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THE SAILOR OR THE FISH // THE SEAFOAM OR THE SALT

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

MARINA LEIGH

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

A collection of poems.

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VITA 75

Marina Leigh

Ghost Of You Here

Haunting,
always.

Bless me cowboy & bless you luna moth
in my palm — it has been a long day.
It has been a long life.

I've waited years
to see you, wings of honeydew. Honey,
do I taste like sagebrush
or church pew?

I want to hear you confess, mouth to
cactus pear, sweet as drought.
& when the water finally pours over my head,
it is holy, it is of the sea.
I am of the sea.
I gasp storm sky at the surface just to sing,
& when I sing, you become a ghost
for me.

I can be the sailor or the fish.
I can be the seafoam or the salt.

Cherubs in the Clouds

for Miles

As kids, we'd try out our names
in the language we made up ourselves
to whisper into the telephone
when one of our fathers came home stinking
of Jameson or another lady's perfume.
& we'd meet on the roof of the abandoned Sinclair
halfway between your house & mine. I'd always bring an apple
& you'd bring the knife your pa got you on your tenth birthday
to gut fish, which you never did. You never had the stomach for it.
We'd take turns cutting the apple, our thumbs against the back
of the blade, the way your pa did it, & we'd flip
our names on our tongues
like pennies sharp as a lick of rust.
We'd go back to your house cause you had a front porch & a cherry tree,
& your mama would ask
what's in our mouths, but when we opened wide
all that was there was blood
the color of cherries between our teeth
on that front porch after school in late spring.
How we'd spit the pits
right back into the bowl.
How we'd practice kissing
in the creases of each other's elbows,
& I'm trying to remember
how your jawline fits
into the soft parts of my hands.
I'm trying to remember my hands
that morning my pa took us out to the lake
before dawn to go catfishing. Before we watched
him press a knife into the soft spot
at the center of its head & *grief* became more
than just a five-letter word. Before the dorsal fin
caught down the side of my palm & pa picked the spines out of me
in the dark.

I think it's our fathers

who teach us how to cry.
They left
their boots by the front door for us
to stick our feet into, but we'd never fill out
in the ways they did. Our laughs stay in our chests.

[cont'd

w/ break]

We wash our hands in the kitchen sink
& the taste of tobacco washes clean off.

But we're making do. We're making love.

Darling boy, let's finish
what we started.
Let's practice kissing
on each others' mouths this time.

I pull up your shirtsleeves & I'm drunk
as a sailor, but I want to see the tattoos you got on your arms
when you left home at seventeen — a plague doctor on one.
Cherubs in the clouds on the other.

We grew up
into our bodies,
but mine's still the same
old skin, honeyed
& freckled by the August sun. We both planted
our fathers back down into the earth, & I'm sorry
I missed the funeral.

We both still feel our hurt right down in our middles. In the middle
of winter, we drink gin by the firepit
in my hometown. You say you're thinking
of becoming a trucker & heading east or
a fisherman in Alaska & heading west.

But give me just one day. It's supposed to snow
all night anyhow. I know I still ask
too many questions. I'm always late.
I'm driving the next state over to place my bets
on all the losing dogs. But just say the word & I'm there
pressing a dish towel to your bloody nose
in the bathroom of Blind Dog, looking

[cont'd w/o break]

at a painting above the mirror of a butterfly
in the beak of a cardinal perched in the trees.

I'd never seen a cardinal until I moved
south. You were born in Vermont
& I think maybe I'll drive north
just to see the colors. No, I think
maybe I'll go back to California
where the sun sets like spilled
honey, turning all the wet soil sweet.

Say, sugar, come in from the cold,
from the night,
from the snow. You gotta stop
looking back. I promise,
there is no one out there
in the dark.

You walk down the street back toward
the bar in your Metallica jean vest, a cigarette
dangling between your teeth, the end of it red
as the wing of the cardinal in the dogwood.

And Suddenly Everything Tasted Like Almonds

My brother tried to kill me once by holding a plastic bag over my head.

My mother says we were just kids
and she believes it.

If it weren't for the neighbor girl who worked as a lifeguard over summers
I would be buried
in an unmarked grave
in the woods
behind my grandparents' property.

People would ask where I went
and my mother would tell them I've gone up
to live with my father in northern Michigan.

*And the boy?
Oh, they don't share the same blood.*

And what am I supposed to do now?

Now that I have come up for air.
Now that there's an ache
in my cheeks
from when they blossomed
into two overripe plums.

I think children who are afraid of the dark
are right for it.

My brother wanted to turn me
into a ghost story.

I remember when I kissed
the floor
the floor kissed back.

