AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HEAVY WATER

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Abstract

The poems that appear in this collection explore, more than anything, the conversation of loss—loss of children, certainly, but also the loss of humanity, of the inherent goodness people are born with and then, somehow, discard along the way. Someone once said these poems are unmistakably feminine, and I consider that both a compliment and a testament to their ability to navigate the subjects of family, class divides, and rape culture.
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Her Litany

Give up your Blue Period,  
those decade-old unrequited lyrics praising  
Russell Laws’ sapphire eyes and milky skin,  
back when you thought you were a poet  
and wore black combat boots and kissed  
Latino boys to prove you weren’t a racist.  
Give up your Russian gymnastics teacher  
who pinched your chubby legs and laughed  
at your struggling body grasping for rope.  
Give up, too, the Hanged Man,  
and the stick switch on your behind  
when your grandma caught you playing  
with tarot cards and thought you’d gone to Hell.  
And give up the rope, the anchor;  
let the river cross you Under (but first  
pluck the silver from your eyes  
and pay the teind). Give up any pretentions  
that you’re Persephone; accept  
the pomegranate juice as it comes to you  
in the grocery aisle and gulp it  
and spit residual seeds on the grass.  
Give up your blood memory, the claustrophobia  
inhaired from your Jewish great-grandmother  
hidden in a trunk on her passage to America.  
Give away your blood, and give up your fear  
of needles and your fear of your fear of needles,  
and forgive yourself the memory of sound,  
of the crack of your clavicle against the car door,  
of each thud your hips echoed as he dragged you  
down the stairs, of the slurp of your plasma sucked  
into vials, of the sick drenched plop of the dead  
fetal cells dropping from your womb onto the bathroom tile.  
Tonight you will un-dream this truth  
and thus tomorrow she will die again,  
she will be rain sliding out of an uncupped palm.  
So give up the shoebox, give up your hospital  
bracelet, the menagerie of prayers scribbled  
on receipts frenetically scraped from your purse:  
give this, you think, give up all this  
and maybe the next one will live.
The Kind of Girl You Are

Your lips are mothwings,  
exquisite lies hovering  
over the lamp’s shattered base.  
You’ve plugged it back in,  
let the serpentine cord  
thread your silence.  
The bulb accuses your skin  
in the bruised light.  
*Tell me what happened*,  
she says, but instead you stare  
at the unhinged lampshade  
while she plucks glass from your arm  
and discards the fragments.  
*That’s expensive glass*,  
you say. *Don’t waste it.*

You don’t blame her  
for ignoring you, but when she leaves,  
you pick through the trash,  
dodging bloody gauze and sharp  
ground glass dust, to salvage the largest shards,  
think maybe you’ll make them  
into a necklace or a picture frame,  
some beautiful, tangible memory  
of the lamp you really did love,  
of the day you bought it for two dollars  
from a yard sale, when your mom said  
*What a steal*, and so you took it home  
and polished the mottled green glass  
and showed it to him, proudly,  
and he studied its weight  
with his palms and said *This thing  
could do some damage.*
Sister

When I lost her,
I thought about the marigolds
I’d sacrificed last summer,
how I’d cut them without reservation
from our flowerbed
and decorated her,
how later I’d stripped
moss from trunks to carpet
our hideout under the porch,
how barren I’d left the bark,
how every tree hung exposed,
how I’d loved her, how I’d
plucked honeysuckle
from the thicket and taught her
to lick the petals clean.

That winter, when I lost her
for the first time, when she slipped
from our house and into another,
I told myself I was ten
and too young
to make any difference,
and this is how I became a liar,
became the awful person I am today,
and suddenly every story
I’d ever told her—
about the richness of soil and the value
of weeds—meant nothing
because she had been my earth,
she was the single, perfect leaf
clinging to the end of the outstretched
tangled branch
I’d offered to the world.
The Weakness in the Sky

You’re 21 and on your first red-eye, sitting abandoned in the last row of the plane, which refuses to ascend and give you the numbing peace of vapor you desire. So, unimpressed, you stare down the Earth, daring her to prove herself to your stubborn bird’s eyes.

She looks—you are tempted to say—like a galaxy unfolding beneath you. There is nothing but an expanse of blackness, punctuated by thousands of lights: suburbia at its most ordered, most understood state.

Then you see it: two orbs—blurring as they travel too fast on intersecting dotted lines, blinded in the caliginous night, incapable of seeing one another’s foreboding shadows—collide.

And you stare, clasped by this miracle, this absurdity, as the Earth offers herself to you, peeling her guarded skin for you alone.

And you feel the way God
surely felt when He heard from afar the sibilant whisper in the shell of Eve’s ear, as her pink-blossomed lips split into coy petals and enfolded the apple’s taut flesh, that succulent globe—

you are powerless, intrigued, excited. And your fingers vibrate against the chilled window in anticipation, fascinated by the horror erupting beneath you, effervescent and impossibly luminous, fading to black as you pass overhead.
Wrong

She will tell them that rape
made you this way.
Rape changed you.
She says this because she wants you
to be explained.
She wants to look at the gallery
of your intense, black words,
the odd comments that explode with fury
from your peaceful-pink lips,
and diagnose you with justification.
And she watches for their
knowing nods and isn’t-it-a-shame clucks.

She doesn’t know you were born
with the tendency
to manipulate,
to dominate;
that you have always wielded words
as razors
and shields.

Even before he tore you
and left your body halved
and broken on the concrete—
before you first felt the exposed
Eden shame prickling your skin—
you were the sort of girl
who relished empowerment,
licking the delicious taste of fear
from your victims.

And even before he trapped and pinned you
beneath him,
examining your fragile,
thrashing wings
with his casual cruelty,
you were the kind of woman who abused men,
and with the patience of a locksmith, you
meticulously picked your way into their insecurities,
gifted with the knowledge
of exactly when to thrust the final, grooved key
deep into their safe hearts.
Still, you were the girl who forced them to like it;
you left your melancholy lovers
with your illusive love
slipping through their fingertips
and unworthy mouths
like silk,
like wings.
Litany for a Third Pregnancy

Let it please be one way, not the other.
Let this child descend in appropriate moons
from my scarred womb.

How far I am now from the girl
who sacrificed her first children
to their father's will—from Abraham
delivering Isaac to that altar of sticks and brush.

But this is no time to be Biblical
(though their father's name was Adam,
though I was his Eden);
already I'm unseaming,
blood scarring my sheets at night,
scant threads threatening
to unravel five months' work.

Let this child be Artemis.
Let her silver quiver strengthen her tiny elbows.
Let each sinew elongate from umbilical blood.

How far I am now from the girl
who sought prayer as an answer,
whose knees were numb from bowing—
from Sarah pleading for a son.

