

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

FALLING OUT OF THE SKY

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2016

Directed by:

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“Falling Out of the Sky” is a collection of poems, both formal and free verse, that explores an intimate familial landscape. In particular, these poems raise the question of what it means to be human through examinations of family mythology and its changes as bodies and memories become unreliable with time.

FALLING OUT OF THE SKY

by

Ruth Elizabeth Morris

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2016

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the editors of the following print and online publications in which early versions of the following poems have appeared.

Writer's Digest: "Inheritance"; forthcoming

JMWW: "After the Shootings in Santa Barbara," "Cooking Goat Curry," "Phoenix," "Picture My Father As A Young Man," "Three Daughters," and "To the Stargazer"; Spring 2015

[PANK]: "Uncoupling"; Spring 2015

Cargoes: "A World of Constant Motion"; Spring 2013

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I

Woman With A Postcard

I stick the postcard to the fridge, writing-side down,
so the miniature version of *Le Demoiselles D'Avignon*

is visible. Each time I go for milk, the women
in the painting stare back at me with strident focus.

For years, Picasso called this painting *my brothel*
with affection. He observed his models for months,

confronting each angular cheekbone and sturdy muscle,
rendering each woman as colossal, nude, all hacked up

and somehow intact. They made eye-contact as Picasso painted
so even now, when you look at them, they don't look away.

He plucked their unblinking eyes and reset them
in animal masks over bodies agape as windows—

above a head, a dismembered hand against red dirt.
Darker still, a fractured body, fused to thrust of sky.

Arrested in brush strokes, the disjointed women move
as if guided by unseen string, like grotesque marionettes

poised before the point of collapse. These women
remind me of another version of myself, sleeping naked,

wholly open, as an ex-boyfriend sat at the foot of the bed
and wrote a poem about the parts of me he found most beautiful:

my sleep-hooded eyes when he woke me for sex, the cleft
at the center of my chest where he annexed his thumbs,

his hands sliding from breasts to spine
as if pulling apart the segments of an orange.

Picasso said his women had within them a kind of savage magic
that thirsted to be captured and seen. I wanted to reveal

this magic in my flesh, to see what men could see
that I couldn't see, so when I left my old lover

I kept his poem. But the woman puppeted on the page
 didn't seem anything like me. Parts of her were close—

her stunted torso, the mole on the bottom of her foot,
 her small mouth with its open smile. From this, I learned

a muse is only a woman cut to pieces.

Inheritance

When I was nine, I tried on my mother's mastectomy bras.
I filled the pockets with kleenex, posing in front of a mirrored door
to admire the curves I had created beneath my overalls.

In locker rooms, my mother's phantom-breast was all I saw:
Afraid to be seen, I held a towel to hide my 'budding orbs'
while she dared other women to look, removing her mastectomy bra.

Once, while her bra was still warm, I reached my small
fingers into the hidden pocket and removed the breast-form;
I held it to my chest—bee-sting nubbins!—beneath my overalls

and imagined the woman I would be when my training bra
was full. Everywhere my future-self went—gym, grocery, hardware store—
she was walking alone, wearing her mother's mastectomy bra.

When I graduated from college, I bought myself a push-up bra
and wore my sweater-stretchers like medals of honor,
thinking back to girlhood, playing bra-stuffed dress-up in my overalls.

Lately, I stare at my nipples while they are still mine. I draw
red lines where the incisions will be, not sure what I will ask for
in the operating room. I hold my mother's mastectomy bras
and ask, whose breasts will I wear beneath my overalls?

Picture My Father As A Young Man

Handsome, no failed marriages beneath his belt. In the summer,
he rides a bicycle from Zanesville, Ohio to a farm in Pennsylvania

and the wheels churn like windmills against the sky. Towns slip
in and out of focus in a kaleidoscope of unchained cloud.

At night, he dreams he rides alongside Mary Pickford
and F. Scott and asks, *How far to Wyeth's house?*

When my father tells me this story, he swears the next day
he found himself lost in Chadds Ford, paintbrushes for hands.

Decades later, in the National Gallery, my father and I stand
in a room full of windows that are not windows—Wyeth's

figureless portraits, exits painted on canvas. My father
buys a print of *Wind from the Sea* and my sister frowns.

She asks why he would buy a painting without people in it.
He doesn't answer but holds it close, and on the metro home

he sits alone, takes a window seat. In another life, my father
might tell me how Wyeth reaches through the frame

to hold his body up while he stares through windows
instead of killing himself. In that life, a braver version of myself

might tell my father the sadness he has passed to his daughters
pools dark in our bellies and threatens to bury us in the yard.

Dream of the Woman in the Orange Grove in Winter

She follows the farmer. he drags heavy smudge pots
from a shed and leaves them in a row, gutting the grove.

Above them, the sickle moon slices the sky.
The trees are white from dirt to the first knuckle

of each branch, tangling in the dark like snarled bone.
The woman walks between the faceless contortions

and focuses her flashlight on the first smudge pot.
The farmer dips a rag in a jar of kerosene

and lights the corner: in his fist, a small sun blazes.
The woman turns her face away from the light.