[cont'd w/o break]

I remember when the neighbor girl
breathed into me
I breathed back

and suddenly everything tasted like almonds.

i am being born

my body is loved.

every day I check
to make sure the freckle
on her shoulder has not frayed
at the edges.

the water is hot on her face,
renders her cheeks red, her lips
raw. the water pools at her feet,
renders her toes pruney.

she wants to sleep.
the dreams are still inside
of her.

the shower, like the hands
of a priest, blesses water over
her head, her hair sticks to her back
tangled in the vertebrae of her spine.

she is baptized.

steam fills her lungs,
and she is cleansed
from the inside out.

the dreams have gone.

today, she will live
off of tenderness
and butternut squash
bread.

i tell her *your blood*
is my blood, if i wake you,
i will wake.

she breathes, and there is nothing.
she holds her breath, and there is nothing.

Naked

When we make love, we become two pecans
pressed together in a tightening fist—this flesh

is all we need for our shells to crack.

He says, *I am a married man*. I say, *I am glass*

*in the shallow riverbed of your tongue. I am this
morning's sun on sweat-kissed skin. I am skin.*

I am skin. I press my cheek to the bare middle
of his back—he smells like wet earth.

I ask, *how do you fight?* He tells me *with teeth*.

I ask, *how do you love?* He tells me he forgot

about his body until I pulled it into mine—
until we became a mirror shattered against another

mirror, which just means we are making art
by accident, which just means we are human—

no more and no less. This isn't to say we are without
fear. This is just as delicate as we can be with each other.

When she was five,

a boy on the playground
pressed her hand into a fist;
he told her this fist was her heart.
She took her heart—
no bigger than, and just as soft
as an apricot—and went home.
She wanted to show her mama.
She wanted to remind her mama
what it looks like to love.

The house with the yellow door sang
when the wind shook glass,
and the girl's mama tacked quilts
against the windows.
The girl worried about the oak tree
in the front yard. She worried
about the dumpster spilling
out into the street, worried
that her drawings would end up
in the gutter. Her mama told her
*baby, the storm ain't makin' the mess,
it's cleanin' it.* And the girl tried to remember
how the living room looked
sun-soaked, but the power went out,
and she forgot how sunlight looked
by heart.

A man told her she has loved
and it shows. He told her
she has fought and it shows.
He asked *what is inside?*
She told him nothing. She told him
sky. She told him a room
so dark she forgot about the sun,
where she can't talk about God.
where she says 'God' and her mama
tells her *Baby, don't curse—die
for your own sake.*

Haiku-esque to God

Please tell my father
that I miss him. Tell him that
he's missing a lot
 of beautiful shit.

O

It's four in the morning
on a Saturday in October
and the bottom of my dress is stained. We sit in my car and wait
for the other's undoing—I mean undressing.

This boy opens my body—
soft as an overripe apricot.

He digs his thumbs into my belly
and pulls me in,
or maybe out.

Mouth to mouth
to mouth
to drink honey poured
into raw wounds.

I cannot rest.

We fall in love
and are both wrong for it.

He kisses my face nineteen times.
Give me your tongue.
Give me your tongue.

He tells me he is sorry.

For what?

He tells me to get out of the car so he can look at me.

I do.

He kisses me and doesn't stop.
One more before I go.
One more before I go.

He tells me he is sorry.

Baby,
stop apologizing.

He opens my body and hungers for me.
He breathes into my mouth
and I open and he is gone

before I have the chance to exhale.

Christmas Eve 2021

For Alex Orejel

I am losing my voice to a wilting—no—
waning moon. When my knees are wobbly
against December, I think California
Avenue goes on forever. Have I told you
that already? I'm sorry. I missed you. I'm sorry
I missed your call, I was cradling a bluebird
with a broken wing. Against my body, its heart against
my palm, it felt like holding a shooting star.
Does that make sense? Do you feel the pounding
in my fingertips when I hold your face in my hands
when you finally kiss me in the alley behind the bakery?
There is snow in your eyelashes. I am learning
to make peace with what was not meant for me,
& sometimes I think it'd be easier if I let you go.
A man's face turned back into a boy's, into a ghost's.
A childhood friend left there in childhood. I cannot think
about that now. I cannot think about the end
of the world right now, I have too much to do. There is coffee
brewing on the stovetop. There are dishes soaking
in the kitchen sink. In the morning, I will run a bath
& ask if you want to wash my hair & you will
because you like how your hands smell like oranges all day
afterwards. You kiss my back, right on my spine between
the shoulderblades. You don't know, how could you,
but I'm going to write about that for as long as I remember it.

Self Portrait In Therapist's Office [Word Association Test]

[Halloween]

The boys throw rocks through the windows
of a cabin. They've got masks
tied to the wrong sides of their heads.

The corners of their mouths unravel,
& I want to lick the sweat off the backs of their necks. I want to be one of them—
to have hands that have forgotten their own tenderness.

[Ophelia]

We become everything
we do not understand.

I become an ocean with a teaspoon
of blackberry honey
spilled
onto the soft side of my upturned
belly.

The sun does not touch me here.

[Cathedrals]

Sometimes I forget which side my heart is on.

To remember,
I close my eyes and listen
for the mourning doves
in my chest; flapping wings
sound like wind
against loose shutters.

[cont'd w/ break]

Like neighborhood kids throwing stones
to burst
stained-glass windows.