Let me believe in moons.
Let me believe in belladonna
scattered on coals under a lunar eclipse.
Let rosehips mend her skin,
let the vessel fill with milk
and bloom in blackened earth,
and let these herbs infuse my womb
with comfort, let them cradle with sweet witchcraft
the girl growing thin inside me.
Nomenclature

“To name something is to know it differently.”
-Ryan Teitman

Because as a child I grew beanstalks in three clay pots in a row on my porch, and called them Moriarty, Vagrant, and Rune and sang to their curling stems each morning before school, I knew them differently—knew that Vagrant liked the Blues and Moriarty was partial to Michael Jackson and wouldn’t climb the tiny trellis no matter how much I begged and twisted his tendrils around the sticks.

So when, one morning, I peeked out on my legumes and discovered Madly, our beagle, had eaten every one, I grieved them by name, washed their pots carefully and vowed never to fill them with another living thing. This, I thought, was the proper way to grieve—to preserve memory with hollows, to leave vacant the cradle and mourn the small lives that had once unfurled inside—but first, to name them.
The Weight

for Eisley

I always envision you at four years:
wild strawberry hair, scuffed Mary Janes,
inquisitive, maybe shy, tiny ears
cupped in my palm to shield you from the train's
alarming screeches. But you never reached
four years. You won't be wandering beside
the portraits at the Met with me, your peach-
pink lips insisting, emerald eyes dyed
like mine. Sweet Eisley, I will carry you
against my back. Your exhalations haunt
me, phantom whispers hissing strange taboo
songs. Palms enclose my throat; they seem to want
their mother. Eisley, I will bear the weight
of your small hands until I'm able to
convince you that our blood ties are innate,
unbreakable. And so I'll carry you
through museums, through malls, on water, through crypts.
My spine will acclimate, accept the heft
of your memory. And you will eclipse
me, ageless and whole, yet leave me bereft.
Gifts

I have promised you I will turn you into a tree.
I will let them burn you, and I'll plant you
in a paper cone next to our tomatoes,
and then, you say, every Autumn
when I falter to the basement
to pull out the canning jars, you will be
with me. You will be with me
even as I extricate the full fruit
from their bitter vines.

You say you will be the sycamore
my babies play beneath; you will give them shade.
And because you are dying, because right
now your only hope nestles in my ovaries,
I don't tell you what I know, have known
for a year now, how there won't be any fruit bearing
the green-gold irises you gifted me.

Instead, I listen to you die through the phone,
measure your fifty years in coughs scratching
the receiver, tearing your lungs, wrapping
paper fracturing under my nails.

Next Autumn, you will be leaves,
and I will scrape earth
around the frail trunk knuckling
from your seedling grave.
Danaë, 2008

She reached for the window
to the sweet, strange rainwater,
honey burned with a sting.

She gathered drops; they melded
in her palm, snaked her hands
and braceletled her wrists.

Retreating, she scraped the gold,
let it scar under
her nails, fell to the daybed.

There the storm took her.

The coins, coppery
waxed moons, filled her.

Later, they called it receiving,
as in have you received the Holy Ghost?,
as in I’ve just received a lovely thank-you
note from your mother,
and this is why she stopped talking,
hers lips swollen to Harpocrates,
and worshiped only the untold memories
in her mind

the child in her womb.
Love Poem to Statues

I have looked to you
in galleries. I have not asked

for much—just for some gesture,
some crooked marble finger
to illuminate the Exit sign. I have looked
for you in gardens,

searched for lanterns
in your glazed irises.

I have looked at you as a cartographer
studies the certain topography of a ridge,

tracing each peak of silt-packed stones,
sketching the mountain in pebbles.

You wear my expectations like a cloak,
thick but removable.

I looked around you, thinking perhaps
that you secreted what I sought.

But there was only you,
face grown into ivy.
Sestina

Once I was asked to write a poem about a supermarket
and so I wrote about a carton of organic
milk spilling on my jeans while I bled out
my second child, and my professor said This is sad,
why can't you just give me something
good for once? And so I drew him a Care Bear

riding a rainbow in an otherwise bare
sky, heading toward a supermarket
stuffed with marshmallow fluff, and something
in there was on sale—it was a jar of organic
multicolored sprinkles—and the hipster-chick clerk with sad
eyes had blue mascara bleeding out

of her tear ducts because she'd put out
on her date last night. And the bear
scolded, “This is no time to be sad;
it's Super Dollar Off Rainbow Jimmies Day at the market;
they're organic.”
And the cool checkout girl played “Something”
on original vinyl, and Paul McCartney appeared in something
tastefully sparkly, looking like a masculine Taylor Swift out
on the town, and he said That sound is so organic
and took off his scarf with a smile and nod to the bear,
which was obviously a superfluous marketing
 technique, so thinly veiled it was sad.

Dear God, Woman, why'd you have to make it sad?
my professor asked. Don't you have something
else going on? Jesus Christ, it's a fucking supermarket
assignment. So I walked out
and into the rain like a cliché, bearing
my frustration to the sky, organically,

and I went to my Organic
Chemistry class, saddened
by professors, overbearing,
begging for something
I just couldn't put out.
That night at the supermarket

I imagined I could be Haryette Mullen and write an organic poem, something
soul-baring, something that could explain how it felt to feel the baby fall out
of me, something sad and real but clever, so fucking clever, like S*perm**k*t.
In Which I Imagine Myself Into *The Wizard of Oz*

I am the trapdoor hinge just-visible through the thickness she leaves hanging over waxy flowers, the bold stockings shriveling under a waning foundation. Later, I will be the Hanged Man's shadow swinging in the trees, looked-for like Kansas, uncertain growth fed by aged cinema strips. But now I'm the absent heart ticking in this tin man. Surrender, Dorothy.
on elevation

the nurse says *take*

*the elevator*

and I think how *elevator*

sounds like a spell

from *Harry Potter*

how it's all tongue

then a bite

(like the father

of the brief bastard

bleeding from me)

how it ends in a choice:

to ascend or not to ascend

how it's a vacant promise

of an *assemblé*

and how I know

not to believe it

but still step inside
Uncle Randy Makes a Mess

And so he pushes the barrel into his mouth smoothly, not snagging a single tooth, and so she realizes he has rehearsed this scene, he has chosen the location after careful scouting, has imagined the script, envisioned his death as a victory, one last closing Act.

He has chosen the bathroom because it is white, because it is her parents' house, because he likes the thought of them scrubbing his blood from the ceiling tiles, because it is small and close in here. She has chosen not to let him get away with murder (as she'll tell the cops later that day), and so she grabs the hilt and twists, guides the shaft down to his cheek as he pulls the trigger, lets him lose half a face instead.

Later he will choose to play up the pirate look for the ladies; he'll buy a black eyepatch and let his hair curl and lengthen. He'll swig rum from the bottle and sway in the sand along the Gulf, and because this is Texas, he'll find a hundred women who dig it, who stroke his half-carved jack-o-lantern scars as they split into a grin. And when his wife comes home to find another girl’s lips on his cock, he’ll say, You did this to me. And he’ll smile.
Sister II

You say the moon haunts you.
I pull the curtains close,
    let them kiss in the middle,
    but it’s still there, gauzy, now,
    spectral.

