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SUB/MISSION

by

Abigail Naomi Brunt B.A. May 2006, Gordon College

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY May 2018

Approved by:

Luisa Igloria (Director)

Janet Peery (Member)

Delores Phillips (Member)

ABSTRACT

SUB/MISSION

Abigail Naomi Brunt Old Dominion University, 2018 Director: Dr. Luisa Igloria

The poems included in this manuscript look at the ways in which women have been silenced and forced to submit, with emphasis on, though not limited to, a patriarchal fundamentalist Christian subculture called Quiverfull. Part autobiography, part documentary and part myth, the manuscript explores the various ways such damage becomes interwoven into women's identities and stories, but also the ways in which women find resilience and strength.

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This collection of poems is dedicated to my mother, my sisters and all the women

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Self portrait: child

My child self is at the beach. Of course she is. She's dancing in the surf and shrieking, loving the largeness of the roar in her ears, the power of the water. Doesn't notice she has a wedgie. She runs back to the sand to flop on a towel, reaches for a sandwich and a fizzy drink. She beams up at me, flashing pearly teeth before settling in with her book. Her eyes drift from the page. Seeing seashells, she arranges them in patterns in the sand, imagining a necklace she'll string: dark blue mussel against the pale pink of clam. I can see she has an eye for beauty, that she is beautiful. She squints up at me in the sun. Sighing, she says the day is perfect, and it is.

I. Fundamentals: a manual

"Nor departs my grief, green and corrosive as a gospel."

—Melissa Range, "Verdigris" Scriptorium

Thornbush

My mother planted a small cutting of her father's wild rosebush by the fence in our backyard. Branches spread outward quickly, threatening the lawn, holding hostage our kiddie pool, snagging our sweaters when we passed too close. Beautiful blooms attracted bees who suckled from stamen teats, but disappeared with the nectar. Never would we see the honey.

My mother liked how birds built nests thick in its thorns, protecting their chicks. She liked the prick, how pain led to fragrant blooms open to reveal yellow stamens insisting upon themselves. Unlike hothouse roses weak in their need for humidity, her rosebush was hardy through New Hampshire winters when blossoms, bees gone, the thorns remained: a reminder, stark in the snow, that suffering lasts.

Trying not to get stuck, we kids would kick our soccer ball towards the wood fence containing the blackberry bushes; they had yet to take over. Inevitably we'd make a wrong move—see the ball bounding toward the bush and run, hoping to catch our error as the black and white pentagons blurred past. Always the ball was swallowed whole.

My father took a chainsaw to the rosebush. It had grown over-large, taking over the yard. He was tired of his kids getting stuck, of our pricked hands, scratched arms. He was tired of how the bush drew blood, demanding a price for every lost soccer ball, baseball, badminton birdie.

He was tired of how the bush made play full of suffering, crowned by thorns.

How to pick your switches

- 1) A pencil, or other small writing implement, something that stings but does not break the skin.
- 2) A wooden dowel from a craft supply store, one used to hang tapestries of embroidered scripture; stings more than a pencil.
- 3) A wooden spoon, broad at its head, does not sting as much as a dowel.
- 4) A leather belt still warm from your waist gives a satisfying sound as it slices the air; it can leave red welts.
- 5) A wooden branch stripped of bark and leaves, pliable and green, can be applied to a bare behind; it may leave scratches.
- 6) A long white plastic tubing from a plumbing supply store, hollowed out, is easy to carry around your neck. It does not leave marks.

Sermonology: how to put your child to bed

You want your child to be as limp as a rag doll, stuffed and clothbound—her smile sewn on.

Bedtime is when you say it is. If it's 3pm and she wakes up from a nap, put her back to bed.

On the corner shelf, in her room, place a wooden spoon to remind her of what she has coming.

Getting out of bed before you say it's time should be like facing a firing squad.

Obituary: Sean Paddock

(4 years old, 2006)

All you wanted was to be held, to feel warm arms wrap your body. You got up at night to play with your toys.
The big matchbox car

was the father, the smaller one the little boy. They played racing games and sometimes big car would tickle little car, then he would hug him.

His wheels protected little car in his strong shadow, but big car crashed.

Here with this new family, there were no warm arms—the only heat you felt was a plastic stick they used to hit your thighs: they said you made too much noise. You cried, threw up your food, and the mom made you eat it. You learned to hide, only appearing at night when the dark, a cloak, could make you disappear,

like a superhero.

No one could see you.

But one night the mom woke up.

She tucked you tight in bed, pushed a wooden dresser on top.

Sermonology: how to prepare the way for your daughter

Before the soft spot on her head has hardened, penetrate her brain. Latch God to the gray mass of neurons, so they'll fire sparks as witness for Him. Pump Christ into her veins. Watch them throb to His pleasure.

It's much harder to crack the head once the skull has fused. She should remain soft, an open vessel, so little reminders can worm their way in. She should always carry her womb before her: the center around which her life is curled.

Obituary: Lydia Schatz

(7 years old, 2010)

Your heart seiz-ed, hold-ed its breath, hoping to make the pain go away, hoping the pulsing that fill-ed your body, back, legs would not take all the blood. Bruises ris-ed red-blue under your black skin. Bring-ed back from Liberia, like your ancestors, without choice you cross-ed the ocean.

Pull-ed

does not have two syllables, does not have two chambers to separate its past and present. *Pull-ed* is long plastic tubing, coiled white, snake-like around the mom's neck. *Pull-ed* is what she did with that snake, what the dad did. *Pull-ed* is what they did when you read the word wrong. In your voice this new word *form-ed* in a huff of sweet breath, past tense *exhal-ed* from the last page of your mouth.

Sermonology: the danger of floodgates

When a woman's body is tensed towards the world, it disrupts order. A woman isn't like a man—she can't make her own head hard.

A woman needs guidance, being tender and weak, she is a hotbed for the devil. She must tend to our commands lest she go astray and forget the way.

Think of Noah's ark. Picture it, Noah and his sons, sweating in the hot sun, hammering away at the wood. It isn't easy to do with just your hands.

What if Noah's wife had refused to round up the animals? There'd be no more procreation and all that good wood gone to waste.

What shudders would rock the ark as the flood poured forth? Why all the Lord's creatures would drown because of her

disobedience. A woman's mouth is dangerous. She mustn't refuse us. We men will go to great lengths to stop it.

Obituary: Hana Williams

(13 years old, 2011)

Here in your new home you wish for the orphanage in Ethiopia. You want to feel the heat, the dry sand beneath your feet, instead of the damp here, ten hours outside in Washington's freezing drizzle. You want back the pounds you lost, the child's body that doesn't bleed. You want to not have to use the outhouse or shower under the garden hose. You want your brown skin unmarked by raised red welts. You want to not remember how the mom told her sons to beat you: how the white plastic whips sliced through the air and into your body. You want to be able to sit down again. You want back your tightly coiled braids, the way they jumped and swayed, back when you could do both. Before, when you ate, when they fed you. Before you were called rebellious, left twenty-four hours in a closet, audio of bible readings, hymns piped through the darkness. Before they shaved your hair clean off. You are so hungry you want even the soggy bread they fed you before, you want even the dry starvation of before or you want famine. You wish each time you fall for the dry heat of your birth home to blazon your skin. You strip your scant clothing off. Naked to the rain you rise to your knees, but fall face forward. Thick mud fills your nose. The mom, distressed by your immodesty, comes outside, covers your corpse with a sheet.

Getting Religion

From the womb we receive it—slipped into mother's milk, we have no choice but to drink. At first we are too young to realize how the nipple, withdrawn, hangs; torturing us, it drops small splashes onto our lips. We cry in our need until those cries turn to screams, then to sobs, whimpers, silence. At this they are pleased, a huge grin spreads across their face and only then will they let us have it. Drink our fill. This is how they hook you. They call it love and you believe them because it is everything you know.