He forces the cloth against the smudge pot's damper
until it swallows the fire, igniting the center

an angry gold. The chimney belches black smoke.
The sweet scent of orange is shrouded in oily haze.

After the final smudge pot is lit, the farmer leads
the woman up the sloping path at grove's edge

and they survey the smoke-cloud trapping the heat
against orange-flesh, fighting the frost.

Watchful flicker; the smudge pots echo the stars.
The grove is a doppelganger for the night sky:

The farmer turns. He unhooks the woman's blouse
and reaches for her breasts. When she opens her mouth

smoke thrusts its way inside.

Where You Go

From my desk, I watch her turn the pages. She is meticulous, each touch
feather-light and exact in her dissection. There, the Christian myth

is splayed silent, butterflyed in Rebecca's hands. She laughs and looks to me,
points to a picture, and crooks a finger so I will sit with her on the bed.

This is a fascination of ours—looking at Bibles. In this one, an artist has drawn
Jesus as a superhero, shirtless and surrounded by scrawnier sidekicks.

Moses is ripped too, and God's voice yells POW and BAM and thunderbolts
ZAP ZAP ZAP to smite people all over the Old Testament.

When we flip to the page with Mary's naked breasts feeding a baby Jesus
drawn as a grown man, I laugh the laugh that blisters throatward

when I feel uncomfortable and return to my desk to finish a thank you note
to my grandmother—the only communication we'll have this year.

My grandmother let the doctors convince her to get a hysterectomy
after eight births, but only with her priest's permission.

There are steps we follow in this family: Marry young—he should be Catholic.
Buy a house with a yard. Carry babies. Die.

So, we thrive as pen pals. We write letters around the holidays. She signs her letters
God Bless. I do not. I take after my father—we don't ask God for favors.

Tonight, the memory of my grandmother's commandment rests heavy on my skin
each time my fingers hook wet, reach for my partner's womb:

childless and empty as mine. I wonder what my grandmother's God would say
about this version of the story: Ruth and Rebecca meet in a lesbian bar.

Ruth drinks tequila until she has the courage to whisper, *Where you go,*
I will go. Rebecca leads Ruth to the dance floor and they move,

hip to hip, until the bar closes for the night. The women go home together
and never meet Isaac or Boaz or beget babies who will beget good men.

Cooking Goat Curry

It all sounds like the beginning of a joke
with an uncomfortable punchline: two white lesbians
try to braise a goat shoulder. We've made a game
out of cooking foreign cuisines together.

*How typical, that you think braising
a goat is exotic*, our neighbors observe rightly,
but they tell us where to begin.

We gather cumin, turmeric, and coriander
with small hands. Rub fingers below heavy bone,
work yogurt into the caustic joint, the swarthy muscle.
The shoulder cost us nothing: a gift
from an enthusiastic butcher to curious customers.

We shoot the shit, as unfamiliar meat
thaws and the cat yowls beneath the table.
We drink wine while the flesh softens
and wonder: was the goat grass-fed? Castrated?
The butcher didn't say, and I didn't think to ask.
Our neighbors say these things make a difference,
but when the meat is so tender it falls off the bone
and into our slowly chewing mouths, I feel no closer
to the goat or its life before it graced our table.
Would I feel somehow more enlightened,
in my knowing the body's history?

Un-Mothered

When the crepe myrtle is blooming, it is easy to sit on the porch-swing
and pretend we are different than we are. Our voices blend for the first time,

choral as the wind humming over bottle-mouths of empty milk-jugs
set out to be filled in the morning. The swing rocks. Our knees almost touch

but they don't. Years of mothering me have taught you to be as wary
of me as I am of you. We've played our parts. Weary second wife.

Ungrateful stepchild. This sadness moved in years ago: made its nest
in the walls, in the cabinets, and neither of us is big enough to let it go

until it dissolves, if it will. It's only water, holding the shape
of the thing that holds it until it is broken. Something is about to break.

I am offering you my fear as a laurel branch. You know what it is like
to wake up with your pelvis hollowed, the mechanics halted and a dark knot

lurking where a womb should be. I look away from the trees. I want
to tell you that I read once that there are people who believe in tree-burial,

digging out tree-bellies like pulp from carving-pumpkins
and tucking bodies inside. A tree trunk will swallow a corpse whole,

the same way, as a girl, I'd swallow watermelon seeds and imagine
my skin growing tight around my stomach as the fruit grew. As the buried

bodies rot, the trees expand, bulging out in the middle as if with child.
A longing rises in me as I look back to the crepe myrtle in the yard.

The sun is sinking and the crickets are out, clicking softly
as a new breeze stirs the branches. A blossom falls. The tree-trunks shake,

thin and weak against the wind.

Morning in Rodanthe

1.

On the shore, she looks like a sandpiper
skirting the waves, quick-footed
where the water turns to white foam
fuzzed against the peachskin sand.