They sound like a roof
caving into itself.

Like fire making a home
out of what once
was holy.

[Knuckles]

& to have hands that have pulled blood / from between the teeth of boys / who open their smiles
like wings / of a magpie twirling pink streamers / from the bloated belly of a roadside deer.

[Mailbox]

An old friend burned his lawn chairs
down to ashes
& sent them to me—
it's an inside joke I don't get.

I write on the front,

not at this address.

A. Calls After 10 Months // Visiting Home

In this story, Saturn's sons
eat him. Ask me again
what went wrong and I tell you
he forgot how many mouths
the boys had, how many teeth
the mouths had, in each son—

no, what went wrong between us—

oh, you see, the sun never set.
In other words, from the sky,
if the flight is long enough, if
the plane flies west fast
enough, there will always be
light. In other words, we outran
the morning, we never mourned

Saturn's sons, we never mourned
Saturn, we never *—just give it time—*

no, forever I will be in a Home Depot
Garden Center looking at a picture
of your dick, no, forever you are lying
on your back on the kitchen floor
in a house you share with someone else
holding your dick in your hand.
How do we talk about that, about love
kept hidden between the lines?

The sky is so orange at eye level.
I am so tired of saying hello
again. In this story Saturn's sons eat
each other and Saturn can only watch,
mouth agape, the teeth rotting
from his gums, he is the one left
mopping up all the blood. I will always
pick up the phone, always hope this time
around I won't hate myself for it. God,
I missed the mountains. I missed the desert.
I am so alone in this. Look at me.

A Western diamondback, coiling in the dust,
rattling my tail, showing my teeth for no one.

Mississippi Man With Snakes

I find my rage every time
a man honks the horn
of his shitty Dodge
Charger Every time
I see a shitty Dodge
Charger This man
feels the same as me
his middle finger high
This Black man who
carries four snakes
down the street barefoot
on his head a bucket hat
around his waist
a fanny pack around
his throat a serpent
He says it's sleeping
but I swear I move
and its eye is on me

A cento in homage to Olivia Gatwood using lines from her poems in Life of the Party

I spent my whole life getting into cars with strangers and the worst part was when I recognized them from somewhere I couldn't remember.
where a wandering child will see a hill, / will throw her body against it / & shriek the whole way down.
I want to know / what it means to survive / something.
i think, i'll never die, i'll never stop running
and toss sun after sun from its sky.
there was no word for *godless* then
I wish the story ended, our bellies bare, shirts pulled
above my newborn wound
What I said happened is what happened / and not what I remember.
it's just that i am not afraid of blood
& we have been alive as girls / long enough to know
what was made for our bodies and no one else's;
to lift our bodies
back into her mouth again and again, like this
the ways she will grow into herself—
between the two of us—rawboned girls with kneecaps / that could slice fruit—we don't. We just
want to win
but soon we grew bored of our own faces, / grew out of our old bodies & threw the photos away
& something, i don't know what, will change,
i don't believe it. you came out screaming / and alive and look at you now, look at how
our bodies tense and heavy like a dozen dying suns
chants a prayer to his naked thighs—*Maybe it's in me,*
but whatever it was is not here

What are you afraid of? he asks. *Why are you so afraid?*

Now a sentence looks like my teeth.
to watch it bash its body against the glass.
the teen girls who teach us to scream
who will cut up their insides for a pack of newports
to see me naked & again, what children we were,
a half-remembered tragedy
to an orchestra of breath in the next room

then a boy and then his tongue—and yes, I said no—
I am always stunned by the fearlessness / of violent men.
how he sleeps / not at all / not at all / not at all

a girl not welcome in this house

how she feels so warm, when she / hears her lover's name in another girl's mouth.
how she made it out alive

she would have to tame the circus by herself.

filled with teeth

You let her rip it to shreds.

maybe the whole town knew what happened there. like maybe no one could get rid of the blood.
maybe it's time / to take a second look.

There's A Yellow Bird

in the toilet

at Pizza Hut,

and I'm crying

at the bathroom sink.

Not because of the dead bird, but because I remembered

the bartender

with the yellow hat

and the eyebrows,

and how he sucked

the straw after he made every drink.

He dared me to eat a whole bowl of pretzels.

He smelled like orange rinds when I kissed his neck,

but that came later.

My mother had a dream about me and the bartender—

said I'd wear a yellow jacket when I met him,

and she was right.

He called me a child of the sun.

He called me the next day

to tell me

I forgot my scarf

and I promised I would come back

for it.

For him.

I didn't.

My mother,

the prophet,

believed we were in love,

and she was right.

[cont'd w/ break]

I wash my hands.
The door doesn't close
behind me.
I tell a cashier
about the dead bird
in the toilet
and she thanks me
for letting her know.

