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# Common Condition

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COMMON CONDITION

GEORGIA DENNISON

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I

THE GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE

*Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.*

– REBBECA SOLNIT

*I've been thinking about what I can't look at:*

–JULIE CARR

## THE GEOGRAPHIC EAR

A bell clapper

trying to escape the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and

A bell clapper

trying to escape the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and

A bell clapper

trying to escape the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and



## HELEN WHO

Mount Saint Helens—  
named after  
Mother of Emperor Constantine,  
who fed the poor, who insisted,  
after three hundred years of persecution—  
ashes itself onto the lone plain, like a wave.  
They make Christmas ornaments out of her.

Lies.

Su/pine

Su/pine

Su/pine.

Mount Saint Helens—named  
after British diplomat Lord St Helens—  
ashes itself onto the whole of the Northwest  
like a storm without a sewer.  
They make Christmas ornaments out of him.

Truth.

Men pressed their organs onto this land;  
nettles folded into dough  
transform the crust a stinging green.



This land carries, against its will,  
this word *discovered*.

Truths.

Dis/

Covered.

## THE GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE

Violence like a human heart  
tossing birch shavings  
into a dry-heat fire.  
Articulated artery,  
a coronary embering  
of iron, magnesium, and copper  
forming red blood cells  
and whispering  
in a tomb  
where archeologists  
find a pint of the canary-colored seeds  
unswallowed.

Become a golden woman,  
a corn kernel pressed in amber,  
a word that has many other words,  
  
or

pleat gilt into folds of skin,  
slash the definition until it oozes.  
Without language  
there is no loss.

As mouth moves towards  
some other articulation.  
As teeth  
gnaw open the sides of your thumb.  
Feed on yourself,  
on the geographic tongue  
until  
the word violence is swallowed  
by a divot in the cheek.

## THE WASTELAND

Being a man, I allowed myself to write poorly. I didn't need it, but when the pilot light went out I insisted on help in the basement, something romantic—dependence. This is how you write a poem: you just start writing. This is how you land a woman: you take up space on her desk. I, the most confident consumer of the dead mother, take it in gulps.



## THE GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE II

Felony tastes like arils

opening the lingual muscle.

I was healing myself

this way

with a box of pomegranates,

fruit

that arrived in the mail

addressed to

someone who

doesn't live here.

Each week more came to the door,

scarred apples went from box to mouth

and then—

more than I could eat—

from box to bin

waxed for nothing

for no one now.

The obsolescence of harvest;

black-eyed produce in

with the half-drunk wine bottle,

the mouth and then the bag

and I grew weary

of committing crimes

with my tongue,

my hands,

like a man.

## ONCE OR TWICE OR

Baby takes yogurt for sleep, lavender oil between the eyes and a book on seals. It's a New England lead house. The sills split and sick. The plastic leaves—gatherers of dead flies. Sunshine gobby maple, sticky bedsheets on the second floor of humidity. Baby cheeks sunfish. Maybe once or twice or everyday baby dodges a molestation in the tacky, leather, Cadillac summer, sucking strawberries out of coned cream. Baby takes seashells and makes them lie together on the bedside table. Canned fruit mangoes the lips. Bucket of lard next to charcoaled dome so the flies die blissed. Baby dirt naked, wet with grass, doing splits over a rusty sprinkler. It will be a bath-thick evening, Dimetapp dreams, baby doesn't know, maybe once or twice or every night baby dodges a molestation. Baby makes space in the mouth for an O, fertilizes the swath with hangnails, practices a patient lip, legs like frozen dandelion stems, seeding, performing adult, baby lifts a calf parallel to the lilac, twists like a trunk. Baby knows. Memorizes the pattern on the paisley quilt. Stitches together the clouds, belly up, supine, once or twice or everyday everyday everyday a little more open a little more closed.

## THE WASTELAND II

My body

is not right.

The sky has been taken out of this part of the world,

water

in all the wrong places.

Man

made

lake

else say

as if

anyone they

would

have

the

audacity.