*It will get me,*
    you say, and turn
    in to me, dig
    your small nails into my wrist.

I carry you to the den,
    face you towards the windows. *Look,*
I say,
    *it’s just a moon.*
    *There are hundreds of moons.*

*But they’re not all*  
    *looking,*
you murmur, and curl
    into a chair, close your eyes beneath a blanket.

And now it is me
    and the books, spines notched
    with answers, and I have to find you
one
    before you turn in to me,
    sixteen and cruel,
sixteen
    and unapologetic,
    unbelieving.

I skim a finger against the bones
    until one hums at my touch.
*This will make it better,*
    I say,
and you believe me
    because I keep you
    because you don’t know
    me.

And you are small
    in my arms, you fit
    in to me,
my *matryoshka*,

and I’m afraid you
are already
me,

but I read to you anyway,
because you are small,
because I once was,
and because if you are me,
you will need this memory,
this one moment I loved you,
believed you could be someone

good one day,
believed it wasn’t too late
to make you someone better.
Loss

*a mostly found poem, from a chalkboard*

When to the earth, the dirt
on the surface of the desert
wears itself as though it is the mirror
in which I see you
turning back. The way starts
moving suddenly, as if without
principles. The lizards fade into rocks.
Hansel and Gretel, 2012

Because he could not trail you both into
the woods and abandon you, famished, to
the night, your father took my ankles down
a staircase, shook until my honeyed figs,
sweet son and daughter, fell. Because he could
not rely on a wicked, lustful witch
(that deus ex machina he required),
he ate you, gnawed rare steaks in restaurants,
took up the task of swallowing, consumed
your metaphorical bone marrow, cracked
your sugared ribs and sucked from them, then wiped
his lips with crisp white napkins, harvested
the luscious strings of meat between his teeth
and spat your memory onto his plate.

You have become my ink and lungs; when I
hear leaves, they whisper scarlet secrets. I
accept the thrall of trunks, of weathered bark.
I look for breadcrumbs, some abandoned trail
of saplings nourished by your vagrant veins.
I search the earth for errant footprints, taste
each sugarmaple for evidence. But
you faded in the Appalachians,
surpassed your father's hungry grasping claws,
and here I am, collapsing the thinned sky.
Nomenclature II

I have stopped naming them.

I have stopped naming them because there are only so many beautiful words to pair with each ovum, and because they are the minnows that skimmed through my grasping hands when I was small and played in creeks along the mountain trails—

because each time I try to catch one as she slides, bloody, down my leg or he falls, tiny and limp, onto hospital sheets where so many others have died before him, and because I can’t,

I have stopped tying strings to balloons and whispering names inside the globes, have stopped burying them in the sky, watching them kite-tail and dig into the clouds, small and far, disappearing to burn into the atmosphere.
Open

She stalks her frisbee
as it slips into the thicket
and flinches against thin trunks.
The discus boomerangs
in the bamboo tangle,
so she quickens,
skirts thistles
and sticker burs,
dodges the itch
of Queen Anne's grasp
and thunders, oblivious,
under one last rung of leaves
into the clearing.

Here, exposed beneath the zodiac,
the frisbee, neon and obscene,
has landed among the corpses.

Perhaps she is the first to see them:
the woman dissected, her uterine walls spread
like a split diary, and the inside—the small—

—but there are no words for this mute horror,
for this single torn page dispersed in the clover.

Her feet propel her
towards the cavernous mother,
whose hands are tethered, whose eyes,
even in death, criticize constellations
and gods.

The clouds peel and wither,
and later, under the moon, they are discovered:
girl and woman and child.

And this girl, this child,
this woman,
whose sweet
cherry screams ricocheted
from leaf to vine to limb to relief,
is carried, clinging, home.
Tempest

Because I forgave you for raping me--

Because I forgave
the metallic taste of your belt buckle
against my lips,
the degradation of new leather
circumnavigating my head,
the pull of the belt's tail
calling me back to you in the storm—

Because I forgave the fury of your body
after it incessantly split me,
stroke on stroke, a jagged bolt splintering me;
the way it couldn't stop breaking
even as I screamed in a forest
of pillows,
the bestial breathing falling on my back,
hot and laden with wilderness—

Because I forgave you enough
to make love to you a week later,
to date you for eight entangled months,
to be your lover amidst the chaos,
to walk calmly through the woods,
trailing you, a ribbon caught on a branch,
struggling in the wind—

—I cannot forgive
the torrent of weeping
that collapsed on me
with the fallen limb of your body;
your tears staining my hair
as you begged in desperation,
the weakness in you more grotesque
than the thicket of pain on my back,
the gouges you placed there,
already swelling with gales of blood.
Professor Lebron Engages in Petty Larceny

Fred had been pushing for hours--
first Greg, who hunched, all elbows,
oblivious to the bartender's once-over,
and said, *What he's having*,
and found himself damning
his palate with Manhattans all night,
his tongue incapable of matching Fred's forty-two
years of vermouth slump.

Mike, swilling, held
every glass Fred handed him like he were Sinatra
or someone even smoother,
and Taylor, singing something
about California, accepted another beer.

And finally, Fred, on the far side of a slur,
urged me to get something—anything.

And because there was no drink capable
of cauterizing my womb—
because nothing in that bar
could numb the memory—
or maybe because it was Christmas,
I stroked the plastic edges of the sign sitting
on the table and said, *This. I want this.*

Fred, slouching in his Santa hat,
winked and slid it into my purse
just before he paid the tab.

Walking home down the cobbled alleys,
the haunt of Gettysburg around me,
I gripped the Reservation sign,
willing this small relic
to memorialize the daughter still
spilling herself from me.
Shame

It had stopped raining.
Under the porch, we buried pieces
of bones we had discovered over the hedge
after hearing yowls stop at the whir of mower blades.
The skulls were neatly severed; bits of fur slid
off angular cuts with blood and wet mud-covered muscle
darkening the damp grass.

I don’t know how long the neighbor boy had been killing—
I only remember the sweet pink tongues from the newest litter
and how they had wrapped around the milk-soaked towel
that morning when his dad had brought them over
to amuse the girls today, he had said, grinning
as we stroked the silken ears and dangled ribbons
above their gray paws.

The earth moved easily beneath our touch,
and soon the graves were open and lined
with damp moss scraped from the sycamore trunks
in our yard. We laid out the corpses forensically,
built skeletons underground, and covered them
with plucked marigold petals and fresh soil.

The next day we watched Mr. Aronstein stare
at his matted lawn and murmur Why, Yahweh? to the clouds.
It’s a shame, our mother said later, he should have had a daughter.
Ursa Minor

for Jeremy

Lodged in a high January snow bank,
our backs impressed in the ivory mezzanine,
we examine the little bear, its Polarc tail
dwindling into midnight.

It has been only hours since you towed
me from the basement of the Mütter
and lifted my legs into the crook of your elbow
to carry me up the stairs, past clinical brass
railings, as I wept for the miniscule skeletons
and dry medical tags:
FETUS AT EIGHT WEEKS.

