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A Few Good Things

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A FEW GOOD THINGS

by
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To Miki—
For making every day worth the effort.

To Liem—
For being mine.

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And thank you to my parents—you guys have set the example time and time again. You make me believe in myself even when I don't want to. I can't ever stop thanking you for that.

ABSTRACT
A FEW GOOD THINGS
(Under the direction of Derrick Harriell)

This thesis is a collection of poetry dealing with depression, the body, love, family, poverty, and the slow ache of memory.

Ruminations on *A Few Good Things*

This project was born out of a desire to explore my abilities as an artist; it became an opportunity to explore myself as a person. In this collection, I walk the roads of my childhood, watch carefully the adult I have become, and speculate with great trepidation the woman I will be. Here, I write about depression, the body, love, family, poverty, and the slow ache of memory.

The first poem I wrote specifically for this collection was "*BRUCE/OXFORD*"—which describes in brief images the two towns I have spent the last twenty years alternating between. I did so without realizing how much "home" would become the underlying theme for nearly every other piece I wrote. As such, I have divided this thesis into a three-part chronology: the past, the present, and the future. Each moment in time in its own way uncovers what "home" has meant to me, and what it will mean to me, for all the years of my life.

To write forty-some-odd poems, one must be willing to wade through a great deal of literature that is concerned not only with a completed product, but also with the skills and sensibilities necessary to craft a well-made work of art. The first step taken in this project was to read Kim Addonizio's and Dorianne Laux's *The Poet's Companion*. The first few chapters of the book are concerned with the different types of subject matter often comprised in a poem, and each chapter's end offers a list of questions and/or prompts that may help a poet to start writing. These prompts proved invaluable in my attempt to create a collection. For example, prompts such as "Write about what you do on a daily basis," "Write about a ritual that accompanies death," and "In what ways do you feel privileged?" led to the construction of my own poems like "Running," "A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral," and "Privilege."

How does one go about making the mundane seem extraordinary? With "Running," I focused on the landscape that surrounded the speaker. Asphalt that is still "soft/enough for our feet/to leave gently dented/imprints," and a winter cold that is "caustic" in the throat. I ended on the image of two people—the speaker and a companion—made small as "two dark cinders." Not only does this zoom the lens out from the speaker and remind readers of how insignificant an action is taking place, but it also allows the tone of the poem to take on a quiet brevity—much like the feeling I experience when running.

The Poet's Companion was littered with samples of poems that were meant to inspire a budding artist. Rita Dove's "After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed" was one such poem. Dove's use of the supposed erotic alongside the innocent inquiries of a three-year-old allows for a sharp contrast that only serves to highlight the question of womanhood. At what point does a vagina become a corrupted thing? Dove begins her poem by writing, "My daughter spreads her legs/to find her vagina:/hairless." The speaker then details how her daughter demands to be shown the speaker's vagina in return. Dove writes, "the same glazed/tunnel, layered sequences./She is three; that makes this/innocent." The speaker is aware of a line between girlhood and womanhood that the daughter does not understand. Dove blurs this line by having the image of two vaginas at two different stages in life stand next to one another in the same "innocent" scene. The ideas Dove presents here are the same ones that inspired my poem "On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On)," which is concerned with my own struggles and misunderstandings with womanhood from the age of six, to the age of twelve, thirteen, eighteen, and twenty-two, and which culminates in a similar experience with a three-year-old child who is just beginning to understand her own body.

While "Learning" attempts to end on a note of contentment and comfortability with self, a great deal of my other body poems are written with the understanding that it is difficult to love a body that is

not up to societal code. "Got the Morbs," "A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don't Like About My Body," and "Belly Fat" were all poems I wrote in response to the question—"what do you find difficult to love about yourself?" While "Got the Morbs" is a poem addressed to a lover who cannot understand the difficulties of living with depression—who denies the existence of such a disease, even—"A Non-Comprehensive List" and "Belly Fat" are both concerned solely with the physical body, and namely the issues I have accepting my own. Though "A Non-Comprehensive List" was spurred on by nothing more than a particularly dark moment of self-loathing, "Belly Fat" was the result of a prompt presented to me by the poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil.

As an acknowledgement of her efforts as a teacher, which are unparalleled, but also as an acknowledgement of what she has inspired in this thesis specifically, I must expound upon Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Throughout my time in her Advanced Poetry Course, Nezhukumatathil presented a series of writing challenges, each designed to enhance her student writers' abilities to observe, analyze, and record the world in a way that felt unprecedented and unexpected. Under her tutelage, we created beautiful things. "A Poem About Dragon Fruit and Teeth Whitening" and "Why I Write" (among others) were the direct result of Nezhukumatathil's prodding.

"A Poem About Dragon Fruit and Teeth Whitening" recounts two episodes I experienced during my time in Vietnam. At the urging of my husband's family, I tried dragon fruit and had my teeth professionally whitened. While eating dragon fruit is not a particularly spectacular event, it was something I did solely out of a desire to please my parents-in-law. When Nezhukumatathil instructed us to write a poem "about a fruit that isn't about a fruit," I realized I had gotten my teeth whitened for the same reason—because somebody had asked me to.

Prior to hearing Nezhukumatathil's prompt, I had never considered why I write. It was something I began doing at a young age for no other reason than I had a knack for it. It wasn't until I

reached the end of that poem that I realized I was fueled by a desire to create for my children a world better than the one I had been born into. That seems a common enough reason, but I hadn't known this was *my* reason until I had finished the first draft of "Why I Write."

Do not misunderstand: my professors and the contemporary poets I have studied influenced more than just the subject matter of my poems. Ross Gay's award-winning collection *catalog of unabashed gratitude* introduced me to an entirely new style of poetry. Gay's utter disdain for punctuation allowed for exceptional fluidity in his collection; this was something I tried to mimic in "Baptism" and "Pulling Out My Own Splinter by Myself, For the First Time, Age 25." For both poems, the purpose of sacrificing punctuation was to create for readers a feeling of urgency, of quickness, and of eagerness—the same feelings one might experience if doing something irrational, like jumping into a canal, or if trying to end a painful experience, like digging out a splinter.

In "Belly Fat," I adopted Gay's use of the word "Friends" to address my audience. The intimacy of such a word draws readers in immediately, and the personal nature of the poem—the confidence issues that come with having fat, force them to read the poem as though it were a friend, or a sibling, lamenting their body.

Gay's use of long-line couplets became for me a standard of sorts. I returned to the form again and again to create what I believe to be three of the strongest poems of my collection: "In My Closet," "Privilege," and "From the Camaraderie of Poor Folk." While these three contain quite a bit more punctuation than Gay included in his poems (except, perhaps, for "In My Closet"), the effect achieved was essentially the same: the poem became a gray area between "poetry" and "fiction." The long lines

allowed for a distinct narrative to emerge while the heavy use of metaphor and simile kept the piece "poetic."