She is looking for sea glass;
she is making a window into the earth.

After pressing each piece into the ground,
she curls her body around it,
shielding her collection before the incoming sluice
of salt and breaker.

Wind-pressed and wet, a piece of her dark hair
sticks to her face like an eel
caught on rock-lip at low-tide.

2.

In deeper water, she moves slowly.

She bobs with the sea's breath,
no longer bird but buoy, a head without a body
almost too far away for me to see.

I call to her.

She takes her time returning to the beach,
where my feet are locked,
squishing sand in the shallows.

When she gets to the place
where the ground drops like a great tongue
below the wilding sea,
she throws herself forward one more time
before she lets the waves carry her back.

3.

Her stride is long and quick: she overtakes me
as we walk to the house.

She takes the porch steps two at a time,
leaving a trail in her wake:
 discarded towel,
a sandal, sunglasses with a freckling of water-spots.
I gather it all into a pile near the door
and rest, legs outstretched, rubbing the sand
from each limb and breathing its dust.

I watch my skin redden in the sun,
pressing thumb into thigh and lifting:

 palest petal, short-lived blossom.

A World of Constant Motion

You have to reach around it to find it—
cup your hands, drinking your body down to the bone.
We avoid our questions together, all lies, even these bodies.

It is not for me to say where light buckles—
where the nail nests in the rafters, where spine stops
snaking through muscle, where shadow brushes body.

You are the bridge rebuilt over the river.
An open window, a skipping stone, honeysuckle creeping
over the trellis. Your mind needs a more capacious body.

I will tell you: the only way to truly see is to touch.
There is a place in the soul where you live in intermission.
The play never resumes, and stage misses body.

The moon stays dry though it reflects across the water.
Sometimes I think if I touch you, you will disappear
and I will drown, fear trapped in a listless body.

As a child, when you removed your roller skates
for moments afterward you still felt like you were skating:
a world of constant motion, this body.

We are buoyant here.
In the dark we circle like water orbits the drain and I lose
sight of the lines—which part is soul? Which part is body?

Three Daughters

1.

From inside the house, through pupil-dark shutters agape as his mouth, our father sees my youngest sister on the roof. She poses with the weather vane. At its apex, an iron cow

jumps over a crescent moon still damp with monsoon haze. The rain is near, so the Bull City air lifts summer dirt from the ground as easily as blowing an eyelash off the tip of a finger.

Like an egret, my sister hooks one foot below the cow-belly and raises the other, demi pointe, to support the full weight of her body stretching toward the sky. Beneath her pose,

concrete steps lead to the cellar. She crooks her neck to stare at our father through a feathering of curls: unspoken challenge. Thunder claps. Her arms pinwheel and the sky

blooms sunflower-bright.

2.

December arrives like a boot at the door and brings with it a familiar cold. I hike the Eno with my father until we reach a swimming hole where the water has started to lick rime

into the riverbank. There, a star-bellied weaver fights to gain traction on the ice.

We watch the spider struggle until, in pity, my father uses a fallen leaf to scoop her up

and place her in front of her web. She hesitates, legs clicking against legs, then scuttles down the bank and back to where she began. My father reaches for another leaf—

guides the spider back to her web before we go. On the walk home, everything sounds like someone is holding my head underwater and I feel chicken-wrung,

more naked than the trees.

3.

Spring: my middle sister makes gnocchi for our father's birthday. Long fingers coil flour, potato, yolk to make the dough. When he gets home, she will be the one to tell him

our youngest sister is on the roof again. He'll fold himself as small as he can be and crawl through the window to hold her, let her drum pearl-knuckled fists against his chest

until the storm inside her calms. He'll gather her body, light as a paper crane, and carry her inside to bed. After, downstairs at the table, I'll hand him a glass of wine

the color of the blood we share and when he drinks it, for a moment, I will feel like I am looking in a mirror. We, the quieter sisters,

reach for his hands.

Helga Braids Her Hair

after Andrew Wyeth

I've traveled a long way to sit on this outcropping
and let low, honey-warm light rake over my shoulders
while you paint the Pennsylvania landscape with me in it:
a little drop of Germany among the marigold and aster.

My husband is probably at home, tucking tulip bulbs
below the soil while I sit with you. I twist my hair into a braid
so I have something to do with my hands. I think back
to my time in the tannery before he brought me here:

I used to pull the soiled skins from farmers' carts
and scrub them with salt, my hands splitting open
to reveal raw insides. After, while the flesh softened
in the brining tubs, I'd twist flower crowns in the yard.

Everything feels uncertain in Pennsylvania: your paintbrush,
still secreted away from your wife, the slippery elm
half-submerged in the lake, the darkening sky, swollen
and writhing overhead, as coarse as undyed cotton.

The sky growls. I watch your brush dabbing my face
onto your canvas, but you paint me looking away.
The wind whips my braid against my cheek
like a knife scraping horse-flesh: limed and cold and slow.

