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To Romp the Sky

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TO ROMP THE SKY

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

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

By Katherine Hamblen

August 2021

TO ROMP THE SKY

Date Recommended 06-09-2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Good Little Girls – “Mommy Guilt” (published as “Absolution”).

When Pens Bloom: A Collaboration between Plants & Poetry and Poets are the Destroyers –
“At the End of Winter 2020” and “Family Walks.”

Shift – “Afterlife.”

Ghost City Review – “Hannah.”

Rockvale Review – “Prenatal.”

My gratitude to:

Western Kentucky University and the Creative Writing program in the English department, for the opportunity to study and create.

Dr. Tom Hunley, Dr. Cheryl Hopson, and Professor Trish Jagers for their thoughtful reading of and advice for this manuscript.

Sonia Chintla, for her belief in my work and for publishing my very first poem. Ellen Brackin Sevits, Jamison Brackin Sevits, and Katharine Reynolds, for always cheering me on enthusiastically.

Mary Ann Hamblen, whose love and support made going back to school possible.

My parents and brother, who have been on the entire journey with me.

Rowan and Oliver, for being my inspiration, second chance, and the best things that have ever happened to me.

Brian, for his encouragement when my confidence flagged, and without whom these poems might not even exist.

PREFACE

Although these poems were not written with the intention of being all about nature, motherhood, and the relationships we have with our family members, that is the shape this collection has taken. We write what we know, and what dominates our mental landscapes. My day-to-day existence is, apart from my work, taken up by my children. They become the subject of my studies of the world, and the focus of my most profound emotions. These are the things I'm often compelled to write about. Relationships with other family members, most notably, my brother, also make appearances, as does the topic of my mental health. Past romantic relationships feature, as well. But it all revolves around my experience of womanhood, and what has become the heart of my life: my family.

The natural world is also the subject of many of these poems, or, you might say, the natural object represents an emotion. The natural world is so rich in images, and images do the work of conveying feelings. I've learned much, and continue to learn, from poets who write in this tradition. Perhaps my favorite poet for this type of work is Jane Kenyon. Her poems are deceptively simple, with precise and lovely images, but they also carry the weight of strong emotion. In a posthumous collection of various of her writing and interviews, *A Hundred White Daffodils*, her husband Donald Hall says in the introduction that Kenyon "practiced the kind of poetry she admired most—an art that embodied powerful emotion by means of the luminous particular." This phrase has stayed with me, haunted me even. It has sent me in search of my own precise, luminous images that can do the work of expressing emotion. There is also a set of notes by Kenyon. It is really only a bare outline for a lecture titled "Everything I know about Writing Poetry,"

but contains gems of poetic wisdom that have shaped my evolution. In these notes, she suggests that when the poet feels the surge of emotion they wish to express through art, they need to find “a way to *body forth* [the] feeling. It’s metaphor, the engine of poetry, that does the work for us.” She goes on to quote Ezra Pound, who said ““The natural object is always the adequate symbol.”” This marriage of emotion and nature, these simple-sounding instructions on how to express ourselves in writing, has guided me as I’ve worked to imitate imagist poets, and enrich my own personal style with fresh infusions of images, as in my poem “Prenatal”:

That summer, there was a sandbar
on our rented stretch of beach, so close
with such a shallow crossing
that I did not fear to wade out, plant
myself there, stare at the horizon
as the waters washed me, healed me
where learning to be a mother
was fissuring me, taught me how to join
both parts of myself, like the place
where ocean blends into sky.

Cutting a poem down to be largely composed of images may sound like rough surgery, and there has certainly been poetry full of extraneous words and flowery language. However, I found I have not lost anything. Rather, I have gained, as I learn to carve out filler words and unnecessary descriptors, and forced myself to plumb the word-well deeper and deeper to draw up those words (or combinations of words) that have not been used so often that their meaning has been stripped away.

I also find this spareness of word and conciseness of image in Japanese poetry. Short forms such as the tanka and the haiku require a remarkable economy of language. The forms are designed to be written in Japanese, and are difficult to replicate properly in

English, but it is a pleasure to attempt it. *The Ink Dark Moon*, a translation of the poetry of Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani, taught me much about the artistry of Japanese poetry. In particular, it is interesting to note the use of specific nature words according to the ancient Japanese calendar, measured out in small segments of days. For example, plums are associated with several days in June, and a poem written with this word would automatically bring that period of time to mind of a reader who is familiar with the Japanese year. I appreciate this attention to the cycle of seasons, as well as the broader focus on nature in Japanese poetry, and the precision of word choice. This type of poetry has influenced my interest in writing about nature, and in excising words that don't move a poem forward. I apply this to many of my poems, and also enjoy trying Japanese forms sometimes.

In terms of playing with forms, I also like trying many different kinds, including the sonnet, and the villanelle, for the challenges they present. I am especially interested in the effect that using a prescribed form has on language. Using a form (or a prompt) can result in a poem that is quite different from a writer's usual style, and I enjoy seeing totally different kinds of poetry come out of my own mind. Ultimately, writing in a "formal" form does not produce my very favorite poems, but it does produce some interesting results, so I like the idea of including a few in a collection.

My greatest poetic influences in recent years have been largely women. Growing up, I felt that the literary world was represented to me as being dominated by men, and it was groundbreaking and refreshing for me to discover the world of women poets. Among my modern favorites is Ada Limón. Hers was some of the first work I fell in love with when I made a serious return to poetry in my thirties. Limón's attention to the natural

world as solace and a form of spirituality have guided me in finding my own aesthetic. Her poems have become more autobiographical over time, and this also appeals to me. I like to see some of the poet in their poems; I like them to be personal. I enjoy reading a poet's biography when I read their poetry, because it helps me get a sense of where they are coming from, what they are trying to express with words. I really love her description of how she learned to catalog the natural world. In the poem "Against Belonging," Limón says:

Once, when I was
young, we camped out at Russian Gulch and learned
the names of all the grasses, the tide pool animals,
the creatures of the redwoods, properly identifying
seemed more important than science, more like
creation. With each new name, the world expanded.