On the train back through the city, you didn’t speak
but instead held me still. I had forgotten
what it was like to live for something other
than memory, but
in the plastic seat beside you, I awoke.

So I turn to you now in the freezing earth and let your lips
resuscitate mine, permit your tongue and feel it twist.
I’ll study the sky as you pen constellations on my neck
with your teeth because here, surrounded by you,
she can be more myth than history.
Wreckage

You, teeth fixed on his clavicle, are suspended in the sea, the frigid water transforming you both: your hair coupling with shells and stones; his skin tingeing denim and mermanish under a verdant moon.

It isn’t until after you’ve salvaged yourselves from the waves that you see it: two turtles stitch hemlines in the muck. Their limbs serge sea with sand, threading the horizon. Inside you, your daughter spools undiscovered. Beside you, her father stokes your hennaed feet.

Walking the shore as she anchors within you, cupping his hand, you find a third omen: a knotted length of blackened timber, toned by currents, stabs erectly, point-down, in the sand. You pluck the driftwood knife from the shingle and carry it home.

Weeks from now, submerged in hospital sheets, you will imagine she began just as the dagger landed between you and him, just as the terrapins breached the tidal lips and dove, abandoning the wreckage on the shore.
Compulsive

It has been seven years
since your uncle pressed his shriveled dick
against your exposed gums that winked
with the promise of grown-up enamel.

But, now, at twelve, you barely remember the taste
of wrinkles soaked in old smoke; it comes to you only
in daydreams you half-believe.
You stand at a mirror and observe five
small volcanic formations spreading
across your otherwise perfect cheeks.

And inside, you feel the tickling
of a notion that tells you to wash your hands
and face. It feels like something you almost remember:
your five-year-old apple-flesh
rubbing against the tarantulic hairs on his scrotum.
You twist the tap until it spouts, rub fingers under soap and cold
(it will always be cold) water and mercilessly
scrape memory from your chin.

It will be the same spidery itch
that tells you, at twenty-one, to bleach
your car’s upholstery, to scour the upholstery
until all you can see are unblemished spheres
speckling the tan seats: so still they haunt you,
woman and child, the burned (cleansed) fabric
charting their absences.

—the same tic that told you to snap
her wrist against the car door, to gather her hair
in your clean hands and twist until something gushed,
until she bled your son into the floorboard,
until that little eruption burned
away.
Grandad Makes the Call

but first he finishes his sandwich.
It’s his favorite
(the Elvis, though he invented it
*long before that pervert came along*),
and it’s warm now—

warm, but cooling,
like his son-in-law’s blood
on the tile—
and soft, too.
The peanut butter oozes
sweetly on his tongue.

In the kitchen, his daughter keens
and clutches her youngest to her breast.
And down the hall, past the broken lock
on the gun cabinet, his wife staunches
the wound with her new towels.
*Get help*, she shouts,
as he pats his lips with a napkin.

Crumbs have fallen onto his shirt.
Though he plucks them off, one by one,
and places them on the plate,
he admires their neat scatterplot.
He could make sense of them,
if he wanted to.

When the police arrive, he’s in the garden
digging each weed to the root
before plucking it from the earth.
He nods to the sheriff and pats his brow
with a folded handkerchief.

Later, he surveys the mess—the aquamarine
washcloths turned to blood, the ceiling
spattered with gray matter.
*Cheryl*, he says firmly,
*I believe you’ll need to clean this up.*
Autobiography of Heavy Water

The first time my legs were open to a boy,
it was on a floating trampoline anchored beside a sand strip
and he had just crossed the border the night before,
and he was seventeen and couldn’t speak English
and so I’m not sure if he understood me when I screamed,
I’d like to think he didn’t, I’d like to think of him
as jumbled, but at the time as I felt his hands
I thought of the palm trees and mangoes and how the water
was beneath me and the water was inside me
and the water was filthy, and I was heavy
with worry about God and the blood on the bikini
his cousin had loaned me, and how she had said *Show him the trampoline*, and about how people used to get gangrene
from swimming here in the 1950s, and the pockmarked
amputees still scorch along the docks in green plastic
chairs, peddling shrimp and longing to be back on board
the boats. And the people on the shore that night were drowning
in bad music and I was thankful, even then, that it wasn’t good,
that something I loved wouldn’t be my rape soundtrack.
And in the distance as I thought all this,
a ship crossed between my scrunched eyelashes
and I scratched my distress into his arms and neck
and wished for a flashlight or a teleportation device,
wished to be anywhere other than the water, the festering
sand-riddled tide, how it broke and broke and broke
and how some people could think this was beautiful,
this clunky ebbing beast split by stones,
and how those people were crazy, how this migrant boy
inside me thought I was beautiful, and how pain
mingled with the water, how he was crazy, how the water was metallic
and tasted like walnuts, and how it gasped
into my mouth with every dip of his palms,
sneaking inside me with him through the black mesh below,
and then I was the water, I was this heavy everywhere
thing, helplessly screaming along the horizon.
February 14th

I said I dreamed I was being burned alive, felt my skin dripping from my shoulders, melting fingernails with flames. I heard my eyeballs explode like careless bubble wrap. I felt it, I said, and then I saw my funeral: marigolds on a casket, and I watched until I saw only flowers, kaleidoscopic petals scorched into my pupils — and it was a pleasure to be burned, to submit to the Fahrenheit and rise winglike above the gathering, if only to see that melancholy garden wasting in black vases. I told you no one has ever bought me flowers, not even you.

“You’re such a Jew,” you said, “dreaming of ovens.”
Longing

Because my mother was soft,
I sought hard women,
women on planes with ice
in short, smooth glasses
stained with gin, women
in suggestive black back-seam stockings,
women in angled hats
driving gritty buses.

Once I saw a woman in blue heels
walking sharply in the Appalachians
by the creek I played in, barefoot.

It wasn’t until the arc of her arm
and the solid step forward
of that cerulean shoe into the gravel trail
entered my view that I noticed the copperhead
sunning two feet from my exposed ankles.

And then the stone
came so quickly even the snake
didn’t notice. Its head painted
the boulder as she nodded to me,
then stepped carefully on,
hips trailing my longing.
Museums

1996

My sister brings the cicada home. It had landed, she claimed, on her shirt: *fell out of the trees like the sky,* she says. *Want to see what it’s like inside?* We’ve only ever held the crunchy, leaflike carcasses. All summer we have gathered them with dandelions, pried their molasses legs from bark and fence posts and added the corpses to our nature museum under the porch: a gallery of sticks and dried honeycomb.

The cicada intends to molt on our mustard linoleum. Fascinated, we watch the thing as it fissures, forming lines that spread across the newspaper skin and blend with the floor’s age marks.

The shell rises and descends with obvious effort—a pattern which I will remember, years later, as the definition of labor, of one body surging for independence from another—until the cleavage splits with a wet pop, and a bulging lime dome emerges. On the surface, now, it is revolting: muddy globes for eyes smeared on its grapelike figure, spiny tubers slicing still more integument and gaping.