## ALL THE GIRLS TO THE FRONT

For years, oral lore was decanted,  
the sediment disturbed, distributed,  
by hasty, uninventive men. Until, women,  
who were uninvited, came anyway, respirate,  
aerating the narrative. We worked and work  
and it is work carving out space in the mind  
of a nation for the right to a word.  
It's true. I'm sick of your male voice—  
the consideration of lake water.  
Your poems: cemeteries of the sounds  
that came before you—tidy couplets  
like granite headstones.  
Listen, listen, listen, a man came  
into the wineshop to tell me  
he was going to take a picture of me  
sweeping to send to my boyfriend  
who would be pleasantly astonished, turned on,  
because women don't sweep anymore.  
Listen, listen, listen,  
I wanted to write about anything else today—  
maybe deconstruct the inflatables of Koons,  
consider the porcelain banalities,  
but then the lawyer who I respected  
who sang along to Simone with me,  
grabbed my ass when no one was looking  
and I remembered Koons married a woman  
who only spoke Italian, a language he, in fact, did not,  
does not speak. Listen, all the women in my world  
are busy confessing the acts of men,  
desperately repeating, repeating, repeating,  
while the men write about nature.

## THE GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE IV

Adriatic—someone  
choking on an allergic reaction  
to wind. It doesn't belong to you,  
even if you licked clean  
the map of it, cut your tongue  
open on paper-water,  
the crayon-blue sea.  
It doesn't belong to you  
because you are still Scarboroughed  
in the library of Ponderosa pine  
and your mouth makes a consistent O

while it wraps around the bow-and-arrow  
letter A. Adriatic: to puncture,  
to pleasure, to move through  
the body, to

slash like an equivalent,  
like a woman  
speaking the habitual word.

THE GEOGRAPHIC EAR II

Oriole is golden aural/

high feather swatch/

a word

left over.

I want out of the state,  
the midday bells.

Nothing goes silent here

even dirt churns articulate

and rain—

oral silvers sliding down maple leaves

slippery with communication.

Everything inanimate

insistent on the audible version,

an erasure of sense/

canal-crushing orange.

### THE WASTELAND III

Pleasure in repetition, pleasure in yoghurt, banana, spinach, pointer weighing down a button and swish, plep, zzzmmmm, I am a new man. I will not punch the bag, or pluck stray hairs from my chest. The routine keeps the irises alive, keeps collards green, reaching to feed. I am not the five silver rings but when I smooth them over my fingers, at the same time, each morning, it sturdies the definition so that maybe I am, or maybe I am the long hair, pulled back from my face, tucked under a hat. Meticulous routine. I put the socks on left and right with the same pull, each morning, how good it feels to be something new, something other than a husband.

## THE GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE V

What spark struck with the flinted crest of this wave of cold steel.  
Needle articulating the center of your forehead whispers calm  
over a trillion fibrous chemical pulses. Stalagmiting the organ  
are the rounded tips to preempt the pallid face of your nerve core  
impaled. The skin, the way it's always breaking. The trauma,  
the way it's always a whole, singular apple, still-life in the gut,  
until tissues crawl forward, map the length of your largest organ.  
Hence the spindle's welcomed delivery, cold in the muscle. A touch  
of red blood on a white cotton ball, and the promise of a dissipating  
itch. And maybe, if enough needles are shoved into the head—  
a new trauma.



THE WASTELAND V

A man tells me my body isn't for him

*but it'd do just fine for someone else.*

He makes a map out of disease

follows it back to the distillation,

the rocks in a glass. There is tenderness

in the tending,

but not in the tendency.

The knife is riddled with the pith of an underripe lime.

With a cut

the skin would pucker

the opening

a sharp gasp for grace.

## THE GEOGRAPHIC LIVER

Today I thought I might love man

because I can't have man.

Grey-autumnal-yellow mines concrete smiles  
out of the homecoming court.

I carve out of the day: time—  
for letters

and trivials. The work is born, again, a wing without a body.

A wing without a body/the work is born again.

Gathers earth instead of wind.

How many parts to fly the poem?

Out of North Carolina's mantle,  
a stranger scoops red clay

for to kiln, heat, palm,

as I further remove from the land

in the stroke of a key.

Your memory bangs on my oil-drummed torso.

In the bottom of my big toe, I put our love.

Sometimes it swells.

Other times,

it's the first to know the river.

I sculpt out time, again,  
touch my organs  
through my skin—they are there, after all—plummy tissues suspended.

