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# Autobiography of Heavy Water

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HEAVY WATER

Candise Whitley Henson

B.A., English with a Writing Concentration, Gettysburg College, 2012

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri – Saint Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

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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.

Autobiography of Heavy Water

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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 pretensions  
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  
inherited 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 braceleted 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,  
her 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 *assemblée*  
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 whirl 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 Polaric 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 strokes 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 14<sup>th</sup>

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 vermilion  
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;  
never 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 liliated 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 Egglard'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  
muscled 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.*