

## ABSTRACT

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INEFFABLE CATALOGUE

Sara Luterman, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

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Ineffable Catalogue is a collection of poems concerned with the limits of language. The medicalization and industrialization of natural parts of life cycles serves as a central theme. Simple language and images ranging from the strong to the surreal are employed. The poems are primarily free verse, but are carefully ordered through the use and breaking of rhythm. There is also a thread of the biblical, linking contemporary plagues with the Pentateuch.

INEFFABLE CATALOGUE

By

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## Dedication

To Elizabeth Arnold, for her incredible guidance and mentorship.

To my parents Dr. Joni Milgram-Luterman and Dr. Maynard Luterman, for their love and support.

To the memory of Nathan Krasnopoler, who hated poetry very much.

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## **Aquarium**

The shark moves through  
the tank.

Its body sways side  
to side, endlessly.

Its skin is  
like rough, gray stones.

You look  
into the shark's eyes.

They are flat and heavy  
as silver dollar coins.

The jagged hole of its mouth  
terrifies you.

You are reminded of your own hands  
on the thick, curved glass.

You press your face against  
the smoothness of it.

The tank twists under the weight  
of your body.

It swallows you in pieces.  
Your cheek. Your fingertips. The rest.

The shark circles above you.  
It is waiting.

Silver bubbles leave your mouth  
like fat moon jellies.

## **A Dollhouse**

There is a set of furniture  
for each room in the house.

Everything is in its  
right place.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator  
matches the linoleum.

On the kitchen table, there is  
a brown plastic turkey.

The turkey is the size of  
a human thumb.

The family sits at the kitchen  
table. Their knees do not bend.

The mother looks  
like her daughter.

The father looks like  
his son.

Everyone is always smiling,  
Even the babies.

The master bedroom is  
above the kitchen.

Sometimes, the mother and father  
mash together there, and make kissing noises.

This is how  
babies are made.

In the nursery, two legless infants  
are painted different colors.

This is how you  
tell them apart.

Some of the furniture  
no longer fits in the house.



It has been replaced  
by new and lovely things.

There is a doll that melted  
under a magnifying glass.

She is kept in a drawer, apart  
from the house.

Her white face drips down  
into her blouse.

She is not to be looked at  
or touched.

## **Farrowing**

A sow presses  
her body  
against  
the crate.

She chews  
at the metal,  
licks her tongue against  
her own dry effluence.

She will eat  
anything given  
to her. She will savage  
her own young  
to break the machine that we  
have made for her,  
of her,  
of her own flesh.

## **Atlantic**

There is salt in my mouth. My eyes burn with salt.  
The cold, yellow water is thick with salt.  
Salt forms a film, surrounds me  
like the skin on a pot of boiled milk.

My body passes through the waves,  
a shade passing through empty rooms.  
All of the animals are dead.  
They have been dead for a long time.

They move against me,  
one hundred thousand little bodies,  
invisible shoals of silver ghosts.  
I can feel the hooks of their teeth.

I am met by their silence.  
They will not speak with me.

## **On Waking in the Wilderness**

Through the milk dark fog, through the wet air,  
the cold slaps my cheek like an open hand.

Beside me, the man I am with is still  
asleep, his mouth slack and wet.

He twitches, like a dog dreaming  
of chasing an animal smaller than itself.

Last night, he pissed into the dying coals of the fire,  
smothering the last glow with an acrid hiss.

The black branches are slicked with dew  
and spread out in hands and fingers.

I imagine them closing in fists, pulling apart  
the sky. What will bleed through?

The man I am with yawns, and I think  
of white air filling his throat.

## Michigan '97

A girl with yellow hair  
tells me that "Jew"  
is a bad word, because  
her mother said so.

I am seven years old.  
The other children at school  
think it's strange, my family  
doesn't celebrate Christmas.

In the evening,  
I watch Mel Brooks movies  
with my father. I'm too young  
to understand most of the jokes.

At school, we are told to make cards  
from thick sheets of red and green paper.  
I am told to just make something.  
It doesn't have to be a card.

A boy in my class replaces  
the baby Jesus in the Nativity  
with a plastic alligator, sees  
how long it takes for anybody  
to notice.

