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This Harvest / A Wild (B)looming

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

THIS HARVEST / A WILD (B)LOOMING

By

Jen Mehan

A CREATIVE THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master in Fine Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2013

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

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THIS HARVEST / A WILD (B)LOOMING

Jen Mehan

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This Harvest / A Wild (B)looming

(M.F.A., Creative Writing)
(May 2013)

Abstract of a creative thesis at the University of Miami.

Creative thesis supervised by Valerie Martínez, M.F.A.
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The following creative manuscript is a swirl of themes, language, intimacies, and violations. Through use of paced, intimate layers, the manuscript explores themes of the lovers, the you, gender (and its oppression), violence and its tenderness, the wilderness and its wild, heritage and legacies, and the (d)evolution of self. Despite the themes, the poems offer a playfulness with form, enjambments and prose blocks, sounds, syntax, lists, parentheticals and juxtapositions. There is hunger here, and it swirls.

for my family

(selected, beloved)

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Drizzled Geraniums

The sea will forgive
me this suicide,
though my mother will not.
Sometimes I think
I was born backwards,
like rain spilling too quickly.
Sometimes I wonder
the color of her geraniums.

At home, cranesbills
veined our garden,
spotted the ground in winter.
Their roots hidden from my touch,
their faces plucked or pocked
by the same, I imagine
those petaled lines thinned
by lullaby or drizzle.

Perhaps it was the sound
of rain. It rolls like oceans,
smells of nothing but backyard.
Perhaps it was my head,
reluctant to escape the sounds.
Odd, how underwater an absent crest
seems like so many geraniums,
whispering of wild blooms.

I.

Sweetest Parts

In Something of the Autobio

At the age of three, we moved into a house on Cloudland. It was blue. But not Fourth of July, robin's breast, blueberry jam blue. It was the grey-blue of a storm cloud not ready to drop.

At the age of four, my sister and I divided the room with tape. She got the closet and radio. I the door and TV. We signed the contract in spit and gummy worms.

At five, I learned to balance a dryer, pour milk with two hands, never scrub cast iron. I learned to mop with backstrength, bike away from cars, to disinfect scratches daily.

At the age of six, I wrote love songs to my cousin.

At seven, I learned to rollerblade. My mother broke her wrist. I learned to sign her name, to button her pants, to shave her. I learned the sound of bones clicking.

At the age of eight, I was attacked by ants. In the car, at the ball field, during yardwork, in class, in the bed. I woke scratching. I showered scratching. My hands swelled, my in-between the toes cracking. I dreamed in tones of itch. Each day, I uncovered new skin.

At nine, my friends and I tried to raise Melissa's father from the dead. We stole all the candles, poured wax on the floor in just the right ways.

At the age of ten, we moved again. In my dreams, that house is still burning.

Implants

Here is a today truth: she could not have gotten closer, would have jumped in your skin if you'd asked her. (She would have would have would have.) She would have your eyes brightened, tattooed, pierced. There are diamonds, diamonds, implants.

These gems are unbreakable, face-oriented, both untamed and proper. Tame me. We prop. We scandal, scandent, dent and get bent. You need (we) to find.

What? You need her, need her under your skin. Need to cover vertebrae, to lump and bump all things bony.

This is our birth-control, rods in arms that bruise every shade of gray (ash, battleship, cadet, dust storm). Grab me hard when I speak cinerous. There are ridges to keep you out. Copper-brown my tongue instead.

There is a she-shape under your surface, she bumps your back out, you are bended and wended and unwound. This is a procession. This is pocketing. You are reshaping yourself.

This spine curves backwards, reflects like diamonds—shatter and polish it for your lobes, nose, ring. Snap this neck like cigarettes.

Diary

I.

I woke with ants in my bed, filling my nose with their legs (some procession of suffocators). They broke off one by one, with the thickness of dismembering doll parts. I think they died halfway through, somewhere around leg four, then careened to the floor when I up-bounded and grunted their limbs back to them. Martha says this means I'm getting better. I take action.

II.

There's a little girl on top of the stairs, on top of the steps a little girl. Girl, little girl, stairs are too tall, tall little girls don't get enough sleep. She wants me to climb with her, wants me to climb (the tall little girl wants me to climb her). Her, her her, here, here, hear, there's hair in my soup and she wants me to bring it to her. Wants me to throw it down the stairs, wants me to. She wants me.

III.

My dose smells of cocoa and makes my skin itch. I take it a lot, can see greens best today, even told Jimmy and Felix so. They said that means I'm getting better. I think it means the grass wants me, that *someone* has to order the blades by height. But this is best done in the moon's blaze, when the darkness prevents slights against shading and discolored leaves. But then, anyone could do that.

IV.

I know today I am symptom free.

V.

Paint, pant, pants, palt, fatler, father, fathom. Sometimes, pillow sounds a lot like lather, but Martha thought I said ladder again, and now I think she think's I'm crazy. Ladders don't help, they're always made of licorice or pine straw, and the Rock Thrushes are to steal the top rung for a nest. Sometimes, I think it would be terrifying to fly. Or lose feathers.

VI.

I'm going to bed. The refrigerator is too loud. It's started to flood my apartment, and tomorrow, I'll probably wake drowned. Or soggy.

We Dash to the Beach Mid-Storm

the rain melting our backs with many warm flirtations.
Hands locked, we jump puddles, fleck grit to sky's layer.

We shiver our weight of showers, arms and stamped dirt;
the sand rebels against the rain, often couples mid-air.

We dive to salted refuge, wonder if drops would disrupt
a fish's silence; how far from surface one must absent

turbulence, that shaking wonderment. Abruptly,
we plunge to shore, trace the softness of the indulgent

land, and the sand and surf shrouding our feet, recede.
We search for surprises or ourselves, reflected

in the foreign, settling for crabs and shells, weeds,
starfish, bottles, conch.

The day ends.

We find no more marvels, and last drops of rain
fall from our feet as final footprints stain.

I'll Tell You the Mythologies Have Vanished

but our fictions are different.
Our requirements: kiss a girl
before you choke her, smile
when you slap, scratch marks
hidden—are lovely. Tomorrow,
she will know you love her,
will find that she can trace
or map your teeth prints.

Darling, make me your wolf. You'll find I can swallow most things.

Know this. When I see you,
bareback and lying on the floor,
it is not your skin I think of
first. It is the ridges of a blackberry.
It is of the sweetest part of picking—
scratches that fill the surprising parts
of body (inner elbows, knee pits—
bits so soft we don't have names).
It is not of your flawed cobblers,
of the hunts for you or the berries,
not of your many failings.
It is my lessening of you
and the fruits. My theft. Your rasp.
My scratching your sweetest parts.

Even wolves eat berries, will find reason enough to rest.

I wait to glimpse thigh
or foot bottom as we walk
to the shower. I wait for you
to ripen. To redden. To burst.

A fight is going on inside me.

Salinity

There is a silence that pursues
the sudden *swish* of palms
shearing, a lizard's hasty loss
of tail, of manatee flesh shredding
through the water. The ocean is
many things, but none of them blue—
the persian green of crest, a storm's
slate, the coral's budding yellows,
and the amaranth drift of me bleeding
in rhythms of *swell*, break, *swell*.

I step, for the hundredth time,
on a snail, know the sudden crack
means I am ruthless. Perhaps Florida
snails have an ocean-driven insanity,
they hear its crackling too often.
(If not from the plum of their own shell,
then from the humid trails of sea
that are everywhere here.) As I wonder,
the snail finds my weight in the shards
of home, probing its sea-strewn lungs.

