

STILL HOUSE

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Still House is a poetry manuscript that explores the relationship between traditional gender roles and traditional poetic forms. The poems in this collection seek to revise the role of the homemaker and interrogate whether it is okay to take comfort and pleasure in tasks that are often labeled as feminine (i.e. cooking, baking, decorating, organizing, shopping, choosing outfits) while rejecting other parts of the homemaker archetype, such as subservience to and dependence upon men. Limited gender roles, patriarchy, sexist comments, capitalism, toxic masculinity, the cis-hetero-white-male gaze, trauma, physical pain, illness—these all can make it feel like we are not fully in control and ownership of our bodies, like something is encroaching. The poems in *Still House* are invested in using the poetics of embodiment (a poetics centered around telling stories about the body through immersive sensory details) to reclaim the body from trauma, patriarchy, and chronic pain and illness.

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by

Stephanie Lorraine Edwards

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- *32 Poems* – “Drunk Bitch Wants to Fuck Like a Man” & “What Is Left to Say About the Body”
- *American Poetry Journal* – “Some Lines from a Depression” (Best of Net & Pushcart Nominated)
- *American Poetry Review* – “Narrative”
- *BOAAT* – “Drunk Bitch Tries Her Hand at Recovery”
- *Booth* – “Calling Her Names”
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- *Crab Orchard Review* – “Easy as Pie”
- *Crazyhorse* – “Essay on Guns”
- *Gulf Coast* – “Drunk Bitch Dreams of a Luminous Stream”
- *Heavy Feather Review* – “Five Days Before the Election” & “I Believe ~~Art~~ Freaks Will Save Us”
- *The Journal* – “Another Poem About Pain”
- *Missouri Review* – “Window Shopping”
- *Ninth Letter* – “Everything Is Going Okay for Once”
- *The Offing* – “Ladylike: I”
- *Pleiades* – “Dream of Crossing”
- *The Puritan* – “On Want”
- *Redivider* – “Spell for Undoing a Life Sentence”

- *Sixth Finch* – “Socratic M^Ethod”
- *Tinderbox Poetry Journal* – “On a Facebook Picture of My Highschool Best Friend’s Preteen Daughter” & “On Relearning Spanish for a Doctoral Requirement” (Pushcart Nominated)
- *TriQuarterly* – “Some Things We Carried”
- *Underblong* – “Harm’s Way”
- *Up North Lit* – “Epithalamion”
- *West Branch* – “A Few More Lines on Lavinia”
- *Yemassee* – “Learning to Leave a Bad Thing Alone” (Pushcart Nominated)

For Daisy & Tinkerbell.

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PART I

THE HOMEMAKER AND OTHER RECEIVED FORMS FOR WOMANHOOD

We still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

—*The Handmaid's Tale*
Margaret Atwood

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A month after I moved into the modest ranch home of my then boyfriend, now husband, a mysterious package arrived in the mail with a copy of *The Modern Family Cook Book [sic]* by Meta Given (1961). It took me a minute to recognize the book: this both is and isn't my grandmother's cookbook. Grandma Doris's cookbook still sits on a shelf in my mother's kitchen, the pages yellowed and annotated with substitutions and additions to the printed recipes. Grandma's cookbook wears a denim book jacket, made from the scraps of old blue jeans with the words "Old Grey Cookbook" hand-embroidered on the cover. My copy has a laminated barcode on the front cover, likely the remnants of a library that decided the book had become irrelevant and wanted to raise a few dollars and clear out shelf space for more recent cookbooks. I never realized until I received this less worn copy, which still bears its original cover, that the book's cover is, indeed, grey (and, frankly, quite old). Whoever has sewn the makeshift cover adorning the copy that my mother inherited from her mother—who died of brain cancer a year-and-a-half before I was born—retitled the book and obscured the original title from my memory. Like this fabric artist (likely my mother, possibly an aunt, possibly my grandma), I am trying to write a book that erases and rewrites some things—things about women and family and modernity and greyness—too.

I knew that this book was a type of housewarming gift that carried a history of women making dinner for their husbands. This book is full of recipes with more butter than I would ever dare put in anything, meals that stick to the ribs and stick to a budget, good Midwestern fare. *Husband*—that was the thing I knew she felt I'd failed at achieving. At my older brother's

wedding, she pulled me to the side and asked, “When are you going to do *this* for *us*.” The answer was in six years, but I didn’t know it or want it then.