## Sheet Music

### *After Matmos*

My mother tells me to sit at the piano  
and play The Star Spangled Banner for her.  
I look at the sheet music, and see what I can recall  
from my lessons. I haven't played in a long time.  
I don't remember how to read the language.

The black notes look like sad, one legged spiders.  
Some of them form spindly clusters, rubbing against one another.  
I think of a documentary I saw on National Geographic and wonder  
if one note will eat the other, though the practice is not common.  
My mother tells me to keep my fingers in a neat arch.

I keep my fingers in a neat arch.  
I want to reach my hands into the staves and feel the small bodies  
of the notes scutter up my arms and into my clothes—  
even the whole notes, which look like little open mouths,  
even though I am afraid to know what will fill them.

## Monster

He kissed my hand when I had not been born,  
although I felt his lips upon my hand.  
For while my flesh had been so fully formed,  
my mind could not yet know or understand.  
And yet he said he loved me as I was:  
amalgamated from the many dead,  
but I was nothing but skin, bone, and blood,  
the words to bring me life were left unsaid.  
He loved a doll, though I was one well made,  
and fashioned with more care than he had been.  
The price of his creation had been paid,  
and he had suffered as his maker's sin.  
Will he forget me when I am not weak,  
or when I part my lips and learn to speak.

## **The Second Wife**

*Adam had three wives: Lilith, a second wife, and Eve.*

And God said: Let us try, once more  
to make a good woman. One  
who will not lie like the first wife  
with others in her garden.

So God scooped up the earth  
and shaped it into a woman, awash  
in blood, meat, and thick white fat, her teeth  
sprouting from gum buds. Adam watched.

Adam saw her raw under the cloak  
of her skin. And she was without shame.  
She reached out to touch his arm  
in kindness. He vomited.

Adam hid behind his favorite stone.  
He did not want to look upon  
the new body of his wife,  
her skin and his own knowledge.

And God said: She will be a companion  
to you. It is not good for man to be alone.  
And Adam shuddered at the company of  
what he saw was beneath her skin.

She sat smiling, under the orange tree.  
When she became hungry, she picked  
and ate one. Tasting the sweetness  
of the fruit, she began to cry.

Adam named the animals. He did not  
name his second wife. She did not  
even have a name of her own.  
She did not think to name herself.

Three angels came and took her apart again,  
until nothing was left.  
They could not allow another garden.  
Adam slept and dreamed of a good woman.



## **Little Soldiers**

Two boys play army on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.  
One rolls down the hill, clutching  
his imaginary walkie-talkie to his chest.  
The hill smells wet, and of crushed  
grass. He spits a blade of grass from his mouth.

The boy calls for backup for his invisible unit.  
He is the only one left. The others,  
when there were others, were gone  
in the flash of fireworks, and bent fingers  
in the shape of a gun.

He army crawls behind a pine tree, where  
two teenagers clutch each other in the bursting  
light. The boy grimly decides that they are grappling  
to the death. He decides the girl is on his side. Besides,  
it looks like she's winning.

Behind him, the other boy has caught up.  
Bang bang you're dead! I dodged! You can't  
dodge, I shot you dead! They do not confer  
like generals. One boy pushes the other.  
One boy picks up a stone.

## **The Living Room**

Take off your shoes.  
The carpet is clean  
and white.

On the coffee table,  
a glass seal balances  
a green glass ball.

The ball is cloudy  
as a cataract or  
a covered mirror.

This is the living  
room. It is not  
for children.

I am no longer  
a child. My grandmother  
invites me to sit

on the white couch.  
She lives alone  
here, now.

When Papa died,  
Grandmother sat  
in a low, black chair.

The mirrors were ghosts  
of mirrors, hidden  
by white sheets.

The carpet was covered  
in paper, and streaked  
with gray mud

as people shuffled in  
with their dirty shoes,  
carrying containers

of soft, cooked fruit  
and bloodless liver.  
Grandmother

wore no makeup.  
I had never seen  
her naked skin.

She seemed like  
another grandmother.  
Lighter, somehow,

as though each part  
of her had blanched  
like old bone.