Coil

This woman takes Communion, enjoys the pretense. Maybe that means *run*. She reads and works with her hands, wines, interprets. I think I should have been in love with her (though she reminds me of me, sun-aged, hair lightened and lessened).

Narcissus drowned in that pool, took a sudden breath and inhaled himself.

I like to think of people regendered. Narcissus, for me, is female. Not to say women are narcissists. Just to find it stiff that this figure, so internal, should have a limb that flails.

I went for her son instead.

Little girls don't want to be. When they grow, they would be men. They would have envy. Me, split-tailed and hungry.

I am so crazy (about you). I am. Somewhere.

This woman. The hand-worker. She wears black so her hands appear brighter when working. On a dare, or spare hormone, she stabbed another in his palm. Her lover could not leave.

I am leaving this town to the tourists. My hands, suddenly, are brighter in the night. The streetlights make shimmers of my body. I could drown in them.

Lights

If I could spend a night with Marina Abramović, I would stare into her eyes and find the scorpion. I would have her stare into mine (and find? water and shoulders shaking). I would take her for coffee, and between sips, I would memorize the wrinkles of her palm with my palm. I would read to her the lines of “Sewing Without Mother” slowly, and she would love my tears, the still way my voice hitches. And I would love her for watching.

This, of course, would happen in a small café of a busy intersection (let’s say *New York*), lit by candles and car beams. Her face would be in a dance of so many flames, too much light. This leads to the darkness. This leads to blacker and blacker coffee.

Yesterday I saw a woman t-boned. I pull a man from jaywalking. Tomorrow, another motorcycle will off-road, the man’s head somewhere between cars. Truckers describe running over a body as splatting a watermelon. How far can you spit the seeds?

We are waiting at the bus stop. We are waiting and waiting and waiting.
The bus stop is waiting for us to leave.
(Note: that is repetitive. “Awaiting” invokes the recursive.)

Those broken people leave the taxi in the street. They must love the lights of a city, the flash and swirl, the nausea and whirl of Ferris wheels. There are no fairs here. Only freaks.

The sea turtles, upon hatching, find the brightest bar to crawl to.

Marina. Had I been there (*Rhythm 0*), I would have hugged you mid-gunpoint, would have licked your blood. I would have found your clothes and burned them.

When younger, I burned cigarettes, matches, hair, grass, and dolls. I thought of their shriveling, burned much of the carpet. My mother quit smoking twice. I froze her cigarettes often, broke them open to salve bee stings. Have you ever popped the iced tobacco in your mouth, wedged the sludge to a toddler’s arm? They may thank you later.

I am catching bugs. I pin them to charts, name and order them (order and name them again—aphids, milkweeds, marmorated stink). I am freezing them. They squirm at the cold, their legs freeze in this way. Later, their floating in mason jars is almost majestic. Ever frightening.

I am floating, cannot feel my legs. I am one of many arms. They twirl, hang, fasten, reach, scatter, untie. They too are vanishing.

When we hold hands, are we *accosted*?

She fell asleep at the reading, at the reading she slept and slept and I wonder what she dreams. If when she wakes, she has numbed herself, has mumbled her limbs to extinction. Tell me—do you feel this?

If I were to follow you into an alley, were to have a pipe, a knife, a broken glass bottle, or merely two hundred pounds on you, would you worry then? Would you silently rehearse the kicking technique, whisper reminders of *scream no!* under your breath? Hold that breath. You won't need long.

If I were golden, you wouldn't laugh so much. Gold stars, moonrise, yellow buds. The shadows will take them anyhow.

If you were to follow me to a rooftop bar, will the jumping distance seem smaller? Three floors, two people, one leap. 400 bones for the breaking. One poem on the way down.

If you die in your sleep, you will die. Or wake up. No one's quite sure. Know this: I die six times a night. Twice when napping.

Marina, the lights, they stain me. I have forgotten how to wade in sea.

Stolen Hydrangeas

Grandfather, today I remember
 the taste of us sea-legged against storm,
 reeling in catches that outweighed me;
 the feel of velveteen between us
 as we wagered word games,
 supplying Vanna all her fortune;
 the shaken angel sketched in your journal,
 the way your stroke-soaked hands
 insisted I believe in your sighting.
 I know the gust of your cologne,
 the coils of your auric rings and chains,
 that hydrangeas bloomed lambent for you.

Funeral day I stole your flowers,
 learned the tints of your medals,
 planted a latchhook in your hands.
 Your wife gave me the snapshot
 I concealed in my dress pocket,
 fearful it would be stolen away.
 I pulled it out to compare
 your mis-powdered face
 to its vigorous black and white hues.
 Do not be confused. I stole
 the dirt from your grave, lit vigil
 nightly to urge you back.

I refuged in your garden shed,
 filled with shovels and rot and damp,
 spiders sealing it emptier with me inside.
 My inheritance is your bible,
 annotated, dog-eared, scented,
 seeded with sketches and pictures.
 In every pair of pale russet eyes,
 weary-set and verbose;
 is the gen of body language
 only the voiceless can prosper—
 the flutter of wrists, slow tilt of head.

Today in the rain-soaked gutter,
 I saw a hydrangea
 painted impossibly blue.

Body of Paint

I.

I could force on you
a painting's raw,
fist your hair,
duck your head
to an inch away
from brushstrokes.

Feel their movement,
their swirl and sash.
There is a fingerprint.
There, accidental fly wing.

Do not think *abstract*.
Think, palette.
Think manatee or storm,
find the yellow stroke
in swarms of blue.

I could force you
into rawness.

Best, close your eyes,
run your softest fingers
over the hardened
dips, move your shoulders
as if you were responsible.

I could force you.

II.

We painted in a winter-cold
garage, lit by December
stars bouncing rays off
tree trunks. No, not bouncing.
The dark swallows such gaiety.

I swallow. I sallow. I shall
seep and weep and feel
fucking disappointed in it all.
The best part of art is closing
your eyes and touching, feeling
bumps and ridges, and spines
of statues. Paint, when oil-based,
absorbs your memory, your history,
little bits of you to be masked
and engrained later. Wooden toys or flesh.

Outside, you cried loudly.

III.

I have painted
your portrait.

Even your hips
sway in pigment,
eyes always close
to beauty.

I am ever intrigued
by the sensuous trickle down
my wrist that could be water,
blood, or gush. The crassness
of you, of blues and lack
of hues, and smears
of red on the wall.

Your body, I painted
by hand. These are mine—
fingerprints you claim as skin.

Water & Blood

Bettie, your stockings are too tight. They're squeezing the fat right out of you & it's oiling your hair. Jesus is talking to you, B, Jesus is telling you your hair is too dark for clothes this small.

Have you seen my SuicideGirls? They have fish & Japanese blossoms lining rib bones. They leather & unleather, cut their bangs in all the right ways. Have you ever heard of bloodline tattoos? This blushing is for you.

There are no beaches in Tennessee. There are these willows, they fasten to wrists, pattern skin with feather-veins. They hold you there, topless, waiting for me or an arrest.

Bettie, can you Wonderwoman, Madonna, Uma or Demi for me? Can you disappear, slowly, forget your name, forget to unblur your face, forget to turn your bondagee around?

Everyone is schizophrenic. Everyone's a pinup.

These tattoos are inkless, all marks come from you. Take that ribbon from your hair, tie it around your throat.

Nightlight

I.