Much like Nezhukumatathil, Blair Hobbs is a poet and a professor whose instruction was instrumental in the creation of several of my pieces. Hobbs was my introduction into poetic form—in its original arrangement, "Hiraeth/Southbound" was a ghazal. But because it was about three hundred words too many to be considered true to form, "Hiraeth/Southbound" was remade into the much less structured poem it is now. Several weeks after Hobbs' class, however, I revisited the ghazal to create "January 27." Where the ghazal had failed for "Hiraeth/Southbound," it became crucial for "January 27." The repetition of "land" allowed me to emphasize the indignation and horror I felt on behalf of the residents of seven countries who were no longer permitted entrance into the US.

"Ode to the Otter Pop" and "Sunday, After Church" were both created under the guidance of Hobbs. The Otter Pop was a sweet treat I loved dearly as a child; so, when Hobbs first introduced me to the ode, it seemed only fitting that I should address a confection that had been the focus of many of my younger days. In "Ode to the Otter Pop," I used a great deal of alliteration ("Sweet summer syrup/sticky nectar," "Arctic aisle aborigine") and short lines to quicken the pace of the poem. Traditionally, shorter lines create a slower read, but the presence of aforementioned alliteration—as well as the use of assonance and the extended Otter Pop/French Revolution metaphor—allowed for a fast-paced poem.

Of course, neither of those poems, nor any of the other poems in this collection, would have been possible without heavy editing and a concentrated effort on my part to make each poem the best possible version of itself.

Over the last four years, I have been privileged to meet some of the most renowned writers this country has to offer. Whenever I speak with these writers, regardless of their position as poets, novelists,

playwrights, etc., I always ask them what they find to be the most difficult part of the writing process. Without fail, the unanimous response has been: *revision*.

To revise a work is to look at art you have produced, a thing that is very much part of yourself, and to tell it that it is not good enough. You have to be willing to pull an Abraham and put your child on the chopping block.

And revision is lengthy. It takes months to perfect what took only days to create. It is difficult to look at the same poem a hundred times, to change the same line over and over, to move a single punctuation mark back and forth, without starting to hate the poem and yourself. But this is necessary. From revision is born the best of what a writer can be.

When I first started revising *A Few Good Things*, I began with the poems that had the least issues. I made slight changes in enjambment to allow for more fluidity in the poem; I adjusted stanza breaks to create longer pauses; and I changed diction to connote more specific tones. These were the easy fixes. Poems like "A Night Out" and "For Ann and Catherine, Whoever They are Now" featured small—but ultimately essential—alterations like this.

Other poems suffered heavier losses. "Ode to the Otter Pop," "Photograph of Towels Out to Dry in a Mississippi Yard, c. 1955," and "A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral" were each originally over double the length of their completed versions. "For My Mother" lost its entire final stanza. These poems and more were whittled down to the bones of themselves, all for the purpose of creating a more organic piece. They had become bogged down by extended stanzas and overly-expositional lines that I had enjoyed writing—and still enjoy reading—but that were a detriment to the overall success of the poem.

Poems like "Sunday, After Church" and "Hiraeth/Southbound" were treated quite the opposite. Where some poems required cut after cut, others required a cracking open. For "Sunday, After Church,"

the original was a little longer than a haiku, but grew into a poem with seven stanzas. "Hiraeth/Southbound" was bound in a traditional ghazal form that severely damaged the emotion I was trying to convey. What was meant to be a comment on the relationship between a mother and a daughter became restricted and unfeeling. By allowing myself to let go of the repetition "home" at the end of every second line, I was able to achieve a much more developed piece.

And some poems were rewritten entirely. "A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don't Like About My Body" kept nothing of its original self. Initially, I had intended to use light, capricious imagery to depict a dark theme, but failed to do so entirely. Ultimately, one half of the poem became very similar to "Belly Fat" in nature—an ode to the body I could not make myself love. The second half reversed this and became an ode to the parts of me I do love. This was one of the earliest poems I wrote for this collection and one of the last poems I revised. In doing so, I was gifted the great realization that it more than okay if the product you are left with is entirely different to the product you began with. That is, at least partially, the purpose of revision.

Of course, revision is not limited to the body of a poem. A great deal of the pieces featured here began their lives under much different titles. "Learning" became "On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On)"; "Clothing" became "I Didn't Realize How Much of Kindergarten I Experienced Through Clothing"; "Eulogy" became "A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral." I rarely explicitly state what my poems are about within the text; in changing the titles of these poems, I was able to create for readers a clearer understanding of what events or subject matters my poems hoped to address. For this collection, the title is necessary for understanding the poem. They often specify the nature of the speaker and the intended audience. The first version of "Future Scene from a Car Ride With My Half-Vietnamese Daughter" was titled "When She Leaves." This led to a great deal of confusion for my readers who didn't understand who "she" was or why she was leaving. Forcing

myself to come up with more specific, more detailed titles allowed me to understand just how easily a few words can make or break a poem.

The majority of the works presented in this collection were reactionary in nature. They were responses to prompts from professors, manuals, and a myriad of published poets who ranged from Donika Kelly to Sarah Kay to Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib. They were written not only in an attempt to justify the time I have spent at the University of Mississippi, but as proof to myself that I am as capable as any other writer out there, so long as I am willing to put in the same amount of dedication and effort.

There was a conscience effort on my part to address issues that are continuously at the forefront of my mind: namely, sexuality and gender. And as happy as I am with the poems that do broach these topics, I feel it would be remiss to write this entire introduction without acknowledging those things not seen in my collection. As a child of the American South, I have had a long and complex history with a multitude of social issues: race, religion, class inequality. The fact that these topics are hardly mentioned in any of my poems bothers me.

But one of the greatest understandings I have gathered from this project is that there will always be things left unsaid—there will always be things that could have been done differently. It is the job of the artist to both accept this inevitability and to rage against it, always. The artist must persist, however vainly, to push themselves to the furthest reach of their limits and beyond, to create even when what is created is an ugly thing—to resist, even when the fight seems futile. I tried and failed many times before I completed the poems seen here. Some, I would not change a thing about; in fact, a few have not been changed at all. Still, I feel others have not yet reached their greatest potential. But with every poem, I attempted to create something that was and is a testament to what I wish to leave behind as a writer.

I publish this thesis with the knowledge that even if it is not all I wanted it to be, it will still be the first stone in a long road of artistic innovation. I will still continue to write and revise and struggle until there are no words left.

