poem title, but like Gardenias, the story never came to my title. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it completely encapsulated what I was trying to say in my collection, a confident beat to the world that, even destroyed, we can become something even more beautiful. Just as a box full of glass bottles becomes art when the bottles are shattered and jigsawed into a mosaic, cemented by black or white grout between the harsh pieces catching the sunlight. I

arrived at my project with the idea that brokenness, or the perception of brokenness, doesn't need to be the final word. A person, place, or thing can become more than the brokenness inflicted on them, which corresponds with the ideas of racial scholars on Black identity in America. For example, Spillers response essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* on how the very word "mother" is robbed of its essential significance reverberated with Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and the methodology of codeswitching between languages, and seeing these connections opened up so many questions under the Diaspora umbrella to explore in my poems. Through their foundation, I questioned the modern mother/daughter relationship, explaining race to the children I worked with, of empathizing with black bugs smashed flat on the sidewalk, and demanded a new way of being seen, in plurality instead of the flat dimensions American stresses on the Black body.

My title is also an homage to language and religion. Linguistically, my title can be read several ways absent punctuation, but the word order of the command reads as functional or broken English, acknowledging Diasporic roots and the normalcy of codeswitching between dialects and spheres where language is instructional and informal. It can also be read as a religious benediction, the Messianic, sacrificial language and iconography immediately apparent to Biblical readers and scholars. All of these concepts are at play in my work, going with and against the grain of these ideas. Moreover, the title is tongue in cheek. It became a mantra I said to myself as I tried to write it between teaching, classes, etc. I knew that writing my thesis, becoming the first person in my family to write a thesis and graduate with an MFA, would break me down like a blacksmith hammering and smelting a sword. But at the end of the two years, at

the end of the book, waiting for me at “The End”, was another self, another me that was in the labor pains of being born. And at the end of my Ph. D is another one, because we will be born every time we change our way of thinking, even if it is just a broadening or shrinking of our horizons.

### Conclusion

To me, scribbling these stories, carving out my identity, and being an English major were in no way related. Now I see them for their intricate connections, how they are building blocks for both self-definition and the modus operandi for changing the world, working as an educator and writer to intervene and change the way that people have been taught to view English as a subject and a method of analysis. I believe it was at the Frost Place that one of my instructors told me that writing your first book is always autobiographical, and that we are telling the story of ourselves no matter how much we try and dress it up or perform it. So, in many ways this manuscript is an invitation to think as I do, to see my inner self as she questions the outcome of colorism, the second self that operates in a second language, the way that religion stands as a back brace for people. I do not claim to have all the answers. In fact, I have had to be honest from my title *Break Us Beautiful* to my closing poem “Chorus Girls Dancing in Proximity to the Spotlight” I have had to be honest and tell on myself because the only reason these pieces are any good is that in the writing process, the revisions, the editing, I could not lie and rob them of their power. I could not blur or evade from their individual flashes of inspiration to say something with my chest. I had to be honest and say here I am, broken and still evolving.

## You Can Spread the Love with an Orange

My father is a Black man from Philly and going up to the so-called City of Brotherly Love was a semi regular vacation to see my grandmother, an arthritic woman the color of chai tea with a crisp halo of white hair, feet clad in overly sensible black or navy rubber shoes. Grandma Liz (since I was little Liz) had lived in the house in Cheltenham for the past sixty years, which at the time was longer than my mother's parents had even been alive. In my head, my grandma Liz is always 92, and even in photographs she is just a taller, less stooped and darker haired version of herself as she reverses age down to her forties. Grandma Liz was born in 1920 and lived through the Great Depression, which may have influenced her into becoming a hoarder on top of being a shopaholic.

When my parents, my Aunt Debbie's family, and I went up in 2008 to clear out Cheltenham, she had completely stuffed the three floors of the house. There were bags of bags, piles of papers, the antique furniture, and just so many things. Fake Chanel bags, rugs, the requisite one thousand knick-knacks of porcelain, glass, and carved woods. We worked for three days and only went through the jewelry and furniture. When we walked down into the basement just to look at what the cleaners were going to go through, my father swore in a rush of frustration. More bags, black kitchen ones, piled up to the ceiling on a bed of a million newspapers and other junk. I looked down at my feet and there was a mouse, flattened, as if something invisible had fallen on him. Grandma Liz never wanted to leave her house because my grandfather had lived there before he died of a heart attack, and made unique additions to it, refusing every offer to

live with any one of her children. But she was so lonely and soul hungry she kept JC Penny flush with her little pensions.

My father remembers the shopping trips that started when he was young, young enough to be held by the hand. One time they took a train downtown and he kept almost brushing up against an elderly white woman, who glared at him over her sharp nose, one second away from snapping, what is this negro doing touching me? But how would she know you were Black I'd asked, because my grandparents were paper bag Black, meaning they were light tan to passing for white. He said the hair was still a giveaway, and I suppose you could also add the freckles.

My dad was a late in life baby when my paternal grandparents were in their forties, which was 1963. *You got her cooking skills but you know Grandma Liz didn't actually like to cook? I'd get Uncle Scott and Uncle Rob from college and we'd take the train back to Philly for a homecooked meal, she's make home fries and chicken and greens and cake...Then she's palm me a twenty and tell me to be a good boy and do well in school.* I remember the love of palmed money as a college student myself.

I remember being angry, unexplainably angry my second year in college when I sat down to write an essay for the MLK, Jr., contest. The winners got an all-expense paid trip down to Atlanta, Georgia to the history museum, but I was in it for the fame. And I was so angry at all the cop deaths, the marches, how Black parties on campus got broken up long before the white ones, and the undercurrent of intersectionality becoming solid for me. I sent it to my sister and she said it was a piece of trash. It didn't win. I couldn't even touch the word love in my paper because I was simmering at the absolute absence of it against my skin.