The worst a parent could do is to smoke too many cigarettes, to leave bottle caps on the counters, and to have pin up posters on the wall. To memorize every route out of town—85 on Wednesdays, 54 on a Thursday, 29 on the weekends, and otherwise, backroads. Five gas stations, two roadblocks, thirteen churches on the way. The worst is to have your gas tank always full and so many stacks of cash, you can't remember them all. To name the children Memphis and Dallas and Savannah and Charlotte and all the cities you've never been to. The worst is to play Sammy Kershaw in the kitchen every night, sketching business plan after business plan. The worst is to stay when you don't want to.

II.

Think of my fifth grade dance and picking out the corsage. Or the day I won game ball—my knees were swollen and hard/hand reddened to every stitch. Or all the checks I folded into my notebook to deliver. Think of my first car and how I drove ten under for months. Think of my spelling bees, my mathletes, my Hawaiian pudding project. Think of my brother, teaching me to skate and bike, to basketball, to clean and scare and be thoughtful. Think of me, four years old, cooking biscuits and washing dishes and ironing wrinkles in mom's clothes.

III.

You could always call me a failure. A try-for-nothing, why don't you just give up failure. Don't break my models, don't spill the candle, learn to swim and sweep and launder. Learn to pour the milk, make the bed, wake your sister up. Learn again. That house—blue, birded, wooden, trampled, dogged, watergun, baseball diamond, cow pattied, biked, fundraisers, go-cart crash, dog pin stink, over-crowded stepfamily, and granny singing in the kitchen.

Stars on the ceiling—I peeled them off when she's sleeping, curled the glow-in-the-dark shape in my palm. Was the room big, or I just that small? I think of this nightlight, two inches from my eye and how with it, I could see everyone.

Stars

Tonight, I wish for your wish.
I would rename them, reshape them.

Stars are not made to walk under
anymore. We cannot lie
together, on a blanket, wrapped
in the cool of summer's ending nights.
We cannot remember proper names
or position, cannot learn to cluster or orbit.

You think me superstitious,
like the ancient world. You do not comprehend.
There are many patterns unable to expire:
wishes, knuckle cracks, sleep,
and writing about a galaxy. The poets
used to glow and sing and dim.
The most massive stars have the shortest lives.

You, an eerie reminder, would consume
the planets, would swallow me whole.
If the stars were Nordic wolves
who would rip their jaws?

Your stars are predictable.
They erupt, collide, collapse,
are gentle. My sun will not
be here tomorrow.

Tonight, we are sparring stars,
hoping to hit more than gas and flame,
our hands eager to bruise supernova.

Grow old with me, expand. Grow
less bright, collapse or explode.
Older stars are more stellar.
Stay—with me, the sky will darken.

If I Were to Give You

My heart, I would have you think of me
as an infant, curling to the steady
thruttle-thrum of a heartbeat pillow.
You will have arrhythmias of crowds,
on rooftops, around anyone with golden eyes.

My liver, one glass of Syrah would do.
It will flame your throat and course
to many, odd lobes. You'll drink with ease.

My cornea, my tears would keep
you clear-sighted.

My lungs, you would hear a tatty intake
at any hint of mold or dust. You will swallow
breath in sea or mid-romantic comedies.
You will move so little, as if you don't breathe.

Bone marrow, then break me open, harvest
me. There is juice to be found.

My face, you would freckle more each summer.
The jaw muscles are taught—I grind my teeth.

My pancreas, enjoy these foods:
the artichoke's lips, avocado, the orange's
rind, and anything with cacao nibs.

My kidney, know I'll keep one
for my sister.

My skin, my dogs would find you on Pleasant Point
and follow you home. The new owners will not know why.

Precision

Why is it that scar sounds like an abstraction? It isn't. These scars are ridges on your cheeks, arms, thighs I can thumb or nose. They are *precise*.

If I were to give you a long stem wax candle to hold, would you only note that some of its skin bubbles over, rivets down the core? Remember, we saw them made; we held the string and dipped and dipped, gaining wax and heat. Your candle was thin. Mine, unsmoothed.

If someone were to ask about the cuts around your mouth, I would tell them I don't know.

(But I can imagine how I would have done it. Start with the bottom lip—when droplets swell, you don't want them to distract you. Begin in the middle to even the site, slowly work to outside on the left and then the right. Move to the top lip. Repeat. Think cross-hatch.)

Tell me one more time a dog attacked you.

I know you keep a razor in your compact.

There is a reason you won't let me remove your boxers. Beautiful, I can feel the ridges.

They are precise.

On Shaping Marzipan Roses

I mold and flesh cool almond paste
into petals, thumb-knead gentle rolls
to discs, curve them base to base
in overlapping folds. They huddle,
humble, slowly dip outward, shaped
partners in a dance against abstraction
(time, gravity, temperatures, and me).

The last flesh I rolled between
trundled fingers, bowled to lips,
was shapely, shapen, unshapeable.
It was soft, paired, symmetrical,
active: it spooled, wheeled, twirled
and whirled, gyred. What I now know:
many things are edible. All salivate.

Roses perennial, trail, unmold in mouth,
warmly tongued and unarmed
between teeth. Marzipan recalls
prominent hips lost, all that can melt or wilt.

II.

Splitting / From droplets

Lullaby

I'm starting to figure me out, starting
to whisper, *lullaby, lullaby, lullaby*,
on the steps of this house, where I played
jacks with girls of the long ponytail
and absurd names, like Tami or Treni.
Absurd always ends in i, which is the end
of lullaby, and the beginning of irises,
which bloom this year with a fierceness.

I'm starting to hate my shoes, toe worn through,
and their scruff on the concrete in that open
vowel way, while the sinking sun splits
the roofs of houses into geometrics, trails
the iron fence like a tin cup along the ribs
of a jail cell or monkey bar. I watch it dip
into treetops, graze my thumb over the concrete
where, even now, I swear I see the chalk.

All the Places My Beloved Lies

in the crest of each water-crusting leaf
in the meniscus of potholes
in the oil-glands of a preening noddy bird
in the crumpling of a water-logged dragonfly
in a hinge's rust
in the sweetened damp of root rot
in layered posters, peeling from park benches
in the glow of 12,000 street lights—all red
in a newly sanded doorframe, and in its splitting
in the Os of “soft shoulder” signs
in edamame pods, sliding between my teeth
in the burn of saltwater
in the bent metal of rims
in the tangled voices of a Jackson-Bell radio
in translated war treaties
in the sudden, yellowed yawn of a koala
in the lowland's no-legged creatures
in the tongue's love for the stutter
in the warehouse's dust
in the wicker's taming of the vine
in the final dew drops of the water gauge

A Headless Bird Lies in the Grass

In the park, the drizzle is slanted
and the sky rubs the earth. I am
benched, watching. There is the man
who up-downs, bouncing his Achilles.
There are children climbing
and falling and dropping stones on ants.

They do not see the dead bird on the soil,
its wings shoved, tousled, newly unburdened.
They do not see its tail marking
the wind, feathers splitting
from droplets, its angle stiff.

Where could it have gained this lightness,
this sudden bareness? For a moment,
I imagine it dumb without eyes or beak.
Did it aim this precise nosedive?
How many wing beats did it drain
from the blood's last pump?

They do not see the bird.
The bird does not see them.

If I were to tell you the name of this bird,
the babble of its song, or the number of feathers,
the pattern of preen, or of all the unfinished

nests and eggs and starving hatchlings,
you could not care less. You'd rather
I tell you of its precise feet stomping ants,
beheading worms, bobbing before flight.

