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As Close As I Can Get To It

Kathryn Leland Henricks

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AS CLOSE AS I CAN GET TO IT

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

KATHRYN HENRICKS

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

A collection of poems.

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As Close As I Can Get To It

The Morning After My Brother's Suicide

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I drive back to Texas in July and find my mother's hair is blue. Over lunch she says it's a rinse so her newly-silvered hair looks less yellow. We walk her big black and blonde dog named Red and try not to fight. Since my brother's death, we have been speaking so softly to each other. In the fall, she mails me homemade breads. They come frozen inside giant Ziploc bags, dated like letters. I wonder what words she is trying to braid into her loaves. Over the phone she says she's knitting a scarf for my sister's boyfriend to wear with his jean jacket. We don't talk about my brother, or mention the morning of the funeral when she overheard me, arguing with my sister, say *She is the reason I don't live in Texas anymore*. I have never told her that I meant it. Instead, we text about a TV doctor drama she loves and the new publicist she hired at the firm. In letters, I draw tropical birds and fold them around bars of lavender soap. I am so much better at loving her this way. At the post office, one year and one day since he died, a new package, rosemary and sea salt challah. No note.

We Say Pain and It Means According to Which Organ

Long ago, a man in Greece would have spoken of his spleen
the way I mean it now when I say, *my heart*
is breaking. French wrings all the bile out of “spleen” until

it becomes “splénétique,” meaning simple sadness.
Plato thought this darkness grew in each lobe of the liver,
and Zang-fu medicine says we hold grief between breaths.

Last year, I wrote you into my ribcage.
But if I really knew which organ
was feverish with this grief, I would

peel off all my skin, tear away my tendons,
just to get at it. Instead, I pull my car
onto the shoulder again and scream each breath.

We will never understand the pain
of daily gentle breath against your raw skin
and how unbearable it became to

be alive. But Brady, I believe you. I know
you felt like you had to choke it out
of your body, how it felt like you might die

from that yell inside you. Sometimes I still
think I can call you back, as if you’re
somewhere I might reach. Like I am driving away

from the ocean, and you are the wet, salt-stained
air that hangs on miles inland.

The Morning After My Brother's Suicide

On-screen, Elizabeth watches golden leopards skulk nighttime treetops in Kenya. Outside her window steam rolls through grasslands and she fills herself with heavy air. This is the exact moment

she becomes queen. That morning sleep clung to my sheets like jungle fog until I tossed over and found four missed phone calls. Not one from him. In England, King George bled blocked lungs into white sheets

while the sun rose over the British Empire. It was hours before Elizabeth knew what she lost in the night. Months later, I will remember the dryer bell ringing, how I woke just enough to turn over and drop back to sleep. Five hundred miles

away, my brother crept down the stairs of our father's house with an electrical cord. Now I long for the pristine grief of that first hour. Each bright morning is a betrayal of haircuts, a new movie in theatres, apartment leases ending and

renewing again. Queen Elizabeth pens letters on black-edged stationary. Is any empire large enough to hold this loss?

A Cerulean Process; or Self Portrait in Blue

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Eating Ortolans

I.

The day after my brother is dead I wash everything. Bedding, clothes from the hamper in his bedroom: soccer uniforms crusted with sweat and grass, T-shirts rank with Old Spice, jeans, boxer shorts, tall black Nike socks. I bury it in the washer under

all the clothing I have packed.
Downstairs, I wretch bile into the kitchen sink, sick on all that is left of him mixed with all I have brought of myself.

II.

My love declares her bathroom haunted. I buy bundles of white sage, bound tight in red cord and bottled Holy Water. She asks how I can believe in ghosts but can't imagine any God.

III.

Our mother is still bedbound with grief when I send his body to be cremated. The last time I saw him breathing I stole a sweatshirt. So at the morgue I ask to choose his grave clothes. Simple blue jeans and my old hoodie. If he is somewhere he can breathe it in, we'll be burning together.

IV.

I kneel in front of my washing machine.
Place my forehead on the lid and
pray *I love you, I love you, I love you.*
Not to anything, but out into everything.

V.

We hang charred sage from the corner
of her mirror, and kiss in the shower until the water
runs cold over unwashed hair. With soft
mouths, we unwind all the darkness of this room.
I can believe, under this rush of water,
nothing is haunted anymore.

BONHAMS: FINE BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS INCLUDING SYLVIA PLATH, The Property of Frieda Hughes

In the Craigslist ad, my naked back is to the camera. I'm on my knees, a pair of black Calvin Klein knockoffs hitched high on my hips.

The top tier of my price sheet was underwear worn while performing oral sex on another woman. *Smell your way to voyeurism*: \$90.

Other men wanted the shit stains, menstrual bleed-throughs, ovulation discharges, or the sweat drench of a long run.

Whatever service was selected, I wore them for a day. Maybe masturbated, if convenient or the client was a repeat.

Then the spent cotton briefs (purchased in bulk on Amazon) were double zipped inside plastic bags and overnighted for another fee.

My character's name was Margot. She was a college student struggling, a red lipstick loving, black lingerie wearing businesswoman building a brand.

What I mean is that I kissed the thank you notes in scarlet, slid them inside the second plastic bag, and scribbled coupon codes on the back.

I've heard sex work called *selling yourself*, like I should have felt that I was losing something in each transaction.

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The Night He Died You Were Underwater

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How a City Holds Its Dead

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Portrait of the Beloved as Winged Nike of Samothrace

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VITA

Kathryn Leland Henricks is a poet from Austin, Texas. She is currently an MFA candidate at The University of Mississippi and holds a B.A. in English – Creative Writing from Hendrix College. She works as an associate editor with Sibling Rivalry Press. Her work has appeared in *The Hunger* and *Rust + Moth*, and her debut chapbook “I Wore the Only Garden I’ve Ever Grown” was published in January 2017 with Headmistress Press. She lives in Mississippi with one cat and a collection of half-dead houseplants.