The love stories that my parents and my aunts and uncles tell change over time, but the particulars are mostly the same. My Uncle Scott's starts well before even meeting his wife. He was a gymnast who just missed out on the Junior Olympics that were going to be held in Germany that year. He may or may not have gone on a binge, and/or punched a wall, he was so angry with himself and the judges, for whom, back when there were perfect tens, the difference between athletes could be one one-hundredth of a point. "If I'd gone to that racist country, and internalized that hate and that anger, I could never have gotten married to a white woman", he said.

I don't know that I could be that honest, articulating that I could be so changed by racism I don't love the person I had a destiny with. To say that I could hate white people back for hating me first. When I dated a white boy, we "argued" over race, he was invested, I simply withdrew because it just demonstrated that this was not my person. How could someone who thinks the N word belongs to everyone raise mixed race children? How could someone with living, racist grandparents raise mixed children? You would really have to leave them, or cut them off until they learned better, and not everyone is strong enough to do that. My friend Willy says that everyone goes through a white boy phase, it's the culmination of the colonized aesthetic, and can be turning point in our self-evolution as woke people. It made me better, but I don't know that I did right by him. I left him with a lot more learning to do, a lot more to unpack about how Black people make him "uncomfortable", and I'm not certain that he doesn't use me as part of his I'm not racist rhetoric, because Black girlfriends trump Black friends.

In 2016, I won that essay contest. I wrote from the one place of love that I had left inside me, the barest hopes for the future and morality of love as a force for change. I believed in it, as optimistic and naïve as it seems now. There's an episode from *Wishbone* that floats to the top of my memory sporadically; the one where rows and rows of enslaved Black people are lashed and hunkering down over the plants they are picking, when one man, one man who remembers the word, whispers it like salvation and it spreads down. They say it all at once and rise up on black brown wings to fly back over the Atlantic towards home like *La Amistad*. My professor mentioned it in our Morrison and Baldwin class, how it could be interpreted as death, and the implications of hope in death for the enslaved. Does it have to be that interpretation though? Couldn't it be new beginnings?

In 2017, I was a new teacher. I was tired all the time because I was doing exactly what I'd been told not to, auditing French classes, my teaching load, my three graduate classes, working out, applying for my Fulbright, and submitting to journals. But life's only interesting if you're doing it in opposition to what everyone tells you can't be done. My curriculum for narratives was my favorite, I used non-fiction and prose poems from some of my favorite authors, including ones by Vietnamese poet Ocean Vuong and Bangladeshi poet Anuradha Bhowmik. We talked about lens and language, about compact spaces telling more and codeswitching. Not surprisingly, my students of color felt very comfortable. One of my students, Milagros, gave me a small gift at the end of class to say thank you for making class understandable. A small bar of orange peel infused chocolate from Ecuador. I don't have very much money, but my mother said I should say thank you, so I wanted to give you this. I thought of my own

Spanish teacher who explained the verb tenses to me long after all the other intermediate students had left the room, and the word “understandable” meant more to me than anything.



## Black Girl Magic

I keep hearing from ashy niggas, stay saying  
a woman is supposed to be a man's backbone  
a man is the head, don't step out your place.  
my friend claps back, so y'all hoteps admit you spineless?  
how devoid of strength you aim to be.

you want to crutch on my backbone?  
I put my red laundry basket on my head in a pinch  
water gallon jugs like my Ghanaian grandmothers.  
I will carry my firstborn child on my straight spine  
tickle his fat round toes, hold his hand up in mine,  
his wispy curls an echo of my 'fro.

They all running for Mr. Misogynoir, negging like  
you gettin' a big head, you think you all that?  
I say yeah, and my head full of thoughts  
that don't revolve around you.  
Black women the most educated  
demographic in America  
coal, cocoa, honey, #blackgirlmagic

my spine is for kissing  
my spine is made of gold  
malleable, swaying when the spirit hits  
hammered flat like the rooftops  
to hold the rain off the heads of children  
my spine is made of broken pieces  
but not broken

re-read your Torah commentaries  
hear how a woman was not made  
from a lowly *calcaneus* heel bone  
to be tread upon, nor the *parietal*  
bone that curves around the brain  
but from a bone that regenerates  
that slender rib that supported  
your own damn spine.

FLOTUS Michelle, My Rabbi, and My Heart Speak to Me

Michelle says, "when they go low, we go high."  
but that rift he wants to build over bones  
over bodies, over votes...I just want to get high.  
she never lets her reservoir run dry. she sips from it  
prays that magic word, "Kuliba!" and when they burn  
she rises high on black brown wings.

My rabbi rubs his milky eyes and says, "what we cannot  
go over, we go under." my cryptic uncle knows how  
petty I want to sink but he means deeper. go to ground  
deep, if Mt. Everest was an iceberg deep.  
tunnel deep into an earth that has transformed flesh  
blood, and bone marrow into trees that will outlast  
our grandchildren.

My heart says, "I don't have to confront what I don't see."  
sometimes nothing touches the intersection that is  
me, my head see too much, watch too much, read too much.  
it all blurs together and will never happen to me. Division  
racks me, whether I want to fly, or lie buried through it all.

Beloved

Beloved, a girl  
whose mother cannot quiet her  
she cries and bleeds and drowns.

Sunset before bed  
Sethe plaits Denver's hair  
tries to cut her sight

Matriarch croons low,  
black voices spiral from green trees  
kumbaya, my Lord...

Mother has dark eyes  
that wrenched at my soul, swallowed  
the still, the red fire.

## On the Sidewalk

There is so much black smashed flat  
a cricket, antennae tracing parallel to the cracks  
a banana peel, wasted compost on the stamped cement  
a handful of weave, like the world's longest eyelash,  
I guess the only difference is if I was smashed down here  
I'd bleed out red over my chalk outline  
but a single day of rain would wash it all away.

## Dip Your Pen in the Ink of My Blood

1528, Spain's Florida, Karankawa, the Chief wet his thumb,  
slid it across the African slave Esteban's cheek  
and marveled at his unstained digit.

Cut to now,  
cut to blue vein  
Black girls wash out  
their color with bleach  
like blood of Jehovah  
water skin with cocoa  
butter and jojoba  
No one fucks with dark girls  
So lighten up  
let the white girls tan.