Woman at the Window

A fallen birch, dull against the snow
looks like a broken arm. In the cavity
left by the ulna's split, a dead shrew
is frozen solid as the earth below.

Around the shrew's small body,
the snow coils, collects against fur
and hoarfrost in lacy tendrils.
The lake is almost frozen. For a breath,

I imagine sinking in the cold water
before the ice comes until I am blue and still.
I hold my splinted arm to my chest
and try to recall the taste of summer

peach, supple as a kiss. My mouth
goes dry. At the window, I observe the birch
disappearing beneath a layer of fresh snow.
You appear in the frame.

With tender touch, you unbury the shrew
while the snow still falls around you.
Everything is cold-choked and white
except the dark body in your hands.

In the morning, you'll build a fire
in the driveway and burn the shrew,
then scatter her ashes in the lake, and I'll watch
your hands trembling through the air.

Elegy for a Bus Stop Bird-Bringer

Someone had knocked the birdfeeder from the birch tree at the bus stop—a cracked bell. Perhaps another woman, shaking the sugar-water free from where it hung on a low branch like a lantern, a lightfruit. Or maybe a boy, angry with himself. I can't be sure. Today, I waited for the bus before the tree, a now-spindling spire without a bell, birdless and bell-less, missing the song of hummingbird-dance that signaled the beginning of each day, a consolation for walking alone. I tried not to think—this is a sign—bringer of birds, broken. I stepped over the drying water the way I might step over a grave. At the center, splotched like a sunny egg, a piece of yellow plastic. Lonely yolk. Above me, the sky webbed uncertain and large through the birch gaps and the sun revealed the bus stop for what it was: not a tree playing host to a birdfeeder, as I once thought, but a flying cage, unfinished and open, the branches modeled after a cathedral's rib vaults, distributing the weight of the stained-glass sky vaulting over morning sabrewings and thornbills, over the waiting bus-riders, unceremonious sanctuary, narthex of bus bench, meeting place of busy place and spirit. As I looked up, snow fell through the window-spaces—crystal prisms, sky-pieces, captured, then unbound—the day, at once, was made of glass, the whole unlikely scene sparkling as if it were carved in gypsum. I knelt to the birdfeeder, taking it into my hand. For that moment, it seemed as if I and the tree were the same. Around me, the sun wept in a thousand tiny cages, full of trapped light, sharp and quiet, pulsing in almost-flight. I looked to the birch. I looked to the pieces in my hand. I touched the jagged joints. And I threw the birdfeeder away.

II.

Anna Eating Peach

The sun's season now begun, light sinks
in Anna's brazen brow. Eyes brim
in challenge. She chases rays with chomping
bites. Like a wild boar cleans bird to the bone
leaves no meat un-licked, she lingers in lunch.
The earth wakes and watches her wanton
tongue flick into flesh. Her fluttering fingers
wrench the fruit open, wrecking the wreath
of skin-pink that skirts her scouting teeth.
A low whine whispers: Anna wallowing
in peach as her lips part, plucking
thumb into thirsty mouth. Then, revealed
at peach-heart, in pulp: a persistent eye.

Falling Out of Sky

This morning I found a baby scorpion
perfect, in the saucepan.
Killed it with a piece of marble.
—Jack Gilbert, “Respect”

My stepfather tells me Orion was a drunk
as he clips winter-wilted bougainvillea blossoms

in the yard. I rake them into piles like autumn
leaves. A morning moon blooms against blue

sky and wears my mother’s face.
When a mother scorpion carrying her babies

on her back crawls over my foot,
my stepfather teaches me how to kill:

*Douse the pale exoskeletons in paint lacquer.
Drop a match. The flame will feather indigo*

at the center, where the lacquer fuses body to body.
He quenches the flames with a lemonade glass,

gulped empty and turned upside down
on the sidewalk. *Quick death is best*, he tells me

as he tosses what is left into the bougainvillea
clippings at my feet. We keep on with the yardwork.

He clips. I rake. I tell him that *I read online*
that the word lacquer has Sanskrit roots

in ‘laksha,’ which means one hundred thousand,
which seems like it isn’t related to lacquer at all

and isn’t the English language funny? He doesn’t laugh.
I try again: *If you are in a rocket and you make it*

to an altitude of one hundred thousand meters,
that’s when you have officially achieved space flight

and you can say you’ve seen Scorpio up close.
He picks up the charred scorpion by the tail

and lifts her so he can look her in the eye,
then looks to me. *You know Orion was a drunk,*

he tells me. *He drank too much wine and stumbled
over Scorpio in the dark.* They are never seen in the sky

at the same time (to spare Orion his shame).

