

## ABSTRACT

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The poems in this collection explore the ways that we, as humans, both relate to and attempt to separate from our own bodies, as well as how we are shaped (and sometimes trapped) by heredity. These expansive concepts are reflected in lyric form, with recurring images of skin, water, blood, and birth connecting a range of narrative material. Throughout, an almost tribal identification with familial mythology conflicts with the desire for bodily agency, the need to claim, impossibly, control over our physical beings.

DOGCATCHER

by

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I.

## Ode to the Mustang Mare

I stand before you barefoot,  
you whose hooves have hammered into shape  
the western plains, whose long black mane once flew across  
scraggly red mountains and the wide expanse  
of land once used to symbolize  
the great American spirit,  
wild-eyed, sniffing the air for danger.

Now when I try to brush or braid that mane  
you shake it out  
to cover up the spot where they branded you  
with ice: *US* and a series of numbers—your official name.  
You sniff my toes, alarmed. They must seem to you so small  
and weak with useless nails.

I see your big wet eyes go wide: as if you fear for me.  
I am not safe. You know too well.  
I cannot claim I know the way it felt:

the roar of helicopters like some horrible  
new bird of prey, flying so low, forcing you  
into a pen, the first time feeling rope around your neck.  
But I can imagine, at least,  
the scent of tobacco and jerky on the breath of a man who grunts  
*Stop being a little bitch* as he tightens his hold  
—full body panic at his foreign weight thrown on your back,  
his heels digging in. For a second you stand paralyzed  
wet with terror and then he  
strokes your ear, *Now that's a girl*. Amazing  
how you could ever love a human after that,  
how any of us can.

I stand before you now with no halter, crazy  
to enter the pasture with no shoes  
but in the softness of grass  
at dusk I'm not afraid.  
I touch your hoof, smooth rock,  
with my big toe, wet from the earth,  
and show my empty hands to prove  
I am your kind: freeborn, untrained.

## How You Know

After the burial, grandpa taught us how you know  
which pecans are good to eat, how you shake them  
gently by your ear to hear the rattling  
of solid meat inside, or else the muffled slough  
of rot, of fruit that fell too many days ago,  
now losing shape, shell softening  
to meet the long dark leaves that curled  
their sharp ends up, that mossed the ground  
to mute our footsteps, wet our fingers  
as we sifted through. And on the other side  
of the yard Aunt Cissy stood as if to face  
a crowd, shouted *Mission Accomplished*,  
and *Mummy had sex with Hitler*, her voice  
mechanic, gruff like in the messages  
she left on phones: “This is a Collect Call  
from Cissy’s Clone” and my mother  
said she couldn’t know now who she was,  
that she was sick and her sickness was one of the blood  
that sits watching you to decide when to uncurl  
its limp body to bore through the walls of its cell,  
and it touches you gently, you can’t even feel  
how it strokes through all of you, smothering  
thoughts like babies in a bed and they said  
the medication didn’t work for her, the institutions  
sent her back after weeks when the other patients  
complained, and she said she’d been taken  
and her body now was just a replica  
they made to silence us. And I stopped myself  
wondering how we knew she was wrong,  
that her real body wasn’t tied up  
in some desolate government room, unlit,  
strung with wires and tubes and expressionless  
agents set square in the door, the shadows thickening  
across their chests while whatever this was  
stood here, malfunctioning, stuck  
on a single phrase: *Mission Accomplished*  
while we kept our heads to the ground  
and knocked our little fists against pecans,  
saving the good ones in our plastic bags  
and leaving the rest to decay,  
trying not to hear her just in case  
it got inside us.

## History

Dead brown seed balls, dried rough and spikey to the touch  
all that is left now hanging from the trees

I watch  
from the fourth floor window,  
their branches cut to stubs to save the power lines—

What is it my grandmother said about trees?

She felt it in her bones when they were pruned,  
could not look without picturing her own arms chopped off,  
skin growing like moss over a stump to cover up  
what had been done.

Plants grow their weapons, thorns and poison fruits  
because they cannot run.

Where she came from,  
they keep a fire burning by a thousand year old oak  
to please the god of storms.  
Before she could speak  
the Red Army plowed through orchards, made extinct  
species of trees, deleted  
her country from geography.

How can we trace that which cannot be not named?

She called it nerves, her hands  
shaking over tea at night too tense to sleep—  
*bad nerves*. Her mother at the upstairs window  
of the Boston house, crying blind-drunk  
into the night, each night, unable to tell why.

In fairy tales, a woman who lives high up  
is always trapped.

Some metaphor for chastity, a tower sealed  
by battlements and moats, virtue protected by a labyrinth  
of winding stairs.

How can I answer, now, this form of Patient History?  
I can't admit I fear I have inherited bad nerves:  
nerves like a bath of searing hot needles,  
nerves like a t-shirt filled with wasps.



That I who cannot speak  
the language of my great-grandmother, know  
the way she cried—streetlights  
blurring to a nauseous glow,  
the lonely call of car horns blocks away,  
the click of keys from a stranger's door below.  
She adds a howl into the night,  
her body rattling as with the raging winds,  
straining to expel in long wet heaves  
what no one would believe: a sharp stone  
pressing deep in her chest cavity.

## Dogcatcher

*I wouldn't elect him for dogcatcher.*

Surreal – grown men with giant nets  
chasing a rabbit through a parking lot.  
I'm half asleep. A van's parked on the street,  
back door hanging open. The rabbit escaped  
from a neighbor's yard, the one with chickens,  
geese. With city views. I've never seen a dogcatcher,  
but know, from my father's old joke  
it must not be the most sought-after job.  
Where was the rabbit going, anyway?  
It must know it's much too soft  
and round to live like the stray cat  
who haunts our door, crying like he wants to be let in,  
then running off. How many uniforms  
does it take to catch one runaway rabbit?  
That trickster archetype, you never know  
which way his hop might land. I saw a box of rabbit, dead,  
in the freezer section of the Great American  
in Prattsville as a child, thought I smelled it though  
I couldn't have—like cedar wood-shavings  
and blood—and the old farmer told us that the howls  
we heard at night were coydogs,  
offspring of family pets who'd slunk away  
like teenagers in the night to meet the wild ones  
with straight-up pointed ears and sleeker snouts,  
tan fur that hides them in the summer grass  
as they pounce and feast on fresh-caught rabbit meat.  
A myth, some say, but what is in the face  
of my sweet shepherd dog, her floppy ears  
twitching in her sleep, one lip curling back to reveal  
black gums, white teeth? A low deep growl.  
Through her dreams she hears their howls,  
higher pitched than that of a brave wolf,  
more childlike—yelping, insistent barks  
breaking through moans.  
Her leg bones move to chase  
or run to them—uncanny other, *other*,  
ancestor, bred by nothing but their own  
fierce lust. They say you can make a wild animal  
your pet, but you will never know  
when they'll revert to instinct. Devour you.  
When I touch her with my foot, she snaps  
her teeth at air, startled back out of it.  
Then her whole body sighs

like a lone woman on a fire escape  
watching a rabbit press against a fence  
and reaching to the bottom of her purse  
for what isn't there, a cigarette.

## Recipe

Chopping raw carrots on bamboo,  
I smack my blade in time to the hammering  
of men who whistled at me  
this morning from the steel beam maze  
of new construction, gutless bones  
of empty condos, growing into home.

Call and response,  
concrete and thick taproot.