Wednesday nights in the church basement

(AWANA stands for Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed. It is a missions oriented club. Words in italics taken from the theme song).

Wearing gray shirts we file in and fill the rows of chairs, boys and girls for His service claimed! The group leader calls out chapter and verse. Bible pages rustle as our thumbs like missiles locate the targeted scripture. Hands shoot up to read *The Lord's commands*.

We are primed, minds oiled at the ready, firmly Awana stands and we sing Hail! Awana! In unison, our feet march in place, following with steps unfaltering as the bars jingle on our chests announcing rank. We pledge allegiance to the flag, placing our hands over our hearts where the badge shows the latest level we completed in building lives on the Word of God.

We say we are holding forth the truth. We don't know that the chosen verses in our handbooks have been selected. Printed against a backdrop of cartoon Indians, God's words follow a path from the wigwams to the teepees. All we want is another feather, another tomahawk pin to put in our bar, to show we are good. We are children. We don't know what it means to fight victorious for Christ our King. We only know we are.

Climbing #1

Bark rough in my five-year-old grip, I pressed my chest to the trunk, steadied

my sneaker on the branch and pulled myself up. Horizon-bound,

it was as if I could climb right out of my world and into the sky—

have a pocket snack of raisins while sitting on a cloud, but the branches always ended

and the sky refused to take me in. Swaying there at the top of the tree, I faced

the long descent. I consulted Mickey Mouse who looked up from my hoodie, but offered

no sound advice. Peering through bi-focals, branches looked further than they appeared,

eluded my feet and blurred in the mid-line of my vision. Suspended

between heaven and earth I awaited rescuers.

Neighbor boys were sent to fetch me, the gawkiest, geekiest damsel-in-distress—

they'd guide my feet to each branch, instruct me where to place my hands.

No matter how many times they brought me back to earth,

I never stopped climbing back up.

Laban's Bargain

A chaste woman waits for her man just like my Rachel did when I demanded Jacob work for it, then disguised her ugly older sister to marry him first. You should've seen his face when the veil was lifted! No matter I got seven years of labor out of him for Leah. Father knows best just how to get the most out of a son-in-law. Why pawn off just one girl, if you can get double duty? Twice the price is nice. Plus who cares what the girl wants? She can only leave my house when I say so, and Jacob is a sucker for her pretty face, so he'll hang in there. It's quite the courtship to watch. Besides my sheep are so well sheared.

How the shit rolls downhill

It breaks your heart when you see that your child is bright and you can't say to her You can be anything you want, Sweetheart because how will you make that happen? How can you open up limitless opportunity when you know you can't even put enough food on the table, struggle to pay the heating bill, have to keep the house cold. You feel like a failure of a father. You see the hope, the trust in her eyes and you don't want to do what you do, but you crush it. You turn that failure upon her. You take her down, peg by awful peg. When she opens her mouth to sing you tell her she can't carry a tune in a bucket, so she'll learn not to use her voice. When she misses the baseball with the bat you tell her she can't hit the broad side of a barn, so she'll learn not to swing for the fences. When she moves her arms and legs to dance you tell her she's gangly and awkward, so she'll never reach for the stars. The cloud cover rolls in and you watch the light fizzle out in her eyes.

Spoils of War

Flinging herself at his feet, lying down at his feet, drying his feet with her hair. She was to be a servant. It's what she called herself, throwing her body prostrate at the feet of his horse after the battle: *I am your servant*.

Her name is Abigail. It means the father rejoices—a source of joy, but here she lies, begging for mercy, the father deaf to her cries, her husband dead, the war raging, and David the conqueror regal before her. She knows what she has to do to survive—

I am your servant, my lord. Take me. He smiles. Yes, I could use another wife.

Young Adult

When I was ten, mom began to leave during the day, often for hours.

There was always some excuse—delivering scholastic book club orders

to other homeschool families, taking some sick kid to the doctor, needing

to go grocery shopping with multiple coupons at different stores, stopping in

for tea with a friend or going to JoAnn fabrics to search for discounted remainders.

After she left, I would change the baby's poopy diaper, nag

my sister to wash the dishes and try to make sure my brothers didn't kill

each other with their fighting while I made dinner.

Days when the light ended and dusk settled in I'd pray,

worried to the bone that this time she wouldn't come home—

that the car had overturned on the highway and she was dead;

that some spastic disease had overtaken her body in an instant,

that she'd simply decided she'd had enough and taken off for Canada,

that I'd be left to raise my siblings and myself. Each time when she

came back and her car turned into our driveway, I breathed deep for the first time in hours.

Headlights glared into the living room window and I felt exposed—surprised, scared,

a deer caught in the road. But she cut the lights; I was the only one who knew.

Pillars

1.

Lot, that godly man, offered his daughters like hor d'oeuvres: a pretty arrangement of petit fours, tasty morsels to whet the appetite of the pressing mob.

No ordinary travelers stopping for the night, the angels drop their disguise, warn of danger: God will smite the city. All flesh, sweet sacrifice.

2.

Lot's wife, a nameless woman, made the mistake of thinking she could catch one last look, carry memories of parties with her as Sodom fell to fire.

How suddenly her eyes crystallized; her body followed. The curse rooted her half-turned in flight into a salt lick for deer and goats: seasoning for all who ruminate.

Generational Bruises

I had grown too large for Mom to hold down for punishment, so she enlisted Dad to pin me to the floor. In his hands, I sensed reluctance, felt his grip waver. She yanked my pants to my ankles and I saw him try not to see my breasts shaking under my sweater.

I tried to turn away, to cover my nakedness from him. I felt the wooden spoon hit my thigh, the sound echoing from wood to bone. My body tensed preparing for the second strike.

In my stare, he saw the agony, saw even deeper the fear, deeper still the anger, flaring from my nostrils. Sweat broke out on my face as I steeled my eyes against tears.

He recognized the look how had he circled back to this: the memories of when his own father, the righteous pastor had struck him with the hot whip of his belt?

Reaching out, he stopped her.
She insisted I deserved it, but submitted, put down the spoon. Smarting,
I saw the spot mottle with purple.

Shoulders stooped with shame, having made his stand so late, he walked slowly from the room. I watched him go, the welt swelling blue and tender, calling across our generational bruises.

*

Still, she would use me—
the purpose: to say all that she
left unsaid. Piled on me
in pieces, a list of his failures:
itemized, categorized, nailed
like so many theses
on the Wittenberg door.
I wish I could say I stood with him
in solidarity, defended him,

but I didn't. My lot in life
was tied to hers: predestined
as women to our mutual blood,
it was safer to believe her, later
to strike in teenage anger against him—
it seethed through me: those years
spent in fear burbling up like bile
I spewed upon his bald head.

Yet even with all the hatred
I professed for him, he didn't fail
to come after me that winter night
when seeking solace in the numb air,
I ran away. It was not hard to find me
a quarter mile up the road,
walking quickly, my breath a harsh
cloud huffed out in the dark.

He pulled up in the car, reached over and rolled down the window, asked me to get in. Even with all the injustice—her contempt needling through me, he *looked* at me: his daughter, so much like him. He spoke my name. I got into the car. He took me back.

Collateral damage: surrogate

For Sister

I was nearing fifteen when you were born. At nine pounds five ounces you were a heft of a baby. You snuggled in my arms and when you woke, crying for milk, I handed you back to our mother to nurse.

No one knew that your frenulum, a tiny bit of tissue under the tongue, was misplaced by a quarter-inch or how that quarter-inch could make so much difference. You lost weight, *failed*

to thrive. When the doctor finally snipped the tissue to free your tongue, mom's milk no longer came in, so she left you at home with me when she went out for the day. I fed you, my hand wrapping your bottle. You reached out to grasp my finger.