Hot Girl Bummer [after a conversation with my therapist about a repeated daydream]

It is July and I have a crush
on no one. I am left
disappointed by a man
no different than the last.
So I break into my neighbor's
apartment, but it's okay,
the door was open, it's okay
he doesn't live there
anymore. There is a painting
of a Parisian street on his bed.
There is Chinese takeout in his fridge.
There is a mirror in his bathtub
and I steal it. Which is to say
I am the common denominator
to my disappointment. Which is
to say I've been living very close
to the soil lately. The daydream starts like this:

I'm back in ~~Philadelphia~~ Chicago,
I have over ~~1000~~ 300 followers
on Instagram, I am smoking
a cigarette, I am inside
a liquor store, there is an ~~earth-~~
~~quake-zombie-apocalypse~~ active
shooter, I am ~~with my partner~~
alone, I save

1. a girl who looks like Brook who will kiss me with tongue in gratitude
2. a man who's been shot in the leg (will survive) and looks like Noah Centineo
3. a man who's been shot in the belly (will die) but is comedic relief and looks like Seth Rogan (you choose which era)
4. A toddler
5. none of the above
6. myself
7. none of the above

Sometimes I die, bleeding out
on the pavement, staring up

at a dark sky or a blurry face
resembling Noah Centineo's.
Sometimes I find a hiding spot
behind the ramen and 1-ply
toilet paper and listen to the bodies
hit the floor — in a dying way
not a dancing one — and I put a fist
to my mouth and wonder
if I should text my mom
I love you or just *ily*. I am not
always the hero of this daydream.

My therapist says it stems from
anxiety. I tell him I just like to be
prepared. My meds are upped
and I don't want to have sex
anymore. I put the mirror in the hallway
across from another mirror. I guess
I should tell you I have seven mirrors
in my one bedroom apartment. I guess
I should tell you *someone* has to look
at my body and it won't be me.

My grandmother leaves 9 voicemails

Oh hi Marina, it's your grandma. Yeah, haven't heard from you for a while. I had this auto accident. I totalled my car; and I've been taking it easy and recuperating and stuff. Anyway, my birthday's on Saturday and I wondered if you would consider coming down to Carson City. There's this really good buffet down here and it would be kind of fun to go to. Anyway, give me a call. Talk to you later. Bye.

When I was young, my grandparents lived in the mountains of Southern California. In late summer, the Valencia orange trees were heavy with fruit, & my mother shut our eyes with her thumb to rub sunblock on our faces behind our grandmother's back.

□

Hey Marina, it's your grandma. Trying to get a hold of you. See if you want to get together this Saturday, in the afternoon for, it's either a late lunch or an early dinner, I don't know, one of the two. Give me a call. Let me know if you have any interest. What you're up to. You know, I haven't heard anything from you since you got back and I really want to know what you've been up to. Thank you, bye.

They hung a piñata from the camphor tree in the backyard. My father held the ropes while my brother, who was four turning five, turning vicious, swung a wooden bat at a papier-mâché sun always just out of reach.

□

Hi, this is Grandma Susan. I'm at your old residence. I think my car was stolen. I can't find it where I parked it, and I thought I'd see if maybe you and I could drive in that vicinity and see if my memory was worse than I thought it was. But anyway. Talk to you later. Alright, goodbye.

In California, my grandmother let my brother & I ride in the bed of the truck, through the forest, through the golden fields, down the backroads. We would lie on our backs to watch the sky.

We'd tell each other stories & it never mattered
what about. The only rule was we couldn't tell the same one twice.

□

[cont'd w/break]

Hey Marina. To use those pans that I gave you, you have to get small pliers. Get small pliers because there's no handles on those things and you can't handle them when they're hot, and, of course, you need some hot pads too, but anyway, you get small pliers and you put the plier on the edge and that's how you move it in and out, okay? Thanks, bye.

My grandparents moved to the desert when my grandmother heard the news that the world was going to end. By then, she'd had all of her teeth pulled. She opened our mouths to stick pills beneath our tongues behind our mother's back. She told us stories about the reptilians inside the earth, the aliens inside of Democrats, how we could time travel if we found the right portals. She played my favorite song about the zoo on the piano. She never said *I love you* when we left.

□

Hi Marina, it's your grandmother. I hope you've forgiven me by now. Would you like to go to lunch at La Vecchia, where we went before? The Italian restaurant up on the hill? Sunday? Let me know. Thank you, bye.

When my grandfather was dying, she took him to a witch doctor in Mexico for three months. The last time I saw him, he stood in the doorway to our yellow kitchen, dusk cradling us like a mother. I couldn't look him in the face, the cancer grown his throat so heavy, a bullfrog in a constant state of croaking.

□

Hey Marina, it's your grandma. I've been wanting to have you come out and see the garden and all that. Turns out this is the week when you need to be planting your fall crops. So. Depending on the thing, you need to cover it in plastic or not. Give me a call, I might not be around until later in the day. Talk to you later, bye.