This is a perfect description of how I feel about naming the things in the natural world, observing them and taking one's place in them. It defines Limon's worldview, and I feel it is the same for me. Because spending time outdoors is such a large part of my happiness and my mental health, I am always striving to know the natural world better and bring that into my poetry. This is also very present in Jane Kenyon's work, and it's clear that I gravitate toward poets who write about nature and use nature to express their own emotions and experiences.

Motherhood is also very present in my poems, and I have looked to many poets for education and inspiration, including Maggie Smith and Erika Meitner. Smith's poetry has a sense of magical realism. She describes everyday scenes in life with her children but brings in that magical touch which makes them seem otherworldly. Some of her earlier poetry was actually based on fairy tales. While I would not say magical realism is present in my work, it is something I am trying to learn to incorporate. Smith's poems are

tricky and have a riddle-like quality that I admire very much. Erika Meitner is more matter-of-fact in its descriptions of everyday scenes. I love her for her humor. She approaches difficult topics such as gun violence and living as a minority in a small southern town, and I am interested in learning to handle topics beyond myself, which has largely been my focus up to this point. From Meitner, I've learned to try humor more.

There are a lot of poets writing and publishing, currently, whose poems become lost to me as they become so experimental in their forms that I lose interest in what they are trying to accomplish. It is the same with the use of language. Obviously, as poets, we don't want to be too plain-spoken. We want to catch a reader's attention with fresh and inventive language. However, I do think there is a point at which words and word combination become so personal to the writer that they become nonsensical to the reader, and this, I try to avoid. I do believe in a poem being accessible to those outside the poetry world. Although most poets do not end up reaching a wide audience, I still like the idea of broad appeal. A poem should say something in a beautiful, original way that makes us want to read it, and although some work may be necessary to understand it, it should not be impossible.

These female writers represent some of my greatest influences but are also only a sampling of what I have read that has informed my poetry. From these poets, I've learned more about who I want to be as a poet: someone who brings a fresh spin to the old stories about motherhood and family, in whose work nature is always present, and who is learning to connect her own narratives to the larger narratives of humanity.

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TO ROMP THE SKY

Katherine Hamblen

August 2021

53 Pages

Directed by: Tom Hunley, Cheryl Hopson, and Trish Jagers

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This is a creative thesis consisting of a collection of poetry divided into three sections. The poems explore themes of womanhood, motherhood, mental health, loneliness, and healing. The first section deals with childhood and family of origin, the second section is about the move into adulthood, individuality, and loneliness. The third follows the narrator into having her own children, creating her own family, and finding healing.

I

Spruce, inadequate, and alien
I stood at the side of the road.
It was the only life I had.

—Jane Kenyon

Estate Planning

with lines from Emily Dickinson, W.S. Merwin, and “Life of Brian”

I have given some thought to whether or not I'd like
to be cremated, when I *no longer find myself in life,*
as in a strange garment. Someone my age
should have a will, two wills, in fact,
describing my wishes in case of death and living
death, assigning *What portion of me be assignable,*
instructing who to pull the plug when.
The inventor of the frisbee told his family
he wanted his ashes made into one, to give people joy,
and it's a noble thing to see your own demise
as a celebration of your life but I suffer from *cherophobia:*
the fear of being happy. Instead, I worry a lot—for instance—
about the wasted hours spent in cars. The average person
will spend six months of their life waiting for red lights to turn green.
My three-year-old children understand the urgency, tell me
red means stop and *green means go* and when the traffic starts
slow my son starts whining that it is time to *GO*.
There is a feeling that all life's hours must be used,
must be enjoyed, that in death, we must leave an impression.
If you die without family or friends in the Netherlands,
there are city poets whose job it is to write a poem about your life
then read it at your funeral. The English choose to make the best
of the whole situation, their most-requested funeral song being Monty
Python's "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."
Whenever I hear the phrase *look on the bright side,*
that song is all I can think of, and whenever
I think of the song, I envision a bunch of guys in loincloths,
crucified and smiling, whistling the tune, willing
to find the best in life and in death, like they've figured out
some kind of secret, they are *bowing not knowing to what,*
and I'm starting to think I should follow
their example, so that when I can no longer *see to see*—
when this world goes dark for me, too—
I'll be too full of thanks to be afraid.

Avoiding Elegy with Prayer

Antarctic ice sheets dwindle and
Build up the seas until they swallow
Continental edges. The water is full of
Dioxins, pesticides, islands of garbage.
Even so, the world feels as
Full of wonders as ever.
Green in abundance, plenty of beauty left before we run out. Unseasonable
Heat just now getting too unnatural to ignore.
I was trying not to think too hard about it all because
Jangling fear trembles my belly and spine,
Kills my calm. But there are people I
Love, small people who will need their
Mother-home to be a place they can live.
Now I pray the planet holds
On for a little while longer,
Plead with the oceans to forgive us our trespasses, atone to the skies
Quickening with our poison.
Radiant world, still breaking my heart with your
Sandy beaches, your sturdy oak trees, your healthy streams—
Tell me you could forgive us, that there is time to
Undo the damage. Don't let us end like
Venus, another paradise lost. Someday only things
Wilder than people will be able to survive here, but don't
X us out
Yet. This clock is not ready to reset to
Zero.

Throwback

Police scanner of my brain
ignores the useful things,
picks old jingles up
tout de suite—
I'll never be free
of the theme songs from
Muppet Babies, Duck Tales,
80s car commercial music—
ninety percent of this gray matter's
usable power spent on nostalgia.
Don't you know, you have to eat
the bitter with the sweet?

What about the big wooden TV,
plastic push buttons,
handful of channels,
weekend morning cartoons
sacrosanct.
Dressed for church, little boy
kneels before the set,
head tipped back,
eyes fixed
through lenses an inch thick.
Memory of a photograph?
Or one that's true?
That question plays on repeat—
I learned early to forget.