A Few Good Things

CONTENTS

I. BEEN

Hiraeth/Southbound [A Note to My Mother About Growing Up & Coming Home]

We began this story under fluorescents,
you (screaming) & me (squalling). I was blue
you, too when they wheeled
my fishtank away.

You threw out the name books
red, your favorite
so I am called after blood
and this love, unlanguageable

Me—small, maybe five— pulled
into the black you held my hand over the stars

you named them *constellations* [***big dipper, little dipper; great bear, little bear***]

In New York
I foraged beneath a great gray canopy wide as southern nights but less
clear
dug through the garbage ‘til I found your stories
hiding (where I left them)

A Thursday, the woods still green memory and a newness

the baby in my arms named for blood knows only concrete

you guide her barefoot over clovers

somewhere, a girl hums a wave crashes

we walk

A Memory, 2001

The future sits across an empty bay
and is hollow there. When my sister
calls I heard the wind and it echoed,
like fire, and we were two acorns

throbbing in the copper earth. Summer
and all things red; if I had been quicker,
or else if the nettle had grown slower,
maybe the heat could have stayed

longer and fuller, and happy at our
sweet return. I am still hurting that
hunger, running my fingertips over
those days, wishing, and calling,

and pushing my soot face against
a nylon net until the screen breaks
and I am sprawled against the wood, thinking
this is the first July
I have spent without water.

I Didn’t Realize How Much of Kindergarten I Experienced Through Clothing

I do not know there are children
who have never met 4 AM, me
in my *Lion King* pajamas—
a cinnamon toast prodigy, I know
where the butter and the bread
are kept—I can find them in the dark.

The television is a monster housed
in varnished wood and sat heavy
on our wilting carpet. I adjust the knobs
until Kay Bain in her Lane Bryant heather gray
three piece ensemble becomes an explosion
of unnatural colors. She reads off a teleprompter,
then forgets the words,
then laughs at herself, and her voice
is an echo that reverberates
across the shadows of my living room
and through twenty years of remembering.

Mom wraps bologna sandwiches in
newspaper and shoves them in our coats.
Mine is a velvet affair with neon planets
that I stroke again and again
until the fabric is worn through
and the planets are dark blobs
like someone has adjusted their knobs
and left them to implode, colorless.

I cry when I wear an all-white jogging suit,
and I beg to be dressed
in the same checked dress for a week—
the one with a metal chain strung
across the collar that feels
like a grown up’s necklace
circling my throat. There is a boy,

Jonah, who wears too big t-shirts
crusted in jelly and biscuit. Thanksgiving,
the class holds a feast made bright
with construction paper cutouts
and homemade feather headdresses—
they fill up our bowls with a soup
they say the pilgrims ate. We know
there is no eating this food, which

has too many green things, too many
garden things, too many things
that at home would be hidden
under a napkin. We know this, but Jonah
doesn't. He swallows bowl after
bowl until he is a Willy Wonka girl
and then his shirt is washed
in new stains: carrot oranges, squash
yellows, tomato reds. My mother

knows every factory in town, her
shirts are all smocks, her jeans
are all torn, when she comes home,
a ring of midnight all around her, I pick
loose threads from her sleeves
and roll them into balls for me
and my sister to flick back and forth.
One ball hits the circular tan
line on my mother's finger—she smiles,
perhaps weakly, and pockets
the ring she has been twisting round

and round. It is a bulbous
thing, with a dull green rock at its center.
It leaves a dent in her corduroys.

Photograph of Towels Out to Dry in a Mississippi Yard, c. 1955

Their lives have been washed
and pressed
single file.
They are worn through,
wrung and wrinkled,
wrought with fraying holes,
that stray
here & there—
left to grow coarse
and untouchable
in the noonday heat,
their skin like deserts,
harsh and dry,
starch scorching.
Worn linens, who
when new,
smelled of lilac
and inhabited the
highest pedestals—
the bar beside the tub,
the shelf above the sink,
the oven door handle.
Now,
they are shoved
into back drawers,
splintered cabinets,
and jagged baskets,
given names, like
“the orange one,”
“the striped one,”
used to mop up grease spills
and urine
or to wipe the hands
of those too downtrodden
to know
what wholeness
feels like.
They are hung
without wooden-peg
luxury. Bleached beggars
wrapped over
and pinned,
like sinners,
on a barbwire line.

On Biting

I must have been a fire-devil, hellion
kind of child if the scars
I left on Alex and Thomas and Diane
and all the little children on the playground
who got in my way say anything,

and though I never tell my mother, and the
teachers never believed what the other
little children said, I still remember
that hard porcelain already yellowed
carving memories into the skin

of fat little children and me a bit littler
easy to dismiss and full of so much,
like maybe anger, and probably anger,
mostly just anger that would grow
and stretch when I was bigger

until it became sadness and self-loathing
and the biting turned inward and then
outward again and all the longsleeves
never hid me like I wanted.

The Derma House Fridge, 1999

This is the belly of our house: a white monolith belching
blanched crowder peas still rich with garden smells

and a glass plate I am made to hold with two hands, it's surface
a grease wet paper towel sheltering a family of hand-breaded

chicken strips and livers my Daddy loves so good. They are
hot balls of iron that I spit into a pile for Half-Pint-the-feist

to lick and gobble until Granny swats him with the dusty end
of the broom. Me, the kindergarten artist, rewrites the skin

of the fridge with multicolored letter tattoos, their hard plastic
bodies spelling out words I still cannot read, and Crayola

masterpieces—*this is Mama's red dress, look I drew a cat
with spots and seven paws*. This is where we hang my child

hood, its still beating heart splashed across the humming
canvas, protecting the jewels inside: Lil Debbie's raisin cookie

delight and the cheap Piggly Wiggly bread loaf Granny
keeps hidden from the mold. Two bottles of Diet Coke,

a battalion of frozen popsicles, vanilla ice cream we made our-
selves, wrapped in cellophane porkchops, repurposed butter

bowls homing carrot-beans-and-corn stew, egg cartons whose
insides came from Clucky our backyard chicken and not

the milk aisle at the store. A blue and white bag of sugar
with its top rolled down and a layer of the sweet white snow

crusting to the edge of the paper, shoved to the back rack
where the ants will never think to look. A yellowed bottle

of buttermilk Poppy tricks me into drinking, I spit it out
near the chicken liver pyramid, and rummage in the bottom

drawer for a sweet thing, any sweet thing, to strip my tongue
its bitterness. Granny pulls flour and butter—never margarine,

she won't have it in her house—from the ice chest menagerie.