At sundown, it's an ancient holiday  
we're both too young and hip to celebrate,  
but whisper *happy, happy*  
guilty that we care, or that we don't,  
that we're abandoning  
not our fathers, really, but theirs and theirs.

It's faith to cut the way the women  
in my family do, fast strokes towards our fingers,  
or impatience. We'd wave away  
my brother's sweet concern,  
as if we knew a truth the men did not,  
some careless passed-down instinct, the belief  
in our own hands.

And if we missed and bled into the soup,  
we'd shrug it off as extra flavoring.

I look calmly in awe  
at the corner of my fingernail nicked off  
by butcher knife so close to skin,  
examine the naked underside,  
smooth pink, the flap  
so finely sliced I feel  
nothing, just watch the rivulets  
coagulate—urgent,  
the body rushes to rebuild—

as I have seen my mother drop  
a cookbook into flames  
and laugh  
while pages bend and twist in heat,  
blacken on the edges, curl,  
then flake to ash.

## Infractions

Meet me where the turnpike splits  
into a Y. Lift my arms and rip them up  
from out of their sockets. Today

I've got a headache with your face,  
a box of Altoids I keep chewing  
and a smoothie you bought then didn't want.

I don't know why, I've been thinking  
about those mushrooms you see in children's books.  
You know? The bright red ones

perfectly round with white polka dots.  
And how crazy it is that they exist  
in wilderness when we spend all this time

sorting through patterns in Urban Outfitters.  
I've seen them, too, as a child, they grew  
in clumps under trees. I'd touch their lips

so gently and even so sometimes the head  
would roll from the stem and then?  
I'd run away, sad to see what I'd done.

In science, we made spore prints  
with brown mushrooms, touched their wet undersides  
to paper to see how they reproduce

and we even drew faces around them,  
made them talk about what they were doing  
and why and with whom.

Now the officer asks if I've been paying attention  
to what I'm doing at all, and I just nod  
that I've been trying to. It's so hard to know

all the answers—where are you going,  
where are you coming from. And no,  
I didn't see his lights blinking at me

for two, three miles, I must not have looked back  
in the rearview. I forget things like that  
when my mind is on you or mushrooms,

or always, really. You say I drive my car  
like it's a lease, like I don't want to stay  
at its wheel till its engine shuts down

on the side of the road and I'm old  
and my bony hands grasp the gearshift  
till the tow truck comes. I don't slow

for potholes, or turns in the dark in the rain,  
don't sit long enough to let it warm up  
even though I know you're right

it's best to wait, to give only a little  
at a time. When you start to love  
the rush of roads too much

and push too hard, you use it all up  
like the quick-ticking pulse of a heart,  
how it stutters madly when you turn to start.

To Lauterbrunnen

Here mountains rise out sharp, torn  
from their beds and dipped into frost  
like those Christmas displays in barber shops  
I would stare at as a child wishing  
I could shrink to know the red train tracks,  
brick chimneys and swirling glitter flakes—  
and wishing, now, I could have been here then  
pressed my face against the window of this train, amazed  
but now I think I've seen too many water bottle labels,  
green landscapes that wet and peeled away  
when we put them to freeze at night and all day  
sucked the cold out from around the ice.  
Your hand grasps my calf across the seat,  
one headphone in, you ask me if I know  
how a mountain's made. And aren't they, everywhere,  
more or less the same? Cut with the hooves  
of goats and hiking boots into the diamond pattern of a quilt  
with jutting tufts of tree, scratchy  
like the ones around my brother's train set I would touch  
nervously in the room where he'd let me sleep  
some nights; I was scared  
when the red dots of light glowed from his stereo.  
I think if we jumped off now and climbed up far enough  
we'd find a moonlit clearing with a pool  
to kneel before and drink our fill  
amongst the cautious eyes of deer and cries  
of great birds seeking prey and building nests.  
And I keep seeing this image from a children's book  
my mother read me, a Polish fairy tale  
about a town where when girls come of age  
they go into the woods and find a pond  
that they must look into to see the face  
of the man they'll marry. One time a girl  
looked in and saw a hedgehog instead  
and I can still see him in bed, a wool cap  
covering his spiny head and thick night socks  
to keep his claws from scratching the floor.  
And it's so funny, I remember being jealous  
of that girl, how easy for her to know,  
even though she crept up trembling, afraid  
to stare into the water and see only  
what is, of course, more terrifying than a hedgehog—  
the shaking outline of her own hopeful face.

## The Cautionary Tales of Divorced Aunts

The way they talk  
after a glass of wine  
or two, side glance  
at their kids and quiet voice  
and *never marry*  
*an Israeli man, and stay away*  
*from artists and I'm so done*  
*with JDate, all the men*  
*my age are just too old.*

Lorraine whispers she thinks  
about the landscaper,  
Javier or Jorge, man who mows  
her lawn and builds  
paths from the deck—  
this one, feet further left,  
this one in darker wood,  
a slick varnish. I play my part,  
tell her *Latino men are so hot*,  
knowing it isn't his dark eyes  
or taut arms laid across  
her queen-sized bed  
she wants, but a woman  
to talk about it to,

like Melanie who says  
I'm old enough to hear  
how great the sex was, maybe-married  
man who played with Meatloaf once,  
threw his guitar pick at her  
and calls almost-when-ever  
he's in town and she can find  
a sitter. How much greater  
the sex was than with her husband,  
gay now, who never turned  
on a light or let his eyes  
unclench to look at her.

And Madeline says she hasn't had  
more men than anyone, just married them—  
lawyers and dairy farmers,  
one who owned a body shop  
and talked her into lipo,  
one who started to believe



the Mayan calendar and fell in love  
with a woman who still wore  
her Woodstock clothes,  
said he could hear her heart  
beating from five hundred  
miles away.

At twelve I started  
wondering when you start  
dying alone, knew already  
it couldn't just be one moment  
in a hospital bed or when  
you make an extra trip to Trader Joe's  
for anyone to ask about your day,  
but a slow lowering  
you can ignore for decades,

like a man I once saw in the grocery line  
buying food for his dog, and a vegetable—  
cucumber maybe—no bag,  
its naked skin touching the conveyor belt,  
and he stood tall, chest out  
in doctor's scrubs, extended  
his credit card to the teen  
bag boy, signed his name  
and I knew without knowing  
that his wife had left, and he thought it was fine  
he could buy the food himself,  
it always looked so easy he didn't know

that vegetables need to be covered or they rot,  
the side you've laid flat on the refrigerator shelf  
will atrophy, soft brown inviting mold  
and you can cut that off but even so  
no part of it will ever taste as good again.

## I Should Tell You

I.

That time I was five or six and hit that kid  
with my sled?

I wasn't sorry. I said it was an accident,  
but really I saw it coming, his ski pants walking  
up the hill, straight in my path—

and I kept going. I didn't try  
to veer to the side, or plunge my boots  
in the snow to stop.

I was thinking about my diary entry for that night,  
how I'd write I ran someone over  
with my sled, five exclamation points  
and a cartoon at the end:

zoom lines stretching  
from my rudders, his hands  
thrown up in shock,  
a flat line grimace for his mouth,  
my hair flying back.

II.

I should tell you when the man hands me the gun  
I'm not afraid. I have known this before:

dead weight on my chest.

I think to ask if there's a test to prove  
I can tell the difference

between the target center of a paper silhouette—  
a plus sign circle flailing in cold wind—  
and a human heart.