**

There is a story I tell him sometimes when he is drunk
and feeling self-destructive, which used to be often,

which my mother does not let either of us forget.
I tell him about a dream I have where women leave

their men to wander the desert on their own, and I go
with them. They make camp near a sad lake, sleep

framed by red rock and sky, the lake dry.
In the dream, I am awake all night. I watch

the other women doze off and I pinch my breasts
to remind myself they are still there,

they haven't killed me yet. There is still time.
The whole dream, I am reaching for another body

to wear: arms wide as sky over the dirt, searching
for someone else to be. My stepfather's voice echoes

across the canyon: *Remember, you are safe. Touch
your ear against my chest and you will hold a glass*

*against the wall, mumbling next-room-sounds in your
skull.* Helmholtz resonance, unknown ricochet

a pulse in my head that sounds like mine.

**

No one can decide if my body is breaking down.

Lump-less for now, I leave my breasts
where they are. I stack and re-stack the dishes

in the kitchen, angry that my body will not do
what I want it to do. One summer, a younger

version of myself ate so little I grew thin
as a half-moon of onion sliced for soup.

My stepfather shrugs when I bring this up—
He knows what this is like: at twenty, he pinwheeled

from a window and a disc slipped out of his spine.
Now, every step feels like he is still falling

or about to fall.

**

When cancer finds him before it finds me, he jokes:

*Spray me with lacquer and let me burn, but don't throw
the ashes on a windy day. You might get them in your mouth.*

**

I've always remembered my dreams: Incendiary
dreams, fire dreams, dreams of heat and wind and song,

mewling dreams, straw dreams, rattlesnake dreams
that are always wriggling, dreams I can't hold

or stash close to my chest, picking me clean
like rabbit bones, humble and tenuous, breathless

and conspiratorial. In one dream, I chase Orion:
he strides across the sky as I run along the ground

and just as I think I might catch his ankle,
a jumping cholla catches my own

and the chase is over.

**

In the hospital, they stick my stepfather with needles
and fill him with drugs that turn his blood

to woozy syrup. *Nothing I didn't try in the eighties*
he chuckles. Nobody laughs.

There are things we talk about instead. We look
at photographs from his wedding to my mother

and they start to shift into landscapes lined in rows
of stone and teeth, sun-bleached teeth in wild jaws

now spiritless, staring at the two of us acting
like strangers in the desert, and no, I don't believe

his God is waiting with gates unfolding for him
like a smile. When I start to feel land-locked, we pile

into his Chevy and look for snow. We drive north
for hours—my small feet against the window,

my knees pressed to the chin I got from my father
while my stepfather's truck climbs, mountain-buoyed,

out of mesquite and into pine forests.
When we reach Sedona, I fall into the snow

like a whale shedding legs and retreating
back to the sea. I lie still—

my mother says I look like
Christ above the door at Moissac,

arms flayed wide, hands too big for his body.

**

During chemotherapy, we imagine alternate careers
for Orion: Entomologist. Exterminator. Explorer.

*If there was one thing Orion should have brought to the stars,
I say, it would have been a new skin. A stronger skin,*

since he and Scorpio are still trying to fall out of the sky.
My stepfather dreams they circle each other

in the desert, Scorpio's segmented tail lurching
into Orion's foot like a needle through cloth.

In my re-imagined myth, Scorpio is caught on Orion's
club and sent back to the stars. In my stepfather's

dream, Orion admits defeat and lowers his foot to be stung.
When he tells me this dream, it feels like I am looking

into a kind of mirror where the reflection is holding
a cup I don't want to drink from. I should say

I-forgive-you before I can't. Each time I leave,
there is a chance he'll find a way to step out of his body

before I get back. A thankless mercy—
a little privacy, a death without an audience,

without anyone to hold his hand.

**

I dream about the same conversation almost every night,
the memory like a terrible book I've written myself.

He makes the request like a hearthstone to the head
and I stand at the cliff of doubt—

though sometimes I dream I do it—kill him
so he won't kill himself and be alone when he dies.

Like a handshake, like *let's-make-a-deal*,
helping him die in his sleep, over

the side of a boat, in the path of a train,
in the church where he married my mother.

**

My mother keeps asking what we talk about.
My mother has a knack for opening things

that should stay closed. Holding fast to silence,
I imagine her running warm water over the lids

of canoptic jars or unhooking shutters before a storm.
She asks her questions while I curl inward,

crawling more deeply inside the body she grew.
When she chides us for talking in hushed tones,

I run out of patience. *Secrets are for sharing*, she says often,
so I promise her I'll say something true

and awful to a stranger.

**

Here is a place with a dream for a sheriff,
here is a town where we can live:

you sleep
and it takes the world to wake you,
you sleep
and you have everything to lose
and you stay
inside, and your body walks around without you.

Dreams of x-rays, dreams of scalpels, dreams
of bodies formerly worn, bodies we're trying to find again.

Dreams of apologies, dreams of self-inflicted wounds,
bruise dreams and burn dreams and familiar dreams

where the princess leaps from the tower
without fear, her hair clasped around her neck.

You can't leave it behind, Princess. You sure as shit can't.

**

The same week my step-father stops calling
I adopt a cat. I feed him scraps from my palm

and tell him secrets, and I don't mind
when he wakes me up or shits in the laundry basket.