*It sounds like Christmas,* my sister says, just before the final leg tears the flesh and lunges the entity forward, directly towards her gravel-skimmed legs perched above Spice Girls nail polish.

Instinctively, we shriek at the sudden intrusion, scared of the *thing* that has erupted at our feet, and our father, passing by, stomps on it, leaving a treacle smear on the linoleum.

2012

Christmas sounds like beginnings. Jeremy peels elven bodies apart as he opens my gift. Another train—the closer we get to Philly, the more he strokes the sweet bruises he left on my neck in the Amtrak bathroom.
In the art museum, I see her for the first time:
Saint Barbara, cracked and oiled, one vermillion
nipple delivered of her breast, discarded
and shriveled at her feet. Long cables of blood trill
from her wound, and her spine stretches into a bridge
that arches from the canvas into me.
In a twin frame she reappears, miraculously whole
beneath three windows, her breasts reincarnated,
and, Promethean, again it begins:
a third painting— mutilated mammillae
severed by metal tongs and silver teeth.
Her nipples gasp on the ground—evidence of her ruined body, of
oaths of mouths she’ll never imbibe with milk and wisdom. Until
in the fourth, hourglass-like, again, she rebirths
into a holy rind encasing sweet flesh.
I want to be this woman, this healed portrait
of faith and future. Jeremy folds around my shoulders,
tucks his chin into my collar and stares with me.
*She was beheaded, he says, by her father,
when they couldn’t torture her successfully.*

My breasts are still milk-laden reminders
of my daughter, successfully severed from my womb,
my daughter, who has joined the gallery of rotting things
that have found their ways, dead, into my hands,

and Saint Barbara, woman I have never believed in
until this moment, triumph of soul
over man, looks at me from centuries of carved women.
*Impermanence, she says.*
Fallout Gallery

on the Mütter Museum

The Fallout Gallery! Come one, come all!
See the freaks contorted here: motherless wretches, orphaned rejects—sure to appall!

Aborted fetuses huddled in jars!
The Soapsuds Woman in her soapsuds dress!
The Fallout Gallery! Come one, come all!

Skeletons loom conspicuously tall over preserved dwarves and formaldehyde breasts!
Retch, orphaned rejects! We’re sure to appall!

Let bile bloom as you decipher scrawls of doctors describing patients’ duress in The Fallout Gallery, where we all cringe in awe behind the muttering walls! (ignore the woman who weeps in excess, who retches for orphans and is appalled by the sight of the glinting fetal skulls)
Visit the site of scientific success—Come to The Fallout Gallery! Come, all rejected wretches! Shroud yourselves in our pall!
Gettysburg

Show me a woman who isn’t haunted by men,
who doesn’t fear certain aftershaves and boots.
Gettysburg, with your cannon-sunk brick
and boulder-slung fields,

you built the rooms I was raped in,
the dorm in which my children died,
the staircase he pulled me down,
the one I still feel some nights
when I think about your silent witness,
the way you let boys slink by with diplomas
and recommendations, the way you pretend
not to see who they are.

I’ll never see your stark, bone columns again
without feeling five fingers netting my hair
and flinging my head into a wall.
I will hear the sound of my legs skidding
on carpet, carry the weight of his hips
as they grappled mine, every time
I write your name on my résumé.

I am ghost-stippled, followed
by his soap-scent and bleach burns
on my cheeks and clothes,
and you, Gettysburg, vine-coated
and austere, house all the blame
I don’t want to hang on myself.
Aunt Cheryl Cleans Up

*She’s cleaning up,*
my dad would say—like
it was a good thing.
Like it needed
to be done. Like all
those girls my aunt
found in bed with her husband
deserved to be smacked around.

*You’re cleaning up,* my dad
would say on Christmas
morning when I’d sit
entrenched by gifts.
It was one of the few days
each year he was sure to be home.

*Got to go bail Cheryl*
*out again,* he’d say sometimes
to my mom. *She cleaned up*
after Randy again last night.
*Knocked this one’s teeth*
*into her gums,* he’d say,
the scent of his last joint
still soaked into his shirt,
mingled with sweat and pitch
from a day’s roofing.

I had to hand it to him, though—
there was one thing my dad did well:
clean up when he went to court
to clean up after his siblings.
From His Mistress

My lover’s nuts are nothing like golf balls; I reckon them to peanuts—shriveled, stressed, and pink and sick. His dick just hangs and falls, comically depressed. And though his chest is chiseled bronze, his nipples sag unchecked like dry old utters drooping on a sow. And oft dear Willy chooses to defect before I’ve cum, eliciting a scowl. I love to hear him sing his sonnets, yet I know he misses half the notes. His chins convulse and jiggle in his silhouette as he recites and plays his violin.

And yet I think I’ll keep him longer still; he might get wealthy by his quill.
Sister III

And blue broke on her from the sun,
and this was the moment I knew her
fully, knew it’s not the right time
meant never, knew I’d painted a room
purple for an emptiness, knew she wasn’t
coming home, that the new quilt
would never be crumpled at the foot
of the bed, that she’d break our mother again.

And then she turned
and the light unshadowed her cheekbones
and there she was, hollowed and shiny,
under the willow,
the sweet girl I’d raised, burned woman
and awful.
“If you can’t be good, be good at it.”

-parting words of my father to his daughters

We took him seriously.
We took him at his word, you might say.
We carried those words the way we carried the cameos our grandmother had given us before she died: proudly.
We polished them.
We hid them in drawers for safekeeping, secreted them.
We took them like vitamins, especially my sister.
One dose of wisdom each day, one capsule to ward off love, to armor herself. She was good at it, we all agreed; men would give her anything when she’d pretend to love them.
We took them to heart, right to the heart of the man I stabbed on the street one night when he tried to rape me. That was me, being good.
On Watching My Best Friend’s Abortion

starving,
I watched you
discard
what I most
hungered for
Doubt

1946

Because there was no other way
to rationalize it,
and because as a minister’s wife
she had an obligation to the congregation
of women flocking to the minute grave,
she shook her head delicately and declared
it was God’s will.

After night had settled on the mound
blanketing her baby’s peaceful corpse
with an unearthly swaddling,
the black questions crept
from the tomb of her heart and cursed
that God
she had sung *Amazing Grace* to
as she bathed her son’s small feet
for the last time,
the Johnson & Johnson’s baby soap
lathering on the new skin of Johnny’s soles
nestled in her incapable hands,
hands that could comfort
but not heal.

A day later in church, she marveled
at the pedilavium, her beautiful feet cupped
in her sister’s sturdy hands.
The porcelain basin stung satisfyingly cold
and punishing
against her toes that wriggled with life
against a trickle of water.
She watched as the sins of her soul
were poured onto the church’s lawn,
muddying the manicured ground.