III.

On the couch we watch a special on psychopaths:  
a suburban town crosswalk at night, those people  
you see walking? The voice says  
they look like nothing to a psychopath,

just black outlines filled in  
with blank space so when they look

out at those begging faces they don't feel  
a thing, just a tightening

of the jaw—as I have watched, stoic,  
emptiness cross  
a face I'd held to mine—

and I press my thumb  
against your pulse, I squeeze your arm too hard.

## Blowout

Old tire ripped wide open down its seam,  
the insides of my car seize with the weight  
of every passing thing, rumbling as if I-95  
would rupture to a gaping concrete throat  
and suck us in. The car becomes my exoskeleton,  
spewing exhaust in time with my own lungs.  
With a donut tire on we crawl along  
too slow for the highway, snatched off course  
in the wake of trucks, a thrashing fish  
dragged limp behind great whales.  
A pickup seems to gallop by,  
muscular metal hulking on oversized steel rims  
like long legs curling up, tensing to pounce,  
crouching like the grasshopper I had to dissect  
in school, how its green skin  
chafed off in flakes of dry pistachio  
and we found ovaries but not a heart.  
A friend told me, one time when we were kids  
that scientists could clone the dinosaurs  
using frog eggs, and in the morning dark  
I'd see their haunches lurk, wide snake eyes opening  
as they emerged from tiny viscous globes like wet marbles.  
The dinosaurs would wait till I woke up,  
kneading the air with knuckled black talons,  
stretching their tough and lacquered newborn skin,  
following me like the men with giant  
heads I'd see in dreams; flat circles stuck  
to white stick-feet, big smiles in the office where we'd come  
to have our heads chopped off.  
My parents promised it was quite normal,  
a standard procedure, part of growing up  
and what did I know, being the youngest kid?  
The doctor said I'd learn to have patience  
if I was a good girl and obeyed the adults  
but I just dug my sharpened little nails  
into their pleather couch,  
picked crescents in its shining hide.

Trap

Snap of metal on wood: we knew we'd killed  
the mouse, grey fur clumped with blood

where his neck snapped, tongue left lost in longing,  
a tiny shock of bubblegum pink forever stretching

towards the peanut butter glob—chunky organic.  
*A little cute*, we sighed, but had to go

after we'd scrubbed like murderers the sink  
and counters where his droppings fell,

Ikea drying rack and cutting boards  
we'd picked so carefully and put in place.

I was determined not to be what I came from.  
In a dream, my mother is over

with a box of dishes she found  
at the thrift store. She is unpacking them

though I beg her to stop; they flood  
the kitchen table, fill the chairs. *We don't need them*

I try to say, *I have to get to work.*  
Back home, the cutlery was sealed

in a Tupperware in a drawer of mouse droppings,  
a sheer layer of plastic that never seemed enough

of a boundary. They made a nest  
in my tampon box, chewed out the fluffy cotton

to keep their babies warm, hairless and human-like  
as they are born. *This is my home*, I tell my mother

but she scoffs, *My body was your home*  
*till you left it. Now you are ashamed*

*of the weeds grown wild outside, too thick for shears,*  
*unflinching beams and rafters built the way they used to be: to last—*

*of how sorely it would stand out on your new block,*  
*my old foundation swallowing up the earth.*

That's when I started noticing

how loud she chewed—my first  
plane ride, somewhere between  
New York and New Orleans where we'd see  
her mother's body buried. As if a switch  
turned on and then the gum  
between her teeth, the squelching sound  
saliva makes as lips smack shut,  
was all I heard. Her mother was dead,  
and we were going to look  
at her dead body, face powdered  
and perfume sprayed so we wouldn't think  
about what cancer does and I hadn't decided  
yet whether I'd look. That's when  
I realized other people chewed  
with their mouths closed so nobody  
would see the meaty insides of their lips,  
the muscles of their tongues, but my mother  
would make you look because the body  
is always beautiful, or something  
she would say. The last time  
I'd seen her mother, I saw the way her gums  
had dried, a porous brown and I tried  
not to calculate how old she was.  
The white-teethed stewardess  
motioned safety instructions for just in case  
our plane would crash. That's when I started  
hinting, asking, "Aren't you finished  
with that piece of gum?" and holding out a wrapper  
for her to spit it in. Her mother had just died  
and I knew I shouldn't tell her, but I felt  
like shards of glass were lodging in each ear  
and she just laughed, then said she was laughing  
so she wouldn't cry. That's when I started  
moving my chair away from her at meals,  
my eyes fixed on some corner  
of bookshelf space. I did decide to look  
at my grandmother, dead, her face  
still pretty and I wasn't afraid  
like I was scared I'd be, but the skin of her cheek  
felt like cold wax when I leaned down to it  
and I tried not to think that I had kissed  
somebody dead, that I had seen a body,  
dead, for the first time and all the chemicals  
that stiffened her, concealer caked to make her

look alive would seep away and leave  
her bare and then—I wouldn't think. That's when  
the wet noise of consumption wouldn't stop,  
a rapid beat like droplets on my skull  
and after, her tongue wandering her teeth  
to gather bits of food that might decay.  
That's when I knew some sounds you can't drown out,  
even with the hard part of your palms  
pressed down over both ears, folded  
into themselves, heating to red  
as your plane flattens out and hits the ground.

## Mother Water

Mother says I should try going for a swim, that a swim  
would make me feel better well doesn't it always  
just make you feel better, how smooth it swells  
in evening something you can hit  
and hit so hard and never hurt your hand  
and never break it so bad it can't repair itself,  
isn't that always how she made herself so huge—a head  
and arms coming out of the vast expanse of lake  
so that she was the lake and when she moved  
it was the lake moving, so you had to beg  
her to stay calm or else it would all quiver  
with the tension of a storm, us swimming  
in the middle and it was okay  
okay with just the thunder but keep an eye open  
for lightning; when it unzipped the sky  
we'd swim for shore. Mother,  
water, mother water, mother so brave  
not afraid of the cold even when we both knew  
that the summer was turning away and the changing  
wind was spitting across the surface, then she said  
you will feel better when you're used to it,  
the sting will stop, if you feel numb just swim  
harder, harder to get your blood flowing  
nothing can warm you except your own blood.



II.

## Ecdysis

### I.

Before a snake sheds skin, he goes half blind  
for just a week or two. The fluid he excretes,  
a grey-white lubricant to ease the slide,  
pools under the scale of each eye  
like warm milk filling up a metal spoon.  
When the world blurs,  
he knows he has to search for a rough surface  
to rub himself against, loosening first  
the old skin from his head, where it will split,  
then working down. If done correctly,  
the skin should come off in one easy piece,  
a hollow tube of flimsy wax paper, a shroud of self  
like the seat of jeans you've worn all week,  
that absence so distinct.  
I used to find them at the summer house,  
not snakes but just their skin,  
outside the bolted wooden door that led  
to a dark cellar pit. I wanted to pick them up,  
to see through them the world in sepia,  
cut into diamond shapes, or press them flat  
over my own skin, flaking with sunburn,  
to harden its texture. My mother warned me  
I'd catch salmonella, so I only looked, and pulled  
the iron latch up, stared inside for any sign  
of coiling against the blackness, stirring dust,  
or straining moon-grey eyes.