Sleep Interrupted

For Matthew

Night blinks rapidly, an eye opening
and shutting. A burning eye, prodded awake
by dreams. The human pupil is a gateway
to another dimension where the scenery
folds like laundry. I hear time and it sounds
flexible; I see you as newborn and troubled man
in one instant. In waking life, too, people age years
in minutes, because I can't keep track of the hour.
Anyway, I'm not so sure time matters
in either dimension, the way we like to pin it
wriggling to the wall— it never stays put.
Evenings stretch out; I keep waking because
I heard a noise or I accidentally drank
something caffeinated or got frantic about you,
again. The moon is pushing me away,
darkening the dark, the chain around my ease.
Katiebear is all out of ideas for how to help;
your manic texts about moving to L.A. to be an actor
make her think you're doing drugs again,
she is taking you straight to the county prison.
Maybe the cell bars can talk some reason into you,
keep you safe. Someday we will go back to outer space,
lit up with the glow of being whole. We will be singing
all the time, we will be clean and rested,
it's gonna be ivey-divey, man,
better than you're able to imagine right now,
but I can see it already, when I close my eyes,
when I can keep them closed, I can't quite *que sera, sera*
this one, oh, you're worrying me
waking and sleeping.

Puff

Love unlids Pandora's box.

—Karen Russell

When he was a little boy my brother had a silky-skinned stuffed animal
the color of a sky halfway between sun and rain. He called it Puff;
loved it like his own baby, treated it with rough toddler affection.
Hard to comprehend his small face, aged, caught up
in clouds of swirling snow, sugar to make him wild and raving.

The real reason I waited so long to have children
was the thought of them ending up like their uncle:
all promise chewed away by bad decisions,
high school track star used up and spat out by shame,
by coke and clients who rented his body by the hour.
Or something like that—same story, different details.
Memories of a boy who loved his soft blue teddy bear
trip through my brain at odd times.
Love can unhinge you,

and it made me so afraid to lift the lid again,

take the chance that I could make good kids
into good adults. But all the clichés are true:
a child's wonder, seeing the world
through fresh eyes,
everything is new again.

Things could be so different, this time.

Tea

In my mother's kitchen
there hung an oversized painting
of two tall, long-limbed women,
two been-friends-forever-friends,
hair waving and softly pinned,
bodies dressed in red, and in lavender,
long, loose, sleeves covering
elbows resting on a round table's edge,
garden in the window behind them
as they sat for some afternoon tea
out of thick, blue cups.

One held the teapot,
one paused as if lost in thoughts
of what she wanted to say, and they
looked so quiet, serene, and close
together, heads bent toward each other,
that whenever I looked I thought
about how they probably loved each other

despite disagreements, that maybe someday,
my mother and I could pour tea
and talk like old friends.

Live Fast, Die Young

I keep the hope you'll come back through the door,
though you are gone for good into the fog;
two-wheeled, spun out and hit the pavement hard—
so hard it split your skull where it was soft.

Bituminous from asphalt, was your skin,
and flayed in places from the rough and drag.
Your body moved at such a rate on road—
it was never meant for such a thing.

No rhino hide could save you, your thick skin
was not quite tough enough, nor your hard head.
A suit of armor might have saved you then,
a sword of foam on which to fall instead

of one of steel, you always had a wish
to move too fast and lose yourself in mist.

Last Meal

Listen, Roo. A fat tumor sandwiched between the walls
of your right sinus cavity is not what I imagined for you.
I hoped you'd get very old, crawl under a bed
and expire in peace. Instead, this labor to breathe
through a mass of tissue, pushing out mucus, blood,
and your right eye. I worry it will pop out and roll
onto the ground as you struggle your lungs full,
your ribs straining to squeeze in enough
oxygen to keep you moving. You're living for snacks now;
when you got your death sentence at the animal hospital
I began feeding you turkey, fried eggs, half-full bowls of pasta
with sauce the kids would not finish, bits of pastry. Some friends
said they cooked up steaks for their dog before she passed, let her
dreamily guzzle chocolate bars as the in-home vet injected a heavy dose
of sleeping potion, enough to make her nap forever. I want that
for you, too, one final gorging, an epic feast of foods
you couldn't have your whole life because they might kill you,
all the delicious flavors your small tongue can swallow
before the doctor puts you to bed with gentle hands.

Jardin

was the name of my Nan's favorite perfume.
It smelled like a garden: luscious ylang-ylang,
jasmine, lily-of-the valley. Only second-
hand smoke makes me think of her more.
Always there, frosted bottle at the middle
of the mirrored tray, atop the dresser where she kept
the other scents. I would sneak sniffs of it, sweet
connection to my second mother, or was she the first
one to hold her arms open without conditions?
One week each summer I'd visit her, meeting
halfway between Nashville and Memphis at the Casey
Jones restaurant in Jackson. She cooked me spaghetti
dinners; we sat down at a formal-set table,
went to the library. One year she bought me a book
I wanted on essential oils, repeated notes of natural
fragrances, bergamot and rose, and it holds space still
in my bookcase, inscribed by her, along with all the cards
she gave me, her *darlin'*. Later, when I lived with her
while I suffered through law school, she would have
one glass of wine out of a big jug from the Macaroni Grill,
and chide me for having more.

Even now, I sit here sipping
a little extra and think of what she'd say,
of the rasp and crackle of her voice,
throat burn of sixty years of cigarettes
that killed her. Twelve years on,
I want to hear that voice tell me
I've had enough, then get a hug
that would set me right for days.

Final Visit

For Mollie Curlee

When I come to see you,

you are halfway
into the next world.