Easily startled by the noise of six older siblings, you couldn't be calmed, so mom would hand you over to me in the shower. Under warm water, you soothed and slept, chubby legs around my waist. In church you began to refuse her, cried and reached for me. Only then, happy on my lap would you sit still.

No wonder then, shopping at Walmart, you started calling me *mommy*. I was embarrassed by the pitying smiles, the side glances from strangers. *Not the momma*, I said, not wanting a scene, but you thought it was a game and giggling continued the ruse all the way to the checkout, calling me *mommy* while I repeated *I'm not mommy*. You didn't care, smiled, holding out your arms to be lifted from the cart.

Salt

I throw my lot in with her, the one who looked back at the destruction—our homes burning.
Like her, I become the salt of the earth.

2. Some Dis/assembly required

"You were a city exiled from skin, your mouth a burning church."

—Warsan Shire, "Questions for Miriam"

Teaching my mother how to give birth

Quiver•full (n, adj, v)

- 1) A bundle of arrows poised to sling their pointed tips into the heart, into the bulls eye of a target. As in: *suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.*
- 2) A reaction to what is feared. As in: the quiverfull woman saw her husband approach. Synonyms: shaking, cowering, trembling. The wife cowered before her husband's reproach. Her hands shook as he entered her. She trembled with the pain of expectation.
- 3) The expectation of being with child. Quivering quickening of the womb. The ever-fullness of being with children.
- 4) The physical sensation of pleasure in being a submissive wife. As in: ecstasy caused by scrubbing a bathtub or cleaning dirty dishes. As in: joy related to the satisfaction of vacuuming the floor.
- 5) A bundle of children poised like straight and narrow arrows, rough edges whittled away. Pointed heads ready to pierce into the center: the heartland.

Each week my mother made bread—

mixing flour, water, and yeast fed with honey until sweet.

She watched the dough swell taut as her pregnant

belly. Gluten stretched like skin over the lip

of the bowl. Ready to knead, she sprinkled flour on the mound,

punched it down to half its size. Dividing into loaves, she saw

them rise again, against the yeast, until round with leaven,

she slid eight whole loaves from the oven.

Growing Up

a childhood at home a hood, a roof, a cover

unseen, too much seen a budding woman's backside

slip from me, be unseen a quiet child, no trouble

glaring embers, empty eyes anger kept well hidden

endless chores, constant bore songs sung keep from cracking

isolation rules, home is school deeper than lessons was learning

dig some holes, future goals bury treasure behind pleasing

useless plea, never free better to keep silent

plastered smile, years of trial a wall to keep me hidden

model wife, end my life first than be so stricken

questions raised, never at ease in this plastic skin I'm wearing

penned page, emptied rage paper won't betray me

tender bruise, be a muse to free me from this prison

out of your grasp, this won't last I'm college bound and driven

woman hood out from home childhood uncovered

Books of the Bible: Mad-Libs version

(Create your own story by filling in the blanks with a book of the Bible. No book can be used twice. Have fun!)

You find the study of early modern English easy. Reading Spenser's The Fairie Queen is a breeze and Shakespeare's "get thee to a nunnery" is the funniest joke you've heard. You're really into the *first Kings*, the *second Kings*, whatever number kings and all their melodrama. You ace all the classics tests because you understand the Romans Numbers. Your brain has Chronicles of the words to every hymn, including both *first* and *second* versions, but you consider How Great Thou Art to be the <u>Song of Songs</u> because it contains thou and art. Of course, secular music is out so you have no idea what the words are to "Hey <u>lude."</u> Sonnets, Petrarchan and Shakespearean, are your friends and you know that someday mastering their rhyme scheme will prove useful for your <u>lob</u>. You don't want to miss your shot so you start writing poems, figuring it will be an <u>Ezekiel</u> if you fill them full of <u>Lamentations</u> as you've seen <u>Psalms</u> other poets do. You're a pro at <u>Proverb</u>-ial figurative language. Much Ado about Nothing is your favorite Shakespeare play. You memorize all the <u>Acts</u>. Beatrice's wit is full of <u>Revelations</u> for your future self. You discover Aemilia Lanyer's Eve's Apology in Defense of Women and this is the *Genesis* of your future *Exodus* but not before the *Ecclesiastes Judges* you to be a wanton Jezebel and start *Philippians* out. *Mark* my words, there's no easier way to become a <u>John</u> Doe, as <u>Luke</u> would have it. They'll let you know you've made a *Colossians* mistake. You're told its your *Deuteronomy* to remain in the church like some <u>Titus</u> of womanhood waiting for your <u>Matthew</u>, <u>Joshua</u>, <u>Daniel</u> or the *first* or the *second Timothy* to show up, so you can fulfill your purpose to become the most *Obadiah* wife. Sure, *Hebrews* the coffee everyday, but the rest of the housework is up to you! You've learned both *first* and *second* hand <u>Thessalonians</u> about being a housewife, so you're <u>Galatians</u> out of there *Ephesians* if it means you'll never be considered *Leviticus* again. You think such things are a bunch of *Malachi*, so you're *Philemon* them behind. You don't give a *Nahum*. In fact, you don't give so much as a flying *Habakkuk* about it. You have no desire to become a <u>Haggai</u> old woman who's <u>doubly Peter</u>-ed out. They tell you that you can <u>Jonah</u> teach stories to either the <u>first</u> or the <u>second</u> grade youth because you might *Corinthians* them! That would be a *Zechariah* position to be in. They Micah you a heretic, so you feel you have to say to them "Isaiah I'm no *Jeremiah* go *Hosea* yourself off before you run *Amos* with all these accusations" It's a <u>Ruth</u> life but remember you're not the <u>first</u> or <u>second</u> <u>Samuel</u> who's had to

live it. You've got to keep going, <u>Ezra</u> they'll be no one left to prot-<u>Esther</u>. You can't go on <u>Zephaniah</u> about it so you might as well be <u>Joel</u>-ly and embrace those other three <u>John</u> Does that've gone before you. <u>James</u> to say you won't be going back, but <u>Nehemiah</u> that, just sing instead, "Don't be afraid. You were made for something better."

Self portrait: daughter

Here, I know my place, know how these four walls lead to other walls—spaces I fill with domestic tasks. Small children cry in the church nursery, nudging my breast. A two-month-old wants milk and her three-year-old brother looks at me in scorn, wants to know why I won't feed her? I tell him I can't. He scoffs, deciding I'm useless. I feel Eve's curse squeeze my insides, her blood running out, soaking the pad in my underwear. I am careful to sit upright so as not to make a mess of it: my womanhood. I don't want it pooling here on the church floor. I'm told there's nothing left to do but locate the steeple, erect and pointing its way toward God. But I'm not waiting for my future to be spearheaded. I've got another point in mind. With my ballpoint pen, I write letters from Patriarchy's outpost, leaving myself a trail of words, names to trace my way out: Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, Gloria Steinem, Coretta Scott King, Madeleine Albright. On the network news I hear Hillary Clinton proclaim Women's rights are human rights. It feels like she's talking to me.

Dawning feminist speaks to fundamentalist

I sat on the couch, coffee in hand, reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Mom came into the room, glared at me, called me a snob, called me the "F" word—*Feminist*, dropped it acrid off her tongue like she'd just said fuck.

She wondered how I could betray her, reject all I'd been taught after just one semester of college. She told me I was brainwashed by my liberal education. But I'd seen the girls from church become knocked up. Left as single mothers when the guys took off. Seen the women, in frumpy house dresses, frazzled, pregnant every other year with yet another mouth they couldn't afford to feed. I'd seen them grow old too young: no jobs, no careers, no dreams—just a tranquilizer God and the hope of flying away to heaven.

I didn't want to die before I was dead. Didn't want poverty to mark me forever. Didn't want to give up everything I wanted just for "salvation". I had no desire to be mother or mothered, smothered or smothering, child-filled while a child still. I didn't want to feel the demise of me in the growing swell of other. To be like the others.