You would rather I tell you I cannot see
that this rain will split the tail and the sky.
That it is the children and their stones
who will find the head—all eyes open, glossy.

Grammar School Hand Fan

A gradeschool girl carefully folds a fan
back and forth as one who kneads bread
learns the board with palm and knuckle.
She bends and coils, the paper now
accordion (the music, air).

She coats each
wrinkle in crayon—with each flick she pigments
her face (the new freckle under her right eye
is *mulberry*, by her lip *wild blue yonder*,
and in the folds of her eyelashes *timberwolf*).

Her ploy: here is the new language
of the hand fan.

A fan on lips doesn't mean *I don't trust you*,
but rather a lament for sun-dried earthworms.
Running her hands through fan's ribs
is no longer *I want to talk to you*,
but rather how the balloon outstrips the clouds.
The sudden open-close-open
is not *You are cruel*,
but now on the wing patterns of the goose.

On Learning to Ride the Wind

whistler, bristlehead, iora, auk, gull, grebe, sangrouse, shrike, sitella, drongo, fantail, monarch, manakin, nightjar, frogmouth, trogon, kiwi, kingfisher, broadbill, pitta, puffback, batise, wattle-eye, heron, tyrant (fly)catcher, whipbird, butcherbird, ovenbird, boatbill, bushtit, bananaquit, gnateater, woodcreeper, honeyeater, berrypecker, flowerpecker, leafbird, palmchat, drongo, oriole, vireo, crow, jay, quail, robin, stork, crane, emu, divers, dippers, waders, waxwings, whydah, wood swallow, wren, kingfisher, tanager, starling, satinbird, sunbird, thornbill, lark, logrunner, lyrebird, old world warblers.

I wish for each of your wings, to sew them to me,
to preen and order my many, vibrant feathers,
climb a cliff/bough/roof/scaffold, and leap.

Anna Freud, Ever a Child

Imagine, that some
women know their own
taste. They dip,
twirl, scamp fingers
through fledgling hair
trying to untie
itself, along sudden
depress of collar
bone when it kisses
shoulder's plump.
Imagine how those
tips burrow.

Some speak
of this. They know
the smooth of mouth,
of throat rushing
to meet you,
and fleeing.
They, too well,
know the shedding.
The shivering, lurching
search for themselves
under clothes,
under fathers,
under skin.

I feel poor
to claim words
not my own.

I am the girl behind
them, behind all. I am
behaved, bechanced,
bedazzled. I am not.
I befit, begrudge, behoove,
belittle, bestow, betray. I be.

To sleep, vestal.
Dream of me.

Yesterday Was January

There was a snow on the ground that had not yet turned hard or sullied—it was pristine, or perhaps that's just my memory of it, my memory that forgot the bits of twig and grass intertwined (can snow twine? There are no limbs). Perhaps I remember that time because you came to me without gloves, your hands waxen and pink and you flexed them over and over and I wanted to grab them and blow them warm, wanted to give you my gloves (I wanted you and wanted you to be). I wanted your warmth. I wanted the snow to never melt—you and the snow would have the warmth, and I, pink hands and my wringing.

Even now, I can see the shapes in the snow—the ones there and those imagined. There are horses and bears, dendrites and sectors, plates and needles, children sleeping or snowballing, there is you and your body burning into the ground. I could think of many ways to warm you. I could think of ways to earn you.

But I know nothing of snow.

Slut-Sham(m)ing

There's the *you* from home, the *you* in here, the *you* with me, and the *you* who cannot sleep.

It's odd when parrots splice coconuts, strange to see a lizard reflected in my cat's eye, queer that the greatest danger when driving is flooding or the sudden unfurling of palm trees.

Strange when you call me by name.

Where are the deer and the goats and the \$5 dives? Where are the tractors and foxes and the pick-up beds? The flower beds? The beds?

Everyone I love moves away. They are f(r)ag
mented. Violent.

In a world of isolation, the communal is in conquest. Reddit threads and reversals. The (famine) mounting. These men, they are minted in this way.

My neighbor—no name—has begun to speak to us, knows when we leave the room to turtle-search, to launder, or to take the trash. Whenever we turn, his striped shirt follows, reflected in water, scratched between palm leaves, or on murky windows.

Bareback and unshaved, this room is too hot for haze. Blackout curtains don't swallow the light, they block it, cock it and untwat it. Dampness and steam.

The sudden Y in dysfunction.

The neighbor peeped in our windows at midnight, and I can just see his thinned face, hungry, nose window-bent, fingers cupped as blinders.

Yesterday I saw the macaws fighting, locked talon to throat, beak to tailbone, and suddenly not shifting, spiraling down the length of treetop to ground, a beautiful driftfall of feather and huddle.

Hurdle. Verbal. Girdle. Curdle. The rotting. The reek.

I still don't know what I want (everything, everyone). Not that pinesap will ever leave my hands. My nails, they stink of it.

Kudzu

There are seeds that linger, bursting years after you thought they were gone (*eradicated* from site), and there are stolons (beautiful, Latin for *branch*), the horizontal stems that bud and replant—this does not mean the same plant shams itself to new soil, but rather a new plant springs, a new kudzu smothers, aims to nitrate, to control eroding, to trade minerals in soil (think *barter*, think *market*—flea or farmer’s). Baskets and soap and lotions of kudzu, teas and jellies of vine, herbs to cure vertigo, headpains, alcohol. They told us this breed comes from China (Who are *they*? They say, they are we. You need, we is.), that the vines on hillsides, shanties, blocked cars, the underbelly of asphalt were made of snakes (copperhead, water moccasin, rattlesnake, cottonmouth) and these snakes could *get you* if you reached your hand or ankle close enough. There is the knowledge that your daddy, if you have one, will spend all year cutting down snake heads, masked as vines, will burn your backyard to ground several times, will coat with spray. It is temporary, this burning, this danger. It is anything but.

Mother

Anxiety is a body-wide response to a perceived threat. –Red Root Mountain

Mother-
 wort, mother worry,
 mother—
 calm your heart,
 learn
 to be a mother
 is incurable.

Sleep.
 Find me,
 brash as a lion
 tail or ear,
 on roadsides,
 in vacant fields,
 or disturbed.

I am upright,
 a prickly bush,
 hairy
 and deeply lobed.
 I bloom
 late,
 but self-sow.

I will widen
 you, relax
 or abort
 your pain.
 With me,
 you will live
 long.

With me,
 you will know
 to conceal
 your love.

To My Daughter

a list of all the places:

In the parking lot
 In the parking garage
 In the park
 In the backseat of your car (your wrist will roll, give out, on leather; your knees will rash on carpet)
 On your date's couch, bed, or floor
 On your professor's desk
 In your bed / kitchen / bathroom / garage (so much hard surface—tile, wall, concrete)
 In any basement
 Walking home / to school / to work
 In the break room—remember the coffee pot can scald and shear a face
 After buying the week's groceries (having your hands full is a problem)

a list of things not to do:

Shave
 Dress that way, all legs and ass and cock-sucking lips
 Listen to music when walking (Neko Case, Guster, Amos Lee, Russian Red)
 Walk at dark
 Walk alone
 Walk with any wrong person
 Wear clothes easy to shred—rather, think buttons / sashes / bra straps / belts

a list of things to do...

Carry your keys, rings locked to knuckle, largest pointed as *fuck-you*. Do not drop them.
 Wear stilettos to break toes (think stigmata)
 Stay on the pill / patch / shots. Know attacks are likely when pregnant.
 Say you have HIV. Say it again. Say it again.
 When you are tired, lie very still.