I put our love in my liver  
and filter it out.

Still, more time,  
still, more time,  
still, more time,

for a word, no,  
words—  
mute as brick  
when read alone

or our words,  
bell clappers in our bellies,  
never put to page;  
they hit walled muscle, and swing back  
not ringing  
but creating space;  
pendulums.

## BETWEEN

Aloe stems rise toward the thaw  
but the windows hold no  
imperial warmth. Fermented carrots  
gurgle in a mouthy belly.

When the versicolor circles  
hide in plain sight,  
arms have reached a peaked pale.  
The mouth says *quiet now*.  
The tongue wonders who.

The desert flower  
on the white calendar  
blooms each morning  
to remind  
that this is a loop.

Exposed to two hours  
of silence a day  
mice developed new brain  
cells associated with  
memory, emotion and knowledge.

We are not mice.  
The principal asked  
the girl what was going on at home  
nine times before she would say.

THE WASTELAND VI

Eat crow—

a woman, an especially old

or ugly one.

Include plumage.

*Well ain't you a silly thing*

*and a pretty one at that—*

the man.

*Oh sweetheart—*

the other man.

Look, clumpfoot cabbage

oozes along the highway edge.

Out

the truck.

Look how straight—look how good and straight—look how straight this line.

Use body—look how good and straight—use every length, look how the curve.

In the truck. Out the pen.

Look, look how thin and sharp.

Look.

A woman is making a weapon out of nothing

out of everything she has.

## BEYOND THE LAST GEOGRAPHY

born a spiraled fennel bulb for no one,  
night eye improved with braided bilberry  
as there was no hour then for reasoning or fear;

a fox smelling color and a lid blinking east to west,  
articulation without the bucketed palm upon the earth  
so the bulb fed the dirt over and over

and the dirt fed the mantle and nothing hungered  
in the heat of the interior, on the plateaued iron  
of nickel, of magnesium, of men.

## II

### COMMON CONDITION

*Judgement maybe it's when being fragile I hallucinate you best*

– ALICE NOTLEY



## COMMON CONDITION

You need to sit still to write the rare image, but in movement: extraction,

New York, the silver rims, silver links, above a cemented sidewalk, bobbing, ticking  
in step to the Georgia O'Keefe exhibit.

If modernism a distillation

if extraction a purification,

then maybe stillness

doesn't belong in art.

I couldn't say. The lines were long, clean, black and white.

I felt pride rubbing against embarrassment by the loud florals of my cotton dress.

On the walk home, the moon was bright against the dimlit Bed-Stuy block.

The moon, the same-cycled self, human number.

We are never completely still.

The tail of a rat alert against tinned trash. A woman in a gown, on a brick stoop.

No rare images left.

I met men at a bar in a different neighborhood.

with paintings of pastel vases  
About the ceiling giant canvases

still-lived, white walled. We gave them a second look, not a third. Staring into our drinks

into the eyes of each other

and others.

Extracting the essential parts. We are never alone,  
never  
safe in our keeping;

same-cycled self, human number, the sun coming up on the walk home.

## COMMONALITY

Alice Notley's yellow Palo Blanco evades her  
and she's the first to admit it  
over our Thursday night dinner.

She swallows white anchovy toast,  
gulps Friulian wine. Until something about  
her hatred for tiki furniture  
wakes me to a backyard,

the magnetite-crystal and witch hazel  
tucking into an uncertain altering. Some mistakes  
are more feminine than others.

I've been lying like water in a cubed tray.

I've been traveling like a Cane toad.

Notley, what pesters you: we are one in battle.

## CONDITIONED

A poetry contest said: fresh, explorative, unique, inventive.

I am not an inventor;

these are old, tired shapes.

Give me new letters, something sculpted

and porous: thumbprints at the scene of a perhaps: bubble in the spit:

every iteration an invitation to change the one before it.

## FOR BOLAÑO, OUR COMMONALITY

Perhaps, the work is born a tree,  
ages in circles, reaches and rings.  
The criticism is the moss.  
The reader is the nesting.  
Or, the work, a feather,

requires many other works  
to fly the wing,  
sustains an empty sky  
but nothing more. No matter,  
the work always continues on

alone or otherwise. Until, one day,  
it doesn't. For all things die:  
the sun, the earth,  
the criticism, the reader  
and the farthest reaches of the work.