There is not much to leave behind,
you almost a husk, and drawn up,

as light as air.
Hardly any hair,

mouth gaping and speechless.
You are not really there

but when I hold up my phone,
live video of my six month old twins,

you take up residence
again in

your eyes. Your
visitor's pass is brief, you are

no longer this world's citizen,
so I hold your hand,

kiss your slack cheek. I
have the privilege of telling you

that I love you
more than once

before our time is up.
Dear one I have

always loved: I will remember
this. But I will recall more

visits to your house,
your laughter like tiny silver bells

pealing, the meals you made
us. The way you just ate and

ate up life, until not
hungry anymore.

Fading by Fractions

For Mollie Curlee and Alma Viktor

Some vacate their shells suddenly
while others fade by fractions.
I wasn't certain which was
easier until I observed my
grandmothers take these
opposite ways into
whatever's next.
My conclusion: going
gradually might be better for
a slow learner like me.
To be jolted into the afterlife
following brief illness or accident
seems too abrupt.
My consciousness wouldn't
upload correctly.
I need time to adjust
to the idea of transition.
As my last act of control,
I want to go
into god by inches.
The grandmother who left slow—
I saw her do this.
Little bits at a time
she shed flesh and mind.
Slipping off small portions as
she became the light.

I Believe the Term is “Pathological”

Little boy, thick glasses, you
cried when big sister took your toys but
I also defended you from neighborhood boys.
You grew up and got high too early,
never knew how to find the ground.
Used your tender streak to
hide so many secrets.

Pileup of fled charges and finally you
made good and got clean, cleared your
record. New job, your own place,
offering us real smiles and good intentions.
Every time, I’ve hoped for your redemption.
You’ve gotten further this time than
ever before.

Requests for emergency rides and
texted wishes to die seem
to come out of nowhere.
Something is very wrong,
again; you won’t let us help.
The truth about you
will float forever in the void of
what we can’t know.

Anonymous mail, dirty envelope,
junkie’s scrawl—my name spelled wrong,
correct address. Your picture
and what you are willing to do
for a price, sent by
someone you fucked
over. You claim it’s a joke—
it looks real to me.

Please say you were born this way,
and not made?
Your family needs some forgiveness,
all this effort to mend you
but we have only your absence and
this ugly sadness, this fear that
never quite goes away.

Once more you're lost in space;
I don't know if you know your
way back and I don't know if I
want you to find it. I'm tired.

Two-face, sweet brother,
trick-turner and trouble-dealer:
I never could tell which one of you to
believe. You took cash from dad
again the day you left, the day
we found out. He won't
reveal how much. He tells me,
you don't need to worry about that.
He claims he's done with you,
for good. In disbelief, he says

and he shook my hand on the way out the door.

Proof

There is a company that will take your money and bury
your ashes at the foot of a tree after you die, to be kept alive

after a fashion, swimming through the veins and sap,
immortal in the leaves returning each spring.

Whole forests of these dead grow, grouped in a cathedral
of breeze and birdsong, limbs scampered up and down

by squirrels; branches subject to time, frost, heavy wind;
the souls of those who've passed persist, voices whispering

in the leaf-rustle. Together instead of drifting alone among
stars, their tree-bodies a way of staying in the world, their thoughts

unmuffled by headstones—a congregation of spirits
still tethered to mortal forms, their existence

a kind of afterlife for which, at last, there is proof.

What Is Holy

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
—Allen Ginsberg

What I know about holy places
is that when they are not waterfalls or mountain tops
or your grandmother's kitchen, they are sometimes
large, open fields ringed by dense trees and buttercups,
above the rushing waters where two rivers join together,
where you can notice the ways all life is entangled, get still,
connect the dots written by an unseen hand,

Like how sacks of fur and bone can be arranged,
Like how a million bits of green
are held together with branches and light,
Like the air hushing as sheets of summer wind,
Like the woman shepherding her children
along the same path I walk,
Like the birds' eavesdropped gossip sessions,

how I am as made of wonder.

The World Beneath Our Feet

There is a world under the earth full of magic and mystery. It holds the consciousness of nature's connection to all living things.

-from the documentary *Fantastic Fungi*

It's what eats you in the grave:
curling tendrils consuming the body's cells
while they surrender their association
as flesh, let it collapse in a mess
of rot now the spirit's gone.
It's how we return what is borrowed,
the suit we're loaned pulled apart by hungry
fingers who chatter to each other; send
messages for more. Dense trees,
each branch a nerve full of juicy pulses,
each one an interpreter of the code to carry on.
They're touched, spidery traces in the soil—
you have to be a little mad to live underground,
live life in a dense tomb, but they are not alone,
are always talking, always inside each others'
minds. Their ancestors rejected the loneliness
of the animal body for holy communion forever, amen,
and a larger purpose: ravenous collective,
kingdom of decomposition, this death comes
with a standard rebirth clause. The ones you loved
made energy within the earth by geniuses
of reappropriation, making decay into
something bursting with life.

II

I fear me this—is Loneliness—
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate—or seal—

—Emily Dickinson

You Can Take the Girl Out of the Church Choir, But...

Slumped down in a hard chair in the choir loft I'd make a show of boredom on my face, but truth is, I loved the coming-together of many people to make a piece of music. Snatches of well-rehearsed songs still steal through my mind, the benedictions we'd sing at the end of a service: *May the road rise to meet you...* followed me out of my hometown, *may the wind be always at your back, the sun shine warm upon your face;* I couldn't stop the energy of those words. Through years of untethered loneliness they resounded patiently in the dark, the hum so quiet it was near-silent, until I was ready to hear them: *until we meet again, may God bless you and hold you in the palm of his hand*—where I'd forgotten I'd been all along.

Because Literary Snobs are the Fucking Worst

Once I went on a date with a tall boy
who surveyed my bookshelves, frowned
down at the Stephen King and romance
novels, made me blush with
the shame of my guilty pleasures,
after trying to charm me over
naan and chutney, but before failing
to call me ever again.
Older me would have said
new romance is feminist,
told him *Sarah Maclean is smarter than you,*
pointed out that his attitude
would not get him anywhere
except the lines of this poem.
Anyway, what he didn't understand
is how I eat up words,
caress them when no one is looking,
take them into me like holy communion.
Ten thousand stories are housed
in the circuitry inside my skull,
stitched into my flesh, characters
running in my bloodstream,
words etched on my
bones in an alphabet
of everything that matters.