Daughter, the fathers / sons / lovers are ready. They are famished.

The Girl in the Staveloftet

-Hallingdal Museum, Norway

They say she outlived the plague,
that for two years she floated
above farm only to burrow
in wild piles of grain, wax thread,
her mother's old clothes.
That she was the only to survive,
her only respite, the tunnel to church
where she could kneel and find sun
between the stave church cracks
where the ballblom flower now grows.

They didn't say her father bruised
her inner arms when he shoved her
inside, that her candles ran thin
after six months, that the scratches
of rat claws at the wooden foundation
reminded her of the plagued palms
begging entrance. What they didn't say—
when a group of soldiers came
for wild berries and goats and found her,
she couldn't unfurl herself, too used
to her small path. That she forgot language.
That she walked over the bodies,
trying to remember the colors of their cloth
or eyes before the sun bleached them.

Walking Home, There is a Dead Rat

I almost reach out to touch
those cooled fingers, to learn
the ground this rat indented,
and I can almost feel the hair
on his knuckles, the small pinch
of his nails grazing my finest
fingertips, the ridges of my thumb.

Would my hand, warm—
also splintered—remind the body
of home? Perhaps there were woods,
undergrown and light-shattered
or a basement, unsanded and wet.
Or perhaps there has been nothing
but this scorch of concrete.

In his mouth are ants. I can feel them
river my feet, prickle with their legs,
antennae, mandibles. I imagine them
on my tongue, their many feet scratching.
I can see them scrape their bellies on his throat,
see them saw the rat's nose, their many mouths
carrying a mile's scent to their burrow.
Do they love the nose for its softness,
for its wet eagerness to part?

Perhaps there is nothing of this home
to linger, there is no joy of *rat* in your mouth.
I wonder if the ants will pass me by,
stretching vowels and hoisting my sound home.
Or if they will linger in my mouth as long.

In Tatters

I. Imagine this:

we are in city walls,
 there are people and their goods
 there are pipes and their stink
 there are animals and their hunger
 there is you and your hunger
 here, there is nothing but this hunger.

II. If I were to shriek, would they think it foreplay? Will they find my guttural recoils from stone or brick, or that it swallows your knuckles? Will they find that my dress rips at shoulder's round too easily? Will they find me?

If you succeed,
 I will die.
 I will feel murdered.
 I will stand trial
 and be murdered.

Or, we will marry.

III. Know this—my bride price:

four goats
 basket pieces, unwoven
 fifty shekels of silver
 cattle
 a vacation house in Hawaii
 a garden, unsown
 dress tatters from fallen women
 water vases, oiled, kilned
 a loom
 two women to hum and braid my hair
 a year of grain

always the ragged of your breath
 the swell of your non-breath

VIII. Chrysippus,
 you die many times
 and well.

You need not
 imagine such reversals.

IX. You need not.
 You, need not.
 You need naught.
 You need.
 You, need.
 You.
 Not.

X. And this:

I have slammed my palms
 against stone until they—or it—cracked.
 I have seen all the men
 and women who would thrust me.
 I've breathed grunted whispered respired.

I, too, have been hungry.

III.

Dropping Blooms

Plunge

Cliff diving in Norway, you turn to me, shake your head, say *Georgia blood binding you? The water's not that cold*. Not that cold has rippled my arms, baby hair turned shield in the wind. I perch on the edge of the rocks, boulded shelves jaggging my feet, toes fiercely curled to sloping stone. I can't make it. I could clear the closest ledge, but the one below jeers.

Arms pressed to widen the sky, I jump.

Feet pedal the wind, hoping to propel away from hidden ledges shrouded in the cliff's mist. Waves lap these sills, laze, spill back in their own dives. I don't see this. No, I see my feet, so white against the wet brown of rock, the blue yawn of ocean. I see the sky receding, shrinking from the water's cold. When I hit, I see nothing.

Nothing but jellyfish. Hoards of pink silicone blindly bumpering one another. Into me. You, *there are no jellies in Norway*. That quick rush of wind, of my stomach not dropping but suddenly righting itself, of missing the cliff's cogs: gone, absent, shriveled. Harder, sowing the sea, plowing paths between swarms of stings. Harder, the palmed uprise from sea, cliff climbing, you looking down, me chilled and drenched at the bottom.

Corner Market

Things in corners: kisses and cobwebs, those secrets of brothers and lovers (theirs/my own), all those forgotten nothings: dusty/soft. There is a tenderness in all things hidden, is a heartbreak in that which is no longer yours... any secret revealed is a solemn sorrow heartbreak, a swallow laid bare on the newly carpeted floor

(no, it is threadbare, is fraying, catches my toe when walking by).

Memories, cloudy and spore-ridden. *Whore. You have found those albums of me by the women before/with/after your mother. You will burn, you will burn, fill with flames or soot.* Yes, let's say it is soot. It's much/many/more intimate, curls in my lungs like words and heart-hurts, second-hand everything. I loop to blackness as it coils. *Slut, I can see the world when you swallow.*

Reveal me this. Revel and jezebel and gondola twirl. Flirt and dirty skirts, too short for dresses burning. Lovers and brothers are the same, find this hem, bare it to shreds. Angle my legs just so.

**I'll Get on My Knees, Answer Your Question. You: Find the Sexy of My Thighs.
(The Prostitute Pantoum)**

Good men need me, uncontrollable attraction,
and sonatas. Reeling louder than *mise-en-scène*, my art
is to understand, to polish the darker side of caution,
to envy myself, feel useless, to fool with pretty mouthpart.

Sonatas reel louder than you. The *mise-en-scène* of my art
penetrates, laces softer than garters. Like so many clients
I envy myself, feel useless, some fool with a pretty mouthpart.
Your words, swift as bucking, mislabel, refragment,

penetrate. Lace into me soft as garters. My many clients:
trace my jaw, nip my wrist, rip me from hem to *arrect pili*.
Your words, swift as bucking, mislabel, refragment. Mine:
Do you want to stroke my pussy? You can never have me. Baby,

trace that jaw, nip the wrist, rip hems and *arrect pili*.
Careless, you associate me, but I have no fiction.
Stroke some pussy, try to have me. Baby,
I'm a lovely handful, unfeasible, self-loathing, and bitten.

I'm careless like you. Associate me with your fictions,
try to understand. Polish the darker side of caution,
find my handful (unfeasible, self-loathed, bitten).
Good men: Need me, uncontrol your attraction.

The Battle of the Bulge

First, imagine: she has said yes.
 That satin gown dips between
 mounds, a landscape wrinkled
 by the window unit. Her Chanel
 No. 5 undermines this conquest,
 too *sweet* for sweat.
 Gently, lean into the mattress,
 flex palm, fold to her face.
 Her cheek was made for your
 ear, her lips to soothe your brow.

My mother—*mom, does he unscrew
 his leg when he wants to fuck?*

Remember the unexpected *heat* of it all?
 So many close together. In your
 back, a thigh or canteen.
 Does it matter? To be that close
 sings of victory. There was nothing
 so swift as the uprooting.
 Nothing so simple as folding
 on yourself.

(leg rolls under)

Relax. You've loved more women
 without a leg, anyway. Her
 hands are surer, her balance firm.
 She will not blame you.
 She will not forgive you
 the relief of warmth—
 will not ensure another embrace.