She wants to teach me how to make cookies

what I make is not cookies, but a half burnt
sheet pan of unrolled, uncut dough that even the fridge

can't stomach. Daddy eats them anyway, calls them delicious
in a voice that doesn't mock, wipes my cheeks and helps me clean

off a shelf to store them on. They sit, unappealing, beside the Mason
jar of lard and the still green tomatoes waiting patiently

to be sliced, breaded, and fried. We slide the bacon and heap the cheeses until I understand
there is always room for the things that matter

even rotting, even sour, even burnt.

Ode to the Otter Pop

I borrow mama's good scissors
the ones she saves for sewing
and lay you out
like Marie Antoinette.
I do not cringe at the sound
of your guillotine;
I have grown accustomed
to the beheading,
and I anticipate too much
the riches you promise.

Sweet summer syrup,
sticky nectar,
stainer of childhood
nightgowns,
frozen juice in a cell
ophane wrapper—
let us have you!
Louie-Bloo, my first
French lover, you sing
the blues
(and spill them too).

You are the last gift
my grandmother gives me,
in front of the fireplace,
before a court
of unappreciative parents,
who imagine me
unruly and
unrulable.
You will sink
in the belly of
my body, will
leave me shaking
from the rush.
My mother will hide you
in the places I cannot reach,
will wrap you in
paper coats, to
save my hands the sting.

Mole Eulogy

Sweet rat babies I loved so well—
why do we have so many cats?

And I never dreamed of being a funeral
director, not this young, but your bodies

are the shapes of graves and my little
hands are born shovels, so I will dig

these holes and name them after you. By
lunch time Daddy will have given up telling me

stop touching those nasty things and will
instead supply my tree root funeral home with

Doublemint wrappers and Piggly Wiggly paper towel
shrouds that will cradle you into the tomb.

The cats will yowl their dirge, a song to the wasted
snack, stolen before it could fill a stomach, and I

will read from my Jr. Bible until your souls
are safe in the house of my grandmother

who will keep you fed until I find you again.
When Daddy is not looking, I will bury

my nose into the soft fur of your belly, I will fill
my lungs with that sweet scent, and then lower

I will push you until your old self is just a heap
of gray mounded into the mud.

Woods Behind the Pittsboro House, 2002

The worst valley. A cough.
A couch. Eating before six.
Calling Mama at work. *Are you*
coming home yet. The wind
on my neck. Rough bark
and treeburn, slipping.
Terrain I thought I knew, empty
hands and skin given back.
A bridge. I never fell,
not once. Abandoned kitchens.
Ladybird buried, with her doll
she stole from me on my birthday.
I pray, still. The clearing is bright.
I sleep on moss

in the sun.

First Grade Autobiography

We live in the woods
with no name. There
is a half-built tree

house—a ladder,
a floor, but no roof
and no walls. We are
never warm. A roly
poly on the timber

doesn't know we have
stolen him from his
home to ours, and Dad

is a loose balloon memory,
a fond dot of red floating
in the back of our minds, buried
in the sky, a passing visitor
in gardens we can't reach.

A dandelion grows
under my toes. I am a sunburnt
sea lion. In the ditch we house
abandoned kitchens, make mausoleums
of their plastic, their dirt stains,
and the two hamster carcasses
resting there. When I grow up,

I want to be a dentist.
I make my stuffed lion
and my stuffed bulldog
and all my naked Barbies wait
in line outside the office I build
in my mother's bedroom.

I leave offerings to the hummingbirds,
hoping. They deliver messages, I hear
if you are a good one. I try
to be a good one.

I write out what I can spell,
and even what I can't, and leave
it on bits of scrolled paper
in their feeder, the one I hung

from a branch near my tree
house. It swings, half-empty,
until a bird with a fat worm
clasped tightly in its beak
and worm juice all down
its plumage lands and balances
the plastic cage.

Baptism

Annie was the first girl
Besides me to go swimming in the
Canal, though she left her
Dreadlocks tied up high in an
Elastic band that snapped and
Folded and kept her hair from
Getting wet which was good cause I
Heard you're not supposed to get them wet and
I don't know much about hair or
Jumping, but I swear she dove face first into the water,
Knees curled to her chest and
Lungs sweating like she had never
Meant to leave the water and
Now she was finally going home, and
Over the next few minutes she
Pulled herself back up to the sky and
Quenched the need for air and her locks were wet but she went
Right back down, to the bottom,
Somewhere near the edge of the world, until her
Toes touched a rough and sandy
Underbelly and her legs knocked at the earth's
Very first layer of rock that lay covered in plant
Xylem and rich bone molasses and she
Yowled, no yelped, no yelled like a communion-drunk
Zealot that she was never going back.

For Ann and Catherine, Whoever They Are Now

Bare back on the open waves,

mouths swinging and speaking dreams

do you remember that time do you?
of course

I do. It was summer, our

bodies just learning
to be women, and learning that *fat*

was not said
kindly.
A Gator rade bottle, wrapper
half-shed, buried in the muck.

Your dad screamed when you didn't

fit into clothes, *do you remember?*

Of course, I do. Your uncle told you
to wear a hat because he didn't know which side of you

was the top. At your aunt's funeral. *Remember that?*

Catherine threw up

every day that summer.
She stole pills, her mom was
a nurse, I think she pretended
not to see.

I remember.

we wade out into the water until our roundest parts have been drowned and you say they were just assholes, just jealous assholes who would say anything to make us feel bad and we're grown now and it's *better*, but nothing lets me forget that back then they joked and you laughed and I laughed and no one noticed the things in our eyes that turned to stone and sank to the floors of our bellies.

II. AM

BRUCE

Chicken manure
strewn across a barren field, clumped
black earth and moist worms.
In the winter,
cows will come
to eat the leftover grass.

Blackberries
that grow fresh and unbidden
on Aunt Judy's farm.
No one planted them;
everybody picks them.
They are tart on the tongue.

Honeysuckle
winding its way up
an aged and looming evergreen.
The kudzu is gnawing
hungry at the higher branches;
it is a danger to them both.

The sawmill,
horns that blow
at the late hours,
stodgy workers
yelling to men in hardhats
long after the sun has set.

Barley and bluegrass,
our organic mattress,
soft and airy, like stepping
on feathered water. Bare
feet and callouses
drowning.

OXFORD

Morning dew
dressing uniform lawns,
crooked finger and cocked
eyebrow beckoning
joggers to early morning
runs.

Mama's tea,
sugar rich, molassed
palette. A clinking glass,
the edge rimmed
with sweat, put on a coaster
if you value your life.

Red brick,
perfectly weathered, strung across
the town like telephone lines.
Buildings erected
indiscriminately, their mayfly
lives quick and patterned.