My grandmother says I can't move
to Mississippi because in a month or so

it won't exist. She tells me about the sun
& about the other sun & about the aliens
again. She takes me out into her backyard where
she's built a dome bunker—points to where
she'll sleep. Points to where my father would sleep
if he hadn't died. She gives me a recipe
for guisado de pollo & I cook it. She plays
a song on the piano that I don't recognize.
w/break]

[cont'd

□

*Marina. It's your grandma. I sent you something, okay? It's priority mailed,
coming in today. That's what they promised anyway. Okay? And it's...
(aside) shit, where is this thing? Oh crap. I'll call you back.*

She asks if I got the package she sent, a tent,
a jacket—*look in the pockets, there's matches, there's
a thousand dollars wrapped in tinfoil.* I ask what the end
of the world looks like this time & she says it's about God—
it's always been about God. She says she's met a man. She slept
with him the night they met. I tell her I've been there before.
She's sold land, is almost out of money, but it doesn't matter,
in a month or so, money won't exist. I ask what if it doesn't
happen & she tells me not to worry, it will. I need to go north.
I need to buy a gun. Use the money to buy a gun. She has three.
She's never shot before, but at least she's ready for when they come.

□

*Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday,
Dear Marina, happy birthday to you. (not my birthday)*

One time a rabbit got caught in a steel-jaw trap my grandmother forgot
she'd placed. It starved to death, stinking of blood, my grandmother
held it out to my brother & I, one side of it gray fur, coated in dust, still
soft. When she turned it over, its wet belly split, & between the ribs,
a writhing nest of
hornets.

□

Marina. You gotta get out of there, okay? I'm gonna send you another small package. So after this week, at least by next week, you need to be going to Atlanta. So you need to call the Unitarian main church in Atlanta and see what they can do about helping you relocate. You gotta do this. Right away. The earthquake is starting up already. It's starting up in Louisiana so it's going to affect...it goes slowly, it doesn't happen all at once. It goes in stages and it started the first stage in Louisiana. Okay? You gotta get out of there. Gotta call the Unitarian church in Atlanta. The main one. The main one. Okay? Bye.

A deer jumps out

in front of my car
& all I think is that
I want to build myself
a home near the ocean.
The outside is white
stucco with a brown roof
& arched doorways & blue
& orange tile tables & chairs.

I half an orange & the knife
slips, splits my thumb
& I'll never be able to
get all the blood out
of the cutting board,
but that's okay. The orange is mine
& the blood, too, is mine.

I collect houseplants & books.
I pour sun tea & bake bread
from scratch & stray cats come to sleep
on the windowsills. I learn
not to fear the moths in the corners
of the rooms. I learn how to french
braid like my best friend
& perhaps, she will teach me.

I think of the balcony in Mexico, the morning
she braided my hair in the sun.

The sun dries the sheets
on the clothesline in the back-
yard. The sun freckles
my cheeks. There are windows.
I buy all the land around it
so no one can ruin it. No one can
build over my home. No one can bury
me.

There are so many windows.

My blood is all on the inside,

but the tree hits the front of my car,
& the front of my car concaves,
& that's just the natural progression
of things. The steering wheel was in the wrong
place. My lungs were in the wrong place.

An Elegy For My Father

A man once told me a story
from his childhood about a boy,
a father, a dog, and the desert.
The dog fell into a rattlesnake hole,
and the father carried it
to the top of the hill, shot it
and left it for the crows.

My father took me to the desert
and handed me a gun. In this story,
he was the dog and I was the father
and the gun was the gun
but it was also the rattlesnake hole.

You see, sometimes my father
wanted to live
In that space between the fridge
And the cabinet.
And sometimes he wanted to die
but didn't want to do
the dying.

My mother whispers
we go on living. We go on burning
coffee and overfeeding cats and flipping through
photo albums so we don't forget
our fathers' faces. And this is what they call
bravery. I call this too much blood
in my mouth. This is where the gun
becomes the crows, which is to say
it becomes irrelevant—the dead thing
is dead. I lie down in the rattlesnake hole
and I become the desert.

On Fear

My therapist told me to write a list of all the things I am afraid of. Then she told me to write a list of all the things I am really afraid of.

Do not come inside,
there is no home
here. Inside is a foolish lover.
She is full of kitchen sinks
full of warm water and glass
jars. If this were real
life, the jars would clatter
against one another
and she would turn her hands
over again and again
to see where broken glass
pulled apart her flesh.
It didn't, of course, it never does,
but she always checks
just in case.

And what would she do
if it did? There is blood
and there is blood
and there is blood
and she doesn't want to think
about it anymore. If this were real life,
she would go back to bed.
Tell the ghosts in the corners
of her room that they would have
to wait til morning,
and in the morning they would press
their mouths to her neck
and when their lust burns,
smoke rises. In the morning
she loses her body in the sheets,
and with the same quiet ease
of shifting an infant
from one breast to the other,
she becomes the dirt.

The girl is me, of course,
scared of everything.