Today, she is reading  
a newspaper. It is  
from six weeks ago.

I catch her clouded eye  
in the mirror. She does not  
remember I am not

a child. She tells me  
to take off my shoes  
on the white carpet.

I have taken them off,  
but I do not say so. I do not  
ask about the newspaper.

I think she will become  
so white. She will  
become invisible.

## Promised

As they lay in bed, her wrinkled breast  
in his wrinkled hand, Abraham told Sarah what  
God had promised them: babies, blessed and fat.  
And Abraham's hand on her belly, there, where  
only error issued, twisted, cursed,  
if even born at all. Now in old age,  
she was pleased with herself, barren, closed  
like a bottle, or the sticky pages  
of an unread book. Not even blood  
had come of her in fifty years or more,  
and now, with her aching joints and old,  
pale eyes, back humped, her body will bear?  
It was absurd to her, as some new law.  
She tilted back her head and laughed at God.

## **Wodwo's Wife**

She rips into the raw flesh, tears with her teeth  
And does not care to cook the stag's meat.  
She loves the warm blood, its iron tang.  
Sweetest of all is its sticky, toothsome heart.  
She eats it slowly and in secret. It is what she loves most.  
She loves it more than rifling through the rich grubs  
That grow full and fat in the soft, stinking wood,  
More than the black birds and their crisp bones,  
More than the rich, speckled eggs they leave in their nests,  
More than the pale roots and turnips in the dark of the earth,  
Even more than the sweet black berries, more than God,  
But not more than the bristled beast that licks the blood  
From her fingers, and sings her a song before sleep.  
She gives him half of her blood-black heart.

## Turning

Outside my window, the leaves turn brown.  
They rattle against each other like small bones in a bag,  
held by an old woman who is going to tell me  
that I will marry a tall, dark stranger.

Another year has passed, and I have done nothing  
but feed myself television and other dull pleasures.  
A friend in Iraq writes that he was shot at by insurgents  
and that it is too hot. He asks for cigarettes.

Last Christmas, I met him in a dim bar in Baltimore.  
The barstools were empty. Lights were strung up.  
An electric nativity scene was covered in dust.  
He told me he no longer liked to be touched.

We drank in silence, a few feet apart.  
Behind the dark window, it began to snow.  
The Christmas lights blinked blue and green and red  
and white and blue and green and red and white.

## Creation

On the sixth day,  
God created the parasite.  
And it infected the carpenter  
ant, insinuating itself  
into what the ant was.  
And the ant ambled  
crookedly, for it no longer saw  
purpose in its work;  
it convulsed in holy joy.  
And the ant came down  
from the canopy,  
which was high  
as a mountain,  
and settled in the cool  
damp of the Earth.  
And the new life  
inside of the ant grew  
with each passing hour,  
and the ant rejoiced  
at the new life within him.  
And when the sun  
was highest in the day,  
and stood still,  
the ant also stood still,  
biting down on the leaf's vein.  
And there the ant died.  
But the life within him consumed  
his body, until it was filled  
with its love.  
And the fruits of the parasite  
burst forth from the ant's head,  
and rained down death  
on its brother ants. And God looked  
at his creation, even the parasite,  
even the carpenter ant, and said  
it was good.

## Record

My grandmother listens to  
a recording of my  
grandfather's funeral while  
I brush my teeth  
in the next room.

The rabbi intones  
his sermon with a  
low and proper voice,  
to indicate  
someone has died

and that *Blessed*  
*is the true judge,*  
as one is proscribed to  
say in such cases. We  
must not complain

unto heaven with our  
petty grief,  
our little deaths.  
The cantor's voice,  
of course, is beautiful

as he sings the psalms,  
as is right and fitting.  
My grandfather was  
an important man.  
My grandmother

covers her face  
and begins to cry.  
I want to ask  
why we are listening  
to this recording.

I want to ask why this  
recording even exists.  
Why my mother  
transferred it from  
cassette to compact disc



so my grandmother  
could sit in her living room  
and listen to it after  
the death of the tape deck.  
*Blessed is the true judge.*

I am not listening.  
My mother is not  
listening. And on  
the recording,  
children give their speeches.