Smoke rumbled voices
pour out stories,
chimney like. We didn't
know anything about life
and neither do you.
They cough.

Worn leather shoes,
supple and perfectly fitted.
We climb hills like mountains,
unbury gold in the woods—
an abandoned train tunnel.
A lonesome creek.

To My Dad, Who is as Scared as I am About Me Moving Away

This is a thing I'm not good at saying
that my skin is a bird
and the city wants roosting—

the bricks here are molded and soft
with lichen that grows skyward
and this is a thing I'm not good at saying:

I still hold your face in my heart these days
and I want to make sorry, and tell you
that my skin is a bird

I never told it to fly, but the bricks
they spoke and said I'm a sparrow
and the city wants roosting.

For My Mother

I never could wash myself
of my mother's language.
The syllables she sang
to me in our old rocking
chair are still my lullabies. She
called me Sissy all my life, I
think I killed her

when I was twelve
and shied away from her
and all her nicknames. I
will never forgive myself
for denying her, for thinking
myself too good for her kind
of vocabulary. In college,

my best friend laughed
at the way I said 'picture'
why don't you pronounce the C?
I never thought before
about the heirloom
tongue she had passed
me, the tarnished silver and
slurred vowels. I touch

my tongue now and feel where
she touched it before, and there
are holes that held my grandmother's
voice and a uvula that rumbles
with the song of a thousand
more grandmothers. I let her
call me Sissy now, though she never does.

A Night Out

Follow me to a place where you cannot pronounce the names
and forget the tongue your mother gave you:
I will teach you how to breathe fire
and we will get drunk on moonlight
absinthe and the brine of the sea,

the bar will feel heady, you will stumble,
and I will carry you up the mountain—
do not be afraid of monsters
or the memories they keep safe for us
they remember far past the dying.

My mother would say: may you be in heaven
half an hour before the devil knows you're dead
we are not dead now, and this blood
is still young. If your lungs have
turned to volcanoes, let them

rest and we will make islands of them in the morning. You
are breadcrumb fumbling to the door, I am too
Hansel, too Gretel, not to follow
you in—I am eager for that sweet
life and my tongue is foaming.

Sunday, After Church

She is white-lace dainty,
eighty years old if a day,
stockinged feet in kitten heels,
grandchild on her hips
and at her knees.

Four of Idaho's best roll
loose in her cart,
bouncing off the box of Lipton
and into the Land O Lakes
she will drown
tonight's dinner in.

Triple sweet corn cobbs
are on aisle three
just past Sara Lee
honey wheat,
across from Great Value,
nestled in between the bagged
butter beans
and the frozen crowder peas.

Her boys, with hands
like bear-shaped
honey bottles,
stick to the Hershey
stamped sweets set low
on the endcaps—
at just their height—
and fill their soft brown
corduroy pockets.

Their dark faces pull
unhappy frowns
as Granny takes their chocolate
back,
piece by piece.

She suffers their whining
past the aisle eight
Dixie cups and Kleenex,
down the aisle nine
Charmin Ultra Strong and
Bounty Quicker Picker Uppers.

On aisle ten,

she grabs a fly swatter
off a dirt-stained shelf
and reminds two greedy
behinds what she had said
about making a scene
in the store.

Running

We breathe winter,
it caustic in our throats.
The frost gathers,
atom by atom
across the lone
and winding blacktop.

On Wednesday they tarred,
sulfur carves parietal art
into our lungs, leaves charcoal
reminders.

The asphalt is still soft
enough for our feet
to leave gently dented
imprints. Black grit
and gravel stick
in the rubber trenches
of our Nikes,
unnoticeable pebbles
that accompany
every stride.

Our calves and ankles
sing fire at us,
our hamstrings
mutinous. Glaring
sun—and us,
two dark cinders
dotted onto
a pale gray
hearth.

On Loving Someone Who Uses You (On Using Someone Who Loves You)

Ours is a razor burn
friendship: too much
friction, not enough
slickness and no balm
to salvage the skin
between us—even Burt's
best bees can't make
honey for our stinging
knees. There is no
undoing what has
become of the places
your hands have found,
these shins, these underarms,
these back-of-necks
have been made valleys
of red spotted hills
and still flaming
car wrecks. My
homegrown welts made
for the rubbing, your new
white jaw made
for the marking,
and the tapestry
of our bodies laid out
like crabs scuttling
over a sandfloor sea.

A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don't Like About My Body

Ten round toes and a flat stubbed nose
and thighs that stretch my pantyhose

Arms that swing with curtain fat
and ears the span of a well-brimmed hat

Straight line lips and birthin' hips
that rip new jeans and break the zips

Belly pooch like teddy bears,
yellow teeth and armpit hairs

A crooked smile, a broken wrist
finely tuned to go *click click click*

Squinted eyes, buckled knees
seven zits, all on my cheek

A tongue that hurts, hands that shake,
a voice that quivers, stops, and breaks.

Ode to the Only Body I'll Ever Have

Bet you didn't know a woman could look like this
bet you thought women were oceans
and flowers and cars and trees and stars
and great big metaphors

Bet you thought I came from a goddess, but here I
am, dirt girl, with hands so soft babies
sleep soon as their cheek
hits this white pillow

With a voice plucked from Southern mamas,
with a voice for singing hymnals,
with a hip that knows
how to hold laundry baskets
and bump doors closed.

I ain't no special one, but damn if I don't think I am.
This belly'll house somebody one day,
and these fat thighs have carried
me up mountains, so forgive me

if I think them too beautiful. You never
met a body like this, except
you have—every day
on the bus, in the schoolyard, behind the
McDonald's.

Every place, a girl with a body
and parts to be named
and mine so much the same as theirs,
with callouses and cellulite
and faces steady as stone.

A Love Poem

If fucking in the Disney World parking lot is what you want, let it be done.
Though I guess I should say making love
because we're at that point
but nothing about this feels like making—
it is the unmaking,
the undoing,
digging under sinuous muscle to find platelets and atoms,
grasping at your eye to find the lashes curled there,
pulling your hair from its roots just to tunnel deeper and further
into the most untouched
parts of your body, singing the song of your blood
until you howl in the wind,
until I taste the heat of your mother's body, that first blood,
pouring
over my tongue and into my cavernous stomach. Until
you are the girl and I am the wolf. Until
you break and learn to breathe through the cracks. Until
we are sky birds, shedding sweet down over all the valleys, until
we are fish rubbing scales against the brownest hollows of the river, until
the bells ring, until
the cat cries, until
a man dressed as Goofy knocks on our windows, which have not fogged,
and security is twisting their noses and the corners
of their mouths into open-lipped sneers, until
I am washed in the body of forgetting, until
your name is my only word and it is a holy word and the heart
pounding in my feet
is burst and throbbing.