The Visitor

For Dan

Your black hair is longer now, shaggy,
as if only time has passed,
but your face looks the same, young.
We sit at desks side by side like we're
back in Civil Procedure, dreading getting
smacked upside the head with strict
Socratic method. These guest appearances
keep happening, infrequent, but persistent.
Sometimes you disturb me; I begin to
think you've been sent as a guide,
preparing the way to the other side.
What do you have to say to me?
Or is it me who wants to talk to you—
still wanting your atonement—
that is doing this conjuring?
When you tell me, *I'm still here*,
asserting that somehow, somewhere,
you still *are*, I feel I must finally point out
that you are six years dead. And you say
yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean
we can't talk. We do: of our law school
days facing each other over lunch tables,
and later, the clandestine meetings
that had me ill with guilt, and the way
you used me like trash. Finally, I whisper,
I wasn't very nice to you, either,
how I steamrolled right over you
in the crush of first-love madness
with someone else, and though
I don't remember any words to your reply—
your reaction, your laughing face
that will never be old,
friend, I remember.

First Date

For Brian

Last night I went out driving
and headed straight for the moon
(did you know? She was hollowed
out and filled with our old longings)
because I wanted to remember the way
it was with us, wanted to feel
dark velvet sky ripple between
my inner thighs, the weight of the air,
you pressing me back against
the car, anticipation thrumming so hard
it demanded your mouth on mine.

The Adrenaline Pump Won't Quit (PTSD Courtesy of an Ex)

It took me six years, but I finally figured out:
the radioactive glow around the edges
of my nerve endings, the disorder wreaked
upon me had a name, and I gasped when I read
myself in its definition.
The at first near-total insomnia,
which lingered in patches for years.
Being afraid when everything seems fine, even
now. Maybe I was always a head case,
but he took a cracked girl
and threw her off the rim of a canyon,
was so methodical with little hurts
until they became huge under my skin.
He wanted me thin so everything I ate was tallied.
He wanted to be loved
at least once a day, I obliged.
I was always afraid.
I remember him driving drunk and crazy,
threatening to take me with him,
his wish to end it all
with a spectacular crash into a retaining wall.
The small damages added up to something total,
oh yes, he shattered the egg of me completely.

Hannah—

Standing alone in a living room
far from home, I learned
you'd given up your life
and almost shattered on the spot.
I was in Oregon, in the valley,
a place so socked in by fog
it could've been Sleepy Hollow—
I wanted to mainline Vitamin D.
Already, I was thinking I might die;
couldn't sleep, couldn't find
any kind of relief. A visit to an old
friend proved ill-planned.
The daytime dark there was opposite
of what I needed: sunshine,
warmth, and healing waters.
Instead, we drank too much,
in the cloud-dense days,
into the frigid nights. Hannah.
You died in a hot city. It was January.
That evening, I read, you texted
a friend for comfort. *Hey pal.*
Next morning he found you, flesh cold.
I was freezing in Corvallis, OR.
Trying to get myself out of the hole
of depression, the same one you were in;
we both found the rope, we were both
falling, but somehow I was caught
and raised to safety while you stayed
down, twisting slow and heavy.
I think I caught myself. I didn't want to die.
Did you? Hannah?

The Healing Curve

During our honeymoon, I was just
beginning to lose my hair

and to eat regular food again,
my body still tender

from that terrible damage
but repairing itself over months,

as I planned our wedding and wondered
whether I'd be well enough to enjoy it.

On the day we were married,
I managed to fill out the dress

which had been hanging off me not so long
before. No bridal diet needed. Later that summer,

we went to the Nevada desert and I tie-dyed
the dress, now tight, and brought it

along for another version of vow-taking,
celebrating relative good health

on the alkaline flats,
on the cosmic playground.

Together we watched a temple burn
against dark sky and that night

I shed some old skin, remade bits of me
the disease had deleted to make space for itself.

Brief Ecstasy in Black Rock City

After solitary months
of sickness and healing,
long, gray days of weak
light and self-pity
on the old brown couch,
I am back to burn,
back for heat and dust,
bicycles and land yachts
gliding across wide, flat desert,
back to swim in deep bass.
We cheer every day for the sun
when it finally sinks behind
the mountains, then neon lights
fill the dark sky until it's etched
with burning colors.
This kind of carnival's
a tempting ground
for a brain that's chemically
off-kilter, fodder and distraction
for a dysthymic heart,
a place for the disconnected
to find connection.

On our fifth night, we discover a favorite band is playing at 2am,
the one we went to see back home where I danced until I forgot myself,
and the information seems magical; where did it come from?
No phone signals out here. More like a game of telephone that's been successful.
Our new neighbors in the shiny tour bus offer us the promise of a short trip
and I hold the powder under my tongue, curious. We pass down hard-packed streets,
makeshift buildings, a city for a week, and reach the appointed place, time to spare,
and by then we are rolling in time to the pulse beats around us—
I like everyone so much better than I usually do, the crush of the crowd can't faze me,
I dance and dance and dance, sightless, but feeling every small sensation,
clothes shifting over my skin, bodies in proximity to mine and I don't even mind,
I'm lost in music and desire. A serotonin dump for a brain used to rations,
it feels so good, it is impossible not to want more.

All the next day, adjusting
to life without the extra juice
made the hours bleak.
What a cruel way to
tease. One hour of sunshine,

is this how it is for other people
all the time? My brother in law says
*Sometimes Mother Mary needs
to hurry the fuck up,*
but I feel like I'm always
waiting for salvation.

Can't Stop Won't Stop

I can't stop for fear I'll break the world—
reciting lists of things that make up mine—
could cause the larger order to unfurl.