So, yes, if that was her definition of what being a woman meant, then yes, I was a snob. Poised, I posed, Would you rather I'd gotten knocked up at seventeen?
In the terse silence, I heard her answer.

Womenspeaking #1

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Nodding our heads often
       to show we are listening
                      to the sermon. The hymnals open
              we sing only sweetly.
                      Honeyed phrases repeating
                             as credo
              dripping from pink lips.
              We comb through pages
                      never <del>questioning</del>
                             <del>do we</del>
                             believe?
The great man lectures
       at the front of the room. We sit
                      there in our place, aware of the growing
              silence like bees
                      in our brains, the nauseous
                             buzzing
              louder with each burned word
              we hear, falling
                             like ash from his lips.
                      It only makes sense—
                             he is
                             on fire.
This <del>passion</del> must be his
       pleasure, endless desire—the same desire
              we feel, coating
              our bodies.
                     whetting
                             the appetite,
              but the only wetness comes
                     from our eyes,
                             put<del>ting</del> out
                             the fire.
We wonder,
       is there any hope
                      for us to be satisfied?
              The crawling gnaw,
                      opening in our bellies, yearning
                             for more.
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Or do we simply end with hunger?

Hunger strikes

("A suffragette being force-fed with a nasal tube" from The Suffragette by Sylvia Pankhurst, 1911)

Writing a paper for a college class. I find her: the suffragette force-fed photo after photo. In this one Emily Davison is lying prostrate her face hazy with ether, her eyes rolled back into her head. The camera captures her shame. She is unable to resist. Her hand holds the armrest of the chair as the doctor's assistant pins her down, his hand gripping her thigh. The doctor has inserted a long tube through her nose into her stomach. Two women stand above her, squeezing pulped food from a bulb.

The image is familiar. Seeing it, I feel a gnawing pain, not unlike hunger, in the pit of my own belly. A memory becomes clear: I am eight, huddled in the corner of a room, shrinking as if I could hide behind the yellow walls. I hear whining high and thin winding along the inside of my skull.

I watch my mother straddling a small boy she used to babysit—she is pinching his nose shut, shoving in a meal he refuses to eat. His arms flap at her as if they were twigs breaking upon a fortress. Her face is stone. She won't be moved. She pushes each bite through his lips, holds his nose until he swallows. She doesn't let up until his cries become hiccups, until he gives up, lies passive, opening his mouth as if on cue, arms limp at his side.

Tears fill my eyes as I refocus

on the suffragette. I wonder what is resistance made of and when do we break? In the photo, Emily seems to have given in—force throttling her spirit. Later, released from prison, she threw herself in front of the king's horse, and he trampled her to death.

Hurricane

Enter into the eye.

The gale forces

have passed and you think if

you come close

to the center of her fury, her whirling,

you can make the wind

die down, release its shaking.

There is moaning from behind the door, the windows are gasping,

but all you see is the rain, how it falls in curtains, wets the bed.

The sadness comes in waves, overwhelms the shore and steals the sand.

You can't make it stop,

so you take it on.

Drink the ocean frothing with madness until you find yourself foamed at the mouth.

Rabid with loyalty,

you hold her rage

the way she once held

you: the eye
of her life
curled in her center—
a raft tied and floating
in her saline sea.

Collateral damage: translator

Sister, you were born tonguetied—the ultimate metaphor for someone unable to speak her feelings or her mind.

You made your body a canvas—a toddler covered in poop, paint, marshmallow fluff. Each time someone discovered you their shock made you cry, but I understood—how you craved the textures on your skin.

Once, you decided to eat a Christmas bulb, its red glass beckoning like an apple on the tree. You cried when you found it wasn't sweet. I was the one to extract the shining shards from your mouth.

If Isaac had a sister, would she believe the story?

Sister, you used to sit on my lap, listening to me read Romeo and Juliet, toddler eyes wide to the sounds.

We both loved the way words moved in the mouth, but I had a harsher vision, the older path.

I was a goat bleating on the altar—God's voice commanding holy blood be spilt.

My kid throat shorn, the knife slit quick, my vocal cords ripped out, glistening

the way organs look when rinsed of blood, pink vulnerability exposed.

A drum beat pounded out the rhythm of my life—intense heart I held for you, waiting for the ebb

and flow to cease, the sacrifice complete to allow your sweet voice to sing, my sister.

But you deny my story. We are left in warring camps—you still believe our parents,

think they acted well. Unlike you, I can't sing. My couplets don't rhyme, don't slide with a smooth

beat, a guitar string, but my words like crickets have a raspy crease, hidden in the shadows of night.

Keep your glorious daybreak, sing your high hopes to the heavens. Leave me my wine and violin legs,

a past you won't discern. Open wide your milk-coated throat, your vocal cords not

frayed by or afraid of the knife. As mine were. Sing then, superior with the ease of their love.

You have taken the cream. Only cloudy whey fills me. Leave me then to my sour mouth, chewing the cud.

Mom's monthly book club selections

She wanted us to be prepared for the persecutions we would face, in a world cruel to Christians—those who stand up for justice. She chose books to keep our minds on target, so we wouldn't forget the darkness of history's lessons.

One of her favorites was *The Hiding Place* in which Corrie Ten Boom hides her Jewish neighbors, gets arrested survives a concentration camp.

Mom knew there was no safe place from fascism; it will find us again.

She thought she should stoke the fires of resistance in us. Give us courage for when the time came.

Now, I wonder what she would do—my mother who loves her house hidden in the woods where the cold frost keeps everything contained and quiet.
Surrounded by mountains, her life cocooned in barriers.
Does it keep out the fear?

I remember the part about the showers, the naked women stripped and skeletal, crowding into communal chambers.

The word *herd* comes to mind, a pressing desperate crush of bodies, waiting, half dead faces lifted in hope, in prayer, but for what did they wish?

For the steel nozzles to send out water?

For Corrie, the water streamed—

a salvation of sorts, but she saw the others like limp goats, piled in pits to be burned.

If my mother were there would she think the water was worth it or would she wish for gas?

Shame

The red flush wove up my neck, each week when my eleven-year-old self dreamed of Greek words, grammar disappearing—awkwardly I gawked at the test page where symbols swirled meaningless until the red F outed me as an imposter. I woke, noun and verb charts like a rolodex flipping through my head and I'd translate Bible passages into fluent English. Acing each examination, I pulsed with fear afterwards, knowing I'd face the constant jeering of my homeschool peers for daring to show my intelligence. I walked away with my head down.

What would it take to walk away, head up to escape the crushing pressure to be dumb? I clung to my smarts, only worth I had. My former best friend gave me the choice, books or friends? I chose books—and isolation. Each week I sat alone on the church pew, my mind repeating verse after verse to keep busy, stay the course. I swallowed words so I wouldn't notice the girls' laughter, giddy accounts of boys and which one was the handsomest, turning to whispers about my old clothes that I pretended not to hear, jaw set, aching, knowing it was not my choice.

Not my choice to play the wolf in the church homeschool's production of *The Lion*, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The lead role went to the same girl it always did, a blonde—her family had money, tithed ten percent. I also played Harriet Tubman complete with black face, escaping the dogs. My last role was Squanto the Indian, which included lines in Wampanoag. These roles taught me what it took to break free, to keep going back. Trying on another's skin, I glimpsed what it meant to be other, primed for shame.

Primed for shame, I felt other when, at ten I began to wonder about predestination, how God chose who would be saved, who would go to hell. I thought it was faulty logic to spend my life devoted to a deity who had already decided my fate. How could God be love, yet so capricious he would damn me before the world was formed with no chance for redemption? Still I feared the repercussions, still felt God's wrath, hot on my face, laughing in scornful derision.

Scornful derision in my dad's laughter each Sunday morning when he attended the church of the tele-evangelists.