## COMMON CONDITION II

On the wine bottle label  
the mountains are reborn  
geometric rainbows  
pointing toward the lip;  
I want to wear their colors  
off my wrists, consider the sound  
blue when it knocks  
against green,

foiling the prisms.

Where this bottle is from, where this glass lip was blown,  
where the label was painted and pressed and glued.  
I take of that. Pressed in me a mortified desire for consumption.

I am this way, a rain cupping palm.

I live along a bordering,  
collect rust on the blue bike and gum it.

Spill out  
perform water.  
I taught myself to

eat the strawberries, a slow drag,  
eyes along the grass line—one long ingestion.

### COMMON CONDITION III

In a dark restaurant

Crosby spins. The needle in a groove catches

as I open back up the right hand rash.

I open it back up.

The lamb cut of the day is a T Bone & a Rack.

Who slices the animal.

Who ties the herb sachet with butchers twine.

Who pours Vouvray.

We are never alone.

The skin reabsorbs the release. A spread.

The coarse, black dog hair made it all the way here  
gathered in the cotton catch of underwear, I notice,  
in the public privacy of a stall,

we carry so much additional DNA.

In a hunch, back on the stool,

I'd like to look at you like a ceiling  
gazing upon a kitchen table, set for an anniversary,

but I can't look at you at all  
because you are not here.

I find a green worm in the arugula and eat it.

COMMONALITY,

wipe him with it—

the sweat spilling from palm.

Does he go bodily

curing himself.

Does he run

like a spiral, thumb-printing north.

Know his name

the source of your separation.

Violent is the release of you

and perspire can mean to glow.

SELF PORTRAIT WITH DISEASE

Thoughts are blue

and thick like London clay.

Bar-rot slinks up

the arms, doused in

tea-tree oil.

After coffee,

the head splits wood.

A sanguine fungus, or maybe,

there is no body,

arms like the

spiraling, springing

succulents,

warming in the pane.

The head splits happily.

Open.

Once a candid knocking

now another hole

to account for.



## A COMMONALITY

My knee is yarrow pink

    in its healing, delicate new tissue,  
still bleeding at the center. I dip down,  
    ease into the dressing,  
cycle through.

    You left the first-aid  
        on the junk shelf along with the blue hammer,  
the masking and your Nalgene.

It helps sustain the habit I scooped out of you.

I drink from the Italian canning jar as I rise,  
find an accumulation in the silence of the floor wood,

    the clean, white dishes  
and the ritual—

I water the plants, pretending you

    are here  
        to tell me:

*I never see you do this.*

It is our game.

    You like to believe

    I make them grow  
        with nothing but a thought.

DESIRE CAN FEEL LIKE AN ITCH

You found the headboard,  
tender-loined, drunk-leaning on Van Ness.

The bed bugs drank,  
North to South the length of my body;  
they feed at night

in threes.

I dangled my eyes off the spider webs  
in the corner of our apartment and lost blood  
as you split open like a walnut shell,  
spilled meat,  
fed the night.

Your black hair loved mirrors  
and women's fingers,

so I took bleach baths  
and tried to return  
what you gave me  
through the drain.

You don't think  
withholding information is lying

so women follow you home  
and you think of them—

a braided, ribboning,  
chain of daisies.

## THE ELASTICITY OF NIGHT

snaps and snaps and snaps

and memory loves

the poem.

Clomp the wood

with the rhythm

keep it to yourself

or

kill an unsuspecting silence

choke open

bloom.

## COMMON CONDITION IV

She was telling me *the knives in the kitchen*.

She has this baby made of meat and spine,  
an s-shaped tube for a heart. She was telling me  
*her little organs are growing inside me*.

I said what about the knives, what about anxiety and the baby.

*It goes away, it goes away, the baby sedates you, the expanding  
of organs. It makes the body calm.*

I said, but you walked street-side over the short-walled bridge.

And the subway ride, I said, I saw you.

The oven timer goes off. Steam gathers between us.

I say trust, we say *trust*, I say trust.

*And they're just thoughts*. She says,  
*and anyway it's just the knives in the kitchen*.