**This Mooring /
Mourning: A Burial Site**

Hemingway's cats, six toed, paw at gravestones.
 Papa, there are people, & they die every day.
 (This seems romantic.) I hadn't anyone
 die in a long time. A concept that feels foreign—
 like fruit in your teeth or a pebble rawing
 your foot. There's plenty to rub you
 wrong. Rub you rotten, feed
 your stomach pink & taffy.
 A little water to make you feel melted. Salted.

Papa, these cats are moody. They gypsy, linger,
 saunter, spit. What am I to do, save
 your bath water for your hyacinth? These same-
 day sympathies—when you deliver my flowers,
 have them sign. Your house is breathing
 already, less sag(e). Smile at me;
 you'll take the ground down with you.
 There are no re/morse(1)s left.

They find all the island's
 moods, remember the bite across
 sea. They've ocean in their blood,
 salt grinding teeth to points.
 Papa, type harder, it's not working. You are
 smelling fingerprint oils & smudge—worthy spirits.
 Spirit your breath, take a soak, let your filth creep
 here, you are fine, you are fine, you are
 finally letting it all go. Everyone's a goner,
 there are postcards for our deaths, our messes
 & dresses & crossdresses. Shake this up.
 Everything is fading.

They've got this mooring in their bones.

We Named it Black Mambo Magic

I suppose this means we're always leaving—a man in the deli sways to his blues, lifts his voice with each measurement of the scale; a cat, stiff with supplication, intertwined with loose gravel or asphalt; you, pushed on a crowded bus, some strange shoulder under yours. It's odd the people we remember. Not your mother's bedroom. That is an indication.

I would like to work in farm fields and factories and bakeries and shoemaker shops. I want to break stained glass windows found in rich neighborhoods. I know, in a cave, my eyes would be the first to go. I'm selfish like that. Your anxiety stepped out of the car in a back Brooklyn alley, hips sashaying all your knots away. Two months since I first greeted her from neighboring barstool—it bubbles from my tummy like Gingerale on a Saturday midnight, like too much salsa dancing or jazz. Teach me to kiss better.

Were I the silkworm, never realizing my home was artifice. My last disappointment was this morning. I'm a damn flirt. I gladiate my way out of the rink, feet still moving in circles. I wash my hands until prints scrub away—vanished like your name shouted to opposing wind, unchosen syllables slapped back to face. I don't think angels accompany to tattoo shops. I like anything with teeth.

Your orthography is restless. It rivers in rust-colors to the floor, but I don't have the personality to meet new people. Name precisely the grammatically correct way to say 'they feel fucked.' The butterfly newly hatched, blood still flowing to crinkled wings. You, out of underwear. Be sure, when you path your fingers along her spine, sense that ever-shifting skin, it will not be language you think of.

My eyes, they're stones, they sink into me. The air that stirs at the flower's boom, the flier's plummet, a fish's breath. I've found new freckles. I'm a trickster and a trigger and a thicker version of my mother and sister. I want to fist your hair, slam those beautiful teeth to table's edge, watch the patterned wood newly color. Or, kiss you. Light me up, light me on fire, light me tonight—these are my worst fears. Flee. That is yours. Lie so low, even the insects will envy you.

You lost the picture of your grandfather, soon after the funeral. I too am restless. I can't remember where I am. Water so high, the caskets popped from underground, were seen floating past parked cars on highway 85. Blood only knows to river or bloom, sometimes pool. Man of course, was once a fish. Though the rave is for wings. Comets have more flare than meteors, know to always keep a tail; we can all burn out before our time. Rehearsal, like a funeraled line dropping blooms along the overflowing interstate, each car blinking to the sidelines: *wait your turn*.

These shapes more beautiful than the name *Atlanta*. Names. Aged greater than the grapes I imagine in California and Italy, the great accomplishment in their plucking, their

lessening. You too will die young. I want to graze the leaves of a palm tree, ask it where it found those colors. Remember—just like those artists, you have mortality. I like the sweet coating, wish to forget the damn boy who first told me that.

Take all these and bury them seven feet down, where not even rain torrents could resurface them: your mother's favorite food when she was three; ideas of immaculately shaped almonds and grapes, each handfull; Tchaikovsky during shower time; baked pot roast with beer and dark-chocolate coated bread; fish filtered through spread fingers. See what pops up first.

That's no treasure hunt, that's a sledgehammer to the face.

Seering

*she spent a night at Apollo's temple,
at which time the temple snakes licked her ears
clean so that she was able to hear the future*

In that stonement, you found snakes, they wound your head with curls and coils, with images, images. You're crazy, Cass, you're a bitch. You're a schizo, you're possessed. Worse, ignored. Spit these snakes, wind them futued. These are our mad-scenes, these are our selves mirrored, lost and befallen.

Second-beautiful, I didn't mean it, would believe you if I could. You're crazy, crazy, you see twisted men, move concubine, twine wars. These are suns untruthed and plagued. Madness, this.

Cassandra, you are we and we see few or you or not quite enough. Take this world and shake it up, strike brain-fever, strike prophetess. (That is overly feminine, ineffective).

Going to your death, you should have been born your brother. Cassandra, when did you begin to lie? Open your mouth, tilt it. This god is spitting for you.

Framed

Chained to a gang, all he could think—
each surly swipe to boulder—
was how this clay, scorched
to dust and remuddied in his eyes,
matched the burnt crimson of her skirt
when he danced with her that first time
and the soft eggshell of her undershirt
when bloodied by his uncle's shotgun.
He didn't know they'd both been sleeping
with her. Didn't know the weight of a woman
suddenly slumped on him, eyes cooled open.

It's like playing Red Rover, you and them,
your hands wedged between two best friends,
palms sweaty and clenched so tight
your knuckles are knocking and white.
And when they lunge at you, trying to wedge
a few years of courage into wrists, elbows,
or anything weak, you hurl them away.
When they single you, jeer your name,
come on over, it's not the game you think of,
or the rage, but the burning like sun-ripe metal
building in your legs as you try to break free.

A Japanese Soldier Evades the British in Marshes, 1945 (Avoid the Salted Croc)

It's an odd sensation: the cool
of marsh slipping between scales
or 44 cavalry—some brackish betrayal
that never smelled of distant home.
Ramree tastes as bitter as ripples
that reflect faces soon to fall.

Imagine, the British shells too fast to lift
shoulder blade or thigh, a disease
too slow to suffer. Yet, the toothed edge
of prehistory snags your ankle, each
barb wading deeper. Look to your
left, see another's farmed tan flash upward,

as you find a surge of relief and mangrove
subsides lung. How sweet this beast's embrace,
each folded foot curled to your chest,
right shoulder, inner thigh. Its pebbles bask
in you. You, like some plover, enjoy
disappointment, the swirl of dodging, of regret.

Do not struggle, lash out your tongue.
Rather, wonder what they were called
before the Greeks named them *lizard*.
I'm sure they too were small, outnumbered,
that they once swam away. Remember,
even a crocodile submerged too long will drown.

When the Lovers Spoke

they dreamed of other lives.

The first—

African elephant:	I am your matriarch. Admire my tusks.
Red-tailed hawk:	When I dive, I plunge.
Cuban crocodile:	I was meant to be a multi-lingual hybrid.
Rough skinned newt:	Nuptial pads keep me limber. Toxicity lingers in your mouth.
Acacia tree:	Let me revive your soils. Addict yourself to me.
Glyptapanteles wasp:	Oh gypsy, dance for me. I am not spiteful.
Blowfish:	I am always outsizing myself.