He mocked them in their crisp suits, perfect white teeth, proclaiming blessing on those who sent them money. Dad laughed because he knew God did not give handouts. Only working hard got a person anything, and not enough to cover the bills piling up.

Each month he watched the deficit increase.

I told dad the preacher was a phony.

He was proud and said *from the mouth of babes...*But I could see it still, there in his eyes: behind wire-rimmed frames, desolation.

Desolation in a pair of wire-rimmed tortoise shell frames, the least offensive pair chosen in reluctance from a cardboard box the optometrist took from beneath the counter. All the pretty pairs that I knew better than to ask my mom for lined the walls next to pictures of models, smug with their perfect skin, white teeth. I scowled at their display of happiness. The optometrist inserted thick lenses into the frames and I put them on. In the mirror, my eyes, too large, stared back. Magnified, I saw clearly: the pimples, my face, blistered with inflamed red bumps.

Similar red bumps inflamed my thighs, where the cheap pink plastic razor grazed over the skin, the harsh soap offering no protection. I sat on the exam table in silence, when the doctor asked why and what happened. He left the room, came back with another doctor to look at my legs like I was a specimen of poverty on display. Their four eyes stared at me for explanation, and I couldn't say I had begged for shave gel, for a finer blade, how I envied Venus brand in the CVS, but my mother said the cheap ones were all we could afford.

The cheap things we could afford were never enough, so each month we picked up the box of government food: powdered milk, shredded meat in a can, lumpy dehydrated eggs, flakes of instant potatoes, which mom and I loaded into the old station wagon, while my younger siblings stared out from the back, hopeful for the chocolate that sometimes appeared—a treat like Christmas. Back at the house, my father, looked on tired and worn. Blue-collar pride shattered by NAFTA and falling wages left him struggling against inflation. The truck driving job did not pay enough.

The job did not pay enough to buy clothes for his eight kids: all dressed in church hand me downs that came in bags. We picked through them, hoping to find something that fit. They were always a little too baggy, a little too short, a lot out of date. I remember how I cringed one Sunday morning when an elderly woman told me my outfit was nice—I was wearing a gray plaid blouse and floor length purple skirt. Other items we received: a t-shirt cardigan covered in red, green, yellow o's scattered like deconstructed Olympic rings, and a purple and gold brocade vest.

Purple and gold brocade vest that I wore the day I gave my first oral report, the first year I attended public school at age sixteen— I thought "Oral report" meant oral tradition, meant re-telling the myth of Arachne and Athena, how Arachne dared to challenge the god, to hold her web up to Athena's own. I wove my hands like the weaving of a loom like the weaving of a tale, like the bright colored threads woven in my vest. My voice wove high and low. Gaping quizzical stares told me just how wrong I was. Head buzzing with shame, the red flush wove up my neck.

Missionary Position

It was my mom's little rebellion—
throwing away the homeschool group's
recommended history textbook when we read:

We came to civilize the savages.

She sucked her teeth and her dark eyes flashed fire. Her lesson was clear: Remember, far back, we are also Abenaki.

Remember, we came from this land.

Their blood is all mixed up with the French in me and the culture is long lost. How can I claim this as mine when I have no memories?

I heard the French on my great-grandmother's

tongue—her voice singing *Frere Jacque* still echoes, but the tongue of my indigenous self is lost. One could say:

We civilized the hell out of it.

Jezebel

You said the dogs would eat me if I did not listen and learn my place. I have been eaten out by dogs, men who, like you, would use a woman, if just for the night.

Little do you know
that I feed them
that morsel
of meat, that scrap
of bacon. Late at night
when you are asleep,
dreaming of war,
I roam restless
and the dogs
whimpering their worry
come to me.
I scratch behind their ears.
Their tongues lick
my fingers.

That thumping you hear in your dreams is not the drum beat of battle—the enemy you imagine is closer: their tails wag, slap the tiles in the foyer.

You are tired of me, find me faded, worn.
My familiarity is a soft rug for your feet, forgotten until it is no longer there.
You drag my name through the mud, say I'm rebellious, wanton.

Fine then, dethrone me. My flesh, wanting, will rise again. No pack of sharp-toothed words you sic on me can hurt. Not after this.

Slick in my throat betrayal oils my vocals.

Leaving the walls of the kingdom behind, I turn to face you, throw back my thick curtain of hair, which once so entranced you. I laugh—a harsh howl echoing off surrounding dunes. I shake off the dust. Go ahead. Send out your hounds.

Womenspeaking #2

It's interesting isn't it how words broil

on our insides.

create a plaque

of charred pain?

How the smoke

from a slow burn seeps

out our skin,

the angry grease pouring out our pores, staining

that old rag

we use to sop up the mess.

How difficult to come clean to take the iced pick

to the throat, the stick used to skewer sentences, then grill and yes,

eat them.

Everything has to be well prepared, marinated

dressed in our best house sauce to disguise the blood.

Could we ever give up the carnage from our mouths, purge

our arteries of paraphrase?

Ask men how it's done—

that sacrifice of language we make.

Ask them

why it sticks

in the back

of our throats.

How many years will it take to get clean

I threw them all out—the crappy God accolades, wanting to rid myself of that paraphernalia, the kid props that bolstered my childhood, re-wired my brain to keep me coming back for more.

Glittering crowns with plastic jewels my chubby fingers had so happily stuck on when I was a good girl, had learned the right verses a little spark for Jesus. I loved praise, beamed when I earned the next level, the red ruby a crowing achievement. How little I received at home. The chores with their endless check off lists and the speed at which I was to finish always found me wanting. There, I learned how not to be seen. But for God I could perform, rattle off his words by memory and take my gilded gold cup home.

Only later, did I realize it was a child's trick. All along my mother was teaching the real lesson— a woman should never be seen. Her performances belong to the clean house, the God-fearing heart.

A besieged city, you

What is the knocking? What is the knocking at the door in the night? It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels. Admit them, admit them. —D. H. Lawrence

A besieged city, you have built your ramparts high and the barriers are hard to break through. Your face of stone wishes to crumble beneath its own weight. You have always been a rock. Strength is your protection. Still you were harmed: those wounds scabbed over picked off again in remembrance. Starving, you learned to eat your own love in order to survive, but now that you have wealth you don't know how to live.

Enter your fear, the uncertain future. Allow it to fill you. Don't seek answers, questions are enough. For one moment, just be. Feel your skin, how it holds you. You work so hard you make creation a task: a drill sergeant barking orders. Rigid lines of Christian soldiers haunt your words. Beauty will come if you trust yourself to open the door. Those strange angels are waiting. Isn't it time to let them inside?

Cue

You push back. You learn to say, I'm not going to take it and then you don't. You stand, stroll to the front of the room, cue the thumping of your heart, backup music, bass to ground the rhythm, to hang each word on that human tapestry. You weave the shuttle in and out of the loomyour pulse clicks, gets stuck in your voice, but you steady the threads with the pause and begin again.

3. Flesh into word

"Submissive to you? You're out of your mind!"

—Anna Akhmatova, "Dark Dream"

Anno Domini MCMXXI

Sub/mission

1.

The tongue is cut out of a woman: the evil of Eve in its maggot-like curl, saved as a talisman for her husband. He carries it in a wooden box around his neck, takes it out to stroke its rough taste buds dried out like a little rose petal. He thinks this increases its fragrance. The woman quiet before him, frankincense in her hair: he would have her know who is lord here. Stroking her severed tongue is a turn on: he never has to fear refusal. Present his hardness and she will spread herself wide as the desert. He thinks she is so hot for him. That wavering tear he spies on the horizon is just a mirage, a shimmering wave of heat and light.

2.