At night, we wander my empty apartment
together, all lights off but the bedroom lamp

to attract insects we can cup in our paws.
If he catches a bug, he eats it. If I catch one,

I put it in a jar and we watch it crawl
in circles along the bottom of the glass.

**

I button my shirt and wear a bolo tie.
Braided leather, fastened with an eagle

etched in bone. Someone says I look like my father.
Step-father, his first daughter is quick to correct.

I let her. It doesn't change the way I look.

**

We used to hunt scorpions at night, while
we should have been sleeping.

Under ultra-violet light, a scorpion
will glow a charged, iridescent blue,

as if it is sheathed in armor
of shivering turquoise.

He held them in paint buckets,
so he could show them off

as if they were mermaids or two-headed
ducks at a circus side-show.

I held the blacklight and watched.
Never crush them, he warned me.

*They could be carrying their babies
on their backs.* I thought this kind.

Scarecrow

Here a hard, headless spine
watches the waterblooms waver
in the sweeping swamp, shuddering
as the wind, cold and sharp
whistles in the waist-coat's wilted
torso. First sluggish as sleep,
the gust soon swells to a swagger.
His sleeves stretch sky-wide:
for a false few flutters
gristle-ground against new-grown
arms, he is alive as the air.

Phoenix

My mother's city sprawls like thunder
beneath the smog-pinked sky:
a ruddy hand, palm to God, fingers radiating
out to unclaimed desert in every direction.

I count my stepfather's pills for the week
to give my mother a break. I take coffee
from the cupboard and drink out of a mug
with her name etched in the clay.

This house is not mine anymore.
It makes my body feel small, until there is
nothing left of me here but a picture
in the hall from my childhood:

my younger self, peeking from behind
my mother's legs on her wedding day
to smile at her new husband, one palm
on her knee, one palm reaching for his face.

To keep busy while they sleep, I clean
all traces of myself from the kitchen.
The cat wails. I take out the trash, inhale
damp clay through a nose like my father's.

Fingers flush Navajo blue, swollen
as the Colorado between monsoons.
Near the gate, a grackle taps at the place
where sidewalk slopes into red earth.

When her beak lodges, caught below
the concrete lip, she uses her claws
to pull it free in a scrubbing
of feathers and blood.

In the morning,

I'll sleep on the plane back to Maryland.
My partner will ask how my mother is doing,
which isn't well, which is a story
we are trying not to tell, and I'll think about

a dream I sometimes have, where I remove
my hands and bury them in my mother's backyard—
some gruesome evidence of my homecoming
as keloidal bumps in the clay.

Self-Portrait with Snow and Lime

The Silver Spring cityscape unfolds
in green haze: it's going to snow.

The roofs huddle together like rows of teeth
the whole neighborhood assembled,
an open mouth. This stillness is familiar.

I think back to the unfinished painting
in your living room:

limes, big as serving bowls
some halved, some quartered, rough-sketched
in charcoal on a canvas as big as your bed
and nearly as empty. Each time I left
before you woke up, I brushed a hand along
the unfinished limes on the way out the door.

Finally, it starts to snow, covering the sidewalk
that cuts a frame for Acorn Park's waterless grotto,
now filling with fresh powder,
my footprints disappearing in an instant.

When it is cloud-fresh, city-snow
is not so different from snow
in the Blue Ridge Mountains
where we met. I extend my hand
and cup a skein of sky, lifting it to my lips.

I shut my eyes and savor the liquid
slushing on my tongue. I try to see
if I can separate the taste
of each particle of dirt, chemical, water.
I taste lime, sour and young.

With my eyes closed,
everything is the color of sleep
and I'm back with you
and I'm twenty, over-confident
and selfish, drinking your coffee
and then I'm sitting on your lap and swearing
I'm not like those other women
even though I am, we both are, young
and bitter as the limes you leave
on the table until you are ready

to finish your sketch and begin to paint.

III.

After the Shootings in Santa Barbara

I keep looking behind myself

in the airport bar. I drink alone,
shirt buttoned to my neck

so I won't have to tell anyone *no*.
Men say I should be softer, more ghosting,

a raindrop rivered in window-glass—
They want me to open my body up

to prying hands and say *thank you*
as they reach inside.

*

Where the river crooks
like an elbow, water calms.

A water skipper's walk is holy, her
thin legs straddling air over the surface

as if she is perched on an unseen saddle,
poised at the place where ripple begins.

Through the reeds, a crane wears
my fish-hooked neck, lowering her face

to look behind herself before drinking.