Perhaps the book is a treatise of sorts: *you may live unmarried with a man—we will not speak of this—but you may not erase your birthright of meatloaf and peach cobbler*. The book begins with an epistolary introduction addressed to a “Mrs. Homemaker,” which includes advice on meal planning, grocery budgeting, and foundational cooking techniques (in addition to recipes). This letter expresses sympathy toward the complexity of a homemaker’s often undervalued labor, which includes attempting to fill the roles of “a psychologist, an expert on child training, an interior decorator, a skilled seamstress, [and] a trained nurse” in addition to a cook and a dietician (Given vi). I decided to begin my poetry manuscript with an erasure of this introduction because I am interested in the ways that being a “homemaker” is a type of form that I am erasing parts of in my daily life but never entirely.

Before I sat down to write today, I cleaned the kitchen, put dinner in a slow cooker, and recleaned the kitchen. Tonight, there will be a homemade beef and potato stew—carne guisado, which is too adventurous, too non-waspy for the pages of *The Old Grey Cookbook*, but is still a beef and potato stew, comfort food that sticks to the ribs. Uncharacteristically for South Carolina, where I now find myself due to the dislocating nature of academia, it has been snowing all day, big puffy flakes of snow, and as a good Michigander woman, I know this is the right kind of food to make for the weather. It likely will be our only day of snow, and I know this form: snow, beef stew, home. Despite my best efforts otherwise, in my thirties I have somehow become both a homemaker and wife—I spent years running away from those prescribed forms for women and somehow have found myself donning scraps of them: throwing away the bits worn too ragged by the progress of time, trying to salvage the rest.

I am also starting my manuscript here because I am always writing in my grandmother's shadow. That may sound odd to say about a woman who died before I was born, but Grandma Doris's life and death so shrouded my mother's perception of motherhood, homemaking, and womanhood that I can't seem to separate the subject matter from her. Though my mother's mother was good at cooking and cleaning, she was a bitter and difficult woman, a cold and disinterested mother who took a lot of Valium. She was also a mother who died too early, before my mother had outgrown her resentment at the paltry, bitter fruit from which she'd been tasked with sustaining herself. Before she'd grown to accept where that bad fruit came from—a tumultuous marriage to a true Scrooge of a man with a nasty temper, burying two small children while six others swarmed around her with their constant needs, chronic migraines, a difficult life—she was tasked with saying goodbye to her mother.

Everyone says I take after my grandmother, something in the shape of the eyes and the forehead. My mother, who takes after her father, has always seemed to hold the ghost in my face against me: face of unkindness, face of unloving, face of inadequacy. I always thought I wasn't formed from the right materials for it: motherhood, a happy marriage, homemaking. I've had little choice but to revise those forms, erasing some caustic bits, renaming others. In my poems about my mother, I am trying to accept her story so that I can learn to refashion it. I don't want to reenact the story of bitter, resentful women in my own life, though I believe most bitter and resentful women have their reasons.

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I am trying to revise the story of the homemaker. This manuscript asks if it is okay to take comfort and pleasure in tasks that are often labeled as feminine (i.e. cooking, baking, decorating, organizing, shopping, choosing outfits) while rejecting other parts of the homemaker

archetype, such as subservience to and dependence upon men. Moreover, as a newlywed, I find myself asking how the roles of “wife” and “marriage” have been and can be reformed. Marriage, in addition to being a ceremony that celebrates the love between two people and their commitment to one another, is, of course, a patriarchal ceremony that historically involved defining women as property to be given from a father to a husband. Marriage is, among other things, a financial agreement. As an educated feminist who makes less than her husband, and it seems very possibly will continue to make less given the hierarchy of academia (my agreement to take a position as a lecturer in order to continue to live in the same city as my husband, as opposed to the unknown terrain of attempting to find a tenure track position elsewhere), I find myself inhabiting a role I never wanted: decorating my home, buying new clothes and groceries, paying doctor’s bills with money that is more my husband’s than mine. What a strange hodgepodge of gender roles I walk around in, what a walking contradiction—and poetry is a great decanter for contradictions; it provides them with a structure, gives them shape, and lets them breathe. Like a good red wine, a good poem has discernable tannins that linger on the tongue; its complexity and internal contrasts are what make it rich.

I see my relationship to traditional gender roles much like I see my relationship to traditional forms in my poetry: I keep taking them off and putting them back on, again and again. I put them on partially to prove to some unknown authority that I can do it all: write a pantoum, make a piecrust from scratch, and burn my bra. I also do both to make what I have to say more palatable. My MFA thesis advisor, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, once told me, “You can say whatever the fuck you want in a poem if you put it in a pretty box.” At the time, I found that dictum freeing: I didn’t have to change my ideas, just the box and bow. I began using traditional forms, sometimes strictly and sometimes loosely, as pretty containers for things I wanted to say

but worried would not be taken seriously, particularly by men, if presented in a less tidy and sculpted form. For instance, my second book (*Humanly*) contains a sestina about a time spent in a psychiatric ward in an attempt not to be pejoratively labeled as a *confessional* poet.