When the tongue is cut out of a woman all she has left is her pen. From this blunt instrument the liquid flows onto clean white sheets. But she is a closed book, passion kept under lock and key in the bedside drawer. She wears the guise of chaste and hidden. She has perfected how to be downcast. It's her starring role. She speaks with her eyes. They know, but like the Mona Lisa they will never tell. She plays the game, spread-eagles her legs. Closes her eyes. How impatiently he chafes inside her. Her woman's tongue dangles in its wooden case, taunting with the ferocity with which he stroked her silence. Beneath her face she composes the next chapter.

Eve after Sappho

Some say she did it for love, to offer the best of the flesh to Adam, that he too, might taste. Some say it was an apple, its taut bud reddening and round, asking for her touch. Some say she was wily, willing her man to take a bite of what she knew. Some say it was a pear, curved as a woman's body, fragrant and green with innocence. Some say she was gullible, easily swayed by a slick talking snake to pluck and fill her mouth. Some say it was pomegranate, beautiful and beckoning to her fingers in its pink skin. Some say it was an act of hubris, the desire to be God that drove Eve to those ruby pearls of seed.

But I say a woman has needs, cravings to eat more than what is on offer: juice falling down her chin like blood as she pops seeds in her teeth. Knowledge a tart reminder, beautiful in its sour and sweet, life dissolving quickly on the tongue. Desire to expand beyond paradise. Who wants to be walled off in a garden anyway?

At the church bbq

Feel the snake sidle up, slide up, offer figs off the leafy tree. Shouldn't we taste the fruit, swallow the seeds, such knowing can't deceive? If you've got a bite of Adam's rib with the special sauce, oh honey suck it off. Meat's so tender it falls off the bone, fat dribbling down your chin. Then lick your fingers of the sweet sticky. So hot it tastes like sin. Don't forget the pulled pork piled high on the buns and drumsticks—there's room for more than one. Feast last on the chicken breast, moist with its maple bacon baste. Stuff yourself until all your lust is sated.

Summers we worked at the grocery store

I, among the fruits and vegetables, stacked sweet melons, orange-fleshed and rough skinned. I put my nose to the green hollow where the stem had been, inhaled swirled smells of must, dirt, sweet.

You passed by with the hand truck on the way to the dumpster, but never spoke, your gaze glinted like ice off my erased face. In the backroom, you stacked squares of splintering wood. I loaded boxes of green bananas to display out front by the door, left without a word.

We used to talk each week for hours; you'd call me from college, but I noticed a theme developing in each conversation. Found it bitter, unripe, sour. Each time you extolled me as chaste, good, pure every other woman was a whore, a slut. You thought I should take this as compliment—singled out for virtue, but all I felt was disgust. I stopped caring when you called, hoped not to be home.

That summer after was terse between us. I raised a ruckus before I left—walked out the door of the church where you and I had sat side by side, best friends through teenage years. I defied all, went away to college.

One night in my dorm room, the phone rang. I picked up, surprised to hear your voice. We exchanged common politenesses, the how are you's before you launched your point across the static line, tone full of reproach, Women were created to be men's servants. I can't believe you don't believe that. What I said sealed the book, cut the word, I can't believe you still do.

A poor girl's primer

After 9/11, *those poor girls* are splashed across every TV. My mother and her bible study pray for them: the oppressed women who wear burkas, who have no rights. *What a shame*.

I remember how when I was a child, missionaries to Africa would visit our church and scare me with stories of evil magical spirits, sticks that turned into snakes and *those poor girls*.

Later on, I learn what they meant: how *primitive* to slice a girl's clit clean off.

During church, the preacher prays for *those poor girls* who are aborted in China, for *those poor girls* forced into child marriage in India. He prays for the victims of human trafficking, for the *poor girls* and women worldwide who are forced into sex slavery.

In Sunday School they teach me about "the cults" – the crazy Mormons with their second wives, Catholics who worship Mary, Mennonites who force women to wear little white caps. How mistaken they all are: *poor girls*.

During church, I hear I'm not allowed to speak – my will and mind belong to God in the form of my husband. During church, I hear my body isn't my own – my glory is in service to my husband; my womb, the service station.

One day after the service, playing horsey with the toddlers, I overhear something and stop short. I feel the bit in my twelve-year-old mouth: reined in, I sit up.

The father of a male friend of mine says to my mom: *she has fine childbearing hips,* assessing me like I'm choice breeding stock, an animal in heat he could mate with his son.

What to say? I sit there a mute beast. Am I also one of those poor girls?

Annunciations:



Dear Unknown Artist,

I would like to make amends for my sad copy of your annunciation. Even though I don't know who you are, it was likely not your intent to have Gabriel look like a happy chimney sweep. I am also certain that your God the father was not a psychotic bearded hipster about to administer a proctology exam after busting down the door. That unfortunate image is totally on me. At least Mary seems all right – perhaps that's only because she hasn't yet seen God's plan. But then, again, I realize your God's plan was probably not the same as mine.



Dear Giotto,

I'm sorry about this poor rendition of your annunciation. I'm sure in your version Gabriel does not look as if he is bearing terrible news to Mary who does not look like a dejected victim of God-rape, set in a sadly disproportionate alcove. I'm positive, too, that in your version, Gabriel's wings do not look like a penis. Indeed, I'm sure that image is a result of my unfortunate projection of 20^{th} century Freudianism upon your virgin conception story. Despite this failed attempt at copy, I am in reality a big fan of your frescoes and realize your laborious process of plaster mixing far outstrips my Pictionary-paced attempts with a ballpoint pen.



Dear Simone Martini,

I just wanted to tell you that I didn't mean for my copy of your annunciation to go so awry. Yes, I'm sure Gabriel was supposed to look reassuring, though perhaps not so much in a *chill out dude* sort of way. I'm also positive he was not holding a sparkler. I do realize that my Mary's facial expression is wrong – that you were going for *fear of God* and not *just saw the most disgusting insect*. Above her a square-winged bird looks on dubiously. I'm sure your bird did not have such an expression and also had appropriately shaped bird wings.



Dear Giovanni di Balduccio,

I apologize for my poor rendering of your stone cut annunciation. It must have been a lot of work to chisel this so nicely, only to have some college student make a deplorable mess of it. I do understand you were going for the relaxed and regal queen look for Mary and not suspicious snob making a fist like she's about to take someone out. I'm also aware you never intended Gabriel to look like a stoned hippie carrying a squid on his back. I'm sure your Gabriel was supposed to present an assured *peace be unto you* look and not so much alien fingers signing *peace out, man!*

Letter: To mother

What was it about pleasure that you feared? No oil for the chicken, nor salt to seep into the meat, you left the damn bird to shrivel and dry in the oven until its flesh felt like sawdust in our mouths. Frozen vegetables barely thawed, chewed like the soles of shoes. Bland oatmeal set before us had only the barest sprinkle of sugar or half-teaspoon drizzle of honey: you said you rationed sweetness so our teeth would not be soft.

Soon I learned all the ways, too in which my body failed perfection—the deep curve of my back, my belly's soft slouch, arms and legs skinny. At eight, I wanted to wear a pink jumpsuit I'd found in a bag of handme-downs, but you said it's unflattering, makes your belly

stick out, a lesson reiterated at the Dairy Queen when dad said it's your birthday you can get whatever you want.

When I returned to the car with a banana split, you disapproved, said to dad why did you let her order that?

To me: that was selfish, you can't eat it all. I would have gladly shared but felt so ashamed for wanting that the portion I ate tasted sour.

Always obey right away cheerfully and thoroughly: you required us to recite this before doing our chores. Expectations detailed on each list were never met in the time allotted. Always, the inspection failed—some missed dust, some spot left

unscrubbed. Each task re-done until the toilet or the floor shone like glass.

My writing practice never formed well in your tight grip. The sad row of K's, all duck-lipped instead of wide-mouthed alligators. I would never let up until I got it right or broke my pencil trying. Your own small script an example of precision: The perfect *Gail M Brunt* read like a typed font of your name—practice makes perfect. Everything had to be neat. If my bra straps fell to the side, you'd insist on pinning them to my shirt so it wouldn't look trashy.