### II.

On the porch bench, my father pulled my toes  
out one by one, this game we used to play  
  
with an evil foot doctor named Doctor Bite-a-foot,  
who would pretend to check them normally  
  
then tickle, bite, and grasp until I screamed  
with laughter, yanked away. My toes themselves  
  
are funny, the middle two connected, not webbed really,  
but cut from the same stalk and he'd pretend  
  
he would tear them apart. One time, he told me

that my feet were soft, and I leapt up to run  
across the gravel drive to prove him wrong.  
And yes, the small stones stuck,  
left a blue bruise on my inner arch,  
but nothing broke. Momentum propelled me  
into the tall grass on the other side,  
just off our property and sticky weeds  
bit up my bare legs, ran their hair-thin teeth  
to etch red scratches in my calves, not deep, but the sting—  
like Listerine poured on a bitten tongue,  
a lemon wedge squeezed after peeler's slip.

### III.

Kids used to always ask, just to be smart,  
what the largest organ on the human body is.  
It was a trick, of course, correct answer  
being the skin, which you forget is its own entity  
and not just the outside of everything.

The human skin is replaced completely  
about every twenty-six days. It has to be,  
how could it touch so much of the world  
each day and stay the same? I told myself this:  
it will go away, each stupid place

I gave to him, each dying patch of cells.  
Then it would be erased, shackle of muscle  
memory when we'd pass in the halls,  
and I couldn't stand his face. I was a smart girl,  
we all were in that school, and I read up;

I knew it isn't breaking, really, even though  
that's what it's called. That flap of skin,  
membrane to be exact, it stretches out,  
that's where the blood comes from.  
And that myth about how you can tell

if a girl's lost it by the size of the hole  
between the tops of her thighs  
when she closes her legs? That can't be true.

In *The Bell Jar*, I'd read it can happen like that  
for one in a hundred girls: your whole being

becomes an open wound. He held a wad  
of toilet paper, dabbed me with a frown  
like a family doctor, familiar but stern.  
After, he showed me Borat clips  
on my laptop and we sat on the twin

futon mattress, each pair of eyes set separately  
to the same screen. I didn't even watch, just heard  
the laugh-track and then mimicked what they did.  
In the end, he brought to school a picture  
of himself as a baby, naked,

his rump in the air. He'd told me before  
that he thought I should see it,  
like that could stir what had gone dry in me.  
But I hated the flab and the pitiful softness of him,  
the dutiful smile of a child posed to plead.

IV.

*Now I am ten and I want to pierce my ears. My mother turns to the mother  
of my friend and says, "It's just, to break that perfect skin..."  
Now I am with her, older, we are walking the dog, I am trying to walk  
no differently than before. I am trying to laugh convincingly  
when she tells me she had this dream, and woke up in a sweat asking  
"Are kids at Stuyvesant starting to have sex?"*

Then I remember when she told me not to touch the baby bird  
fallen on the street because if its mother smelled the oils from my hand  
she wouldn't take it back.

V.

And wasn't it first the softness of my skin  
you loved? You, with your warm hand  
on the ache of my back at the bar,  
grazing it over the surface, uncertain  
how hard to press. And now you know,  
alone, the knotted skin  
beneath the breast that grew a cyst  
I was afraid to see a doctor for,  
so let it grow and pulse for months  
until it swelled so far the skin  
covering it stretched thin and smooth

as glass. Amazing,  
how the body cures itself  
if left alone, how the fluid tore open a hole  
to expel the tiny mass,  
the white rubber pebble I'd carried inside me  
like guilt and then I held it in my hand,  
sticky with pus and blood.  
Now in the dark you will find the spot  
with your lips, press them to it as if to stop  
the burning hurt I hid so long  
before.

## VI.

In the house of the dream, we know  
there's something wrong. Razor blade stuck  
to the floor of the tub, a blade we saw a girl  
take away in the night to hide, a girl

in a nightgown, blonde hair. She must have lived  
there too, but never spoke. Of course I tried it  
like most preteen girls—lifted my mother's razor  
to my wrist in the bathtub, left a scratch too shallow

to draw blood. Then cried to my bed for the first time,  
began to relish bed where I'd think myself to tears,  
then shake alone. In the dream, Melissa sitting on my bed,  
my young cousin. Her mother and sister say

her new boyfriend is a "moose," which in the language  
of the dream meant "pimp," and she his slave.  
She swears it isn't true. When they leave, she shows me  
pictures on her Facebook page as evidence:

they are holding hands, kissing. There are hearts.  
Captions from Taylor Swift songs, yellow grins.  
At Lisa's wedding, she told me she'd lost it  
that summer, *just said fuck it, you know?*

She was sixteen and I told her *that's so old enough.*  
*It*, like a rock we carry in our skirts' pockets  
and finger when nobody's watching, pressing it  
down into the cloth till it tears through.

## VII.

*Ecdysis*: the act of casting off,  
*esp.* of slough or dead skin in serpents  
and caterpillars, or of the chitinous

integument in Crustacea. From the Greek *ekduo*:  
*to take off, strip, or (figurative) put off*  
*the body, clothing of the soul.*

You used to try to cut  
the birthmarks from your arm,  
carefully with your Swiss Army knife,

wanting to know if they'd come back the same.  
I did it once. A mole began to grow  
on my cheek and I didn't want it there

so I dug into it with a safety pin  
like I did with pimples,  
ripped its surface off and pressed the skin

with hydrogen peroxide till it foamed  
over white. I think if I wanted you more  
I would have to carve the skin

from my face and my body, unzip the cavity  
of your chest like a coat you hold open  
to shield me from the cold and burrow in.

## VIII.

We never had Disney movies in the house, so I learned love from the real stories: The Little Mermaid's tail was fixed by an old lady with eight great oyster shells to show her rank. When she complained they hurt, she was told that pride must suffer pain. She was the last of her sisters to make the trip up to the land of men. There, she watched a shipwreck in high waves and saved from it a beautiful prince, kissed his forehead and stroked his wet black hair. Once home, she was depressed he didn't know it was her who pulled him to the shore. Humans, she learned, lived shorter lives, less than a hundred years and yet their souls were immortal and the mermaids' souls were not. She wanted hers eternal and the sea witch said she'd get it if she won the love of a human man so that he would forget his mother and his father for her sake. First, she had to drink a potion for her tail to shrivel into legs. She would dance like a vision, she would be beautiful, but for the rest of her life each step she took would feel like treading on a bed of sharpened knives. She loved him, so she drank it. He called her *little foundling*, was quite fond of kissing her small hand as a brother

might. When his father arranged for him to meet the daughter of a neighboring king, the Mermaid strained to see if she was beautiful. She was. The prince assumed she was the one he'd seen, the perfect maiden of his dreams who rescued him from the water that night. The witch had told the mermaid if she failed to win his love she would perish and become sea foam on the morning of his wedding day. That last image: her diving back to where she came from, knowing her body would disintegrate when wet from lack of love, expand into the frothing mass that covers almost all the earth like skin.

IX.

Deirdre tells me I should start  
at twenty-eight. It isn't like she thought.

She couldn't have another right away.  
*And did you know you can't take baths*

*for a while after?* Vaginal bleeding, risk  
of infecting the torn skin. Sister, you lost

the baby so I bought you a stupid scarf,  
tan with white hearts from J. Crew Factory,

sale price. It seemed so much like you,  
you always loved a touch of something cute

and child-like, hand reaching for  
the crayoned wrapper of an organic chocolate bar

at the register, how you always order appetizers  
for a meal because they look better.