Yes, I say, they're just thoughts. *Just thoughts*, she says.

Yes, but maybe a drawer, I say, maybe a drawer instead of just hanging there.

*Perhaps*, she says, and slides one off the magnetic strip to cut the meat.

## COMMONALITIES

The world hangs from the beak  
of a Dusky Grouse.

The worm death bound,  
desperate for the earth.

What parts of yourself would you give away,  
make new in some other assumption.

W O M A N,

if you want to practice killing you have to extend

like a blossom on oxygen and carry blue

up to the roof

while burying

your bulbous, knotted hand in the hole

the dog dug for the ragged, stuffed animal.

You have to let dandelion greens open out

from your throat, sound your mouth yellow,

and then, spilling into a tuft of spindles—

you seed the air.

## FISSION

Your skin is inhabited,

the yeast builds an indestructible home

in the gut.

You are each day closer to the chanterelle body.

Trust your fungal skin

trust the man

or abandon your causeway

gather many others—

a greedy Norway maple absorbing

all the nutrients from the soil,

suffocating any other plant that tries

to thrive

in its path.

COMMON CONDITION V

I told him

I loved him

even though I didn't

as the backhanded

bellowing

of a blundering

homeless man bled

out and married

the drone

of the Market Street trolley

creating the sound

of a mouth emptying

into a *HUUUMMMM*

so the word *love* got lost

so he had to ask, *what*,

so I had to lie, again,

so he grasped my hand—

so happy to be fooled.



## COMMON CONDITION VI

The snow falls faster than a word can be recorded. As the evening pours out I find myself over-explaining to a breath. Is it narcissistic to speak expecting a listener.

A pothos plant hangs above my bed, turning, going brown in the waning winter. I'm so angry. I burn days-old baguette in the oven, let smoke lift off and it passes.

Over the phone, my self is carried along with my voice, not because I want it to be so. If I could remove from this I would—the way we remove from land to enter water. I right the receiver into the might of possibility, the fury,

and hang up, without hanging anything up, spread out, belly up, and let heat from the popcorn-ceiling vent resist the rise. I recommit to the perpendicular agreement. Lift off.

It's contagious. This ritual. This standing up.

III  
A REVOLT

*And what I most regretted were my silences...*

–Audre Lorde

## FATHERS & BROTHERS & MEN

My brother and I thought a drainage pipe was a portal to a gully of giant, yellow salamanders and the ability to fly. We hung around it, waiting for some strange fauna. Dandelions grew in the muck by the opening. Broken glass gathered around the copper. That was the summer we spent every other weekend at Brenda's house, where my Dad was—quite suddenly—living. Our room was a cold, unfinished basement. Sleep set in thanks to Jack and a torn pink blanket that would later disappear. Spray-paint in the cellar turned rocks into gold. We threw the stones into a wagon and peddled them throughout the neighborhood. Made quarters off of little white lies no one believed.

How many men do I think about when I think about Brian Eno? Jake from Philadelphia. We are sitting in The Royal Cuckoo and they're spinning *Taking Tiger Mountain*. We have beers. It is dark. I love him but I haven't told him. Then there's Chad. We are in Asheville and it is night and he's telling me how he writes of smoke obsessively during winter. This time Eno is ambient, quiet backdrop, a swelling. And now, it is you, Jesse in my new bed, you hooded and waning. You still as a warm jet. How many men do I think about when I think about other men.

The first time I became aware of my intuition was the morning my cousin Kaitlyn dropped me in the supermarket, cracking my head open. I came to in a pool of blood, my Auntie Karen crying above me, touching me without touching me. Kaitlyn insisted on throwing me onto her back and carrying me around the store. I didn't want to. I had a feeling. And so I got nine stitches in the back of my head that fell out in some boy's swimming pool in the summer of 92. He tried to put them back into my skull, reopening the wound.

## INTIMACY IN THE INANIMATE

The blue oxygen mapped the illumination  
of nothing  
but a cardboard Heineken box,  
    green and white diction,  
a persuasive red star  
    melting  
yawning  
    into the inarticulate expanse.

You hated the feel of the sand, you  
were not without your rubber,  
    your cork, your soles, those socks,  
those days. There was less at stake  
and I could be fucked by you  
and not feel anything and that felt good.