If you light, you alright.  
boys repeat  
what was thrown at us  
by enslavers in words, whips  
with pale-grabbing-holding-down  
-taking-who-they-wanted hands.  
That is how we got so light. Became one  
drop Black but a few drops  
white enough to be mistaken  
for Latina, light skin pretty girl.

## I Wish My Mother was Less Laissez-faire about Color

My identity was a playground insult.  
My village was bone white,  
no soul sisters, no brothas.  
My grown up self fires back,  
wraps that hurt up,  
labels that incident  
under things marked 'duh' and 'of course.'

I am a Transatlantic joke, with the punchline,  
388,000 Middle Passage survivors  
explode like wild oats in spring  
400 years, slave, and Freeman to be my ancestors  
counted as chattel in the census

my maternal ancestor Ghana black,  
all slave in Orangeburg, South Carolina,  
my paternal ancestor straight up  
white in Richmond, Virginia all the way down  
to Pennsylvanian paternal grandparents' paper  
bag black, and me, brown skinned in between.

Growing up in the suburban South,  
my sisters and I, we whispered worried  
about my father, who had blue  
eyes but our kinky hair. My sisters  
asked mom is dad Black?  
My older sister Kyra held up  
her arm for evidence  
she said he was a lot lighter  
a lot paler than some white people.  
He's black and light, mom  
sighed, diced onions for chili.  
She never said how black  
people got so light.

why did god make chocolate?

one of my five-year-old boys asks me during lunch, oozing  
Nutella on the table from his graham cracker sandwich. I explain to Judah  
who is my favorite—also the worst boy in the summer camp— *well chocolate comes  
from beans on trees called 'cacao'*—And they all say *eww!* and *gross!* Judah glares at  
his Lunchable  
like it has personally betrayed him, while our only three-year-old Andrew shrieks, *I'm  
ALLERGIC to legumes!*

Judah has asked me why  
*Ram's eyes are small, and how can his mother be white?  
and why are you brown like a crayon?*  
I said *because some people are chocolate and some people are vanilla  
but both are good,* and thank God no one decided to shout how much  
they hated vanilla or chocolate.

Because of course they don't say, they shout.  
Now he has me curious, on why chocolate got invented  
the bitter cacao beans boiled, stirred smooth with rich, creamy butter  
and sugar like a sword, beaten, cooled, beaten down until every imperfection has  
evaporated and all that remains on the wax paper is smooth chocolate.  
I remember licking the bowl of my birthday cakes, the chocolate  
coating my nose and sticking to my baby hairs  
as I dived in to the eight-cup glass.

## Strange Fruit

When the white men were gone/ I cut myself free from the tree/walked back into the dark/ my mother's womb/ wet and blood slick on my back/ leaving handprints on the trees/so no one would follow me/ the moonlight burned my head/ and there were two faced owls cackling to each other/ as I stumbled through bracken/ through red clay.

The house is afire/was afire..... / the roof is caved in/there are logs turned spindly/ like charcoal sticks for drawing/in the hand of God/dress burnt smoke/ hot shards of glass in the remains/protuberances and dark gray bruises/ swell up from the flat clearing/ where the cabin sat/ mouth closed, eyes closed/ but a long arm reached in/ down my throat and clawed at my eyes.



## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackgirl

I. Is there a better feeling  
than having a Black woman  
touch my hair? it's all soft today  
from the honey rinse, and  
she bats it out of the way  
to shine her fingers  
on my gold Spanish earrings  
like she knows me.  
She knows me.

II. It takes a lot of prayers  
to fix what's not broken.  
Hair, skin, ass, the sound  
of your laughter peeling  
from large lips...

III. and to fix yourself. Your  
perception of yourself anyway.  
To love your hair, your skin,  
your ass, the sound of your  
laughter peeling like church  
from your potent lips.

IV. She burrows into the sand  
under a cactus. Tarantulas and  
scorpions take turns walking  
across the granules on her back  
and one tickles the upturned  
palms of her feet.

V. She shows me her palm,  
blue veins snaking like serpents  
under the Fate line  
a little pulse in the thumb.  
I hold it to my ear,  
and like a shell, I hear  
an ocean.

VI. She turns her hand over  
and all the moons have been cut  
off from her fingers.

VII. Sister turned around and flipped her soft gray t-shirt up to confirm she was my sister, the broken wing bones jutting out from ribs.

VII. Sister-girl put her fingers in my mouth, so I kissed her. she kept calling god as a witness as she held me, came to me, called me beautiful.

VIII. My mother washed out my mouth with orange Dial soap in the kitchen.

IX. It takes me three tries to open my mouth to ask for help myself, but negative one to advocate for anyone else.

X. There has been an approximation of my voice. People think I stole it, to speak with them over phones, and in polite conversation, before I slip into something more comfortable, with fewer syllables, the grammar of forced adoption.

XI. Yes. Someone asked me if I could blush. I could, when I was younger. I tan. I freeze in the cold and wonder if it is sacrilegious to want to return to Ghana where it is warm.

XII. I keep no idols or icons, because I am forever discovering how two faced they are, and not in the good makeup way.

XIII. 40% of Black women wear their hair natural, and we are no better than, or worse than those who don't. But it differentiates. It is why Chinese tourists in Spain snapped photos of me like I was an exhibit, *Exotic Girl amongst the Ruins of Cordoba, 2014*. It was why the white beauty pageant chaperone traced her hand through my twist out before I went out onstage, in Jackson, TN, the only Black girl.

## Streams

If I do not concentrate on breathing/ I will drown. /In the salt, the distilled water, even tears /*I'll show you how to breathe down here*/after three hours exercise, I, too, can feel/ the tight and drawn marble/of overnight muscles/ my father defends my wearing a blue sports bra/ in the dining room when my older sister questions/ it as indecent/ this from my father, who complains of Indian accented telephone operators/and the Spanish coming to take back their country.