The second—

Chimp:	I forage. I chew leaves to sponge water. I brachiate.
Owl:	I solitaire, break parliament. I do not construct. I find the abandoned.
Sea turtle:	I inhale rapidly, will emerge if mating.
Tree frog:	To fulfill expectations, I am in an arboreal state.
Vine:	I am scandent. I climb, train, run, stem, steep. I also wicker.
Water striders:	I always wanted to know how to dance, weightless.
Needlefish:	Alarm yourself. A sideways sweep of my head would be your last.

Larry Levis

"My body is a white thing in the sun, now. / It is not ashamed of itself, / Not anymore."

Luh, luh, imagine two names plumped like rolling fruit on the tongue, two Ls, two languid, lingering sounds you could call your own. To be in everyone's mouth, waiting. Larry grew the son of a grape grower. He knew of thick-soled boots and broken jeans, of the trellis, of vine pruning, canopy scaling, and a passion to remove fruit clusters. Larry, when you saw your father tearing over shoots growing down, growing dense, growing dim, trunking, or unbearing fruit, I hope you remembered to look away. To shade yourself in scandent green. Know when he called you, he imagined those Ls bursting like wine-readied grapes pressed between the thick of roof and tongue.

Larry born in Fresno in '46, a boomer baby, just like my father, also named Patrick (Larry's middle name—a slew of dual syllables). My father's never been to California. Or to a vineyard, save once, last Thanksgiving. Us, inspecting colors, swirling liquid under dim lights, breathing just as we sipped to let the buzz hit the mouth and brain. He prefers beer, now nonalcoholic, pointless unless you've developed a forty-year taste for it. He's a hole in his heart—that's not a metaphor, it's nickel size, a millimeter too small to operate. A faint heart like Larry's.

Larry died when I was seven, he forty-nine. Odd numbers, odd like learning physics from billiards and railroads, from the hot-cold medicine of migrant workers, the finger-worn lecterns of each class. (Lecterns and podiums: the podium elevates you, the lectern masks. The distinction, I am careful with language.) Larry died young. Larry died young.

The heart can only handle so much poetry.

The first poem I'd read of Larry's was in a transient class, co-taught by two poets tripping. *Throng the desk, open the blinds, shut the lights, catch* "The Piano Has Been Drinking." Read Levis in the dark, about the dark, learn to know the dark. The lines I learned best were letters scrapped, trumpeters failing. To find duende in my girlfriend's gauges, in the sudden *darkness* of it all. Fucking hobgoblins. "The Morning After My Death." Larry's fucking dead.

Of his life, there's not much to find. He graped, he schooled, married and fathered. Wrote a bit, won some stuff. Nothing in the details. I'm waiting for Michele Poulos (poultry, paltry, pantry?) to finish *My Story in a Late Style of Fire*, the latest I pledged on Kickstarter. I'm to wait until September (a goal for his birthday? He would have been sixty-seven. When is too old to have died young?).

Larry, teach me to syntax, to lush, to thump readers in the heart. Their physical heart. Their gushing, holey, weak weak hearts.

Attic Conspiracy

My father stores a leather briefcase,
 worn on the edges, hinges rusted
 apart, that houses newspapers
 from the Kennedy assassination.
 Twenty pounds of them. His father,
 Irish immigrant, collected them,
 and I can imagine him, whiskey-wet,
 hoarding the paper, smelling the just-
 fading cologne of Jack's suit seeping
 through, of Simoniz glossing the car
 bumpers under a Texas sun,
 of the engrained Terni crown on rifle.

Maybe he imagined himself
 like Jack—three days with no headache,
 slipping his hand under any woman's hemline,
 complimenting more than a wife's perm
 or skirt patterns. Maybe he too wanted
 the fanfare.

Or perhaps, he knew well
 the sudden breathlessness of too many
 children, of how to be Catholic and watched.
 Maybe he could imagine himself
 parading, finding his sudden, last moment
 unrecorded. Only grandfather's, unremarked.

Instead, I know his legacy—
 this well traveled suitcase that splits
 at my handling, opens to flower
 Jack's faces, caskets, mourners
 in smudged ink, that wallpaper the attic
 floor. This is my only reminder
 of my grandfather—and I can almost hear
 the rustle of these pages at his fingers,
 how they linger or fret. Then again, it might
 be the wind ruffling pages at my knees.

Walker

My grandmother, ninety, obsessed with dying,
needs help in the bathroom. Collapsing
onto the wide plastic booster chair, she slumps
against the toilet paper holder. My mother and I support
her as she wipes, and count the steps to her walker.
On the way, she straightens
the hand towels. She shuffles through
the rest of the family—six years with Aunt Kathy,
a two month stint with Joan,
a Florida cameo with Barbara. She arrived
at our house three days ago, one day
before my dog chewed her oxygen line.
Don't worry; she's fine. Though she won't meet
anyone if her hair falls flat, applies lipstick
for the postman, whose eyes, she tells me,
seem too close together. Forty-five minutes
and four wooden steps pushing the walker
to the mailbox. Three miscarriages, seven children,
a couple strokes: a couple times a day,
she asks to die, tells us with an airy chuckle
she may not be here to see my father's tomato plants.
Huddled in a thermal blanket, she reads
her pill labels. Because soda makes her vomit,
we told her the factory shut down. Each day
she watches the news and waits for their strike to end.
At dinnertime, she sits on the couch and watches us speak.
Or we play her box set of *Walker, Texas Ranger*,
and I think the excruciating beauty
of those Austin sunsets helps her forget,
briefly. With her red wine and pot roast, forget
the things her husband said that hurt her.
Or her alcoholic daughter,
who married three like her father.
I'm asked constantly how old I am,
because dementia means her husband is still alive,
or that I'm her daughter,
or that she and her sister still shuffle
through the Depression in their ankle-length skirts.

Brewing

-a collaboration with Sarah Williams

This is my last meteor shower on the trespassed fields, one last chance for my crush on that dampened blanket. Whispering Swift's lines in your ear on the truck bed at the drive-in. The full name called always means trouble.

Your name means trouble, means a menace, means I've slipped again. Your skin, it is lovely.

Slip n' slides are the country kid's water parks... Rocks, sticks, ants and all. I'll take you this weekend. I'll take you and break you and placate you, find a stream and drown you gently—think of the erotic dance of the diving beetle. Numb lips and finger tips, strands tight around my four fingers. The shorter breath in the shorter strides of the jumpy fish.

Breathing paused. Or ragged. Fishes dreaming of naming clouds. Nimbi accumulate moisture and feed ponds with toxic mutations. My brother caught Blinky in the Hooch one spring. What a feast. We played marbles with the eyes. We lag, shoot, knuckle down. We're on hands and knees, cheeks pressed to riverbank.

That water was never transformed into a better day. Blood rushed faces and flour-dusted palms. What beer do you enjoy? Anything with bite, with glass curled lips, barley and saccharifice. What broken homes are made of and brides are brought to.

In the Beginning

There was rain. It spilled quickly, as if the clouds could bear no more gravity, no more sag. They loosed their load and to the asphalt the rain fell, as if rooftops and children's upturned faces were too smooth to tread. The rain, when it landed, like so many defiances, chose to uplift again, and reversed, jumped back to air as one who presses shoulder blades together, as if they too could suddenly leap.

The faucet, in a great act of piety, chose to worship rain, or cuckold him. I, my hands immersed in suds, graze my fingertips, palm, accidental cool of wrist against the inner lift of a glass bowl, always surprised at the smoothness of the thing, the sudden reprieve or absolution found in cleaning the cleanly. In my reverence, I saw the faucet unload her last drop, and this child fell to my hand, a fall unbroken and unsought. It too shied from my touch, sprung toward its mother again.