1996

On his deathbed, even though the synapses
in his brain barely flicker,
my grandfather can quote the Good Book
with an eerie perfection,
his fraction of a voice reducing
the power of the red words, the words
he once used, fifty years ago, to calm
a sea of rage that ran clotted and brackish
through his wife’s body.

She waits beside him,
a patient scarecrow
waving the vultures from his bed,
praying
for her remaining, hovering sons
to fly into obscurity
so she doesn’t have to listen to them
as they crow over his possessions,
separating precious artifacts of his life,
squabbling over guitars and hymnals.

She pulls me into her lap
as he screams Whore! at her,
the woman who sits vigilant
in the green chair,
who washes his feet with a tenderness
he can no longer understand,
the woman whose name he can’t recall,
her face mutable as clay
the potter has neglected.

Sometimes he can almost remember
that she smells like roses
and loves the way his pens bleed
into his shirt pockets.
Sometimes he can almost remember
their sixteen children,
the pride in her smile
when Johnny took his first steps,
the way her face illuminated
when he bought new white shoes
for Johnny, a little big, with room to grow—
shoes long rotten in Virginia soil.

But mostly, he remembers the scriptures,
and surely
the woman by his bed must be a Babylonian whore,
to be so beautiful
and yet so indecent as to caress the cheek of a stranger,
a man,
lying naked beneath only a thin gown,
a young abandoned child in her lap.

2000

Even at ten years old, I am surprised
that she has lived four years beyond
his emaciating death.
I lie against the brass footboard
in the vacant bed, feeling
the tickle of her pink electric blanket
against my cheek.
Her church steeple clock counts
the remaining wisps of her life.
Tomorrow
she won’t watch The 700 Club
or Benny Hinn, and she won’t spread
marmalade onto her toast.

My sister curls her body into mine
and asks where grandma went.
To climb trees in Heaven, I say,
because it is the only answer.
With papaw? she asks.
Of course. With papaw and Uncle Johnny.

After the funeral, we build a fortress of empty packing boxes
in the ghostly room,
lining the inside with her pink blanket
and one of her dresses,
fabrics more comfortable
than silk.
The door handles of the fort
are made with her hairpins,
and we latch them to forget
how she looked coughing,
expelling the blackness from her lungs,
struggling to lie to my mother
with each ragged breath,
it doesn’t hurt; it doesn’t hurt much now,
and later,
how she looked powdered and highlighted
in a celery-colored suit,
surrounded by the garish death flowers,
her feet still flawless in their soft white shoes,
her last word lingering in the black silk above her lips.  
Johnny.
Hope

Above the crib, bees dangle
from just-visible threads, hovering
in anticipation,
their wings poised for flight
behind a layer of dust.
The crib, too, is waiting.

The woman sits in a rocking
chair, soothing
herself with the patient beats
the chair’s feet make on the wooden floor.
The chair does not have to wait.

She listens to the clock
on the wall but tries not to hear it;
it ticks carefully
and counts her mistakes
by the seconds, until
her head is filled only with the sound
of one failure falling heavily
with the tock of each second hand.
The clock waits for change.

Downstairs, the floorboards sigh
beneath four pairs of small shoes
that try not to squeak so they won’t disturb
the woman, their mother.
She thinks she is Saturn
and could swallow child upon child
and never have it be enough;
ever contain enough of them within her own
fragile body to keep them infinitely
young, eternally preserved.
Didn’t Saturn,
she thinks,
grow his children even as he swallowed them,
incubating them even as he held them
in the bile of his stomach?
It would be like that story she heard once,
as a child, about swallowing the seed
of a watermelon and letting it bloom
vast and sweet in her stomach.
She suspects that gods wait for nobody.
The father’s coffee cup is full; 
his restless hands tie four pairs of laces, 
just before the children rush outside to be out-
of-sight. Their bug-catching nets are pregnant 
with potential, waving with possibility, 
until the smallest child’s hands grasp 
an elusive butterfly. His delight echoes 
in the trees. His muddy, willful feet 
bring him to the mother, and he places the torn, chromatic 
wings into her empty hands. 
The father hears the sharpness 
of skin slapping skin, 
and the child’s cries, 
and waits a moment before climbing 
the timid stairs.
You Were Fifteen

You could not have known
the danger of prayer, the silent karma
God would toss at your feet
in nonchalant mockery.

This is the lie you maintain.

You watched the saturated bodies fill the TV screen
and imagined them straining to speak,
their mud-coated tongues swollen with accusations.

If Ophelia had known the certain way
water would slowly bathe her lungs
in tempestuous waves, would she still have thrust
herself beneath the liled surface?

If she had heard, say, Katrina’s
sultry name, seen the bitch’s predatory eye
as it unceasingly raped stone and flesh and earth,
could she still have penetrated that river—defiled
those thousand little deaths?

This is the secret you keep.

You prayed for a season of storm-rent roofs
so your father’s hands could paper them closed,
so he could remake history.

You were fifteen.
There was one box of spaghetti
sitting in the hollow pantry.
You and your sisters were cutting apart towels
each month to catch your scant, starved blood,
and still, you will never forgive yourself.
I Speak Summer

What more can you ask of me?
I have given already to you
all of me that is soft and trembling.

I speak summer for you
so that my body is a garden of velvet pansies
you will want to rest your head on.

Do you want my fallen, rusting
leaves and barren branches parting
to sky, accepting any blue that fills the emptiness?

Would you rather split my bark
and stare at my sap-soaked dryad
as she weeps for you?

My I-love-yous grow in meadows,
in blades of grass,
razor-thin and inviting.

Walk in them
until your beautiful shins
are covered in curves of blood.
Always

Because you were the man who formed her cells with me, each miraculous, clustered flower sprouting into sinuous arms and legs, clever fingers—

Because you and I have craved each other always as opium-riddled tongues and ravenous crow-clouds descending on carrion—

Because your fingertips were the only constellations she saw as shadows from inside my tumescent womb: five-pointed maps of heritage and longing—

(and even though your hands were the reason she died)—

— I could not hate you; I could only scream into you i carry your heart, i carry it always, my furious breath in your hollow collarbone, the weight of my anger settling in your empty eyes—you, who never carried the excess of her ruined body, never felt it sucked from you, pulled from you by gravity and fists.

And I, the empty rind, still loved you.
The Beanstalk

Of course I’m a woman.
Inside my cautious, tucked womb
he saw my possibilities, my strength.
And so he handled me gently, running
his earth-stained fingers along my spine,
stroking me with the desperation
of a rosary, his hurried, whispered cants
invoking my hidden milagro.