*If you want two-to-three, I think you need to start  
at twenty-eight—my womb in panic—someday*

I'll tell my nephew I was high  
when I heard he'd be born. High, and lying

on Fake Neal's carpet while we tried  
to order pizza, watched the tracker narrate

every step. So hard to grasp the word:  
*pregnant*, then a fear or joke

to me, a word typed in the search box  
nervously. And then the moment

I was leaving for my plane back to school  
and he grabbed my finger in his fist,  
  
his eyes still blind, and wouldn't let it go.  
You lost the baby so I bought a scarf  
  
with big white hearts, a circle scarf  
you wind around your neck, in tan and white,  
  
looks great with a black coat. A touch  
of whimsical against the cold  
  
that comes for you. I thought it was your style,  
lighthearted, though maybe that won't do it  
  
anymore—how you could somehow choose  
hardly looking the best thing on a rack  
  
and put it on right away, new light  
in your eyes, isn't that always how you'd fight the cold?

X.

In my mother's dream, a blonde girl  
just older than me. We are playing together,  
happy, with no words. A girl she'd never seen,  
but thinks could be the one she lost  
right before me. Maybe there always,  
a translucent shadow, following. A sister,  
though if she had lived I know  
we would not be sisters and I would not be.

XI.

Children's Garden, summer, the boys I taught  
crowded around a tree, for once undistracted.  
They were watching a cicada molt,  
  
expel the bones he had that day outgrown  
to leave the tree marked with a cast of him.  
Cicadas will molt four times underground  
  
as nymphs, sucking for thirteen years the sap of roots  
before the fifth, when they emerge adult,  
growing their wings. They live then only a few weeks,



in which time they must court a mate  
and lay their eggs. The boys kneeled down  
and whispered to each other to stand back,

learning suddenly how to be still.  
It's like that, isn't it? One day you crawl up  
to the world huge and bright and know

this is what you have been growing for.  
The females listen, silent, while the males  
vibrate the membranes on their abdomens

to sing love songs. She'll lay her eggs  
in twigs, piercing the wood  
with her sharp blade, the ovipositor.

And then a boy from a different group ran up  
with a stick and hit it at the tree,  
struck the cicada's body to the ground.

They tried to save him, but his adult skin  
was still too new. The fresh-set wings tore  
and his back caved in. No other reason

but to ruin a thing so powerful to seize  
an audience. The other boys were hungry  
for revenge. To tell on him then didn't seem enough.

They wanted to destroy his garden plot,  
stamp out the fledgling leaves of vegetables  
and rip their hair-thin roots up, leaving weeds.

XII.

In Prattsville, summer town, we helped unload  
hay bales off the truck. Laura, a childhood friend, was visiting.  
We jammed our fingers under the tight-pulled twine  
and threw them off, let them bounce and fall  
onto each other. We were in short sleeves,  
and the hay chafed our arms; red irritated bumps  
and scratches spread like rash. Then her face changed  
to something horrible. She turned to run inside,  
her jeans too short as she plummeted downhill.  
The red reminded her of what she'd done  
to her own skin, her mother's paring knife

shaking in her hands. It's not just preteen girls—  
species of primates and birds will do it too.  
The rhesus monkey demonstrates an increase  
in self-biting behavior when faced with the stress  
of relocation to a new housing facility.  
Your dog or cat might lick itself  
diligently in one spot until the fur wears thin  
and leaves a sore. There was a cockatoo  
at the pet store where my father would buy food  
named "Psycho," half-bald because he didn't have a mate  
and plucked his feathers out from loneliness.  
I'd stick my finger to him through the bars,  
let him latch onto it with his claws and bob his body  
up and down, the way they do when courting.  
My parents always joked he was in love with me,  
a strange joke now that I think of it.  
When the white male cockatoo is accepted  
by his female, they scratch each other on the head  
and tail. This strengthens their pair bonds.  
Perhaps the comfort of another's claws  
stuck in your head, drawing the pain you've balled up  
slowly from your skin.

### XIII.

*In the dream where I think I am done with poetry  
I am sticking my hand through the bars of a cage  
to decide: I will know if I stick each through two times  
still thinking it. I stick my right hand through,  
and the tips of the fingers on the left and then  
the baby caiman alligator snaps at me—  
how stupid to assume an empty cage,  
not looking in!*

### XIV.

You only want your body covered half  
in sleep. I wake, my hair tangled  
against your chest, reach past  
to blanket's end, the muscle cold as glass,  
familiar shape of arm foreign to touch.

When you don't know, I memorize birthmarks  
and freckles on your skin. I know the three  
on your forearm that form a play button,  
a constellation aiming for due north,  
and some where even you have never seen.

As if someday I might be called to prove  
that I was here. That lights were on and my eyes  
opened to you. To draw a map  
from scratch on a tablecloth at a diner across  
from a man with a looking glass

to say I knew you, yes. Know you  
the way birds of some orders know when to come home.

III.

For Hannah, on the Dock

Your knees bent bony, asymmetrical  
like a filly born wet, balancing,

long stretching feet feeling the water  
for its temperature,

sand-colored hair chopped off, tied up  
in a top-knot, sunglasses perched

above eyeglasses while you thumb  
a thrift store Bishop, only half reading,

pausing to eat a sun-fermented slice  
of watermelon, rub a spot

of hot, fast-melting sunscreen over skin  
already shedding off.

I want to write the words that girls like you  
will read on docks like this

before they know they're girls.  
Those careless summers gathering dry wood

to start fires, crashing through scratchy brush  
to find a broad flat rock, poking crayfish

with sticks to see if they would pinch.  
Their ghost-white backs and claws

like a creature unfinished waiting  
for its details to be colored in.

We were so brave back then,  
holding them by their tails while they twisted

their fetal, translucent legs up to hurt us.  
Grown nervous now we cringe

from water spiders casting out wide webs  
off of the dock, the female *Argiope aurantia*,

black body painted like a totem pole  
with a chiseled yellow skull and narrowed eyes.

She eats the male, they say, when she is through,  
then spins three sheets of silk to hold her eggs.

Stretching on your stomach, chin to wood,  
you call them *writing spiders*, show me how

they draw thick zigzag lines across their webs  
like zippers pulled to hold the center in,

ribbons crisscrossed to showcase long sharp legs  
and piercing mandibles.

Nobody knows for sure  
why when she comes of age

the female of the species starts to write.  
Maybe it's a shield to hide behind, or a trick to appear

larger to enemies, a quick way to dispose  
of excess web—or else to attract a mate with lines of silk,

pieces of egg sacs and debris from half-devoured prey  
signaling readiness. Announcing change.