I remember my father telling me how he used to watch me in my walnut crib/ hand on my milk swole belly/ as we examined each other, this small human/ this man with magnifying glasses on his face/ I am afraid of what it means that my mother did not/ hold me, but for someone with so many children/ she is fond of all of them in different ways.

I was taught to swim when I was five/ and by that I mean that I was allowed to walk out into the ocean/ and someone held my hand/ then dropped it/ to go swim with the dolphins farther out/ but I crawled back to the worn red plaid blanket, ate some gritty tuna fish/ which is maybe why I hate it./ It was only when someone tried to teach me how to swim/ that I started near drowning/ and a stranger had to show me/ how to dive into the water/ and kick off the pool's twelve foot bottom/ to return to the surface.

## Werewolf

My father is a werewolf. His body is covered  
in long black hairs because he is a man  
and doesn't have to shave in public. On his finger knuckles,  
on his toes, his chest peeking out over his worn, faded green  
tank top that he wore to cut the grass,  
on his back when us kids would rotate our  
fists over and over on his knotted up back  
on the disc he threw out but couldn't afford  
to get fixed. I suppose he could, but he gave me  
good straight teeth instead, or my sister dance lessons.

My father is a werewolf, with hair writhing in public  
on his chin, black and now grey mustache, a tamer Afro  
than his fashionable twenties. He has large teeth  
that crowd his jawline and his eyebrows are spiky bushes,  
I remember when he used to make his caterpillar brows dance  
for me by wiggling them up and down  
I want to return to that memory, to be small enough  
for my breaths to fill up the palm of his hand.

## Summer Skin

boy grinding on me late night in Nashville,  
you still gonna fuck with me when I get my summer skin?  
no one told me until too late, when you slather your ashy self  
with coconut oil and soak up the sun your melanin  
goes ten whole shades darker, fuck all that Ulta you splurged on.

The taste of blackest berries may be sweetest,  
but don't no one really know for sure  
since they get plucked after the brightest  
and lightest ones that photograph perfectly  
and fall to the ground in the shade of their mothers.

Gorgon

*The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most un-protected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman.*

*Malcom X*

The iconography, the language, the stereotypes, the connotations, so much pertaining to the Black woman is animalistic, oversexed, at times violent, at times pathetic, but always, always underscored by the difference between her and white women. Black women were thought to have a higher pain tolerance, a lascivious nature based on two simple facts. That white men wanted them, and their striking features: the Hottentot ass, the swollen red lips, kinky hair curling up to a silent god, the exotic night and the darkest shadows ensconced into the skin of her.

Never mind her. Whitemen stripped her of her humanity long ago. Objectified her in slavery, but she's only worth a dime free. Her differences turned into monstrosities, she turns men to stone and no one bats an eye. 36 Black transgender women killed so far this year alone, 36,000 Black women disappearing without so much as shadows or a police siren.

*I am not yours anymore, my grandma  
whispered my history to me as we shelled  
peas. I know I have more than three faces.*

\*\*\*

She became Sapphire. Loud, belligerent, angry, proud, and no one could stand her. No one could best her. She carried her family on her back and hung for it more

than once. See her as the Loud Black Woman, and a watered-down incarnation as the Sassy Black Friend.

Never mind that she's got a lot to be angry about. That even a standard sentence, in her mouth, in her tone, is always too loud for men, for women, for anyone but her experiencing that stab of pain. She's pushing against four hundred years of white patriarchy like Sisyphus, but they are a stone she can't squeeze blood out of, or even wear down with all her tears, no matter how many sons she loses.

*I am not your Negro today or tomorrow,  
and you best pray that you don't  
catch these righteous hands.*

\*\*\*

She became Mammy. The mother of someone else's children, but never her own, because mother means to nurture the way you see fit, and you can't do that if you don't even own yourself. See her pictured with one breast hanging out, the other mauve nipple in the mouth of a little white boy cradled like a bouquet of flowers.

Never mind that this child would grow up to espouse those good Southern values that placed her and a Jersey cow in the same red ledger, noted her offspring in term of lightness, the number of teeth she'd lost, her sweet temperament as she cooked flapjacks and smothered them with butter and syrup. How many little girls that she nursed grew up and made their husbands sell her pretty, distracting granddaughters? How many little boys that she nursed grew up and broke bucks?

*I am not your mule,  
to cart men on my back,  
or front for pink pussy marches.*

\*\*\*

She became Jezebel. A welfare queen with five kids by five different baby daddies, a thot who should have minded her own business, looking fast, acting fast at five. Even with good English and good hair, her dress is always too tight and unprofessional.

Never mind that to take a man between her thighs is the purest act possible when the blood memory of J. Marion Sims cutting and ripping down there without a drop of anesthesia, lauded and set in stone with a plaque that leaves out how he perfected his gynecology methods. That Black women are the most educated demographic, and yet the most cited for their unprofessionalism, which translates to even the slightest whiff of refusing to assimilate.

*I am not your rap artists girlfriend,  
and I will take my lovers on their knees,  
or to my mouth like a holy kiss.*

These ideas try to overtake her selfness. America is encumbered by history to see her as a lesser monster. America looks at her and turns to stone. Not one iota of sympathy for Black women, Black women's strength, Black women's power, Black women's differences.

*But here I am, in the face  
of a world that would swallow  
me whole, laughing.*



## Homegoing

It was the most important thing, for each grandson to wear a tie and each granddaughter to wear a white dress. My cousin fixates on this. Only no store is open, he has only \$20. He has to go run to Goodwill for a swath of the silks pink and blue plaids, green and white diamonds, a red ruby one perfect for Christ, oh he's not coming? No, he's got work. Who can work on their grandma's Homegoing? Who can? Like he asked to be ignorant enough to fuck out 3 kids at 21 and the paycheck.

My grandma is withered to 90 pounds, and I wonder if seeing her die has hurt my little brother, only 13 and bigger than her. Does he cry about her? Auntie does. She comes in dabbing at her eyes and "Lord" wails at seeing mammy, this half Southern, half Nuyorican exclamation.

Meanwhile my dress is too tight across my fat stubby neck, and I curse vintage shopping, but where else can one get a white dress that doesn't show a panty line? Everything is so sheer nowadays.