When I lift my bowl and with it, upturn my water, it is the many reflections of my hand I see fall to surface, rebel.

Notes for Poems

“I’ll Tell You the Mythologies Have Vanished”

A reference to the Cherokee “Two Wolves” parable.

“Lights”

Marina Abramović’s 1974 performance piece, *Rythym 0*, allowed the audience to use 72 selected objects however they wished on Marina (including weapons). “Sewing Without Mother” is Kimiko Hahn’s poem from her 1999 collection, *Mosquito & Ant*.

“Water & Blood”

Bettie Page (1923-2008), a conflicted, sexual pin-up icon. SuicideGirls is a website that provides softcore porn, often featuring women with body modifications.

“Grammar School Hand Fan”

It is contested whether hand fans have a history of secret languages. However, many mark fans as ancient communicative tools for battles and social (court) life alike.

“Slut-Sham(m)ing”

Reddit is a social website based in California, and is largely contributed to by anonymous—and statistically male—users. In 2012, several admitted rapists (seemingly protected by their anonymity) discussed their attacks in detail on a Reddit thread.

“Mother”

Motherwort is a traditional anxiety-reducing herb/tonic, often used to aid pregnant women (or women menstruating or going through menopause). However, it also causes bleeding, and has induced miscarriage or been used to abort a pregnancy.

“In Tatters”

Chrysippus, a young man of Greek mythology, was kidnapped and raped by his tutor Laius and soon died thereafter. Laius later became king, and his raping caused divine punishment for his bloodline—including his son, Oedipus, and granddaughter, Antigone. This myth (though believed to be of Christian influence) suggests Chrysippus’s fate as the first documentation of a male being raped.

“Seering”

Cassandra, a woman of Troy, was a seer. When she infuriated Apollo, he cursed her and though she retained her foresight, no one believed her premonitions. She was the sister of Hector. Epigraph from Wikipedia [line breaks mine].

“A Japanese Soldier Evades the British in Marshes, 1945 (Avoid the Salted Croc)”

During WWII, Japanese and British soldiers fought for possession of Ramree Island (off the Burma coast). The Japanese soldiers were forced to retreat into the marshes where hundreds fatally suffered bullets, starvation, disease, and attacks from the thousands of lurking crocodiles.

Process Notes

As poets, we are often asked to define our craft. What is poetry? What is a poem? Who is capable of determining these answers? My first year at the University of Miami, we watched Elizabeth Gilbert in her 2009 Ted Talk, “Your Elusive Creative Genius,” and she discussed poet Ruth Stone and how, according to Ruth, a poem was a “thunderous train of air” that would come to her. If she found paper and pen fast enough, she would write down the poem. Sometimes she would almost miss it, but grab the poem “by its tail and she would pull it backwards into her body.” At other times, she would blunder entirely, and the poem would continue to another.

I have not forgotten this, because had I been eloquent enough, I would have so described my process—bestial, impulsive, spiritual. I do not wake up each morning to write. Nor do I obsessively pen over holidays, walking to class, or when riding some elusive (and potentially metaphorical) train. Rather, I work and clean and make budgets and craft and go for walks until poetry comes to me. This poetry, it is an overwhelming brute that seizes my lungs and makes me want to weep and scream and combust. If I am around a recorder or paper or receipts and napkins or even my arm (I am typically around my arm), I record it. Sometimes, there are heartbreaking moments when the poetry comes to me and I do not write it down. These are the moments when I could go immediately to lucid dreaming, first thoughts, the subconscious, etc. This is when I could write poems.

I think everyone has these moments. They might not have them every day like I do (but mine do not always last long enough for a poem and rarely make it to the page,

anyway) or be intuitive or trained enough to recognize them. Yet, to me this means everyone experiences poetry. It is this emotional overwhelmingness or this spirituality that is poetry. Some people express it differently—in painting, in business drafts, etc. Poets use poems to communicate this energy. Better poets are aware of techniques (rhythms, structure, or a calculated rejection of all techniques) to express this energy best. That is what we study here. How to best share our emotional gut-shredding pressure with others. How to breathe (eat—ink dripping) poetry.

My styles of writing have changed radically since coming to the University of Miami—shattered, knotted, coiled and churned (everything bundled, fraught). I was initially trained (taught for a politer word) in a more traditional way—think Romantic, think Modern. I was taught by men and women who wrote like their teachers, and their teachers wrote like their teachers. It is amazing how immune they were to contemporary, playful (language-driven), challenging (in form, syntax, progression) poetry. How immune I was. They instilled valuable lessons—an appreciation for stillness (i.e. moments of breathlessness) in poetry, and a need to critically link forms to content. Their instilled formats have become something of a template for many modern poets—there is a fear that M.F.A. programs mint these writers—again, writers who write like their teachers, who write like theirs. At what point does someone update the printing press? At what point does someone hand bind the seam?

This traditional structure (a theoretically idealized formula for poetry according to these instructors and writers), as detailed by Marjorie Perloff in her 2012 essay “Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric,” is as follows: free verse lacking emphasis on the “construction of the line itself,” line-broken prose (i.e. grammatically coherent) with

“graphic” imagery, and an epiphany rooted in or sparked by memory. This formula has informed generations of poets who choose to focus on theme or “graphic” imagery, rather than also heightening language play and structure (both in the lines and in the overall form). I too wrote in this way until I came to the M.F.A. program at the University of Miami. During my course, my professors Maureen Seaton, Valerie Martínez, John Murillo, and M. Evelina Galang helped to challenge my ideas of writing and structure. With their help, the influence of my peers, and the new authors I read (Harryette Mullen, Yoko Ono, Maggie Nelson, Jean Valentine, Kimiko Hahn, etc.), I began to push my own envelope (now *envelop*, as in “to swallow”). I began to play with forms, syntax, themes, parentheticals, collage and collaboration. Structure and linguistic play became as important (or perhaps more important) than images and themes—coherence is secondary. I had first been drawn to poetry through the language. The breathlessness, the heart-hurting images—they had come later. They are my natural instincts, my first thoughts, my “true voice,” I think, that prefer this hierarchy. This I have learned in the last two years (this last couple. couplets. coupling. coupe. the real question—sherbet or car?).

I would be remiss to neglect my peers, who have in every way been as influential as professors and other, published poets. I find their work often to be better than I find in print, and I know they are bringing the next wave, the next movement to get its own capital. We will soon no longer be in post-Post-Modernism; we are not satisfied with Perloff’s structure. Of my elders, there is Leah, from whom I stole an appreciation for the dictionary—there is language that rolls with marbles under the tongue, and we are to find it; to Chris J. who taught me to see backwards and to revise from rubble; Nicole who taught me the beauty of prose lines and collage; and Meredith whose proficiency I envy.

Of my peers, there is Chris C., who taught me poems come from many places and take much cultivation; Essy who taught me a great many things, including the art of the long line (though I have yet to master it), that images can haunt you long after the page is turned, and that we will always write for someone; Dee who taught me that concision is beautiful and lovers, divine and lethal; and Amy who taught me that, every time, the reader is more important than the poet and white space more dangerous than ink.

I could write about creating this manuscript over the last few months, and how difficult the orders and titling were. I could write of revisions and re-papering my apartment with poems. However, that is not what this process has best taught me. Rather, I have learned that I read and write when the beast comes to me. It will all fit together in the end.

Jen Mehan