    You did not ask because what would I say.  
Keep looking, there, into that control.  
Always on top, removed from the Atlantic,  
on the same greased mattress *quiet*.  
When you touched me. You never touched me.

## OUR CONSERVATION

Unlike aloe or dogwood

human cells are without walls.

The membranes—self-contained—

permeate selectively a lineal history—

the nucleus containing the trauma.

## FATHERS & BROTHERS & MEN II

In Greece, a man put his hand up my dress, attempted to grab my vagina. I was 19. There were dogs lapping, pigeons crooning, vendors selling sandals and meat. How strange—the way a foreign language dissipates when someone is preying on your body—how suddenly there is only one universal language. The world calling back to you: *You are a woman. Your words are no good here.*

The final time a man grabbed me he grabbed my ass. I was waiting tables at a restaurant in San Francisco. I broke a PBR bottle on the mahogany bar and cut his neck open.

This is not true. I was held back by stray men before I could get to the folds in his skin. The bottle hit the linoleum and the bartender kicked me out.

My father wants to talk. He's desperate. He's sorry. He's changed. He sends letters to the restaurant, emails to my old friends, presses messages into my brothers, but he dare not call. My male therapist says there's much to do, but struggles to help me make sense of it. There's no sense making here. Here, there is nothing and everything coming together to make a slow breath.

When I was 13 my older brother told me to take care of my mustache. I spent years ripping most of the hairs off my face after that. I can still feel the wax warm and running down my lip. He told me: *No one is going to buy the cow if they can get the milk for free*, after I lost my virginity. He has two little girls now. I wonder what he tells them.

No one has ever lost a virginity. It's not a bracelet or a mind.

Jared told me I had gained weight. He encouraged me to not order the bread bowl and just have soup. I ordered the bread bowl and let the chowder run down my chin as he sat across from me drinking coffee. Sean loved it when I gained weight because my breasts would swell up. I don't know which is worse.

Hey mama, baby, sugar tits, peaches, white bitch, little slut, cunt, legs, stems, sexpot, cum guzzler, cum bucket, hoe, cum dump, bitch bitch bitch, girl, little girl, tits, ass, no ass, dumb ass, baby baby baby baby, little stupid fucking bitch whore fucking look at me when I'm fucking talking to you don't you fucking walk away from me.

When I was 15 I went to a house party and introduced myself to an older man whose name I don't remember. "Georgia. Nice. I really like those peaches..." He grabbed my left breast and held.

## FOR JACK

The baseball bat was hickoried and splitting in the hands of my brother whose language was the autumn massacre of milkweed. There were small worlds in the pods that kept the monarch larvae satiated. Watched them wriggle in the ooze. What did we know of the earth. Our father flew carrier pigeons to our mother's house so we might feel closer to him. None ever came.

I love my father today which is always odd. I try to send this love along. I chase the memory of my brother to the bottom of my spine where the ache lives. The feeling is an extension, knows no skin.

We, silent, snapped the milky heads, harvested the weed sap. As the autumn sun sucked summer humidity off the granite stone I peeled bark off the birches. Jack threw sticks at reeds. The conservation was willing, bending towards the small-hand-slaughter.

If a stranger might want to feel my love they could hover over my lower back when I crane. I keep it there—in that small wince.

Our gates anchored in a tangle by earth's proximity—my brother and I did not argue, speak, when we were out in nature. Our small destructions soothed the anger into a warm lull, slid it into the bread of our bodies. Later, his anger grew up and out of him like a bloom.

I gather mine in the invisible pocket. Love folds into it until I am unsure. I am so full of shame.

Today, my father would be made-new with my voice but I reach out to my brother instead. A satellite, a tethering without a line, he is there so quickly. So light, now. Where did he put all that knowing. It snows, it melts, it snows, it melts. It snows. It melts. He is free in his forgiveness.



## THE NAMING OF FIVE MEN

### SILK WORM ELBOW

This trinket house is yellowing kitsch,  
cinnamon coffee, bags of garlic from back east.  
A cavity in the mouth that's filled each morning  
teases the nerve in the gunmetal cold of the basement.  
At the window a chipmunk pup scream  
and the spindle tree, seeded, encroaches the spines  
of mystery novels. Silver rings, silver rimmed face  
and silverfish—all attic ridden—feed on the starched,  
crawl above a rosemary, lavender, mint, cream  
bathroom because there are traces of women  
in the folds of skin on the back of his neck.