In my current manuscript, the forms of a pantoum (“Easy as Pie”), a villanelle (“Thirst: Song”), a Shakespearean sonnet (“Sonnet with Begging”), a less traditional sonnet (“Under His Eye: III”), two erasures (“This Book Is Your Book” and “Thirst: Ghost”), an epithalamion (“Epithalamion”), an aubade (“First Aubade”), and a healthy handful of allusions (“Elegy for Lavinia,” “A Few More Lines on Lavinia,” “Mouthy,” “Narrative,” “Under His Eye: II,” among others) have all been used to contain subject matter that at one point or another I have been told is not appropriate for poems (or, more broadly, for proper and educated women)—too confessional, too domestic, too sentimental, too emotional, too lewd, too angry. This impulse toward containment strikes me as similar to being told constantly when growing up that I needed to watch my tone, to smile, no one likes a whiner: women are often told to put their dissent in more pleasing containers, to slyly slide it into the conversation—to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” as Dickinson puts it. Indeed.

My pantoum “Easy as Pie” attempts to use the constraints of this traditional form to highlight the constraints of traditional gender roles. This pantoum is disguised by squishing the quatrains into couplets, a form inspired by Beth Bachmann’s poem “Last Call.” Bachmann’s poem utilizes the pantoum’s repetitions to illustrate the haunting nature of a daughter’s last call before death, a call to a father to come pick her up, and the choice of collapsing the quatrains into couplets creates more speed due to the lessened white space, as well as sense of full immersion due to the sprawling line length. In a different approach to this form, my poem uses the pantoum’s repetitions to highlight the cyclical and encroaching constitution of gendered

expectations. Though it should be clear to the ear that patterned repetitions are occurring within the poem, the eye is unlikely to immediately identify the form. The traditional form is disguised, much like gendered microaggressions (like mansplaining) often remain half-hidden amid daily interactions. “Easy As Pie” deals with the challenges of something synonymous with ease in American vernacular (making a pie), and more broadly the challenges of expectations women face (for example: getting married, having children, making decent pies); I thought that disguising the heavily labored form might add a pleasant level of irony (especially to anyone who has struggled with a handmade piecrust falling to pieces in their hands or sticking like glue to the waxed paper and rolling pin). There are many concerns hidden within this heavily structured poem about making a pie: the concern over being judged by others (in this poem, the personified figure of the piecrust dough is the source of judgement) for being a “fruitless” and “futureless” woman—a woman without progeny— coupled with the more nagging concern over the mother figure being disappointed and hurt by the speaker’s decision to not follow in her footsteps: “first the ring & then the stroller.” The ending reveals that the speaker’s mother has greatly shaped her, that her mother taught her “how to feel,” but the speaker is not following the role she was shaped to fill, which creates a sense of cognitive dissonance.

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What does choosing free verse sometimes and received forms other times say about me? My father critiques his friends who pick and choose from Leviticus; take it all or leave it, he argues, feeling superior to the homophobic bacon eaters in his office. I am, for better or worse, a picker and chooser when it comes to forms for womanhood—I only want the parts that suit me. I putz around a house that is only in my husband’s name, order new organizational apparatuses from our joint checking account, cook us baked swordfish and roasted vegetables with no starchy

side to get back into my swimsuit body, and read Adrienne Rich until I fall asleep. But I think we all do it, in a way—take bits and pieces of what we inherit, discard what is too ill-fitting, too frayed.

Although the poems in the first long section of my collection are not all in traditional forms like “Easy as Pie” is, they do all deal with interrogating prescribed forms for womanhood. The section begins with my poem “Narrative,” which looks at martyrdom as one of society’s permitted forms for womanhood. Relatedly, Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* outlines “angel” and “monster” as calcified forms for women that “male authors have generated” over and over again in literature (17). They write that these roles “have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also invaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitively ‘killed’ either figure” (17). Although angels and martyrs are not exactly the same thing, both represent purity and devotion. In “Narrative,” I was trying to kill the idea of celebrating women for martyr-like qualities: purity, suffering for devotion to patriarchal figures and structures, being celebrated for having suffered (as opposed to criticizing patriarchal figures and structures for causing suffering), and looking beautiful all the while. I wanted to write a poem that depicted suffering and violence honestly but not in a heroic or romanticized way.