We've buried both my grandparents from ALS in 5 five years. My mother is a wreck. Or she would be if she was honest. I can only muster tears for myself. My lover says I must not have loved my grandparents, and yeah, maybe I only saw them once a summer but shouldn't I love them? Enough to cry like my brothers are? They're just more emotional I guess. I wonder how many times they can fold a flag (16) or tamp down the earth with great truckfuls of earth, so dark it looks wet. I wonder if there's any slave bones buried out there by the lake. This used to be woods with shade, but

now the sun is so harsh the funeral home provided green tents for the service, and the director can't help smiling at the surcharge, dollar signs being spent as she waves us goodbye.

## The Bent Woman

is crouched over the red soil  
the scent of hot blood, the  
purple afterbirth cooling  
where she flung it at the cacti  
her pet coyote silent, eyes all askance  
his mistress will not let him near  
she is hurt, he smells the blood  
and she was weeping, full body  
sobs. Her fingernails are broken  
from attacking the earth  
grabbing it to somehow hold back  
the girl falling into the world too soon  
then flinging it, wanting to hit something  
her throat is hoarse  
she was crying for her lost son  
has now lost her daughter  
and there are no more wails left  
in her.

## My Grandmother

If she was a house, in her rafters she would have a little  
space, a widow's mite, for my God to rest his head.  
a slim gray mouse crushed under her hoarding piles  
in the dark basement. The doorbell would be broken.  
There would be one or two hard Tootsie Rolls  
that had rolled under the massive walnut sideboard.

## Trout

trawl lines for a catch  
and scoop up the reaping in the sunset hours  
beat it dead, a sharp head tap with the mallet  
flake off the scales, slit it down, remove the  
gut of slithering purple and maroon  
spear it, roast it in its own salt water  
and the first bite is soft, fire crackled  
but juicy. sometimes I've missed a bone  
and it stabs my cheek. You don't need sauce,  
lick it up, lick my fingers, lick the plate.

## Accents

I like the way my roommate Emily says, “Russellville”,  
Up? Down? Wherever here in Clarksville is,  
you know, in relation to normal, Cheltenham, Philadelphia.

I like how this place,  
with its bluest blue hills  
marinates in music that seems to flow from the words,  
yonder, apiece, y’all  
steady and slow.

I love how the radios crackle  
and the chords come out whistle-like, croon-like  
even though the words stay depressing and raw  
the song is true,  
so the song is beautiful.

I don’t like that the roads are curved  
for the rain to coast off of,  
it makes cars coast off too easily.

Oh! But I like how things taste,  
a meat and three here  
is a piece of meat, chicken usually  
with vegetables, boiled and salty.  
Is it good for you?  
Well, it’s good for my tongue.

I like how the new and the old  
fold into each other,  
the AT&T building is called  
the Batman building,  
his pointy ears watching the skyline.

The ever-renovated public library  
with its “donated by” statuettes  
a block away from tattoo parlors  
and places made to look old  
so that those with new money,  
new to the city will come in for the atmosphere.

Country House in Orangeburg, South Carolina

Night time. The youngins play in the yard  
yelling, running barefoot  
over the mole hills and shale gravel  
mindful with dark eyes  
of the apple tree stump  
cut down last April,  
now a red ant hill.

The damn things still won't leave.  
On the porch grandpa sits  
in his wheelchair  
can't speak, head lolled to the side  
Grandma fans him  
my sisters Ann and Beth chatter low  
all side eyeing Pop  
see if he needs anything.

My beer grows warm in my hand.  
Only 67. It's not the age killing him  
Jesus, this time last year  
he could've jogged out in the yard  
keeping time with the toddlers.  
ALS one year later  
his breaths come nearly too slow.

Motherfucker

A few years ago, on an Urban Dictionary haunt I read that the origin of the word comes from a slave practice. The master would tie a sack over the man's face and tie him to his mother, and in the dark all men look alike...so the child fucked their own mother and the offspring were bred out for a specific trait, the strength or endurance that was already evident in the second generation. I sat there, and gooseflesh rose up on my arms and legs. Someone was walking over my grave again. I'm beginning to think that that I've angered my future grandchildren who bury me, and they throw my remains out on the street, since I ghost-shiver so easily. But this was deeper inside me, a gnarl in my gut. I stopped thinking, trying to process what I'd just read. I could picture it so easily, like a macabre gif of a man's strong shoulders cradling his mother, both too afraid to even whisper who they were to each other, the orgasm a retreat from the labor and scarcity of language, what kind of life is that? Who wouldn't volunteer to breed with a neighboring slave if they'd even been given the option?

It isn't true of course. Another search disproved this origin of the word categorically, citing that the term rose as the ultimate insult to break the European taboo of incest and male-mother relationship bonds, while my eye glanced over possible Freudian interpretations of the insult. But I believed it, believed it for a whole-ass moment. My America is capable of doing this, and I knew it in my bones, that whole parts of my history and genealogy are shadow-kept because they reveal the monstrosity of us, and only our blackness as synonymous with a scapegoat has kept America together for as long as it has been. Imagine that Baldwin, the black sheep of the family who almost broke it is the one making it resemble a family. And maybe when we're



finished mediating, we will be a village again, not this democracy or this republic in the spirit of ancestors so few of us can claim unless we are Greek.

Motherfucker. But what if it was? I can't quite squelch the idea in my brain. Something too dark for even Toni Morrison to write about. I have to remember the intrinsic value of an enslaved body, why fill a girl's belly with a deformed child through incest? Just like pigs, the sows' offspring are recorded and memorized in order to avoid deformed piglets. And I find a saving grace in the inhumanity of my ancestors, that this one sin would not be visited upon them because it would fail to fill the coffers. Most slaves were not on the gargantuan plantations, but held in small groups, sometimes just one or two, the ultimate symbol of wealth. If I was transported two hundred years into the past I could fetch \$850 on the auction block, which translates to a small used car nowadays. But I will meet too many people's eyes to return unscathed, and that's the heart of this fear, that no one, not even the scrap of two years when a mother nursed a child, would be allowed to remain sacred and loving, that this too could be tarnished and destroyed in a single night.