Peaches

I hide my ghost at the bottom of the swimming pool,
Where he reads newspapers and waits to die
Again. Sometimes I sit with him and we speak
While holding our breath. I admit that my laugh's changed
Since my pops ain't wake up from his afternoon nap.
I tell him 'bout the garlic bread in the fridge at home
And 'bout the boy who asked the ice cream truck driver
If they take credit. I tell him how that boy reeks of a love
That ain't for me, and my ghost says *Darlin', all we have
Is right now. Be full of love, but don't be soft no more.*

In the bath, the water's run cold, and my ghost sits
Cross-legged on the bathroom sink, drawing faces in the steam
In the mirror. And I ask him to *please, take a washcloth
To these shoulders and rub until my skin's raw.
Until my skin's got no love left to warm a boy who crawls
Into my bed, into my body, crying sanctuary.
Whispering goodnight, goodnight, goodnight.*
There will be peaches in the morning, in the
Kitchen sink, waiting for your sweet, sweet mouth.

Remember how I tasted? Like honey
In chamomile tea, like sunlight on your spine,
Like smoking a cigarette on the back porch
While your wife slept in a bed grown empty of love.
My ghost lives in the orange trees, in the city
You write odes to. When he visits, we take the stairs
And in gold, paint *more angels, baby* onto the roofs
Of parking garages, so that God will know
Where to send his saints.

Come Hell or High Water // When Miles Asks Why I Don't Just Move Back to Reno

He promises to send letters come hell or high water.

He calls to tell me that he lost his keys

again. That he lost himself again.

That this time around, he needed

four stitches in the back of his hand & a girl

with a sewing kit at the bar fixed him

in exchange for a couple lines

of coke in the back storeroom.

Next time around, I'll keep him company

while he figures out the spaces

between his fingers, tattooed hand a star

against the bar countertop, a gutting knife into oak, into

flesh & how he'll say *fuck yeah, it hurts*, against the blood

between his teeth, gashed finger to his mouth.

Next time around, I'll stand in a 24-hour gas station

& the lights will be too bright

& I'll see my face

in a fuzzy television screen

only it won't be me—

that girl will be one second behind.

I'll look at the man behind the counter

& then I'll look at the cigarettes behind him.

That's what I'll want—the cigarettes, not the man—okay,

the man too.

I'll leave with a pack of Newports

& a pack of condoms & two quarters change

& I'll go back to the car where Miles waits

& we'll go back to his house, but he'd lost his keys

so we'll sneak in through the doggy door,

& in his room, we'll fuck doggy-style

& not even use the condoms.

His pillow will smell like sagebrush the morning after

rain, & taped to his wall will be a drawing of a cardinal

embedded into a wood of gold & it'll be the most beautiful thing I'll ever see.

Self Portrait With Eyes Closed

i

I died today

in a past life.

She had small hands.

She was named after the ocean

in a different language.

She held a bird

to her ear, but there was no song.

She held a gun

to her ear, and there was a song

but she didn't recognize it.

ii

My mother told me once

in this life

some things will ruin you

and you will let them.

I ask my mother why she made me

out of sagebrush

and abandoned phone booths.

I ask my mother why every morning I wake up

and I am nothing

but a body to catch the light with.

iii

I didn't know there was a correct way to pray—

I've been doing it wrong.

I press my palms together

and all I have is flesh to show for it.

Tonight I built bedsheets into forts

and filled the hallowed—I mean hollowed—places with crayons

and juice boxes.

[cont'd w/ break]

Maybe this child asleep on my chest
is the closest I've ever come to God.

iv

Here is a joke.

A stranger walks into a bar.

(This is where we laugh)

A stranger walks into my life
and makes it his own.

(This is where God apologizes for giving me hands and no one to bless with them)

The Painting

For John

The two of us, we were always
in the making. We stand in a museum
before a painting of a barn and blood
birthing a lamb. He asks me,

How many times have you been born?

I tell him that my birth is unending.

The gap between his front teeth
is just where the rain leaks through

the roof of this barn, is just where he names me
goddess of paint-stripped door frames.

It is a startling thing—the tender way
he touches the card next to the painting,

mouths *anonymous*, as if his tongue
can turn the faceless into something
recognizable. I want to turn the newborn lamb
over in my hands, feel its heart

pounding through its warm, sticky chest.

How strange and how beautiful it is.

When the dawn finally comes, we will marvel
at the way the blood thickens in the sunlight.

Inside Joke

I take scissors to my blue dress to shorten it to its pockets, which are deep enough to hold entire fields of dandelions. The signs all point to yes. This is what the Magic 8 Ball tells me when I shake it—my ma and I had an inside joke about a sign in the doctor’s office that read *Don’t Shake the Baby*. Then in high school, EJ Medina shook his son, and the baby died, and a lady came to talk to us about the developing brains inside of an infant’s skull. She compared the shaken baby’s brain to oatmeal, and when she said oatmeal, her hands mimed scooping with a spoon, and I thought *that’s fucked up*. I think of Sabrina, defending EJ because she couldn’t believe her boyfriend could dig his fingernails into their son’s wet, pink cheeks, and tear out the life of the child, soft as an overripe peach.