## Manhunt

What all the kids were playing after dark,  
advertised on fliers hung  
around the campsite—  
my mother said I could play  
if I wanted to, but I didn't know  
the game and anyway  
thought I might be too young.  
I heard them hollering out  
when they caught each other,  
the gleeful fear of waiting to be found,  
wanting it almost, then shrieking away  
through the brambles of night.  
Inside the tent, the smell of my mother's lotion,  
my father breathing heavy in half-sleep.  
I rolled my mummy bag  
to the far side, covered my eyes  
with the nylon shell and wondered if they were outside,  
the lifeguards on tall wooden thrones, no shirts,  
muscles like you don't see in city schools.  
On the wet grey floors of the beach bathroom,  
in the little changing stall I was alone  
for a minute, could see how the forest green  
of my swimsuit grabbed me by the hips  
and cupped my breasts.  
I wanted to show them, see,  
I am not the child my mother is looking for  
when she calls my name, asks me  
if I'm coming to swim. In other countries,  
I'd heard the girls are forced to birth  
at twelve, I'd heard grown men  
could pick you off the street.  
When one smiled at me  
I thought he knew,  
or else he was just squinting in the sun.  
Their girls wore neon tanks,  
sequined bikinis, bathed  
in tanning lotion scented with coconut,  
never swam. How strange, my mother said,  
to wear a suit you couldn't really swim in.  
I raced to the divider, blue and red,  
my technique powerful in such small space,  
finishing in just a couple strokes.  
Now bound tight in my long johns, dry  
I heard them shouting

just outside the stakes and fly  
that held this tent up, just outside  
the arc of zipper, and if I squinted  
through the mesh, I could see  
shadow forms brazenly rounding parked cars  
and stones, coming so close to our poles  
that I thought they would crash.



*Bad Girls, 2002*

I never asked her if she loved it too—  
the way our faces looked made up all wrong,

the crooked false lashes, lipstick like clowns  
still preserved now, shaky in moving frames,

yellow-stained light of VHS tapes  
we'd watch until they felt like real movies.

Somewhere we must have learned to aim our eyes  
straight at the lens like that, our nostrils flared,

our tank tops scrunchie-rolled to belly shirts,  
plump skin unmarked and bright from years concealed

and bodies young enough then to pretend  
we didn't know the way our nipples swelled

beneath the thinning stretch of outgrown clothes,  
costumes we wore to make it all a joke

so her mother, filming, wouldn't know  
our brimming new excitement as we stared

squinting into the mirror, sucking fat  
of cheeks between our teeth, practicing

till I forgot the play and lost my face,  
dissolved into the longing to be looked at.

Reunion  
*Las Tortugas Bar & Grill, Virginia Beach*

I watch the chewed rind of a pineapple  
pose as the fruit of the bush beside our chairs—you know the kind,  
with little waxy leaves trimmed round, symmetrical.  
Appear natural.

But what is native to this boardwalk space?  
A tiki bar, a cold night beach, rum and the pulsing rhythm  
of Spanish song.  
A paper parasol, stalk of bamboo.  
Laura's face fatter now  
around the chin,  
I guess new medication.

For a second, I believe the pineapple  
is really growing here. Then see the ants,  
the jagged marks of tooth.  
This is Virginia, after all, where hearts  
are big and red on every white t-shirt.

I drop my straw paper into a pool  
of condensation on the glass table,  
watch it grow limp, expand.

I think to ask her, hey  
remember the time we bought thongs from the dollar store  
to see how they would feel?  
We wore them just an hour,  
whispering on her parents' air mattress.  
Or when we stuffed our bras to sneak outside  
at night, as if the lumps  
of toilet paper would make us look older.  
We ran—I was sick then, coughing—  
halfway to Dunkin Donuts, scurried back.

We used to say when we got married we'd live  
in a house together, us and our husbands on bunk beds, I didn't know  
if she was joking too.

Tonight, a crazy woman spits  
into a glass, returns her piña colada  
claiming they made it wrong. She will not pay.  
We watch her as she saunters off  
to one of the hotels.

She comes here every year, the waitress says,  
and does the same.

We take pictures like the ones from last July:  
us smiling on the beach, the waves at our feet  
Laura's long arm stretched out as far as it will go.

Teen girls in bikini tops, short-shorts walk by.  
I suck at what is left inside my glass; just ice.

Pseudocyesis

If she can feel it then it must be real.  
If she can feel it growing  
like a bean deep in her belly,  
like the radish seeds  
she would plant from her hand as a child,  
how she would have to squeeze  
her fingers together tight  
or they—so small—would slip  
between the cracks.

And if she squints  
closely at the second sonogram, she sees  
a body like a spill of milk,

and if the doctors would just take another look,  
if they could try again to hear a heart,  
they could find out what's wrong,  
what she knows now misformed:

*anencephalic:*  
the brain developing  
mostly outside the skull,  
or not at all—she has seen photographs  
of heads half-formed, cut off  
above the eyes

—she's not afraid of it  
but feels it there,  
her abdomen weighted like a tire swing  
in heavy rain.

In the waiting room  
(they shake their heads, nothing again)  
she strokes the spot  
beneath her navel till her skin is red,  
calls me to please feel it one more time.

And I think of the rag doll  
that we started once to make from old tube socks  
stuffed up with t-shirt cloth and sewn  
to body, legs, a head—  
no arms yet and no face.

The cat would hold it by one leg

in her teeth, drag it along  
then stop to wail over it as if  
to ask for help for a child she had lost,  
or begging us  
to make it whole, to sew on beads for eyes  
and yarn-braid hair,  
the red string of a lip,  
to set it with a spine to let it stand

– or searching for a place to bury it.

## Driving by a Seafood Stand Outside of Baltimore

Obscene, I think, how crabs are sold by sex  
in cardboard bins against the highway marked  
with Male, Female.

We used to find them dead  
or dying on the shore, and pick a stone  
to toss against the shell, always unsure  
if the claws jerking was a sign they were alive  
or some reflex that persists,  
funny, even, like those skeletons on sticks  
you see jump out, how loose their fingers fell  
against the air—my aunt, back then,  
had skeletons that danced  
from Guatemala. You must have pulled a string  
or turned a tiny crank to wind them up,  
and they would spin, ribs rattling, I swear  
I heard one laugh. When blue crabs mate, the male  
performs a dance: stands on his walking legs,  
and with his paddles rocks from side to side  
releasing pheromones. They then must wait  
until she molts, revealing the soft shell  
that lies beneath. He'll carry her  
under his belly till she starts to shed  
her hard layer; they call it "Doubling."

I liked it when they pinched.

A smooth second of hurt  
you know is good because a crab  
is meant to pinch, and you are meant  
to learn what not to touch  
(hot stones around a spitting fire pit  
or the white caterpillar's spiky fur)  
although you never will. Like that summer I slept  
in a room full of bees. I let their buzz  
from the floorboard beneath my bed  
lull me to sleep, and afternoons  
felt their fuzzy crunch under my heel,  
a stinger stuck in the arch of my foot,  
barbed if you look up close  
so when you pull it out it tears the skin  
to shreds along its path. I didn't want  
to tell my father. At sixteen, didn't want  
him in my room, always with heavy shoes  
that would break the bits of plastic,  
makeup and things, earrings, on my floor  
he said he couldn't see. When he ripped up the boards,

he found a hive of them, and tore  
it out in chunks, tied it up in a plastic bag we left  
somewhere along the road.  
Funny, this was the summer  
there was a shortage of bees across the globe.  
Everyone was worried  
who would be left to pollinate the plants.  
Long after they were gone,  
my window stayed streaked with honey,  
raw, yellow-white and hard, and that faint smell  
like nothing else: bodies humming  
up against each other  
building, working, spitting out  
their thick sweet juice.

For All The Babies We Prayed Would Not Be Born

For Zoe, freshman, who I told  
*wear white shorts when you're waiting,*

*favorite underwear. That's how you beg for it.*  
My mother taught me how to wash out blood:

cold water in the bathroom sink, my blood  
pooling in the wrinkles of her knuckle.