## Nappy

Yesterday, my white friend asked me why more girls don't wear their hair natural like me, and I told her, "it's a long story. I don't mind telling you but its like, you have the whole slavery times"—my tongue still trips over "slavery" versus "enslavement", despite my full and thorough commitment to placing the onus and responsibility on the masters. "Not much time, so you'd just wrap it in a scarf, actually, in Louisiana, there were hair codes after enslavement, I just learned that last year. But anyways, after the Civil War, you have more time, but from then until the 60s the focus was on bettering the race through education and advancement, so you would try and lighten your skin, straighten your hair with a hot comb, wear good clothes. Then you had the Black Power movement, and Angela Davis and them all wore these fierce Afros to claim their natural beauty, the way their hair grew out of their head. So, it became a political statement, and still kinda is.

Some little girls in Africa, of all places, just got reprimanded for wearing them in primary school. Then you had conks and braids, and then now the Natural hair care movement is really flourishing so about 40% of Black women are estimated to be Naturalistas, but other women still perm or wear weaves or wigs or some combination". I don't tell her I wear mine natural because I panic at the heat of the curling iron, 400 degrees burning my scalp and my ear, and the chemical burns of the perm(anent straightener) has scarred me for life. She doesn't understand that our prospective bosses see a liability instead of

## Naturalistas

### 1. Naturalista definition.

A fashionable African-American woman who wears her hair natural, in twists, braids, Afro puffs, sisterlocs, locs, or a blazing Afro. They are very prominent in cities.

If I go outside  
fickle Nashville will downpour  
wash my hair in rainwater  
briny, salt of God's tears.

This Naturalista watches  
perm haired girls  
cover up with magazines  
bags, unzip their coats  
and cover their hair  
becoming all hunched shoulders

Every water droplet beads as  
water drops  
beads  
crystal  
reflecting light  
jewels in my kinky mane.

## The Eve Gene

My breath was short and I was shaking to finally know, how much is me and how much is someone else? With my DNA, I didn't expect to find much Native, and good thing I didn't bet money, because there was exactly 0. I am a mix of Africa, Beninese, Nigerian, Ivory Coastan, and a whopping percent of Ghanaian. There was about 19% of European: Irish, French, Scandinavian, a drop of Italian and Russian, and 2% ambiguously Kazakhstani. That was the only surprise. I was pinned down like a butterfly now, labeled and glassed into a box. Only instead of confines, I found release. I joked about my results with my students, asking if I could now say white insults like "cracker" and "white trash", since I was about 1/5 white myself, and how far does one drop of whiteness go? I bonded with my pageant friend Angela Porcelli about our shared Italianness and love of complex carbs, and with my Campbell friends on our motherland, aka potato-land. And I started listening to Ghanaian musicians like FUSE.

But as I compared results with others, we all laughed at the blonde with her 1% of African DNA, our one common origin. That's how we all know we're African, way back when. That mitochondrial DNA of the first woman in who knows what age. Reading the DNA breakdowns and research articles I found on JSTOR was like reading in another language, everything needed to be translated, and I wasn't sure that I wasn't filling in my own gaps as I read along, but the consensus seemed to be that there were DNA sequences that the scientists could follow, and they were least diluted in Black women, meaning that we're all versions of a Black woman named Eve. I wondered what it would have been like, to see her in my Bible picture book as a child instead of the slim white hips and backs representing Adam and Eve, the diadem of black kinky

hair and the skin glowing underneath the Afric [sic] sun, a mirror image of the yellow,  
life giving sun.

## Shtriga

My second mother  
she took precautions with me  
warded my bed  
with pig bone crosses  
to keep the *shtriga*  
from kissing me  
with the evil eye  
to find me like a hound  
trails its prey  
even in the dark.

## Shaman

I am curious about the moon's childhood  
she is a brilliance, she has matured over her scars.  
But the burned side of her body must include her tongue  
because we have been ascribing her, assaying her, admonishing her.  
Putting words into her gray mouth, pulling sacredness out  
I said to myself, here is some kindred  
my most center direction of the cardinals.  
Instead of milk, I fed my daughter handfuls of the crescent  
reflected in the still pools to calm her fever.  
she said  
*there are butterflies slicing their machetes  
under my skin*  
and I could not get that image gone  
not even when the Moon had taken her  
left her body for the Sun to find.

## A Fish Resurrects

The height of Brazilian science is to strip a tilapia fish of its skin-leftover like whey from the factories- and sterilize it to layer over the chemical burns, sometimes from those same factories. “It burns”, the patient Josue says. “That’s to be expected in the first 24 hours,” the doctor replies.

He asks if there is any pain, elevated respiration?  
“Only when strangers see my arm,” Josue jokes, “but my son, he thinks my new scaly arm is funny, calls me Fish Man”.  
But so far there are benefits of becoming piscine:  
the bandages need no changing like traditional linens,  
the sloughed fish skin adheres soft and wet to the human epidermis,  
the darkroom is a catalyst for white blood cells to develop into armor,  
and the creamy pink skin a miracle after the blackish green tilapia.



## 6 Ways of Returning to this World

Your shoe. Yes, I could be your shoe,  
eating dirt, holding you  
but kicked off every day.  
Really, I wouldn't find anything different.

Or should I return as a song?  
I would be pure electricity  
Girls would shimmy their hips  
and I would always be someone's  
stripper song.

My ex's walls. Bear with me.  
We think so fast when we die, all the electrons firing  
if I accidentally thought of the man who turned me crazy  
I might come back as his walls.

A nail clipper!  
My owner would  
search desperately for me to crop their hangnail  
off before the blue glittered nail ripped  
to the quick.

A cookbook.  
To be stained with flour  
smears of chocolate, pops of sizzling oil  
making the novice's hand steady as she nervously read me  
again, and again for dinner with her mother-in-law.