The litany of what stitches a girl—
careful threading that keeps whole and binds—
I can't stop for fear I'll break the world.

This globe that's speared upon its tilt-a-whirl
might well be hurled out of this space and time—
could cause the larger order to unfurl.

The cares wrapped round my finger like a curl
are meant to keep disordered thoughts in line.
I can't stop for fear I'll break the world.

A meditation-medication swirl
helps, but I can't shirk the chore assigned—
might cause the larger order to unfurl.

Can my grains of worry form a pearl?
My skill's unequal to the grand design,
but I can't stop for fear I'd break the world,
and cause the larger order to unfurl.

Winter Solstice Ghazal

Have I always been so in love with light?
Saffron-yellow leaves filter pinpricks of sunlight.

Rain-soaked days and chill drive me inside until
I crave gray skies and dim days full of electric light.

Night comes early as the year dwindles, makes me
want to cover everything in rainbow-matic lights.

Cocooned at my kitchen table, I write in company of
Christmas tree-scent and one flame flickering alight.

I keep my children closer than ever, the world
is dark and they are my irreplaceable light.

This time of year is holy. We have so many ways
of fighting short days with rituals of light.

Katie, the darkness may have beckoned many times
but still you have found your way into the light.

Making Time for Love

Awake again to tiny voices and a bed
to myself, husband asleep on the couch.

Working long hours has made him
crave the solace of drifting off

to soothing tones of alien conspiracy videos
on YouTube. Gone are the days of leaving

for work late and having only ourselves
to take care of, lazy mornings with love

a possibility. I must dress the children;
he must take them to school,

but I will hand him a cup of coffee
with the disgustingly sweet Coffee Mate he prefers,

watch all my sweethearts from the door
as the car leaves the drive, long for them

each in turn during the long day.
Having kids is not so good for

romance, but we find time for it
when the time is right,

and it still pleases me to think of him
when I please myself.

When I Chose the Name They Gave Me

In each classroom at least two of us, so common,
I'd repeat it to myself as a child until it became
foreign, worthy of fascination. Pleasing K
to begin, then the consonant in the middle
drifting between T and D on the tongue,
pulsing with repetition, underwater hum drifting
back like the radar of a submarine, echolocating
through the dark deep, carrying through
to eeeeeee, like meeeeeee, making Katie
mine, though it is vanilla,
it is familiar, sweet, the name I started
from before trying on formal Katherine,
then grown-up Kate in college, until at last
I felt myself so adrift I wanted to be known
by sounds that called me home.

III

What I want to say is
that the past is the past,
and the present is what your life is,
and you are capable
of choosing what that will be,
darling citizen.

So come to the pond,
or the river of your imagination,
or the harbor of your longing,

and put your lips to the world.
And live
your life.

—Mary Oliver

Possibility

went dancing in the yard,
took counsel from the stars,
filled my cup with night,
took sips to keep me soft
around the edges.
the oldest magic in the world
is hidden in my womb,
ripening again like the moon.
one more month the fruit drops
to the ground. i take no bite.
but soon.

Prenatal

Just-ripening belly, barely swelling
the maternity two-piece made up
of beautiful shades of blue,
I drove down to the sea,
two fruits still green inside me.

I took coolers of snacks,
fruit cups and low-fat cheese sticks,
I dined on fish and potatoes,
steroids and prenatal gummies,
working to soothe the gut
so inflamed by your creation,
by my brimming cup of hormones.

That summer, there was a sandbar
on our rented stretch of beach, so close
with such a shallow crossing
that I did not fear to wade out, plant
myself there, stare at the horizon
as the waters washed me, healed me
where learning to be a mother
was fissuring me, taught me how to join
both parts of myself, like the place
where ocean blends into sky.

My First Sonogram Prompts Me to Think About God

Reclining on a chair meant for possible mothers,
magic wand inside me senses your vibrations,
bounces them back to the videogame screen
before us—two tiny gummy bear astronauts
springing around the space of my uterus
at the ends of cords of flesh and blood.
Already I nourish you, and you are two.
After this your grandmother will tell me
of the stillborn twin brothers, the piece
of the pattern I was missing. Daddy sees you
somersaulting in womb darkness too, makes jokes
about a third hiding somewhere
the echolocation of technology can't reach.
I would like to slap him but I am pinned
to the table with the baby-detector,
holding my center in place to see your
very first image. The Gummy Bears
cartoon theme song plays in my head
even as I tumble through my own void,
grasping for a stopping point
but I have no cord tying me to my source,
anymore. Not one that I can see.

Wrecking My Body for Love

Full like an overripe fruit, it's a wonder
my belly never split until they laid

a knife to it, removed two squalling
sweethearts, a placenta, oceans

of fluid—the doctors said even
my insides were swollen.

Some women still look good
in a bikini after giving birth

but my stomach will always look
stretched-out, sagging, mapped

with broken blood vessels,
and, at the bottom, the flapping

piece of flesh I call my wattle.
Nothing can tighten this skin

but surgery. I'll pass. The babies
make me happier than I ever was

when someone admired my
smooth body.

Mommy Guilt

for Oliver and Rowan

I.

Around my neck hangs a tiny, silver disc, dulled
by the oil of my skin, and sunscreen,
so small it's hard to recognize the full-haloed figure. I like it that way.
Would hate for anyone to mistake me for something I'm not.

"Is it a saint or something?"

asks the lady at the YMCA who notices it as I give my children
into her care to get thirty minutes of peace and cardio.

I surprise myself, seeking Mary's blessing. Who am I to request it?

but

now that I'm a mother, I'm a hair-trigger crier.
Obliterated any defense I had against tales of children grown
and children lost, I have tears on tap, the hormonal tide
permanently in, since my body was so altered.

As my babies become toddlers, scale highchairs,
dance on the edges of couches, I dread the day they learn to leap.

How many heart-stopping moments can I survive?

II.