I’m a woman—how else could
he have grounded me
in golden Southern soil
and watched as I sprouted voluptuously
into his machismo?
I touched the clouds; I looked
into the face of a god.
I made him climb my supple curves;
I made him worship me,
and when I fell, I fell the way he asked me to:
cut neatly
down.
The Girl

He is holding your hand
the way he might cradle
a ripe, halved orange, studying
each connected cell and vessel
of your fingers, mesmerized
by the sudden explosion of sweetness
coursing along your blood routes
with each pulse,

and when he draws your open palm
to his kiss, you realize
that to him, your veins are ribboned tongues
unfurling secrets into his curled cochlea.
In his choked sigh, you hear the only truth
in the room, hovering mothlike above your bodies:

you understand that he will inhale your mango-sweetened
hair, lick your peach lips
on every woman he bows to taste.
You will be his wine,
and when he lights a scarlet taper
on her cluttered dresser, he will pray for you,

and this is why you cannot leave him yet,
this boy who reveres your hips
and threads your spine through his hands
like prayer beads, each notch
in your back an answer.
Adonis Considers Venus at the Olive Garden

Sitting across the oak table from her,
he watches her wise, thin hands toy with the stem
of her glass. Her fingers cradle
a lemon slice. The translucent half-moon hammocks
in her palm, mimicking her crescent nails.
She doesn’t look at him, but

the circlets on her finger do—they glare
as she slides her husband’s credit card
into the leather billfold, presses it into the waiter’s
palm with a smile.
Tonight, as he trembles with the weight
of her beauty, he will place her willowed form
on her husband’s bed. They will drink bitter wine
just before he brushes her milky spine with his eyelashes.

For now, though, he is only the ephemeral man
who makes her consider her insecurities.
He is the slice of fruit she toys with,
that sweetened jewel swinging in the branches of her idle hands,
the multi-paned window magnifying her fear
that he, too, will erupt into envy and attempt to bridle her.

She slides out of the booth, walks silently to the car,
and he follows.
Milk

We are in the milk aisle, where cartons perch
and glare with pink plastic pupils in the clinical grocery.
*Twenty-two percent of pregnancies end in miscarriages*,
the doctor had said, the eye of his stethoscope
hypnotically transforming his voice to the sharp crackle
I hear now puncturing the chilled silence.
*One-dollar off Eggland’s Best.*

The woman next to me skims her fingers over sweet,
salted butter, the box too far from the extent of her arm.
I reach for it compulsively, and beneath her coat-flap
is a six-month swell I envy. Her other child sings
from behind cart-bars, nestled amongst avocados and strawberries.

It is said that my grandmother looked for omens
in egg-cartons, read our futures in cracked shells.
The twin yolks she found, perfectly whole and globed,
were literal, and my sisters slipped
from my mother’s womb two minutes apart.
My own divination, studied under her rheumy eyes,
was less certain: a casing as white as apricot blossoms,
so hard she had to snap it twice against the wooden bowl
before it oozed a shattered membrane down the sloping sides.

Was there ever a more frightening word than egg-beater?
Was there ever anything more accurate?
I think she knew before my birth what kind of woman
I would be: hardened and gelatinous at once, a paradox of maternity.

And now the woman and children amble
Towards the muffin bins, and I’m left again with the solitude
of choice: organic, of course. For the baby
already dripping from my center. I turn to you, egg-beater,
and the cardboard carton I have chosen, saturated with plenty,
sprouts a steady leak and fills my palms with droplet-taunts.
* Fucking waste*, you spit, and recede to the car,
onto seats I will saturate with another umbilicus
within the week when you’ve beaten me again.
In coming months I will dream of your fingers dipped in bloody yolks,
but for now I rinse the wasted milk into a porcelain sink
and dry my hands on my rusting jeans,
drink a glass just in case the baby lives.
Salvage

This is how your children are born:
in threads and names.
They are the driftwood knife
in your closet, the salvaged souvenirs
of their father, in an array of lovers
you have collected like seashells
and placed on shallow shelves in a spare room.

This is how your son lives
six months after his death:
the unopened jersey-knits (so hopefully
tender) he never wriggled in are reborn
in dye and lace and gifted
to cousins he will never meet, children
you’ll resent and love.

This is an instruction manual for healing
without forgetting: a lineage of clothes and words.

And Eisley, your first little beast,
her father’s first victim,
is reborn, her name tied to your cousin’s latest baby.

This is what you drag
from your breached uterine walls:
two mirrors tempered by waves;
four eyes filled with judgment.
In the Months Before We Left Him,

my father paneled the house
in wide cedar planks,
built cedar staircases
and cedar chests,
so that at once
the house was made of eyes,
chatoyant and guarded,
that weighed me,
and the morning we left,
they followed me,

and it has been ten years,
and I have never since walked by them,
and I am still watched,
begged.
Sister IV

I’m coming to grieve Gettysburg
the way I sometimes grieve your
youth, back when we played under
our grandma’s porch and I tickled
your chin with dandelions and
we’d steal our brothers’ knives
and carve sticks into forks
and spoons and dig for flat rocks
to use as plates and have picnics
there under the stripes of sunlight
that filtered through the boards—

which is to say I grieve the hope
I once had for Gettysburg, the way
it once promised me some shiny
future between those pillars. It was beautiful there,
especially the day you visited
and we watched The Wizard of Oz
and you scrunched your eyes
when the witch eased into smoke,
just like you always have.
I left you, cinnamon-haired and still
lovely, and waded through leaves
on my way to class.

Tomorrow your room will husk
empty again, and our mother might cry,
and I’ll sit in a rocking chair beside her
and let her hold my son, let her breathe
in his honeyed scalp as she tries to forget her last
baby grew away, grew into the beast you
pretend you’re not.
Wicked

“WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT A GOOD LITTLE GIRL LIKE YOU COULD DESTROY MY BEAUTIFUL WICKEDNESS?”

—last words of the Wicked Witch of the West, *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939

She felt like wax. Wet. Mutable.
She thought maybe this was reincarnation,

maybe now she’d be unburned,
maybe skinned in neutrals.

It was steam. It was freedom.
It was like becoming

air and her killer's breath
just after the broomstick fell.

And it was flame—each vivid pore shrieking, immolating,

offering itself to ashes
in penance.

It was elegant:
twist of cloak and dress,

black cloth chrysalis of mourning
pouring into smoke,

those shocking talons
becoming

human, grasping sky
in search of life.
My Sister’s Husband’s Penis

empty squirtgun
vacant house
mythical beast
hopeless wasteland
venomless snake
The Boy Wonder
stuttering vinyl
short stack
lost generation
Spontaneous Abortions

What I fear is everything—
every thing is one spontaneous
abortion, eternally bleeding
out into the cosmos—
that each umbilicus severs
at my touch, segregates
limb from body,
and that I am the solitary woman
watching a furtive squirrel
digging its claws in furrows
on a birdling’s breast and cracking
its bones, sucking the marrow
raw and warm from the carcass,
as the weight of responsibility
for this small death and a million
others falls onto me: as significant as the dandelion
seeds I raped with a single exhalation,
leaving the stem exposed
on the lawn.
Clarity

All week long, I have been mourning
the old windows from the house’s antique integrity.
My father segregates bubbled glass
from withered siding, his fingers still miracles
in sunlight and splinters, fixing my mother’s house.
Each hammer-chord splits me;
before, the metronome of metal on roof
and wall was the sound of my father’s success,
the way he could transform a moldering foundation,
encase it in chrysalitic tarp, rebirth it
with wooden floors and new paint.