All the things you said that even now I can't stop unhearing. Can't stop unfeeling. You spanked lessons into our bodies to toughen us: you knew hard truths and truth could not be bent so you broke us instead. In anger you struck out as Moses did. Rock and water poured bitter into our mouths.

Fierce in your need to protect, what you gave, you claimed to give in love, for our own good: the world scared you with its lack of control and medicine, you knew, was no cure, but a mask. You distrusted anything that came without pain—you taught us to be strong.

I am your daughter, resilient even in drought. I know how to exist without water, thrive in sand. I am the woman you said I would be: *The one who always knew who she was* and all that entails—the bittersweet fact that I am not *A big Gail*, not the reflection you wished for.

Still I carry you within me. Love you, even as I push away from your mooring, your small island that is not a place of peace. I rush to the open world as to the ocean waves I loved, as to the trees I climbed as a child. Because you couldn't keep me close, you increased the distance. And now

I'm gone. Still I feel your remedies: acidic, stinging like apple vinegar in the throat, and I choke on the God you force fed us. How our hungry mouths longed for kind words: manna from heaven to fill us, but fear spoiled the bread, bittered the flour so that it sank as rocks, gnawing our stomachs. I wish you could have given us more of the sweet.

Vice

Sometimes I'm still afraid that the old testament God of my childhood will find me and mete out justice for all my failings—that he's got a tally card filled with petty grudges and he's pretty sure I've tipped the balance on mercy. Plus he remembers my pride: how I took off and left for college, leaving my little sister—and you know how God is about family values. I'm certain he's up there laughing at me, completely doubled over at the irony that I spent my childhood raising kids and now as an adult I'm unable to conceive. As a practical joke, he's hung a sign on my womb. It reads: Abandoned, all who enter here—and it's like he's stuck his big gnarly God hand in and has my tubes in a vice grip, saying well, that should teach ya.

It's ridiculous how even now these stories have sway and I know a God cloud hovering in the sky and throwing down lighting bolts to strike me should be as laughable as the idea of God's arm elbow-deep in my lady parts, and yet the craziness still gets to me. When I'm alone in bed at night looking at the fearful moon, it's so quiet that my pulse is the loudest thing in the room and I know my blood flowing to my heart could stop at any time and I wonder how long I will get away with it before I'm discovered being naughty, drinking yet another glass of wine, sneaking my vibrator from the bedside drawer. or something worse—a real sin, relishing fantasies of bashing my abusive boss' head into a wall, hearing the satisfying crack of his skull. Each night worries swarm my brain as I sleep, dreaming of the unfinished chore list, tacked on the fridge, each task marked with an hourglass quickly running out.

Re-ordering the world

What are those houseplants with the heart-shaped leaves? If we had an easier relationship, I would call her to ask or send off a quick text message. I know she would remember not just the common name, but likely, the Latin one, too. The way it is listed in the Audubon field guide, every plant categorized by region and species, alphabetically ordered—each detail neat and in place.

I don't call, even knowing that she would like nothing more than this—her daughter's voice, a tether on the end of a long line of states I've put between us. I don't call because I know I will hear all the things she believes, which terrify me.

The last time I called, she told me she stopped taking the Coumadin they gave her for the blood clot. She was convinced there was no clot, no sticky mass that coagulated in the place her eggs once were.

I reminded her that the mass breaking loose could have travelled to her lungs, choked off her breath. Knowing even as I spoke, that the possibility of death still wouldn't convince her of the doctor's good will. For her, it's all a giant conspiracy—none more so than the scientists and the doctors who walk hand-in-hand with Big Pharma.

Last time I visited, she put out gluten-free muffins because gluten causes heart disease. She fried asparagus in bacon lard because the USDA lied and bacon was really a health food. I watched as she took the tender green shoots, threw them into the hot fat until they shriveled, became limp, tasteless in the grease.

Scorched Earth Policy

You no longer want

to fight this battle, perhaps you never

wanted it.

the gun, they gave you

before you knew how to shoot

lies unloaded

between your legs, you pull

out the bullets

drop them one by

one into the waiting pan,

a surgeon, extracting lead

before it festers.

Outside, the siege

is getting worse, but you

have taken off

your combat boots

and no amount

of advancing troops

will co-opt you

for covert operations.

A deserter

you are left

to wrap

your own wounds.

ripped from a bible

You hope these tissue thin pages

will be enough.

*

When you leave, they will burn

the bridge.

Burn the fields behind you.

They will leave

no fertile soil

to make sure you have nowhere

to grow.

You will be shunned

like a leper.

Contagion spreads quickly

and if one part of your body

causes sin, you cut

it off.

You wander, an appendage

in half-eaten skin, shreds

surface as nerves

exposed in a tooth, painful and insistent. Still you

hesitate

to have it looked at.

It is comforting to have something

familiar.

In some ways gnawing at the root

is its own pleasure.

But gangrene makes you sick and you know somewhere

there is a cure

for rumination,

a place not yet seeded

with scorched remains.

*

You are thrust

out into the world, a new

born escapee

from those who have been born

It is difficult

again.

to focus. Eyes still blurry strain

to make clear

a life others take for granted.

In this, your new humanity

you enter

buildings

that are not bombed out

feel a cool hush surround

see flowers in the atrium

a fountain burbles water

into a waiting pool, and the walls hold stories

the colored canvas

brings remembrance

the sharp angles of your bones

lift and fuse

*

Vision centered;

now you ache

in a new place

you want to belong

know you don't.

Your old friends.

the woods

are budding new leaves

and the mountain has been trod before,

wearing down crevices

to follow,

if you can trust the path etched there.

The mountain trail is a tough one,

but they say the view

is worth it.

You can see for miles, see new soil in the distance.

Lace up those hiking boots.

Be smart about it.

Collateral damage: aftermath

Sister, you are in the hospital again, your arms lined with razor thin slices; *scratches*, our mom calls them as if you had come upon a stray cat, or gotten tangled in the backyard blackberry bushes. On the phone, states away, I ask you how you feel. You say, *if I knew, I would tell you.*

But I know, and that knowledge grows an unwelcome fist gripping my breath: sister, not mother, I couldn't stay. And you, small child, didn't understand that day I packed my bags for college why I had to leave. You only knew I was gone, disappeared.

Looking back, I only now realize that you couldn't adapt to loss, couldn't process separation. You began to seize, your grief a glitch in the brain unable to be fixed.

Each time I'd come back to visit, you'd cling, plead for me to move home. I'd say *I can't I'm all grown up* and you'd howl, *Take me with you!* You'd stitch, your unfounded hopes up anew until I left again—a Band-Aid pulled off again too soon.

You thought this separation was a cruel joke like how I used to kick you out of the shower—I'd be rinsing my hair and I'd hear the shower hooks rattle, then your toddler body slip-thud into the tub. I'd open my eyes and see your face smiling, expecting

a greeting. Each time I'd expel you, I felt guilty—a god who had given you Paradise, only to snatch it back.

Climbing #2

The pine's pungent breath bathes my skin. Anoint me, ancient one

with your blessing. The pitch will not burn this time. Your rough

bark an advantage, I balance and pull upward. Below me, the sad earth appears

smaller. I ask only that my vision be clear, my intent truthful

in its telling, that I may see the world new in all its many angles. Smaller,

yes, from afar, yet broader in its lure. The aperture widens

to accommodate more light.
I am who I am who I am. Who am I

to judge? It's time to bury the hatchet, put aside

old wounds. I have nursed the past and found it wanting, a child

hungry in her desire. Sated now, I stretch

limbs to the limit. The sky will not refuse me this time.

Ars Poetica

Love in the aching spaces, the empty pause upon the page.

In the hands that write

the broken

lines.