Self Portrait in Therapist's Office [On Middle of the Night Panic Attacks]

There is a murmur of starlings
in my blood. Their restless wings cast shadows
on the wrong side of my skin.
They open wounds and fill them with lemon rinds,
and I ask, *why did you let this happen?*

They reopen wounds and like mouths
beneath bloodied noses,
in their many voices, with their many cowardices.
they echo, *why did you let this happen?*

Orange Underwing

I am confused, but I was once
a moth guided by girl voices in the dark.

I sought light, always light.
Please don't ask me to remember

their names in the morning, my wings
are weary. Clipped short by a child

with boy hands still pink and plump
as peaches, but finding their violence,

their victories in hurting. My wings
were not made for palms clasped over me

in false prayer. My body needs saving
sometimes. It was nighttime there

always. I am confused, I have
shapeshifted my one time already,

but in softer hands, in savior hands,
in girl hands, my aching body becomes a sun.

In The Dark All The Mini Coopers Look The Same

*I've made this mistake before,
she tells me.
In the dark all the mini coopers look the same.*

*Sometimes, if it's been a long night,
I get in the wrong car.
Offer my body
to the wrong man—or woman—
one time it was a woman.*

The guy with the mini cooper is a regular. He don't hassle me for cheaper prices.

*If you want, you can spit in my mouth.
He likes that.*

*I offer her a hit of the joint I was saving in the glovebox for a night
like this.*

*I don't really like how this shit make me feel
but if it's true what they say about God
I won't have to do this forever.*

I tell her that if given the chance, I would break God's ribs.

You shouldn't joke like that.

*I apologize.
I don't know any other way to joke.*

Self Portrait in Blackberry-Stained Winnie the Pooh Dress

My mother calls to me— / her wild daughter—& I hide / in the blackberry bushes / searching
the earth for animal bones / to wrap in leaves / to bring to my mother / who tells me to put them
on the back porch / who places a soft hand on the top of my head / says *my wild daughter* /
without any aftertaste of blood.

The first girl who kisses me smells like coffee beans.
She holds my face to hers, whispers

come here, let me look at you,

& I am six years old again
my chin in my mother's grip.

She tells me to open my mouth
& here I am
opening it.

The blackberry
pressed against the back
of my teeth
stained my tongue violet.

I don't tell the girl this
of course.

Her lips barely graze mine.

She asks if I would like to meet her parents
& I tell her I cannot be that person.

[cont'd w/ break]

When I Say I Love My Mother

My mother birthed a grave
full of overripe peaches
and coyote mint—

 this grave became a girl
with a name that doesn't fit
in man's mouth.

I was born desert sweet.

I was born with an ache
in my left ear.

 When I say I love my mother

I mean I wish she would stop asking to borrow money.

I mean she tied a string
to a doorknob
when I was six
to wrench the teeth
from my gums
and she lied
when she said it'd only hurt

for a second.

 I turned my face
to the shadows—
 I stared up at my mother
told her I wasn't scared
 —no—
told her I wanted to go
to sleep in that wildflower grave
I once was.

 I stared up at my mother and dared ask
 am I doing something beautiful?

My Father Is Dead

When I was six, I stayed up past my bedtime
on Christmas Eve, and I thought Santa wasn't going to come
and my pops came into my bedroom
and called Santa for me—to put me at ease. I realize now
he was going to fill our stockings. He probably called my mother,
half-asleep upstairs, wrapping last minute gifts.
Or better, he didn't call anyone at all. Just one of a million
Santas, tricking their child into sleeping.

He had a tattoo of the devil on his arm and I never asked him about it.
He had his last name tattooed across his back. I used to joke
and say it was in case he forgot it. Now,
I think,
it was in case we did.

Laundry

For John

I wake up next to a boy
who smells like dryer sheets
and pears. He sits in a chair
by the window and paints
the face of everyone he knows
who's died.

He photographs me folding laundry.

*I want to catch the way the sunlight
is hitting your hands.*

The boy's father beat tenderness
into him with a leather belt.

Let this be the last time
the father makes the son
kiss tobacco stains
off his fists.

And let this be the last time
the son apologizes
for all the blood
in the sink.

My own father buried a gun in the backyard / in the solitude of an autumn morning / when I was
nine / and my mother washed / his clothes in the bathtub / turning warm water / into roses.

We buried my father / beneath a pear tree that never blossoms / and I promised that he will be
remembered
/ for every unremarkable thing he ever did.

Portrait of Lovers

I take a man into me to soften his sighs.

I tell him

*I want to do with you
what the evening sun does
with the hills,*

which is to say, I want to set him afire—

no—aflower.

If I plant my grief
in a shallow grave,
he will know me
naked except for the song
& the sweat
& the afternoon sun
setting across the lavender fields grown wild
in my mouth.

Naked except for the song-
bird's wings rustling in the dark of me
against a window
part stained-glass, part smudged mirror
in the corner of the bedroom
of my childhood home
black as an empty eye socket.