Now I hear the beats and see skeletal hands.
Every nail my father forces into the boards
is a scratch on my arm. From the beginning,
all I wanted to be was someone
other than the crumbling statue of my mother, ten years ago,
staring everlong out the kitchen glass and straining
to hear my father’s truck tires on the broken oyster-shell driveway.

I am haunted by men. The window panes,
new and clear, reflect with eerie perfection
the body I have become, shrouded and waiting
in a courthouse, waiting for the scent of love
and fear mingled on my lover’s neck to draw me
away from the witness stand, so that I never have to say
yes, he hit me as I speak to the gloss on the attorney’s bench,
in which I can see, reflected, the lover who built me
into nothingness, so like my father, his ghost-knuckles
purpled and cracking above his polished shoes.

At home, my father scratches his beard
and installs the next window. My mother pours
cold tea into green glasses and they sit
in an accusing silence in the heat. I will never forgive you,
they seem to say; this is her message to him,
the man who sipped away my youth, who made me
into this kind of woman.
From the beginning, all he has wanted is the universe
to explain itself to him. But hearing its silence,
he leaves the cup, emptied, on the table,
for my mother to wash.
Mamaroneck, NY 2013

Sophia’s limbs decorate the harbor-grass.
If I could love a woman, it would be her—impossible
coal-glint hair snaked with dandelions
I had chosen, scarlet lips drawing a scone
inside, and fingers that sketch secrets
hidden against blushed cheekbones.

Here I lie: one empty woman sagging,
back impressed with sassafras bark, city-weary slouched,
longing to long for the safety of wombs & hair married with twigs
and mud spread over calm breasts & unbloodied palms,
some person turned place I can harbor in, can carry my children’s corpses
to and be not broken by the comic homeliness of penises,
the ugly slump of a bloodless dick that rises
at the sight of skin against drywall, of prenatal blood against tile.
Texas, 2012

Names of towns you have long forgotten
now bubble in your throat,
landing on your tongue
with the bittersweet taste of pecans
and dewberries.
Angleton, Van Vleck, Point Comfort.
Palacios.

It doesn’t seem to matter
that you love the worn Hemlocks
in the Keystone,
or that your stomach jerks with excitement
as you crest a battered hill
and are redeemed by leaves
and aging sunlight—somewhere
muscle in your gray matter,
you know that half of you
will always be buried
beneath this largest piece of sky,
scented with bluebonnets
and stored in salt-soaked water.

It will always explode
with the fireworks
your dad lights on Jensen’s Point,
the colors suspended,
poised with the moon above
the mysterious, poisonous Bay.

And it doesn’t seem to matter that you
are twenty-one now, old
enough (you suppose) to remember
the smell of dead sharks rotting
on the sterns of shrimping vessels,
or the day you found
the crimson stain on a copy of
The Poisonwood Bible
in the parking lot, and followed
it to the body of your teacher
behind the school’s dumpster,
her blood smeared in a comma
along the parking lot,
and the names of the boys
who broke her
trembling on her spattered, uneven lips.
Her teeth were pearls embedded in the humid asphalt.

It doesn’t matter because your toes touch a seashell tucked in the sand, rooted by the Bay, and suddenly you are fifteen again.

As much as you hate it, as many moments as you fell asleep wishing to be lifted from that oppressive, lupine ceiling, you can’t help but feel that your feet will always point south; that as you rock your children under northern lights, you will be tempted to travel a dirt road in a truck that smells of sunflower seeds and a hint of marijuana, of scorched sunlight and new cotton.
You will have to force yourself to ignore the call of the Bay as it waves to you, asking.
Absent

You will always be this—this woman
who almost loves the men who dove
roughly into her, their hands breaching
her legs, inducing waves of revulsion and stinging guilt—
& maybe this is why all your honest poems
start with you:
because you can’t accuse yourself
without damning your readers,
without raping them, too,
until they feel the truth tucked
into that guy’s jeans
along with his polo, capped
by the blood-flecked belt
he still runs his fingers across
each week when you see him in class,
stroking the metal tooth like he once caressed
your head after taking you
—& because you want them to feel that sweet
tension, that place where fear and love
blur in you.

And there’s a difference,
you want to say,
between forgiving & whatever
it is you’ve done to this place
so you could survive, so you could walk
out in four years with a diploma
with your ex-husband’s name inked
on the parchment
and not become the next casualty
on the battlefield, the next suicide
from the bell tower.

In four years, you have learned to coat *Gettysburg*
in spit and to stone it with your words,
and if by *doing great work* they mean the papers
you’ve written for money on nights you were too tired
or bruised to sell your body,
then you suppose you have done it.

You can’t forget what you owe this place,
how it built your career and taught you to lie
with ease, how it’s the only reason you became
a writer, how it brought you to the man
who’d make your children
and then take them away, how it coddled
man-boy rapists & how that somehow allowed you
to earn a living, to whore out your mind
and body (because, damn it, it was better to give
than be taken). In four years, you haven’t been able
to shake that feeling of obligation,
that blood debt to Gettysburg, and the truth
is that you’ll never stop loving it
and hating it, never forget your children
are buried near the train tracks behind your old dorm,
because, after all, aren’t they what it was all
really about, in the end?

You didn’t set out to be this kind
of woman, but here you are,
writing about your vagina and hoping
no one notices how much you hate yourself,
& most days, you can accept this.

In four years, your mother has watched you wither
into silence in the car ride to campus,
your voice slowly ceasing to sing as each semester
eased into the next;
she has grown quiet, too, because of you.
In four years, you’ve never been able to tell her
every twenty she found in her purse
or fifty under the bed was from you,
& each one hurt.

After four years, you’ve begun to suspect every
decision you’ve ever made has led to this ending,
every man who ever touched you
or wanted to—those scraggly roofers
your dad brought home; Bob, the hippie manager
of the Blockbuster who’d stroke your long,
shining braids each time your mom sent you
in alone; the gang of boys who cornered
you behind the soda machines in fifth grade—
has made you into you, and you hate this, too,
hate that you’re not the woman
she thinks you are, hate what you’ve become.

And if you were honest with yourself, you would admit
you’re afraid your husband left you
because of the things you didn’t say,
the thousand screams he never heard
because they were bitten into other necks.
You would have to own the truth of your silence
and the way it slowly accused
him of being pure,
the way you wanted to spit the word privileged
at him, the way you had to teach him the concept of paying
bills, of owing something to the universe.
From the moment he looked at you,
shirtless, in your attic, and said, Show me what to do,
you took up the task of teaching him and never
relinquished it, never stopped the deluge of instructions,
and in all those words, still
you were silent.

In four years of love and marriage,
you never once wrote a line about him
that wasn’t tinted with Gettysburg’s shadow,
the smoky figures of your rapists darting
behind marble columns,
or the stubble that clouded your dad’s friend’s face
as he stroked your nine-year-old legs
in the Texas grass.
There are some things, you want to say,
that are unforgiveable.