You Were Driving

I looked away
for just a minute
and suddenly

all the masterpieces
had your face
all the songs

sounded like you
and every time I opened
my mouth,

a poem
with your name
fell out.

Belly Fat

Friends, here is the truth
of my body: it has spent
the life of itself
learning to fit
into smaller places. When
everything you are
is a roll
of cookie dough squeezed
into plastic coating, when
you are always
the round peg
in a box made
for hourglasses, always
the swollen
limb floating
aimless in the churning
waters. When you
make your mirror
a liar, close your eyes
and see thirty pounds
less of a girl, when
you make a list
of enemies,
write *scale*
at the top, *calories*
right under it, your body
a martyr to your
own fingernails.
There is a hurt born.
A hurt that goes
nameless but sits curled
in your blood like
venom, like heavy
iron, soaking your throat
and your thoughts
and the palms of your hands
until you bleed
with the wanting, until
all you touch turns
and becomes an untouchable
thing. Until you spend
July buried in cotton,
your skin smothered
and smothering
the memories of minds
who remember the

softness of your
undressed arms. Until
you go years without
knowing your
naked body. Until
the world shrinks
and you are a
Goliath, one stone
away from falling.

Got the Morbs

I'll call it a great gray monster and we'll both know
what I mean, because gray is sad and monsters

are frightening, any child can tell you this. When I
make noises in dreams, like screaming, but not—

more like whimpering or like a prayer I swallowed
that afternoon with two Advils and a Coke,

know it is not you I'm crying for or about, but I
still appreciate how you shake me awake, the callouses

on your hands are splashes of water, except
they aren't, they're sandpaper face scrubs,

either way thanks for not leaving me to fight
my figmented feral killer alone. I cry

on Wednesdays, and during the middle of Mondays,
sometimes in the bathroom, curled against the tile.

There's no reason for saying this, except that I know
you've started calling your mother

to ask how to stop me from yelling at pillows
and cleaning the bathroom, but you're wrong

you should be calling *my* mother, she's the original
pillow abuser, the first one to grow mold

all over her tile. But really, she isn't, that was my grandmother
who in '13 drank a rainbow of pills (but only slept

for a while). Maybe this is the reason, maybe
this is why: I want to tell you I've bought

the hammers for unbuilding this house. I'm dissembling
the timber to make new pieces of me, but I need you

to remember, however you can, that I've been rotting
for longer than you've been around, remember

too, how trained I am in splintering.

A Poem About Dragon Fruit And Teeth Whitening

A meat like blood and a meat like fingernail tips
and a body that is enflamed lush and leaking, a
squelch, almost, with black seed sprinkles and juice
that dribbles out of the corner of my mouth
and onto my old blue v-neck, the one I got from Martin.

I never put my tongue to the dragon before Vietnam,
and I never let bleach touch my teeth either, but
in that kitchen I did anything anybody asked of me,
so while my teeth were still rich with sting
and chanting their pain to my teeth roots, I bit into

the flesh and Liem joked and said *be careful it doesn't*
stain your teeth and that kitchen was made for women
who eat fruits they never wanted to taste. All
twenty-eight plus the new budding wise one
stood straight backed and gleaming but that bleach

was burning my gums and cringe wired my mouth
into an uncomfortable grimace so when they offered
the clear plastic bowl I only shook my head
and shook it again when they offered again
until I couldn't and they were putting it in my hands, saying,

try it, try it. You'll like it.

Why The Fuck Are We Awake At Four In The Morning (On A Bus In Vietnam)

My eyes burn hot and snotty
like rheumatoid tomatoes,
like the fever in toddlers—

it is too early for this kind of adventure.
The beach will still exist
at noon, I say, and am ignored. I hug
the green plush frog pillow and try not to cut myself
on the metal pieces of the bus
made for people smaller than me. Everything In
Vietnam is made for people
smaller than me. It is one of those days where
I am shedding all that good
lunar blood, but not in the beautiful way
that poets write about; I feel like I am dying
soaked in my thick blood, in the ugly way
that poets write about.

Outside, in the half dark, old women
and one old man stand like open palm
trees stretching their eager and grasping fingers to a beaded god,
their bodies twist into a strange half breed of yoga and taichi, two
unnative beasts in Vietnam
but welcomed, wholly.

My father-in-law sings along
to songs I don't recognize,
his anthem nasally and high pitched, just shouts
that blister in the early morning, and he
is a tea kettle whistling to the lonesome tune of a train, they are both
blowing steam, and every language spoken in
this country feels foreign to me.

January 27, 2017 – US Congress and Trump Ban Muslims On Holocaust Remembrance Day

Look at Lady Liberty and see how she weeps, a newborn's tears tracking
her great stone cheeks for all the little children learning to toddle in a no man's land,

for all the mothers offering a red and swollen breast to babies who only know
how to cry silently. They are not the first pilgrims to come beating at the gates of this land,

and they are not the first to be turned away, but they are the first I've seen and it makes me
colder, makes my fingers shake, like a dove, who has leapt from the cliff with nowhere to land,

hands outstretched, grasping, saying, *help me*. This is my honesty: I don't know
a beautiful way to say *they are dying, and we are doing nothing, and they have no land*

or home or anything but the skin on their hands that is already stained and cracked
with the wanting and you still say no and this does not feel like my America, like God's land,

this feels like you spit on my grandmother, like you don't remember your own family's
footsteps, how they walked across Ellis Island, looking for a land

that would welcome them but to just say it, so this is me saying it. This is me hanging
the banner, clearing the brush away, passing out the visas.

Privilege

Air conditioners in January remind me of Memphis, the long gray
sidewalks that work like bridges between one type of neighborhood

and another, like I am walking through a pop-up book where one
page is two frozen yogurt places next to a hot yoga studio and the

next is a chain link fence with sagging holes and seven daycares all
wearing the same copyrighted picture of Dora the Explorer on their

unwashed shutters. One time we used iPhone maps to go get sushi
and it took us on the quickest route through crumbling parts of the city

and we rolled up our windows because there were people knocking
on windows and that felt like the greatest unkindness I ever did,

and I am still sorry to this day. My dad says I'm going to end up with
a knife in my stomach, and my husband says this, too, now that I'm married,

because I always give my money to hungry eyed men on the street,
and I tell them we all die someday, and I know that's a cliché, I know

that's what every movie character says, but I've always been a giver,
even when the giving hurts, and I still I think it's better

to die holding the hand of someone who needed a hand to hold,
anyway. I am trying to make this right in my head, but everything

still feels like a half-filled water balloon and I am missing
those hot days in August when the sun filled every part of Memphis

and the shoed and the shoeless felt the grass with the same kind of smile
and I handed out all my quarters until the grass turned cold and wet.