## **Gray Column**

The bones are  
rare, dim  
against the light,  
a gray and  
broken column

## Love Song

I realize as you bend  
to unpack the spoons  
that I do not love you.

that I have not  
loved you for a long time.  
The brown gap of skin

between your t-shirt  
and your jeans  
sickens me. I do not

want to spread my  
fingers across your  
soft belly to surprise you.

I do not like the fact  
that you constantly smell  
of strong dish soap,

or the moustache  
you have grown  
as an affectation,

the bristle scrape  
of it against my lip.  
And when you leave

again, in the blue light  
before dawn, I promise,  
I will not even

think fondly of the  
warm place where  
your body was.

## Becoming

Little sister puts out  
a ring of powders,

lines up the soft  
brushes by size.

The largest brush  
goes on the right.

I try to follow what  
she teaches me.

Words are heavy  
in my mouth:

*foundation, blush,  
and base.*

I watch my sister first;  
How she puts it on.

She rolls up her  
eyes, tells me,

*this is how  
you get the waterline.*

Looks like she's  
gouging the pen

into the meat  
of her eye.

Little sister takes  
my glasses off.

The world becomes  
a soft, pink smear.

The first brush makes  
gentle circles on my face,

feels like touched  
by the tongue

of a small  
and loving animal.

Her hands aren't gentle.  
She holds my chin,

to pin me.  
*Do you want this or not?*

I imagine my face  
in the mirror.

I do not recognize  
myself.

## **A Textbook Case**

A family history is a valuable asset in predicting some outcomes for (you) the patient.

Your doctor may use your family medical history to assess your risk of hypercholesterolemia, a pathological desire to please others, or an idiopathic inflammation to the sense of your own self worth.

Your doctor may use your family medical history to recommend treatments or changes in diet or other lifestyle habits to reduce the risk of disease. For example: He may suggest that you no longer consume items high in sugar, fat, color, heat, or any pleasures of the swollen flesh. Exercise regularly in order to maintain your position on the chart.

## **Thanksgiving**

Jude butchers the turkey, cutting  
thigh from leg, thigh from massive breast,  
separating strips of skin crisped with fat.  
I think of my anatomy textbook.  
I can't unsee

the bones. The words  
are the same. For example,  
the human spine is full of marrow,  
which is not only good in soup;  
it makes blood.

## **La Giaconda**

A brown postage stamp,  
her white face a smear  
beyond the crowd.

After a hundred years  
of advertising, she  
has shrunk

and cracked.  
Once, a woman tried  
to shoot her.

Now she is encased  
in a dark film  
of bulletproof glass.

Visitors, on average,  
contemplate her sublime  
for fifteen seconds.



## Gate A17

A boy and a girl wear  
uniforms that match  
their father's.

His shoes are highly polished,  
like their family's silver set,  
passed down from the civil war.

He pretends not to notice;  
the children have soiled  
his shoes.

Sometimes he does not sleep.  
Instead, he goes to watch them,  
safe in their beds.

When he is gone, he will treat  
their photographs like silver or  
a precious heirloom.

Perhaps he will bring something  
this time. Perhaps  
he will bring them  
a stone.

## **Another**

We became tired of waiting  
for her to die of stomach cancer,  
of her silence, of her shitting herself  
so that my mother considered diapers,  
as if the limping indignities of old age  
were not enough.

I imagine he held her, her small body,  
bony and shaking on the metal table,  
my father, crying, his huge shoulders  
slumped forward – the needle  
could take up to twenty minutes,  
but they call it “the good death.”

Over dinner, my mother insists  
it was beautiful, it was a part of life,  
it was beautiful, it was beautiful.

## Memory

Half asleep, curled in  
on herself, and clinging  
to the moment before  
the sun's red crowning,

there was a woman  
whose breath smelled  
of warm, sour milk.  
She dreamed of houses.

There was a man  
who pressed the hard  
little buttons of his shirt  
into her back.

Outside, a tree  
blossomed unseasonably,  
petals yellow and heavy  
as grandmother's perfume.