*Always cold.* For Ashley on the quad,  
walking head down past the twenty-foot-tall board of fetuses

a group at our school built—  
all squirming red as worms, the forceps looming

towards them, towering, the hand of God.  
The boy who drove with me to CVS

in doctor's scrubs, a greasy ponytail,  
who made me pay for Plan B, said to text

when it was "good and *good*." Numbers  
I invented for the forms, the doughy nurse

so honest-faced I wanted to confess.  
For the damp concrete floor, parking garage

closed for the night, for the 49'ers jersey  
I told him to take off (the Giants won).

For Amy snorting milk out through her nose  
when I, online, morphed her picture with his

to form a baby, told her there's no way  
she could keep a thing like that. The coat hanger

haunting our dorm room floor,  
the intersection where I dropped him off,

library where I hid the One-Step box.  
Black hair stuck to her face,

she almost sang: "I don't deserve my mom.  
I don't deserve my brother or my dog."



Our flat in London where she squeezed my hand  
with nails, a warning on the label of our wine

of swollen belly slashed with an X-mark;  
*you see*, I joked, *all you have to do is finish this*.

When at the Western Wall I prayed for blood,  
abdomen aching to divulge, come clean—

his widow's peak, oil on his forehead, high,  
pictures with his girl at a track meet.

And for all the babies we prayed would not be born:  
may someone else birth you,

somewhere with long skirts sweeping cobblestones.  
The women squeezed tight on our side, searching for space.

I watched one, next to me, clutching a photograph  
and a little girl, guiding her chubby hand

to a free spot of sandstone, teaching her how to bend  
her body towards the earth, how to bow her head.

## After a Heavy Rain

A man and woman walk  
along the county road to save young newts,  
velvety bright orange toxic skin  
pulsing urgently with each heartbeat.

Many have lost parts, their hand-like digits squashed,  
or tails mashed to a white, wet pulp  
bleeding out on the pavement.

Others, still whole, inch slow across the road  
not knowing what will come.

At the season's first hard rain, the newt efts know  
its time to migrate back to the pond where they were born,  
darken in color, grow their gills and mate.

The couple wonders if crushed parts  
might grow back as the newts become adults.  
They don't think so, but neither wants to say it  
so they place the bodies in puddles off the road  
and whisper prayers.

What's lost?  
Just cells. A few inches of newly formed tissue.  
No lungs, no teeth. Natural,  
her mother said. Animals  
birth their young in litters  
or spawn sacs bulging full of tiny eggs  
knowing some won't survive.

In time, the road starts to grow dark.  
Headlights from passing cars  
send them into the ditch, and they turn back.

They do not speak except to say *cold night* and *look, the stars*.  
They are both thinking of, in different ways,  
the things we bury just to stay human:  
the dead, our faces in our lovers' chests.

Morning Commute  
*for Allison*

At the roundabout, a white van tilts  
sideways, two wheels caught up  
on the cement just like (it comes back)  
the dream I had last night.  
We were on a subway car,  
looking out at an elevated highway  
where a van hung off the barrier,  
a short metal gate and underneath  
long crowded streets. The two left wheels stuck first,  
then body slid across and tilted down,  
right wheels now gripped for life; I thought,  
*that is terror*: rusted rail between  
the road and off, the driver now  
jerking his wheel crazily and car  
still moving forward, axels clutching metal  
like a tight curled hand. Allison, I'd call  
if I still knew your number and knew  
if you still believe in witchcraft,  
or if I ever did. In pictures you hold a plump baby;  
you're sane now, my mother says. Off the drugs and out  
of your Texas town. Some days  
you feel a rupture, you told me once,  
between our world and theirs. Some nights your dreams  
change things. You ever wake  
up shaky? Hard to explain  
the way the corners of your eyes will catch  
a ripple of air, a motion just offscreen.  
*There's something with our women,*  
you would say, *our women* like the aunt who flew  
to Costa Rica for a tummy tuck;  
on the street she touched a statue  
of Mary in a booth and the man began to yell  
*El diablo* and the villagers  
scrambled to hide. "My pain,"  
she'd always say, as though to speak  
of a pet kept on a leash, grabbing  
her abdomen, "I'm suffering  
for my sins, for all our sins."  
My thirteenth winter, she got me away  
from the others and asked if I'd heard  
about Jamie Lynn Spears and didn't I know  
it's a sin to do that, *that*, that thing she did?  
White sweater-clad, her breasts pointed

straight at me from her push-up bra,  
her pin-up posture. What is it to admit  
I too am proud  
our women are beautiful—  
    grandmother kneeling in a gingham dress  
    to braid the long hair of five little girls  
    and later, my mother's fingers  
    at the nape of my neck—  
despite what pain. You, the first who told me  
we were vain, how perfect I thought you were  
when I first saw you. You, on tiptoes  
in high heels to see the photo of our grandparents,  
his hand tight on her waist, adoring gaze, they say  
she made a dress from crepe paper,  
too poor to buy a new one, and all the boys  
still looked at no one else; once she told me  
that I looked good in red, should wear lipstick.  
Your black hair piled atop your head, casual  
like a crown, you said you talk to her  
every day too, sometimes  
in her birth month the yard would fill  
with blue jays, blue  
as her eyes, mine, as a child I thought  
when hers shut I could let her see.  
What we inherit:  
frantic calls in early morning,  
“Please tell me you're okay, I had a dream.”  
I always worried what would happen  
if my mother didn't tell me to be safe.  
When our grandmother died,  
our grandfather looked out at the dove in his garden and said,  
    “Doves mate for life,  
    but this one's all alone. Like me,”  
and when he died you told me of two doves  
you saw flying away, and was that true?  
Where we come from, they leave out millet seeds  
to feed the dead whose souls return  
as birds. You said you could teach me  
to use it, our gift, I was scared  
I could be you; your small pink lips  
sipping a Bloody Mary on the dock,  
or your voice husky  
on the phone saying *It's back*,  
that you haven't eaten anything but pills  
this week, you're down  
to so few pounds.

I think I should follow the van  
to see where it leads, but I'm late,  
the lot is full and I forgot my wallet.  
When it ruptures,  
you have to let it seal itself again,  
don't keep tearing.  
Aunt Cissy did,  
and she choked on a hot dog,  
a side effect  
of what she was prescribed  
and when they spread her ashes in New Orleans  
the gulf filled up with oil; my mother's voice  
uneasy, shivering to think  
of all that black—shimmering, toxic film  
expanding uncontained  
from where they cast her,  
sticking fast  
to sand, bare legs, frail wings.

*You say I need to learn to let things go*

I'm an old ragged dog with a bone  
hanging on as I snarl, crouched down low

to lick at a spot where some last scrap of meat  
was long since chewed off, and you

always slamming the door on my snout.  
Now you tell me to drop it, there's nothing

that's left to pick out. We once had a mixed-breed  
named Jack, who bit my father's face

and left a round hole of a scar, like a pock-mark.  
I could still tell you the specific smell

of that dog's breath: the years of hunger,  
sulking after wasted deli meat

baked in the sun of streets, a sour plaque  
that lingers with you, even as you find

yourself in a safe place, "forever home,"  
newspapers on the floor to help you learn

how to behave. Jack never seemed as clean  
as the dogs we'd had since they were born,

who I'd let lick my face. He'd lift a leg  
while looking, shiftily, around the room,

afraid, I think, that he was doing wrong.  
One tooth he had was broken in half,

left bottom fang chopped flat, revealing  
tooth as bone, as if a small piece

of the skull were sticking out. He died panting  
like hell in our hallway. "Damn dog,"

my father sighed, shaking his head.  
"It's like training a dog," you told me once,

how I jump up when you open the door  
and I'm on the fresh sheets in my dirty jeans,

when my toenails need clipping and dig parentheses  
into your calf, like I'm adding one more thing.