Holy Woman

I write the word of my body out
like pages of holy scripture
I am an apostle and
this is apocrypha
this righteous body
I am blaspheme
I am clip-
winged dove
flown.

Granny Rose Makes Us Take the Clippers to her Hair and Does Not Cry Until the End

There is a bridge in Canada there was a bridge in Canada
seventy-five died in its fire

the young engineers the new bridge builders
wear rings of iron

to remind themselves how easily a thing can
break

*

In November they start the chemo we shave her hair
on the front porch

these are my children the strands in her fingers are swift gray streams slipping

softly onto the wood

seven of us, cousins and daughters ring her and keep her bare head
from the buffering wind

a quiver
a shake of her lip

a child calls—a cousin still but younger

she tucks the lip in, holds it between her teeth sucks up air her nostrils deep wells

she pulls upright,
uses the chair arms to lift a thousand years pass

she is tall again

I sweep the hair
pull clumps from the bottom
pin a few to my shirt
where they curl
and remember

On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On)

I. I am fascinated by her pubic hair,
the way it curls and pulls at the
skin crease between her thighs. I
am six and she has given up
on ever going to the bathroom alone
again, I consider myself her guard—
when she goes potty, I offer my
hand in solidarity. She never takes
it but she leaves the door open wide
enough for me and my separation anxiety
to take up our post against the wood
panel walls. The black bramble thatch
is a wild animal and I am wondering
if I can tame it like I would my Barbie,
with a plastic comb and sheer
determination—I am distracted
by the paper that is blotted red and I do
not know enough of blood yet.

II. I watch her from the bedside, my eyes
like stone, and she already immune to the staring
hooks the fabric on backwards
and upside down. She twists it to the front
and pulls the straps up each arm until her body
is a caged thing and I come to the understanding
that this is a technique all women know.

III. Two miles away from my front door
I am twelve and scratching at the wide bank
of skin between my belly and my crotch,
there is hair long and black, singular
and curled like the Christmas ribbon on a
present I cannot wait to open. I have
forgotten my six-year-old memories
and do not realize I am tugging at the
first strand of adulthood; I am too scared
to tell my mother, afraid this means
I am dying.

IV. A year later I hold prayer meetings
in the shower and cafeteria, on my knees
in the water I beg for that good blood all
my friends already know, I ask for the
swell of my breasts and the rounding of my
hips—I think I know what a woman is.

At lunch, a girl will walk by, and I will
think her body righteous, and I will strike up a
deal with God—*if you just make me that
pretty, I'll do what you want, God, I'll
do what you want.*

V. There is a party, and I am freshly
graduated, so I find the shorts my mother
doesn't know about and the jacket a gay boy
gave me and wear them with the intention
of giving, but less than I know. The music
is a bomb and it is still ticking after I am
settled on the couch, a boy's hand tucked
into my breast, an arm curled around
my waist. Ticking, even a week later when
the boy takes me on a date, ticking through
his tongue on mine and that hand again,
ticking until I am told
about the bet
and then I don't listen to music again
for a long time after that.

VI. I am twenty-two, and I have reached
an acknowledgement of myself that is no
longer concerned with the standard. She is
three, a little cousin, who has a mother
and aunts and more women in her life than a haram,
but she still watches with rapt attention when I strip
for the bath. She strokes the hair on my vagina,
because it is a vagina now and not a crotch or a
junction or a private part, and has not been
for a long time, she looks at my breasts
like they are Disney Princesses, and I smile
and explain what I can as best I can until she
loses interests and we climb in the bath water
run high with tugboats and Barbies.

III. GOING

Pulling Out My Own Splinter by Myself, For the First Time, Age 25

A needle whittling under your skin
to the wood already there you are
hybrid thing made of earth and blood
and this is the pain saying what
you are is not what you should be,
moist starfish tongue slurps juice
from your first layer of half opaque
whiteness and leaves a throb, like
a Ford with a fan belt issue rattling
and the voice of your mother
not corporeal but living in your old head
whispering to the cliff you've made
not much more, just a little longer
and the whir of the nearby table
fan, set at the highest speed, a chilled
net to catch the sweat of your body.

Muddy Paths Make a Sucking Squelching Noise When You Walk in Them Barefoot

When you are a girl who walks in the dirt,
and I am a girl who walks in the dirt, you
learn to stay inside when it rains, or
you learn to love mud on the crust
of your feet, or you learn where they sell

shoes for the walking. I still don't know
the street of my home, and the stones have grown
far from my toes, and I never found a shoe
they made in the size of a girl whose feet
are wide slurping swamps,

so I am digging in spades, the heads
of my feet, to the muck and the mire
and the goo down below. If they find me
here walking in dirt and walking in rain,
tell them beware, tell them stickers grow here.

Why I Write

Here is how it began:
I am thirteen, the second
child, learning to box
the disbelief in myself.
They tell us to write a story, any story. So I write
about Mama and Daddy, about slow dripping honey and the hungry cows
in Mr. Nix's backyard. The hay sticks to my clothes
until I am more grass than girl
and wide pink sandpaper tongues lick me over until
I am raw and new. This feels like a cleaning, like
a birth, and I am thinking, maybe I have found
something for myself.

Here is how it begins:
the keystroke, the crumpled Walmart receipt,
the fourth notebook I bought this month, 3 AM, noon,
six minutes after the plane lands,
the lead falls and then—
I am the living
and the dead. Buried
and walking, like a specter
that has gone shoe shopping, my feet
rugged, my hands searching. The gravedigger,
the unwed mother, the ginger boy in class, a ham
sandwich, the first orgasm, my grandmother,
two hundred thousand lost souls, a forest
in Denmark. I borrow the skin
of too many, and create from them my own worlds.
I am all the ones that have ever lived
and all the ones that never did.
I have a child coming,
not this year or the next, but maybe
years after that. I want them to know
this earth has got a few good things.
I am thinking if I do this, if I do it right,
and quickly enough—maybe I'll leave
a few good things behind.

A Series of Questions For the Lexicologists I Will Never Meet

Is there a word for the twelfth floor delirium
that comes when you see the line between skies
where the rain begins? Or a word for the intestines
that do jumping jacks in your stomach when the plane
touches down and the world rights itself
around you, or else a word for when you
go to the store twice in one day and both
times you forget the eggs, even though all you
needed was eggs, maybe even a word for
the moment the white powder sinks and sifts
into the mound of ants and they start keeling
over, one by one, marching, one may only assume,
to Zion? A word for the day you discover
Greek mythology, or the delicates setting
on the dryer? Is there a word for relearning
your mother's face? Or eating cereal
out of a cup? Is there a word bigger than
forgiving? A word bigger than anger?