Uncoupling

The things she forgets, that I called her
by her last name when we slept
together, that we were each looking
for something we couldn't say, holding
the barest moments hostage on skin
& on paper, that I would be nothing
like her in the end, no lilies to say
I dare you, I dare you, please don't—
that everything & nothing changed
when the leaves fell & the sky whispered
itself grey as the charcoal in her hand
when she sketched limes, blood
oranges, that the snow slushed
into the wailing creek & we swam,
that it was like diving for pearls
blindfolded in oil-gunked debris,
over & over, in numbing flesh
& everyone knew what we were
searching for but our own bodies
& when our knowing finally came,
resting heavy like the morning dew
on the spider webs, it would be
unwieldy & spurred by spring thaw
gnashing into the creek-sides,
that we wouldn't know how to be
reckless anymore, that we would learn
to be small & cautious & afraid,
& once it was all over & done with
we would speak of each other
the way one speaks of the dead—
fondly, with respect to what is done.

The Fox Tattoo

A mutual friend gets married and I see you
in her wedding pictures, thin as a cotton tiller

and more withered, your arms spindling from your shirt
sleeves, all elbows, veins pressing through translucent skin.

I heard that you spent weeks convalescing
in a Thai hospital, your body drifting in and out of dreams

where you became the tattoo on your chest: what began
as a small tear in the skin just below the nipple

growing into a doorway for a red fox who leaps
from between your ribs and answers to your name.

In the dream, you lead a leash of lonely foxes
who wander with soft paws against cold ground

and leave it as still and undisturbed as it is found.
In your throat, a small whine claws its way forth, swelling

and retreating with each weary heartbeat--echoed by clipped
mechanical chirps from the machines keeping you alive.

The fox wears your ginger hair as coarse fur stretched
from shoulders to tail, and when he runs, each distal shaft

shakes like corn-stalks trembling against a wind
that carries with it Alma, Georgia, and the cloying smell

of Vidalia onions, fresh-cut and weeping their sweetness
through your mother's kitchen and into the yard.

Daybreak

Through our kitchen window, it's easy
to see the barrel-chested buck approaching
riverbank with childlike caution.
Step-wait. Step-wait.
Spreading stout legs wide and steadfast
as the footbridge further southward,
he grunts, begins trudging crosswise,
quiet, even as the thin ice shudders
beneath his lumbering buck-weight,
threatens fracture, freak accident
where he'd capsize beneath cracking ice-slab
sinking quick as stomping footsteps
into fresh snow.

To the Stargazer, as She Dresses for Bed

You tell me again, as if it explains why you cover your body up:
When you were sixteen, your father returned from Bosnia wrecked
by guilt over his absence. The day he kicked in your truck window
after an argument, you ran to hide in your bedroom until it was dark
enough to see the constellation of your birth. Cancer, the crab, watched
your father sweeping up the glass you left behind.

As it watched you too,
you dressed for bed, separating your skin from starlight. You pulled
your nightshirt over your head and heard a low hum, like white noise
slicked at the edges of a universe made of everything
humans have sent away. The stars that make up Cancer's claws
were the dimmest pinpricks of failing light, ready to flicker out one by one.

Reflected in night sky, your question:

what does being human sound like?

For years, you've lifted your eyes to the same cosmic blueprint your father
could see above his post in Sarajevo, looking for evidence to refuse
the parts of you that whisper, *You are flesh. You are ruined. You are full
of light that will someday go dark.* This is the animal you couldn't escape.

When you woke, the truck was waiting in the driveway and your father
was throwing open the curtains on the kitchen window.

Night-Swim with a Childhood Friend

We're women now, afraid of the woods at night.
 We slip from the sleeping house anyway, schoolgirls again

as we dash across the meadow, past the treehouse
 and across the sinuous road, still warm as flesh.

We do not pause at the rock-scrabble
 we cobbled together years before to mark the place

where trail slices forest open,
 birch trees brassy where the fireflies cluster,

carving spaces for themselves in the pitch
 where they can, scattering when we rush past,

then regrouping, their abdomens flushing orange
 as the tiger lilies we picked roadside as girls, amassing armfuls

and carrying them home, filling empty milk jugs
 with sugar-water to keep the flowers blooming.

At the Eno, I tip my head back and inhale: the river
 smells like a memory where we fall into the water together

as children still learning where to reach our hands, lifting
 moss-slimed rocks to reveal mudbugs or salamanders bolting

from muck to moving water, escaping into the rapids
 where our hands are not as quick. We let them go, some pebble

of guilt in our bellies inspiring our fear of the current.
 Now older, we have learned not to pry rock from riverbed,

not to invite the wetness to our waists
 in case our bodies can't stand firm against the rushing water.

When Same-Sex Marriage is Legalized in Arizona

Like yolk dribbling, fork-wounded, from a poached egg
The word *wife* drips from my mother's tongue unhindered.
Sometimes a bully, even to men of God, my mother is
A spur in the preacher's flank until he agrees to gay-marry
Her daughter—a far cry from my first year post-closet:
My mother and I pretended to eat brunch, made tight-lipped
Small-talk about the newspaper. She clung to the story
Admitting the gay penguins in Toronto had separated
And moved on—second marriages, so to speak—
To women. I said, *It's a great argument for sexual fluidity.*
She said, *Maybe it was a college phase.* And closed the paper.
Now, she taps her watch, the empty space on my left hand
And suddenly the room feels too light—like a marble
In a mason jar, smooth shine skating against glass,
Nothing but its own weight to hold it back, slow it down.