Right before they arrived, I was as scared as I'd ever been.
Afraid the fear would crack me, again. Suddenly sure
I'd ruined them with forbidden turkey sandwiches
and rationed sips of wine.

Awake, as the scalpel sliced into my too-taut belly,
parted the tissues, a Mexican dip layered with skin, fat, muscle.

Before she began to cut, the doctor said,
"I'm pinching you really hard,"
and I didn't feel a thing, so I trusted her,
and I was numb,
numb with anesthetic below
and numb with seizing terror above the waist.

Your daddy, sitting by my head, told me
he could see the lower half of my body
behind the curtain, wriggling back and forth
as the doctors tugged to loosen them,
maneuvered two babies out of me.

When I heard your wails,
it pierced my panic in an instant,
tied me to
something new,
flooded me with
purpose.

III.

You will not find me at church, confessing my sins to a man
who has not earned them. Kneeling in pews,

or lighting the wick of a white votive
in the nest of sweet wax smell
and little flames to mingle
with the prayers of others.

The rules in these Houses of God don't make sense to me,
they make me itchy

for the outdoors, but I still
love ritual, so I go

to the neighborhood Mercado, instead, pick out
tall candles plastered with pictures
of Mary, sacred heart, Virgen de Guadalupe,

and a plain blue candle for good health,
symbolic of that other mother, the one who
will cradle us for good, one day,

one day far from now,

I pray.

IV.

My little ones, I feel I am not

working hard enough for the easy forgiveness
bestowed by your young memories.

So many nights, your daddy is not home
until it's almost time for you to
sleep. O these long days, tethered,
I am full of thanks for the
gift of being with you,
and I envy others with freedom,
work, a place where they are known.

I still crave recognition in the world.

Sitting before these mother-candles, at my own altar,
the one I made up for myself,
I strive to accept grace for all of
my small failures.
Sometimes I talk to Mary
because she must know all about
the plaguing worries of parenthood.

My flaws, I feel so keenly, scatterbrained and self-involved,
each time you tumble is a painful regret,
every instance of my own raised voice,

as your small face crumples at a sharp word, I tell you,
I'm sorry. Please forgive me,

and you do, with soft little arms wound around my neck.

Blowing Away the Dandelions

Everyone's out today:
robins, bumblebees,
squirrels, the first bits
of green bursting forth from
brown branches on the oak trees,
and I'm noticing all these things
more because my children are such
fascinated observers, the world
moves slowly in their wide gazes;
they name the bees again and again;
their favorite game is blowing away
dandelion fuzz;
their faces appear dirty,
their eyes so full of shine,
their small heads haloed in sun—
it stuns me to see how easy
they take joy where they find it.

The Truth Borne Out

When I gave her the news of my double-blessed condition,
my grandmother told me of her brothers, twin boys stillborn in the '20s—

but see, her memory wasn't so reliable when we spoke, then she passed, and all
the people who knew the details were beyond the reach of the telephone.

Delivered without breath, unmoving, in Alabama, where they didn't tally up
those tiny almost-lives until the 1940s. No birth certificates. Not even

death certificates to record that strange state of being birthed into this world,
but not quick, their mother left to live a memoir of guilt bound with ironclad

Southern Baptist taboos—no one wanted to speak of it—babies born dead.
But though we have nothing other than hearsay as confirmation,

though, when she told me, my Mimi's mind had mostly moved on,
the truth of them is borne out by the pattern of proof in my own belly.

You Try Feeding Two Babies at Once

Nipples are a hot topic of conversation for my three-year-old twins, and what's not to be fascinated by, I guess? Varying shades, flesh-toned rainbow of pinks and browns, flat or convex, pebbled or smooth. Sometimes they pull up my shirt before I realize they are coming in for an inspection, laugh self-consciously as I tug it back down.

In grown-up girls, nipples are a private part, like a vulva or a penis. But there's no stopping the mystery of the body to a child. *You have nipples*, they say, *and I have nipples*, and mine are in fact flat, hard to suck from. I bought a double breastfeeding pillow before they were born: green, covered in colorful cartoon characters, and unknowable, its design too complicated, its proper use mysterious to one who'd never birthed children.

Later, when I tried balancing one newborn on each side, holding each up, propping their heads, encouraging them to latch, I couldn't do it.

I tried to pump for two months before quitting, exhausted, resigned to feeding them bottles simultaneously in their bouncy seats as they faced each other, full of failure and a diminishing milk supply, as if this way of feeding them wasn't hard enough.

Family Walks

In a chain of four, tiny hands held in larger ones,
we stroll at the pace of very short legs, attached
to owners who like to marvel at other little wonders,

picking the *yellow flowers* and the *white*—
both dandelions. It's a hard word to say.
We walk again by the stream; it's swollen today from

all the spring rain, rushing, risen. Whirligigs dropped
from maples make satisfying spins down the distance
below the bridge, to where cold water travels over stones.

We stop by the old shutdown school to let the babies
run on wide-open land, wade through too-tall grass
to sit on the throne of the electric box, preside over

a field of too-tall wildflowers. We notice all the trees,
the ones that are so big because they are so old,
and the pink dogwoods, because *I love pink!* my daughter

tells me a dozen times. Both are trees' namesakes, the rowan
and the olive—so it makes even more sense that they take
so naturally to the natural world, so full of small delights.

Lost

Vacuuming the house seemed good and necessary
while the children were playing and distracted

so I ran the loud machine over the wood floors,
happy in my accomplishment of getting something

done during their waking hours, not checking
on them for a few minutes while I enjoyed

the oblivion of push and roar. When I clicked
off the noise, my daughter presented herself

but I did not see my son though I called and called.
He was not hiding as he often does but was simply not

there. When I noticed the front door ajar,
I covered my eyes with my hands though my lids

were already closing--not enough ways to shut out
the terror of this thing I hoped would never happen--

tore out the door, up and down the street, over
to the neighbors' and he was *nowhere*, and I was

sure my life was half-over until he ran back
into sight from up the road, unharmed and barely

scared, and I was so struck by relief I could scarcely
comprehend the small, easy ways in which we can lose

everything.