A mirror.  
I don't know why,  
maybe then I would  
finally stop being afraid of them.

## Alaskan Alchemy

Yellow eyed wolves that circle her camp,  
watch her as she cuts ice with her *ulu*, her woman's knife  
she cuts and stacks, pours water, scatters snow  
erects an igloo that cuts out twenty degrees as the sun set  
and the cold came, not like razors, but like a mother's touch  
warm and soft lulling you to sleep and then the wiser coyotes  
would gnaw your frozen carcass in the morning. She made something  
out of water and air and ice, something out of nothing  
performed alchemy, she said let there be an igloo.

## Glass Womb

in the future, children will germinate in manmade wombs.  
of course, by the future I mean now.

I can have a child grown in a blue glass womb  
emerging from a bead of water like Mami Wata  
split tailed and serpent skinned, and I will have done  
my part in parturition, my mother will have a granddaughter.

I trace the womb at night, it is exactly one-degree warmer  
than my palms. I feel like a witch when my nails scrape  
the crystal ball, the luminous red and purple eddy of liquid  
tempting itself to transform into flesh and blood. I divine her perfect bones  
when she is born there is no pain, no smacking, no shrieking  
she speaks in perfect sentences, but they are not a language we recognize.

## Sunwise

In a sunwise circle  
were ten warning signs  
two handfuls of bodies  
the druid's explicit disapproval  
of the king of Cashel and his Roman ideas.

These same priests and priestesses  
who borrowed white oak switches from their sacred trees  
to make a love spell for his new bride,  
who proclaimed him a welcome reincarnation  
to the throne whose heirs would reign a thousand years.

*Disowning our peaceful practices to preserve them  
is darkness in the name of the spirit.*

Priestess Brigid had protested at the slaughter,  
her corpse now faced true South, the lowest direction.  
This is a two-faced god.

## Ireland

All the king's men and all the king's horses  
effervescent in the fog writhing across the moor  
imaginary, real, my demons, their angels  
open a red-haired boy from groin  
up his buttoned shirt to his throat  
yank his hand from the red river, slit it.

## Silk Road

The silk road strands across the silver stream  
an icky chronicle to a chubby arachnid  
chains spewed from her bodies' digested flies  
a war queen, blood can't be washed or willed away from her hands  
yet she is as studious as a restoration sovereign  
by change of an hour she has leapt, leapt, and leapt again  
begun on a boulder, ended on the birch sapling  
spawned three summers past now soaking up the stream  
and wended she along her path  
skeleton safety strand, traverse  
stronger silver silk  
chased over, reinforced to super strength suspension  
bridges the air like a skyscraper laid lengthwise  
as her little marvel shooting off to  
ally with a side stone, the lesser branches.

Start and stop for a sip of sun spit fly  
*sangre a la mode*, she returns to her primordial mandala  
a sampler of sticky residue breeding out for fly legs  
dragonfly wings and walking stick heads  
traverses six months across her silk road,  
repairwoman, trader and dealer, some insects span  
more than her mouth, she cannot consume them  
realist, she sets free. The rest crunch under storing sucking  
sick sweet strands choking over under around  
their circumference; created being cracking down into unbearable compost thing  
I don't deny our human roads were any  
less into performing practical savagery.

## A Windfall

I am not overly proud of,  
Nor sensuously attracted to this skin,  
these curves, this walk.

I run and I think,  
my every breath escaping my lips.  
Life is something that, I thought,  
should be spent like a stranger's wealth, a windfall.

The prayers have kissed me sane,  
to see the tenuous thread  
spun by the Three Gentle Sisters.

## The Call of the Void

I am obsessed with yanking out  
my perfectly good white teeth. The pain  
threshold of my jaw, how much  
higher is it than my partner's punch?

I have to turn my body, to stay  
my hand from yanking the fire  
alarm. I can't pull it, so I'm dying  
to dig my nails into the white plastic  
and yank it hard.

I am irritated by the flash of panic  
of being outnumbered by tall men  
in the elevator, wish my teeth  
would turn to hollow white fangs  
so they would step around me like a rattlesnake.



Chosen

L'chaim.

To the pursuit

if not

of happiness

a less somber life.

## The Most Beautiful Drowned Mouse Daughter

A mouse I drowned reincarnated into my womb a week later. She remembered the drowning when she was thirteen, nibbling on a piece of Havarti cheese. Or more likely, when she was three. I licked my finger and wiped her peanut butter and jelly smear off her dimpled chin and she grabbed my innocent thumb and bit down—I thought she just meant to lick the purple Smuckers off my finger—I jerked away at the pain, she kept my nail in her mouth.

## Rorschach

Red paint catches my eye first, smeared in a sticky texture as the pages try to pry away from each other as I opened the bent paper, breath held like Schrodinger's cat's owner, would there be something recognizable inside? I see a vibrant, dark pathway, something six-year-old me imagined as hell, with a river of fire beyond it.

I glimpse blue and puzzle out that there are butterfly wings, ripped off a Painted Lady butterfly and affixed to a fairy's walls. They swing like saloon doors, scales showering the snakeskin floor rug as they turn this way and that.

There's a blue pelvis with budding green ovaries, like tea packets, except webbed veined like the underside of an oak leaf. I wonder how heavy that bone is removed of flesh.

Note the bright paper, no longer pure, all black flecked and bisected with color, the only thing its missing is some orange. I could put it in the corners over the red vivisecting the purple kidney bean shaped wings threatening to rip themselves alive and three dimensional. If I turn the paper over backwards I see a comedically mournful cat, red nose, blue gray fur, and giant ears, her little paws outstretched as she slides on the freshly waxed floor.

## God Almighty

If I was God and Joel Olsteen came up  
to my pearly gates tonight after dying  
I'd point back to the gospels like a teacher  
with a syllabus, page two addendum three.  
Son, I have to judge you harshly  
for your actions, **I was hungry...**  
**I was thirsty.... I needed raiment...**  
and Joel would squirm and God-me  
would like that because God-me has  
favorites and Joel's not one of them.