## **Enumeration (Ten Plagues)**

*It is traditional to remove ten drops of wine from our glasses  
as we remember the suffering of the Egyptians.*

*-Maxwell House Haggadah*

### **One**

Black river black blood  
in ditches           black  
blood in wine glasses  
black blood in the bathtubs

A week of stinking  
clotted water we drank it we  
                                  drank it we  
                                  drank

### **Two**

In our ovens   in our beds  
they were not so bad but  
there were so many

### **Three**

On every living thing one thousand  
kinds  
biting biting           biting  
little bodies dark with  
blood

### **Four**

Were they wild  
beasts or swarms of  
flies?  
They were upon us with  
black teeth

### **Five**

These are the animals that died  
horses  
camels  
donkeys  
cattle  
goats  
sheep  
the dogs were fine.

**Six**

Swollen                    mottled  
with blood  
loose and rotting in our own  
skins                    black fruit left  
in the sun

**Seven**

There was thunder      hot fire  
   flashes  
of light  
   hailstones  
crushed                    the skull  
  
of my neighbor

**Eight**

A cloud                                    multiplying  
ate every surviving thing

**Nine**

Darkness  
that could be felt

damp

heavy on our skins

**Ten**

A gray smear  
licking  
under the edges of  
the door.

## **A Death**

You do not look like  
you are sleeping.

Your feet  
shake.

You bite your tongue, so  
they put pink gauze in your mouth.

Your face is black and  
crumpled.

Sometimes,  
you open one eye.

Inside of you,  
a wrinkled fist dies slowly,

atrophy expanding like wet,  
disintegrating paper.

When I pray, it only wastes time.

## Visiting

We put on paper gowns  
and nitrile gloves to  
prevent infection.

The gowns are yellow  
and crumple like  
stiff bags.

If he sees us, he must think  
that he is surrounded by yellow  
angels.

A nurse comes to clean  
the hole in his throat  
with a rubber tube.

His mouth,  
toothless and black,  
opens wide.



## **Feeding**

On the third day, a tube  
was inserted  
into his stomach through  
a hole.

This was done  
in order to provide  
long-term nutrition  
for him.

Studies have shown  
that this does not,  
in fact,  
prolong life.

Swaddled in bedding,  
he was less  
than seventy-five pounds  
when he died.

A forefinger and  
thumb fit an easy  
circle around  
his thigh.

Even then, he chewed  
when he was fed.  
This is not  
an uncommon response.

His teeth ground against  
each other until  
they crumbled in his mouth  
like ruined marble.

## **In Hospice**

Your mother cradles your body in the bed.  
She moistens your lips with a small, blue sponge,  
and jokes that you would never let her hold you.

Your brother does not touch you, or look at you.  
He has held vigil for six months, and  
for the first time, you have disappointed him.

He tells me about a dream he had about kicking  
the old woman who hit you with her Honda Civic  
until her face is a pink mash of blood.

I hold your cold, crooked hand,  
and know that we are waiting  
for you to die.

## **Digging**

Wearing the black clothes  
torn ribbon pinned  
he shoves the curved  
down into the black dirt  
because this time  
mulching, planting, or  
This time, he is  
his brother's coffin,  
again and again  
body wrapped in white cloth  
He digs as if  
of waiting for nothing

bought for burial,  
to his chest,  
side of the shovel upside-  
again and again,  
It is different than  
clipping overgrown roots.  
moving the earth onto  
and he stabs the dirt pile  
as if he could hide that shriveled  
and bags of black hair.  
he could bury months  
to come.

## **Before**

The white crackle  
of television snow  
fills each of the mind's  
windows, builds on the roof  
until it creaks from the weight,  
and we are left to wonder if it will  
hold, or will it collapse, and if it does

## **Orbital**

Fists ball up,  
fingernails cutting  
little half-moons  
into the palms of my  
hands.

I take one  
little half-moon  
pill.

I notice  
that the word  
*benzodiazepine*  
is iambic.

Maybe  
I could write a poem.

## **After**

Black light on black snow,  
cut through by black ribbon  
of road. Nothing grows here.  
There is no moon, no moon-  
light, only a black thicket full  
of crows, whose black bodies  
become shuddering leaves  
in the windless night.