### EYE LASH

Filthy this a blue bandana  
holds treasures and I'll never  
wash it because it smells of eucalyptus,  
royal neon martinis and the nitrogen riddled

### LAVELLE

chicken piss of Dora, the smallest hen,  
the one the others pecked incessantly until  
she bled. The width of my past  
cannot be measured in goldenrod or feet  
but still I count steps and cabbage heads,  
circle garden searching for some meter.  
How many daisy chains fermented on sand dunes  
the first year I fell west and folded over and over  
again onto the crests of the pacific like  
a ribboning

### SOFT SHELL BODY

how many chanterelles  
broke beneath my feet and disturbed the earth

### TWINE AND POTHOS

below Mt. Pisgah because methamphetamine;  
I spoke the language of the porch raccoons  
but couldn't perceive the ferns. A new idea  
unfurls and moves through this Black Mountain  
house, parting the blanketed doorways, asking we resist

## SILK WORM ELBOW

the reminisce, demanding we place the ruler  
back in the junk drawer. If we keep smoking  
through this arid winter, we could reckon  
our new wrinkles come spring, age like trees.

## FATHER

The past—a line along the road that breaks  
and paints the cement in twos then threes, until  
it blurs into one line and the numbers lose  
the fight against infinity—was caught  
between the hips of tar, the dips and lulls  
in old concrete, so that the driver lost  
his mind in linear, cold memory.  
His thoughts are paper moths that plume alive.  
He finds the sweet, small body in his head.

## BEING A WOMAN I THOUGHT

My Grandmother did not tend her asparagus. The shoots came out of the muck by the snapping turtle pond, every April, on their own. My Aunts hung around, bored in white linen, painted, cigarette-mouthed, skin. I thought being a woman meant little to no effort. Every effort possible. The girl cousins always in doily, matching socks, pink bloomers, red checkered dresses, red-ribboned. They wore their hair in rags overnight and tendriled like fiddleheads in time for church. Their confirmations were lacy rufflings. Under their tongues some bread I longed to know the taste of. I thought being a woman meant giving yourself to a long-haired man who always looked sad. In Brooklyn, my sister dressed me up with blue eyeliner, stuffed socks inside the golden heels so I could stomp the steel of the stairwell *hips, use your hips*. I thought being a woman was hair and nails; growing everything out. No, I thought being a woman was bare and trimmed; shaving everything off. My mother sucked in her stomach, complaining, while buttoning up her paisley dresses. Blonde in her hair, perm in her hair, red in her hair, blonde in her hair, brown in her hair, blow dried, ironed, feathering, fettered. I thought being a woman meant teacher or dancer or nurse or mother or vet. Congressman, weatherman, mailman, fireman, fisherman, salesman, chairman, craftsman, gentleman. My neck drooped off the tip of my spine towards the earth, heavy. My Grandmother corrected my posture with the stick of a broom. Worried about the drooping of my future breasts.

FOR MY MOTHER, DESPITE

At the window,  
    children reborn in a slow parade.  
                    One is a green,  
glittered, pipe-cleaner  
    butterfly.  
One is reborn  
                    the consideration of an empty river,  
dances in a wooden canoe  
                    dragged along the tar.  
The sticky sensation of memory,  
    of milkweeds in the hooded season  
                    of my past, emerges.  
We used to fiber our stomachs  
    with the pits of olives, grew watermelons  
in the bottom of our bodies and spilled  
    the pink flesh of gourd organs  
from our mouths.  
    A blueberry bush  
                    danced through my window.  
I ate them all;  
    my mouth turned a perennial  
indigo and I became the country's  
official bloomer, kissing  
    men and women into white  
bell flowers,  
    but when I woke  
        my Mother was throwing  
wet laundry onto the front lawn  
        and sinking her teeth  
into the thick glass of another bottle.  
                            The liver as gland,  
                    branching and uniting,  
the liver as pâté, the liver as milk thistle,  
    tumeric or dandelion, regenerating,  
requiring sterilization, a clean,  
    healthy cut  
and time.  
    Or maybe my mother will be reborn  
        a beluga and the only liquid  
            she will ever know will be  
ocean water. At her disposal,  
    all the arctic cod and halibut  
        she could ever want  
and the words  
    acidity, minerality and stone-fruit  
will make a home in the mouth  
    of another.