## Good Catholic

girls grow up to salute flags  
call themselves patriots,  
argue god into a jewelry box,  
take out the gold cross  
necklace for Easter, Christmas,  
and christenings of distant cousins.  
There is no patron saint  
of gay children, but the Pope  
turns a blind eye to fathers.

## Girl Poem

I mistake her neck nuzzles  
when we danced as “just kisses”  
& honestly, I thought she  
hated me. I’m very bad at women  
loving women. I never knew  
a finger in my mouth  
could be erotic, or that her voice  
could sound that sweet, or that  
kissing her felt, God, it finally  
felt something. Why is that?  
Why is her perfection & beauty  
something she has to hide?  
Why can’t she sleep in my arms forever?  
hand over hand cupping the crescent moons  
of my belly & leaving a darkly starred  
night to fend for itself?

## Splinter

It is when you write about your complicated life with your father. not because you hate him, but that it is not straightforward to say that you love him because the way that you love him is not the same as the way you love your mother, which is to say that you didn't think she liked you as a child, and read her diary that said she found you difficult and didn't like her back for years. Now you talk on the phone, and you try to like each other because you really are each other but you will not talk to your father because you are angry with him, not out of spite, but because you think you can win, think you can pull respect out of him like a splinter, if you set your teeth to it right.

## A Single Wooden Spoon

I can't be bothered to hold the grief of Gaza  
and Syria today. To hold the banshee cries of  
Black mothers or the violent thirst of Flint  
water. I can barely hold myself, and I'm already  
digging my nails in

every moment of every day  
drums pound (death knells) and we ken  
new words for our genocides to keep them  
restrained like matched horses.  
Whose language is this violent, consciously  
or unconsciously? What will it do to us  
if we hold it in our mouths too long?



Sparrows tumbled from my throat, which is to say

that I tasted feathers in my mouth,  
retched up something dark for you,  
that the death omens fell at my feet  
one after another, three four five,  
five birds worth a farthing,  
and God was watching.  
A red ant looks up and blesses Him,  
lays a forage trail  
around the manna of carcasses, the stiff  
peach bird legs clawing at the sky,  
nails still shiny with my saliva,  
white feathers rustling with a horde  
of tiny red jaws starting at the neck,  
biting the swallowflesh  
parsing it down  
to the hollow bones,  
a snarl of feathers  
like uncombed hair,  
and earth stained, crying out  
with blood.

## Trilingual

*Learn a new language and get a new soul ~ Czech proverb*

I should experiment with languages,  
the third lung budding in my chest  
it forms a circle with my original lungs,  
slick against each other, trying to respect  
their own fissures of tissue, intakes of air,  
the primal mandate to contract arrhythmic  
around my red *corazon*. Some words drain  
down to my toes and refuse to circulate  
back to my throat.

French is whisky sour,  
straining new bilabial contortions  
of my lips. A smug nasal *ã*, and professor  
Cuisiner's shrug that I absorbed, *très drôle*,  
each word is baby voiced, sniped short before  
the invisible letters, /t/ and /s/, foreign  
to my Southern tongue.

My palate of English tastes wild, vocabulary  
filling my teeth, nerves tangled at the roots,  
but there is Spanish electricity sparking in my brain,  
*púrpura y azul* from childhood, some words  
superseding my native tongue

I think I will be funny in Italian, if I'm judging  
my personality shift in languages, scarves  
I try on over my throat, harsh, flirtatious.

It feels heady, serpentine to commit to memory  
new words and new structure, but I am now  
ten years old in all my languages,  
and I am almost confident  
that I can unhinge my ribs flat  
and float-fly through the air,  
swallowing languages at will.

## Poder

I remember this verb  
as the one that sums up  
I could but I won't  
The power to make something happen.  
It reverberates in my chest,  
and I conjugate it constantly,  
*puedo, pude, podré*  
I could, I was able to, I will be able to,  
some sort of stake,  
a promise to my prospective self.

Of Which American Nostalgic Show am I Speaking?

The show is about 50% whining, 50% yelling. No one jokes or dances. Naturally, this is very boring.

The FMC is trying to choose between a tall muscular blond, a tall, muscular brunet. They both have heads that look like blocks. The whole town is white. I guess that makes it escapist? Really it just makes me think they murdered everybody else, and this town's book entry into e African American Green Guide Book is just a big black X for here be danger? don' step foot here.

Ars Poetica: Explained with Or

Words that are enough on their own  
something worthier than the blank page or screen  
a start, a triumphant end, but it's the in-between  
startled by all the nouns we've grown  
accustomed to placing in little garden beds  
now violently free to intermingle  
confound and turn us on our heads  
but still make someone say "it's not poetry it's just a Bob Dylan pop single."  
Words carefully and artfully arranged.

*Free as blood in the veins, a charging rush but ordered*  
complete thoughts usually,  
*I, you, lust.... wander—broken*  
but at least enough to make you think  
*mindless captivating popcorn flick*  
ponder the greater meaning of life  
*cease to bow down to the epic, vaunt the crumbs that fall*  
or appreciate the simplistic aspects of it  
*every line grandiose as holy writ.*

## Letters Faded Yellow

Dear Elizabeth

You are young because you have not lived  
happy yet, you are shaking because you  
want to be born and are rotting in  
a womb of your own making. Breathe:  
go where its darkest and be born.

Dear Liz, everyone's laughing  
here with you  
wonder of wonders.

Dear Eliza,  
your mother is calling for you  
she says she's sorry but she will not  
say for what, perhaps you remember?  
If not, make something up  
so she can receive closure. Be a good  
daughter, not one  
who remembers.

## Chorus Girls Dancing in Proximity to the Spotlight

in the darkest edges by the sudden light  
that breathless audience there  
and brilliant you illuminated here

dust motes drift around you like  
a settling snow globe set aright

you are close enough to touch  
my hand while I remain unseen

I whisper a word, a line you need  
and you carry on the show,  
none but the other actors know.

the whole world's a show  
so, there are no small parts

no mere sister of, daughter of  
wife of, mother of, or lover of.

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