When Jack was new, we couldn't put our faces  
close to his. He had to know the treats, the cautious pats,  
were not a trick to slam him in a cage  
in the back of some government truck, send him away.

*A lean and hungry look*, we used to laugh  
when he walked by, half-crooked from his stroke,  
side-eying us. He'd crowd the food bowl, looking up  
and growl, suspicious of such human love.

## Getting Back In

In the dream I am leaving the white winter lodge. I am taking your car. You are angry with me. I will drive myself home and bring the car back later so you can drive home. It doesn't make sense, I realize then. I stop to get gas, drive back to search for you.

You are standing by the counter in the lobby store. I grab at your waist in relief but you stop me—"This is why I'm divorcing you." I had added a new channel to your cable subscription without asking first. You won't let me explain: there was only one show I was trying to watch, I didn't know what I was clicking on.

You walk in front of me shaking your head and say, "I thought I could love you for my whole life." We stand outside a long hall with glass walls. Inside, girls are practicing for a ballet. You watch, disinterested. I yank your face to me; "If you don't love me I will walk until I find the center of the snow and sit down there to die."

\*

When I cry, I am my mother. Her hot red face  
crumpling into folds, estuaries filling with wet salt.  
How quickly it happened. Pulling at her doorknob  
hoping she hadn't locked it. Or when she'd open the door  
of the car, still moving, and say she would walk.  
How she'd claw at the handle like a raccoon  
who couldn't work a lock. How my father would drive  
so slowly next to her. How he'd beg her come on,  
this is dangerous. He couldn't go far  
with the passenger side door rattling  
on its hinge—she never closed it. Maybe that was why.

\*

I wake reaching for you like those shapes  
our fingers know—the smooth cube base of a charger,

solid weight of a phone. Soft side of a wallet,  
chaotic clash of keys. And the panic of absence

when I dive my hand into each purse pocket  
and feel only such pointless things: a penny picked for luck,

a lipstick tube. And though your arm still falls  
like a seatbelt across my chest, I worry

it is not wrapped tight enough. I could still wriggle out,  
and step silent across your sleep if I wanted to leave.



In a different dream, I was driving your car  
through Charleston; I had left you in our hotel room.

I was going to a wedding, driving past  
colorful little houses, iron gates. I noticed then

I was sitting in the passenger seat, and the car  
was moving without my control. A cop behind me.

I jerked the wheel to pull into the parking lot  
of a highway motel, tried to say it was only a mistake,

tried to call you to tell him my name because I am not listed  
on your insurance plan, and did not know my way back.

\*

The way she will answer her phone  
like an otter eats a crab, holding it upside down  
and prying it open with her fingernails,  
picking up just after the last ring,

somehow not right for this world.

When they first met, she was trying  
to work the copier. *You look bewildered*,  
he said, and showed her how.

It embarrassed me, how she appeared  
on a city street confused like her grandmothers  
stepping off the boat, how she'd rotate  
ninety degrees and picture a map

of America to know whether to turn  
left or right off Madison. So late I learned  
the still sadness in her. Alone,  
she'll only eat a slice of bread,

a piece of cheese. The fall of her face  
when I've tied my shoes to leave.  
I used to wake to her typing like rain  
in the dust haze of morning, her lips mouthing

so close to silence I could never tell  
what she was saying, incantations  
for a day starting to bleed pale light, for years  
in cramped apartments where she tried to grow

an avocado from its seed, suspended stabbed  
with toothpicks in a jar by a window  
that opened only onto an air shaft.  
And those long distance calls that wet her cheeks,

gestured me gone. But still I would envy  
the way she loved—iced coffee sweating  
in her hand and a loose summer dress,  
glassy water of an evening lake, the last

burnt bits of garlic in the pan, the paint-rough hands  
of a man who took her and kissed her mouth  
before taking his coat off each night,  
him driving slow behind her when she said  
again she'd divorce him, her getting back in.

## For My Father in His Studio

What can I say when an old friend sees my face  
and says I change, it seems like, every day?  
When we first met, I wore all black,  
the next year floral sundresses with strappy sandals, now  
I sit across from her red-lipped,  
a pencil skirt. The way my father paints:  
ripping paper soaked in matte medium, layering  
each image with the next, the canvas thick and rough,  
cement floor mosaicked with sticky strips.  
When I tried to call his paintings beautiful,  
he always said *well, don't get too attached,*  
*tomorrow it will look nothing like this.*  
He'd take my photos ugly, sneezing or mid-chew,  
the body to an artist he told me is just another form,  
like furniture or apples on a plate.  
We would sing *twinkle twinkle little star*  
beneath the heavy comforter, looking through  
its seams for light. I kept saying *like a demon in the sky*  
and he never corrected me. One of those times,  
he asked my greatest fear. I couldn't think of one  
and asked him his; he said, "Myself."  
Father, I'm sorry I was scared and I chose words instead  
of paint. I could never get right the shadow  
of dimension in your face, it came out flat  
like the monsters we would draw, exquisite corpse,  
passing the folded paper back and forth,  
your heads with bulging eyes and rotten teeth;  
once you told me of "geeks" who bit the heads  
off chickens in sideshows, said don't tell mom.  
And while your notebooks fill  
with my sweet brother's sleeping penciled face,  
you, pacer of nights, you rendered me  
in the image of your own unrest,  
always too light a sleeper for you to sketch.

## Reflection

The woman I danced with in my underwear  
after swimming in the Sea of Galilee at midnight

left her lover's car to share with me  
a sweet green drink and kept repeating a word

in Arabic I only later learned was for "sorrow."  
I've carried nothing of her but her voice,

the clear and mournful song of a desert lark,  
high-pitched, pleading. All I could do was move

my bare feet and my hips to a faint rhythm  
from the car's radio, throwing up my hands to mimic her.

Not a sea, technically, but a lake enclosed by land.  
I swam slow breaststroke towards the swelling moon,

towards something that I'd heard  
might clean my body pure. Full trust of lowering

the self—half exposed skin—into a pit of shadow,  
foreign water. Woman at the bottom of the cliff

in Manarola, staring into the Mediterranean—  
was I wrong to assume you were thinking

about death? Those incomprehensible depths  
in sunlight, bright as a glass of ripe white wine

but nights it breaks so hard against the stone,  
huge and alone, bellowing with terrors

like a child grown too big for comforting,  
like staring into a mirror in a pitch black room, your face

without the artificial veil of light  
a dark blank space.

Aubade

Mornings, the newborn elephant floats out  
in front of me, stiff-legged and leathered,  
spiraling in place.

I reach for him, to hold him to my chest.

His trunk uncurls and wraps around my arm,  
squeezes straight through to bone

and I don't want to kill him but I will.

My mother warned *these are the dreams of womanhood*.

She taught me *swim or drown*  
when my small legs grew weary of the lake.  
And so I tasted it,  
opened my eyes wide in the murky wet

and watched the last sun trapped  
in swirls of dirt, sticks, rotting leaves,  
the gummy eggs of fish—  
until I forgot my way back out.