WHEN MY FATHER SPEAKS

night dilates

the war,

everything feels in the dark for something.

The dead wander his mind

but he'll never say.

He parachutes his moon hands

when he lies,

imagines God considering him fondly.

Manmade

they say

as if anyone else

would have the audacity.

## THE CONSERVATION

Female ants gather food upon the earth  
while males tunnel the ground open.

The endless world below is not for you  
until it is.

The crabs leeched, right to left,  
the horizon of Mother's underbelly,  
a gift from Father:  
unaffected amoeba,  
choking open Vietnam.

He is this way  
tinning the can.

## THE CONSERVATION II

They're marriage.

    Their marriage.

        There: marriage

hangs off,

    loose skin

        mantling.

Apricot and coffee

    different

to the taste bud

without time.

Spoon elderberry,

lose memory,

    empty like cold

moving through a conduit of throat.

Some mistakes are more masculine than others.



## ORNAMENT

My mother, a sand dollar—  
her radial pattern  
a crown of leaves—  
burrowed along  
the Atlantic sea bed  
in and out of clay  
until a starfish lay upon  
her hull  
and sucked her cool,  
fleshy,  
body  
into its own.

She was left  
a doily ghost,  
curing on the shore,  
when  
some earthly thing

combed,  
palmed,  
hooked  
brine-skeleton  
to  
dead  
limb,  
a  
dangle  
of  
bone.

IF YOU WANT AN OCEAN MADE OF WATER

you have to go to a woman.

You have to empty you out

until all that is left is an aching of limestone

and some salt.

The rock—refusing to dissolve

on the tongue—

burrows in the brow,

drinks from the skin

until the woman has drowned you.

## THE TRUTH

I ask my students if they believe people are capable of change.

I ask them this to get them talking

I ask them this to get them writing

but mostly

I ask them this because I am desperate for an answer.

If people are capable of change

then my father didn't molest me

because he changed

as in his impulses  
as in his desires  
as in his history  
as in his mind.

If people are not capable of change

then my father didn't molest me

because he was successful in stopping himself

as in once  
or twice  
or every day  
he touched  
who instead.

Most likely

(my students confirm)

the truth

is a combination of both.

Perhaps my father went weeks

without sexualizing me, perhaps years.

Perhaps he almost did

in a bathroom when I was ten.

Poured himself another Crown Royal instead and passed out in a chair.

It is possible therapy worked.

It is possible the pain he caused

strangled his desires

—

each one of their soft necks

—

to death.



It is impossible to take my sister's pain  
and murder it.

But sometimes

I think these pages

small crime scenes.

As in

in her honor

as in

his destruction

as in

all I have is this

and I would kill for her.

It is a particular kind of loss

of faith

of truth.

*So dramatic*

they say

and I want to tell my brothers

you have to understand

this IS a drama.

As in  
this is greek or biblical or Shakespearean or actually no one has ever written this.

But it happens.

It happens to children.

It happens.

All. The. Time.

And each time is another small drama.

But I don't know.

None of us know

what it was like for the other.

My brothers the same sex

and what to do with all that

but make a hollow

in the maple

with a soft fist

and repeat

so as never to repeat.

And me the opposite sex.

And my sister

I'll keep making weapons, here, for you

even though you don't need them.

I'll make them out of everything I have

And leave them for the future.

TWO WHO MADE ME

but in most things

her only

light on the leaf

the parakeets

named Sky and Sea

all books

the gathering

of a fist.

FOR MY SISTER

Small girl fingers periwinkles from black spirals.

After discarding the bodies—

salt-flesh dead in white sand—

she pockets the briny husks.

*You are killing*

*small innocent creatures.*

Shrugs

pulls another one off barnacles

rips snail from shell

collects another home.

## A REVOLT

A bell clapper

escapes the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and

A bell clapper

escapes the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and

A bell clapper

escapes the bronze body

rings      rings      rings.  
and          and