I lie on my bed, pull a goat's head thorn out of the back of my thigh, wonder how it got there. I ask the man, just once, to check his pockets before he leaves.

Just once, I want to hold a goat's sun-
bleached skull—
press my thumbs deep
into where its eyes should be.

The Man Who Swallowed Darkness

He belongs to the doorway, beyond the glow
Of the streetlamp's cone of light. The cigarette hums orange
Against his mouth in the shadows and he belongs

To the pavement, like all the dandelions
The devil pokes up through the asphalt. I wanna invite him in
For peach black tea cause I'm just a girl ready to love

Whoever's around to be loved. A girl who walks
Down the dirt roads carrying blackberries
In her cupped shirt, the fruit staining the hem,

Staining her lips bruised. A girl who just watches
And watches and waits, but he holds night in his hands
Where my hips would fit, and to tell the truth,

I ain't been touched in awhile. I'd let him
Into my body the way he becomes a ghost
In the window. The way my tongue presses

The blackberries to the roof of my mouth. He will watch
The juice trickle down my chin, making my chest sticky,
Making my skin sweet. He will watch it purple the pink

Parts—this part ain't pretty. When his lips
Hesitate against my neck, I tell him
If you don't like what you see, then don't look.

Litany of Loving

A

In the morning
 there are too many unsayable things,
 so we don't say them.
I waited a long time to meet someone
 like him. He smiles with his teeth
so I want to sleep with him.
 I want to invite him in-
to my home
in a different country, in a city
 where the birds talk
with their fists and the people
with their guts.

He asks, *what have we got to lose?*
I tell him, *everything.*

O

The ray of sun through the skylight
 window on the slanted ceiling
 is the first thing I see when I wake up.

He kisses me.
He kisses me.

Dozens of half-empty water bottles frame his bed, which is just two twin mattresses pressed together. I ask about the Nyquil and Gatorade, but he doesn't hear me.

Or he pretends not to hear me.

Last night, we were messy flesh and messy tongues and messy fists twisted into sheets and into shoulders. I tell him to hold me down and take what he wants
and he does.

He touches his lips to my spine and I want him to remember the way my bones move beneath my skin in the morning. He holds my hips in his palms like lovers do—tight enough we might become strangers. We might become ghosts. We might become human.

In the morning, he kisses me.

He helps me find my dress, and it smells like dust

and cigarettes.

L

We meet in a bar and he wears a green sweatshirt
and he plays pool but he's bad at it.

We meet in a different bar,

at a different hour, and he holds his hand

to my back as if he's afraid he'll ruin me.

I kiss him first.

I find his mouth and I take it.

He ties his green sweatshirt around his waist. He dances.

He says *don't worry, baby, everything will turn out alright.*

It will. It will. I kiss him.

I want to sleep with him, but I don't. I step outside to get some air and I keep walking. The roads are quiet and I keep walking. I don't look back. The moon opens wide and asks for permission to swallow me whole. I tell her no. I howl for no one.

M

The dead finches in their shallow graves know
no gods. They turn
into each other, sharp beaks and wings and fragile bones.

In unison, they sing through the dirt.

They sing, *take your time.*

There is so much to see.

Together, we saw a man die. I was wearing pink heart-shaped sunglasses
and he was wearing a yellow hat.

I closed my eyes and heard the soft sound of my body

hitting the mattress. I heard the soft sound of a body

hitting the pavement. His arms forgot to become wings.

His fragile bones became dust.

Where We Forget Our Names

For A.

To kill ourselves for the birds
is such a human thing. And when

I say *human*, I mean *holy*, and when
I say *holy*, I mean the neighbor's cat

gave birth under the front steps.
I mean this morning repeating

itself until there is nowhere left
for the sun to go but beneath

our wet tongues. Your body
is familiar because your body

is my own, and you can take this
however you want to, but there

is no difference between silverware
scattered across the floor-boards

and teeth chattering on the wrong side
of this tender boy's cheek. Which is

to say, I will put them all back
in their rightful places. I have run

out of ways to talk around this. When
I say *blood*, I mean the mountains

are our mothers' muted hands
wringing the river out of the stars.

When I say *haunted*, I mean we are mouths
turned cathedral, and that stained-

[cont'd w/ break]

glass sunlight on the back of your neck
is just me sharing my secrets—I am

the window. And when I say *love*, I mean
the desert and the ever-opening sky

kissing the same earth woven into and out of
and into our flesh—strange and inevitable.

I have run out of ways to say I am sorry.
And maybe it's the stars that need to go.

Maybe this is just our undressing
before each other. Ask how to nude oneself

back into animal—into a wild that will
have us, for we are hungry.

VITA

Marina Leigh is a queer, biracial writer and photographer born and raised in Reno, Nevada, and she earned her MFA in poetry as the Grisham Fellow at the University of Mississippi, where she also served as the senior poetry editor of *Yalobusha Review*. Her work has been published in several journals, and she is the author of a poetry chapbook titled *Wild Daughter*.