Morphine-Muddled

After hours of disjointed dreams
on the too-short leather couch
by my kids' pack-n-plays,
I'm full-awake before light hits the windows,
conditioned to alertness by the rhythms
of childhood, its little illnesses
and minor emergencies.

My cycles of rest run, now,
on the way my kids recover;
they endure days of fever
and droppersful of baby Tylenol.
I'm grateful. It's no small thing, miracle
of modern drugs and minute clinics.

And we are at this place,
sun's rising and setting
in the Blue Ridge mountains,
where morning recalls
a half-hallucinating night of
morphine-muddled perception and
misoprostol, one burning
day of magnesium drip
to bring twins into the world
without getting myself kicked out.

Another hour,
I could have slept—
but the center of the
world has shifted,
changed me seismically.
They are peaceful,
not yet awake,
breathing easy,
foreheads cool.
When I woke, I found
I know my history.
I've been saved, too.

My Son Learns About Boo-Boos

Rubbing your small thumb over the area of peeled-back skin, like a worry stone, size of a dime,

raw flesh exposed, tender to alcohol sting
and sear of lidocaine. *It hurts*. Medical tape

binds the wounded place, talisman against pain,
reminder of what happened to it—

The stove is hot!—you can't stop
repeating these phrases like mantras,

full of wonder, eyes fixed on the boo-boo
as you soothe yourself with touch.

In the small, plastic red car, you sit,
astonished at the damage to your young body.

At the End of Winter, March 2020

Everything slept, for a time. The glow of the sun was thin. It still is. As I look out my window, weak March light illuminates everything. I want rain for the garden my family and I will plant while we are home for so long together, I do, but I also want one golden day to hold on to. I want to go to an empty field and let the kids fly their new kites. I want to buy tiny tomato plants that will flourish in our backyard. The embroidery of nature's quilt is becoming slowly suffused with green, long brushstrokes, shades of celery and forest, making a brightness in a world newly indecipherable, where death seems more possible. In it we are isolated in houses and apartments; where we are meant to stay, for the good of each other, trying to avoid a dying made of raw, drowned breathing. But we weren't built for so much solitude; Larry Levis said *a body wishes to be held*, and I am lucky that I am not alone in here. I hear the constant racket of my children, but there is also a new kind of silence outside. Cars stay in their driveways; the usual noise of traffic has been replaced by deep quiet, by the return of birdsong to prominence, the hum of our own blood in our ears. This way of living is slow. There is time to notice the dogwoods budding, go outside and till the soil, time to talk to people we love but can't see on the phone, to make plans for the parties we will throw when it is safe to be together again. It could be holy.

Separation Anxiety

For Rowan and Oliver

I do not want this hard, sweet time to end,
long days of fighting with myself because
I have both your love and respect to win—
parents and children don't know the same laws.

The joy you make me feel, simple and sweet,
it is almost enough, but I'm longing
again to be a person, whole, and free
to craft words, is mother always first? Wrong

or right is my constant guessing game. I
feel like you're being wrenched away from me.
Though the choice is one I make myself, why
do I still feel I'd never be ready?

If the timing is wrong, then I pray you
will learn it's a better me who loves you.

Double Fantasy

In Fishy Town Square there is part of a wooden train track,
small painted people and cars overturned, strewn
across my parents' old seventies side table
with a pair of goggles and a broken pink plastic necklace.

This basement den, little kingdom, preschoolers' domain
of train tables, cartoons on the TV, white string lights
circling the ceiling, and stuffed animals
including a child-sized deer that is, I swear,
staring at me. After the kids' bedtime I like to enjoy
the fake fire down here, the ambience of leftover
holiday decorations and one candle bearing the name
"It's Beginning to Smell a Lot Like Christmas."

I read poems, and ponder my children's small world,
the even smaller worlds they build—like towns for fish—
the shared nature of their vision. They swam
in the womb together and now sometimes
they still seem to communicate across silent air,
vibrations carrying images of the square, what
it will contain, who will rule it. All because
of my biological tendency to ovulate
two eggs at once, that by mere chance,
I gave them a life where they could know from birth
the pleasure of someone sharing their dreams.

To Romp the Sky

Through the car windows we spy red, orange, purple
bunches of fake flowers dotting rows of headstones

at the Spring Hill Cemetery. Up the road,
my son remarks *I don't want to die* and from there

it's unstoppable, the font of *I don't want to be cold*.
I don't want to go in the hole, and it's been building to this,

hasn't it, since we lowered our dog into the ground,
explained that only fur and bone remained, the spirit

gone to romp the sky. This is what becomes of the ideas
that burrow into the brain's fissures, the endings we

all must live with, the loneliness that must be reconciled.
I'd be lost, he says.

I couldn't find you.

How to Be a Good Student of the World

If you ask why the little
redbirds hop through the yard
and the army of squirrels
dart around, I'll say
it's winter and our yard
is rich with favored
nuts and worms.

But if you want to know,
for instance,
why the sky is blue, should I
make something up?
When Calvin asked,
What makes wind? his dad said,
trees sneezing.

I confess I haven't been a very
good student of the world,
but I'll make it up to you.
I'll learn to observe more closely,
study the habits of the flowers,
learn the shapes of all the leaves.

Later, Calvin wandered
in the windy woods
with Hobbes, commented: *the trees
are really sneezing today.*

Lie or truth,
children absorb
what we say,
and I want truths for you,
leavened with a little
absurdity, a hunger
to know answers,
even to the hardest question:
what happens to us
when our bodies stop?

Because if I can't answer this
question, the others don't matter.
Because loaned words
sometimes know more
than my own.

Because there is a loving
force present in each
particle of creation,
holding us now,
at the hour of our death,
and forever after,

and no one ever told me that,
but I am telling you.