Eduardo C. Corral as Cormorant

In the hallway before his speech, he looks past my face
while we make small talk about our childhood winters

in Arizona: we both watched migratory birds
and wondered about snow. The sun stayed warm and bright

over the cracked earth. Our worlds were small
and full of light: there was nowhere to hide.

I think, we met three years ago. *¿Te acuerdas?*
He doesn't, so I don't ask him anything else.

He addresses the classroom with his arms unfolded,
fanned out like he is sunning himself in this windowless space.

He tucks his black oxfords together, unmoving perch
beneath slow wing-flap, as his lecture intensifies.

He flings poem-sounds through the air, insisting
they be digested right there beneath the low lights.

We watch like a nest of baby cormorants so water-
desperate they'll guzzle straight from their mother's throat.

This invigorates him. He begins to quote from his book:
The heart can only be broken/ once, like a window.

Instead of feathers, he wears a marled blue cardigan
with dark buttons, like eyes blinking at us as if to say,

“It's only another joke about a bird eating a snake!
What's the poem in that?” *¿No mames!* The poem is:

I've eaten the fruit, but I'm still hungry.
The bowl is empty. The bowl is eating itself.

Anniversary

The sink drips: a slow, steady waterslink
clinking like a knife-tap at the rim of a glass.
A toast! We are a hammer's throw from happiness.

Soon, the sunlight will drape like lace
on our shoulders while church bells sing
and confetti lingers in the air.

We keep turning the hourglass.
We are building something out of sand.
Someone is going to say uncle.

Someone is going to pull at the loose thread
until the sleeve unravels and the whole thing
looks like a bird's nest in a hand.

The gun is on the wall ready to go off
but the door is open. Dinner is on the table.

Nightmare Where My Stepfather is Dead

First, you set fire to the house where I grew up and close the door.
You wait inside. You would gulp the gasoline like communion wine
if you could still swallow or keep anything down. Instead, you slick
the kitchen floor and ignite the burners on the stove, kicking your boots
up on the table while you wait for smoke to kill you before cancer does.
It's been months since you could drink but you pour yourself a whiskey
and cradle the glass, raising the scent to your nose to inhale. Before a sound
gargles free from my throat, the dream shifts and
We are in the backyard
of your mother's house, picking lemons. You are shirtless, a bandana
wrapped around your mouth and neck to protect surgery incisions from dust.
You wear the sun with the pride of a man who has labored
all his life. You throw a lemon and I catch it like I am catching a bouquet,
stumbling backward. At once, there is a soft, rattling hiss. I am still—
you taught me to back down. I step inside for a shovel but when I return,
you are kneeling, smiling, sun washing over your face for the last time.
The backyard is dissolving into a building and
You're standing at a wide window
in downtown Phoenix, looking out over cars driving to the airport, splashes
of color in an endless line, like dogs chasing cats but somehow brighter,
beads on a dress-hem as a woman twirls, moving fast enough to blend
bodies into air, flashes of painted light. I'm across the street, in another window,
and everything is motionless—your window like some great distant lake, frozen
and flipped on its side, ice crawling up to sky and reflecting my face back to me.
Then, your hand, your head emerge from cracks fractal and tinted red. Somewhere below,
tires screech. When I look down, the scene blurs and
I've agreed to get married
in the church where you married my mother, and there is no one
to walk me down the aisle. Everywhere, empty chairs where you might sit.
I throw the bouquet and it transforms into a lemon in mid-air.

Map

—after Bruce Snider

And my mother will say: Someday, you will return to Arizona.
And I will reply: Before I left, I was left by Arizona.

Men with rough hands weave metal into snouts and open mouths:
creatures who can drink from rivers with no water throughout Arizona.

Morning, first flicker of salamander-tongue. In the kitchen
pork sizzles in the pan like my feet against the asphalt in Arizona.

As a child, I lay grapes like ant trails along the brick borders
in the backyard and waited for them to turn into raisins in Arizona.

A red knot rises on my shoulder as I skim the neighbors' pool.
Early summer, golf balls fall like rain in Arizona.

Country boys shoot pellets into Budweiser cans strung up like cardinals
on a telephone wire at the top of a desert bluff in Arizona.

From my bed, I watch a scorpion scuttle across the ceiling
until it loses footing and falls into my sheets: I name her Arizona.

The mountains are filled with Fool's Gold and animal-bones—here
things are lost and lost again. My father met his first wife in Arizona.

The first time I felt another woman's mouth on mine,
it was in the attic of a foreclosed home in Arizona.

At night, we pretend the drought is over, drink water with mouths
pressed right to the tap. This is the lifeblood of Arizona.

We soak grapefruit in whiskey and sugar: Christmas morning
arrives with its mouth on fire in this part of Arizona.

I dip my finger into the dust covering my windshield and write
marry me, Ruth? A little trick I play on myself in Arizona.