Which was the first word? How do I say it?
Is it tart or bitter or sweet as sugar-dipped
strawberries on Sundays in the South?

Future Scene from a Car Ride with My Half-Vietnamese Daughter

We are a happy two—
wolf & cub,
due east
toward the airport
and the rising sun.

She considers me
a stubborn compass,
freckled cheeks &
yellowed grin—
a Polaris, a Golden Peg,
a Northern Star,
showing her the way
home.

She is reading a poem
about Vietnam,
the words stretch out,
short and dark,
asking every question,
not too unlike herself.

Did the people of Viet Nam
use lanterns of stone?

She tells me about the
Druids. They, who had
certainly carried
lanterns of stone.
Who had worshipped fire.
She wonders—
how it must feel, to capture
a god, and keep him
in a stone cage.
Carry him in hand.
Use him to light the way.

Were they inclined to quiet laughter?

The Druids had laughed,
she says. Dragging
the foundations of Stonehenge,
gleeful at their good fortune.
And they laughed in Vietnam—
she had heard it,

carved into the sharp jaw
bones of her father's face,
patched into the quiet lines
of her grandmother's smile.

I tell her about the dry cleaners
on the corner
of 5th & Lincoln.
I tell her about the wedding
dress—
abandoned now,
for six months—
in the front window
with eggshell lace
& a pink sale sticker
& no stains.

In Vietnam, she says
the dress will be red,
hemmed with gold beads
and embroidered cranes,
their knees crouched
and wings spread
always
ready to fly.
The mother of the bride
will weep, as though losing
a child,
in order to bring luck
to the new couple.
In America, guests will throw rice,
and the mother of the bride
will weep,
for similar reasons.

She has too many questions
about her own wedding.
Will she wear white
or red—
will her guests throw rice
or eat it.
Will I weep for her,
shower her in
good-fortune tears,
or wrap her

in mother arms
and never let her go.

We are of an age
where I no longer
have answers,
and she no longer
expects them.
Instead, she fills
the silent spaces
between us with
off-key singing
and more poems.

Eventually, we reach
where we are going,
me to the drop off zone
at Kennedy International,
her to a place where
I cannot follow.

I watch her back fade
into the long
and distant crowd,
her body a beacon,
gold and shimmering,
bright and illuminating
as fire
caught in a stone cage.

From the Camaraderie of Poor Folk

This is us, the learnt, who have built our memories from sticks
in the backyard and the garbage bags in our living room that

hold what were somebody else's clothes, we who are now grown
and remaking our lives for the sake of the not-yet-borns who

will never eat always cold food like we did. This is us, in our
few numbers coming to a communion and here we say:

the potatoes will be potatoes and there will be no hard
chunks of paper flakes made half solid to gag the swallowing

and all your cars will have doors and pieces that belong to that car,
and you will keep your cars and no man in a white jumpsuit

with a clipboard will nod his head in compassion and take
your car anyway. Your green beans and sweet corn will

not be housed in tin, your blue jeans will not come pre-stained
unless you want them that way, you will not suffocate on the smell

of molded laundry and dollar shampoo, and the dogs will not
scrounge in your home looking like a lost brother who wears the

same scrawniness and hungry fleas and collar that you do. We
will take trips to the coast or to the mountains and you will know

what a plane is before you are twenty, and no one will joke when
you eat your food and drink your drinks because you will not choke

them down like you are fighting for a share. There will be no tens of
children in your room and shower and bed. Mama will not work a double

shift and daddy will not work a night shift and the word *factory* will
be something you know about only from picture books. We will

give you pink satin dolls and cold buckets of ice cream and when the
winter comes there will be a fireplace that smells like logs and smoke

and we will put to ash all those things that poked through the mattress
and stabbed our arms 'til they bled, years ago.

A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral

When, at the end
of my days, you
stand before the
congregation,
wearing black
and a half-formed
smile, a hastily
written eulogy
clenched in
your hand, look to
the crowd, to all
the ones I left behind,
and tell them
I am stardust
rewritten.

Tell them matter
doesn't die.
That our universe
is the result of the
same substances
arranging and
rearranging themselves.
Tell them, when I was
born, I stole ions
from the stratosphere,
platelets from
the soil, handbones
from the sea.

Tell them, I am
infinite, the
combination of a
thousand million
lives. Tell them,
my mother pieced me
together like a
patchwork quilt,
she did not know
the ocean roaring
in her belly
was once a star
exploding
three million lightyears

away.

In My Closet: A Quilt, A Cup, An Obituary, Prize Tickets, and Two Pictures of My Sister

What hands were these that knew the colors of the world
and put them into a blanket for a granddaughter, not once

but twice, and then three times again, her red and white
fingers making red and white squares, and the shapes

became a suffering of their own until she could say that this
was the blanket of her days and she was passing

all of it down to me, and my sister, who sat heavy on the couch
for three days and did not remember her tongue, even at

the graveyard where a tree grew, a black tree, that was dead
to the people walking by, but had a thick trunk and hands

made for the uncovering, now I know that the tree was old
and was a dead thing before my sister or I ever built

kitchens and bunkers and dentist offices and pirate coves
from the hollow spaces between its roots, and this is not

a metaphor, it's just a tree, but she used to braid my hair
and tell me about the wind talkers who gave their secrets

to the silence in the branches, so I wrapped her in my best
cotton coat even though she is thirty pounds lighter

than me and I put her in my car like a toddler or a pug,
and I rolled down the windows until the wind drowned

out everything we didn't know how to say, and there were a few
years where I lived in every place but home, but at night

I walked down a hard path to her and my quilts on the living room floor
where the dust had piled and become an allergen dump

and I would drink Dr. Pepper out of a cup we got at the fair
our parents took us to in 1999, before my dad read about

a man whose feet were cut off by a Ferris wheel and then Dad
didn't take us to fairs anymore, but I kept the cup, a red

and white monstrosity with *Coca-Cola* written in script
on the side and a long bendy straw that scrunched

and folded and was ringed by fingers every time I drank no matter how
big the fingers were and my sister would eat bread balls

which were just the cheap kind of white bread slices rolled
in the palms of our hands again and again until they metamorphosed

into fat spheres that she would take gaping bites out of like apples
and there were no pits to spit out and my cup never held rum, only soda,

and our fingers were never stained with nicotine and we didn't know about taxes,
but we reached a year where we started thinking of ourselves

as adults whose bodies were too small, whose feet were still attached
but wandering and the only patterns we had left were stitched in red and white.