In the hum

that sounds the iambs, each round vowel in the mouth reminding us of the moan of ourselves—

Hunger in our bellies to be open, to the chew and clip of consonants the grind of the teeth over words.

Each phrase that passes from our lips.

In the ink,

standing at attention. Each curled letter a missive.

The stand of the ink is love. The poem is love.

The poem is a stand the way a tree stands, not the missile

of a soldier with his cannonballs lobbed in anger, shattering bones, burning the fields.

But a tree—

unfurling, flowing with sap,
ready to hurry into flower, throw
some shade, add sass
with its red and orange musing,
yet ground with the grip of its bark.

The poem is a tree—

knowing the brevity of its leafing, still it chooses to come into being

because we need the beauty.

Looking for Miracles

1.

Several times now my mother has asked me, *Have you thought about a breast reduction?*

Strange question, coming from a woman who thinks doctors are part of a conspiracy,

who won't take her blood pressure medication and believes dental fillings are poisoning her.

Yet she doesn't hesitate to suggest that I, her oldest daughter, should be placed under

the knife: not for cancer or anything that threatens my life,

but because my body fails her standards.

She assaults me anew—with the suggestion

I should be cut open, my largeness removed—

brought down to size. Something acceptable.

2.

She asks me for a massage. Asks me to use my strength

to soften her, relax the rigid lines of her neck and jaw.

Her face so tightly controlled the way her pantyhose

holds in her varicose veins, her belly stretched from eight children.

She can't accept the imperfect—flesh reminds her she will die.

I turn her head, work down her trapezius. She resists my touch.

I try to release the pain, make the blood flow back, wanting her

to let go, unclench for once in her life. To live.

But I know she can't. She is trapped in absence, a specter,

waiting on the sidelines of her life. She winces, so I lighten my touch.

Larger change requires trust—a relationship we don't have.

So when she says afterwards *I don't feel anything different*

the girl in me is tempted to respond: *Yes mother, I know. You don't feel.*

But I am wearing my professional hat, so I tell her the knots in her neck

didn't get there overnight, that it will take more than one session to dissolve her

hardness. I'm good, but I'm not that good. If I could do that, I'd be a miracle worker.

Massaging mother

My hands are huge, cradling her neck. Her carotid flutters near my fingertips, so close to the surface. Her bones, delicate; body, light. Her voice begins with the usual criticism, and my anger rises in response: a boa constrictor in my chest tightening my heart. My hands startle, then back down. I realize I could break her.

But what is left to be broken?
She's frail. My anger recedes,
makes way for compassion.
Gently I rock her, my hands
becoming two waves, buffering
her body. I, as ocean, could swallow
her, hold her hostage in my
big whale belly if I wanted.
Her lion's teeth hold no power, here.

I observe her from this new position, and she becomes just another client—a body stressed by time and work, age creeping up on her. Her muscles are bumpy, hard as the dirt road where I grew up. I can see her jawline tightening in resistance.

How deep the pain must be to spark such fear, drive such anger, to pursue the small child who erred on the detailed chore list, dawdling for an instant when her imagination sparked a scene of submarine spoons, diving in the dishwater.

From this distance, what is her life? Small house on a dirt road in a small town with rugged small-minded individualism, must-grit-our-teeth-to-survive. A husband with a small income.

A church insular and growing ever more insular with each break, its broods of homeschooled children lined up like *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

She was, this woman, a mighty lioness poised to pounce on my every failure; I trembled in my girlish dress as she tore me to pieces. But I'm not her; she's not me. Little explorer climbing up trees, running down the beach, flying to Italy—I need to see this big beautiful globe, want to know what can I read, what can I eat, what can I make, who can I love?

I lift and stretch her arm.

My mind drifts and I breathe her out.
I let her go, push her out to sea—
those restricted emotions, calories, circumference of driving distance.
Her need to be less, to cut down.
Her tidy, stabled Jesus.

For my mom, with love for what she's sewn

With sharp-pronged teeth, she rips out mis-sewn seams, gleaming metal gripped in her white-knuckled hand. Regretful now, of the extra leeway of a thick hem, she pulls the threads, gathers the fabric.

Watching her I wonder, does she wish she'd restricted any space that allowed me to expand?

Does she wish she could re-sow me, re-make the scene, re-conceive a godlier daughter? But the spaces she gave are where I grew the most, where her better lessons took root.

When she could let out the rein of her thread, it was then that she taught me to think—not to trust the history textbooks, not to believe in manifest destiny. I remember how we watched *Roots, Schindler's List* and *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman* together. Seeing suffering and strength on the screen, both disturbed and comforted me.

What was the message she received?

Self portrait: cooking goat

It takes a long time to prepare a goat, much longer

than most animals. Goats are tougher; they have to be

from all that climbing. They do not yield easily.

Their necks are particularly sinewy from head butting. You cannot snap them like a chicken.

Goats are smart, not like geese. They will not run headlong into cars

and become roadkill.

Goats are ruminators:

they will chew on something a long time before swallowing. Be prepared to wait

at the table for your goat to be done.

If you are going to throw a goat in a fiery pit, remember to sacrifice it first.

It will not go quietly like a lamb.

Goats are not like veal cutlets:

do not pound them out, they get mad. The taste will not be pleasant.

A goat is better when allowed to marinate, preferably if it can play fast and loose with the spice and a douse of good sauce.

It is best not to nitpick a goat. Its bones get tired from such treatment.

It will never find the mountain.

Unlike a beef steak, a goat does not respond to a quick sear. Be sure to pre-heat the oven

for a slow

braise.

Goat is best served with red wine.

The tannic structure brings out the flavor, complements the sauce.

Trans/substantiation

Take your place at the table. Why don't you believe you belong here? Your roast goat is stuffed with herbs and the gravy runs thick with scent;

the savor is the lamb—
the choicest meat, tender
for which to pay a debt.
Medium-rare, the blood runs
when the knife slices through.
We flock to it: *Take*eat, this is my body.

The road to hell is paved by goatherds, but a seat is saved—the braise is done, the juices are running clear and sweet.

Gratitude

It's when you smile because you're no longer there. The lioness has lain down the goat and there is strength in the limbs that carry you away from her exhausted mouth. Her jaw may ache until the end of days and you only feel sorry for her need to hold on so much, to tear into things, to feast on the displeasure of others. But you've got some sturdy horns and you're ready to blow some music, prance about on little goat feet. Feel that freedom infuse your step. Muscles quicken so you can hoof it to greener fields where you'll find peace in understanding all that comes to pass and passes on.

What a sensuous banquet survival is

I could weep at the color of this tomato, red-orange against the drooping roses.

How is it that joy flees as soon as you feel the pulse brighten in your wrist?

But happiness is just ourselves at rest, the place where love exists as kindness,

where eyes flame as lamps fill with oil that will not burn out—a miracle

to see by. And in this dancing fire, mutual wine kisses our lips with its calmness, purple

as blood that runs us into a river of cells. Yes, love and this evening, too, shall pass

even as this summer washes into fall. I watch the hours on the clock, see your chest

rise, forehead cool now, fluid flushing from your lungs, and I breathe in this

rusted tomato, the last juices of summer spilling their scent as the leaves outside

are turning. Apples will come now, their crisp noses nudging winter

and you will recover, find strength in your native nature—fir and snow.

VITA

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Abigail Brunt hails from Gilmanton, New Hampshire where she spent her childhood climbing trees, reading and racing her bike down the dirt road. She graduated from Gordon College in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in History and English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She received an honorable mention for a college poetry contest in *Christianity and Literature* for the poem "Necropoli di Crosifisso del Tufo" in 2006.

Before coming to ODU to pursue her MFA, Abby spent the intervening decade first working in human services outreach support and case management for people suffering with major mental illness, then later as a licensed massage therapist. She currently has no other publications, though she hopes to change that soon.