Initially, I became interested in the idea martyrs not for their purity but for their refusal of men (many female martyr figures end up being tortured for refusing to have sex with men). In an age when America has elected a president who has boasted about how his wealth and star power enables him to sexually assault women without consequence (“You can do anything...grab them by the pussy. You can do anything”), women voicing their refusal is more important than ever. In my poem “Narrative,” St. Agatha appears. Agatha is the saint often depicted as holding her perky breasts on a silver platter. In Italy, there is even a dessert named after her (*minne di Sant’*

Agata) that is a breast-shaped, ricotta-filled pastry with a creamy glaze and a red cherry nipple. The dessert (representing her breasts) is often eaten to celebrate her story.

Unfortunately for St. Agatha, her story is much less pretty and whimsical than her dessert. Quintianus, a Roman Prefect, wanted to marry the girl but she refused him because she'd vowed her body and heart to Christ. So, he had her imprisoned in a brothel. The brothel didn't break her convictions, so he sent her to a prison and had her tortured, including hacking off her breasts, but she kept her faith and continued to refuse him. Agatha has become the patron saint for rape victims and breast cancer patients. In "Narrative," the speaker tries to use Agatha's story as a framework to understand the experience of being awoken by a neighbor in a college dormitory who is screaming bloody murder to escape from a man who forces himself on her, creating a parallel between both women's acts of refusal of men and the harm they endured because of their refusals. The scream is a prelingual event; it is a communication that does not require words, a rupture.

When creating a voice for this poem, I drew from Anne Sexton's collection *Transformations*; in this collection she retells the famous Brothers Grimm fairytales with a heavy dose of biting sarcasm, a general dismissal and diminishment of the heroic men saving various princesses and damsels in the stories, and a mocking attitude toward both purity and beauty standards. In her poem, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," there is nothing sexy about Snow White's victimhood (she is described as rather stupid and doll-like), and nothing extraordinary about her saviors (the dwarfs are diminutively described as "little hot dogs" and the prince is rather pitiful and thick-headed). I thought it was important that the speaker in "Narrative" was not displayed as a hero, rather just a human trying somewhat inadequately to be decent. The poem critiques the masculine gaze's over-sexualized depiction of the brutality done

to Agatha's body. I wanted to remake Saint Agatha; I wanted to show her as bloody as she would be with her breasts cut off; I wanted a saint to whom rape victims could actually relate, not a plate with unmolested silicone-plump mounds on it.

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I am interested in the ways that gendered expectations, such as beauty standards, encroach upon and restrict women's bodies. In "Window Shopping" I take on the idea of dress sizes as a form that requires women to constrict and reshape their bodies, much like a set meter or stanza length can constrict and reshape natural syntax and diction. Of course, the stakes of these formal constraints are different: one is constricting the sign, while one is constricting the signified. Reshaping a physical body through restriction of caloric intake, for many women to the point of malnourishment, is dangerous. Restricting language is arguably dangerous, but in different ways. This poem examines the impact of the form of dress sizes on the speaker as an extended metaphor for the various gender roles that appear constricting, and in their own ways dangerous, to the speaker's perception of herself and way of life: wife, how does that form fit? Is it always a size too small? The symbol of the pink fabric tape measure, which is a familiar tool to the speaker who has been raised by a tailor, begins to lose its original meaning to the speaker when her partner is unfamiliar with the object, has never attempted to measure his body for clothing or for attempts at shrinking. The speaker skillfully wields the tool around a dog's vulnerable neck to measure her collar size, feeling the animal's trust and ease in her arms. When the speaker calls the dog a "good girl" for sitting still and letting the speaker measure her neck, I intended that word choice as a commentary on how human girls are often expected to sit back and take having their bodies measured and judged as worthy or unworthy. The dog, of course, has no opinion or shame attached to the number revealed by the measuring tape, whereas girls

are often asked to accept that the numbers say something about them—lazy, industrious, marriage material, cheerleader, lunch lady, unlovable, pageant queen, runner, cat lady. In the final stanza, the speaker moves toward a meditation on what amount of distance it would take to unknow the form of dress sizes, as well as to unknow the narrow idea of what “wife” means that she does not wish to inhabit.

I often worry that this collection is too hard on my mother. I am sure that she did the best she could with what she had; it seems that she had a very negligent and harsh mother, who had a very challenging life of her own. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes:

You own what happened to you. If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point at you, while a chilling voice thundered, “We *told* you not to tell.” But that was then. (Lamott 6)

Sometimes that makes me feel better, but I am not sure if I believe it’s true, not entirely. Other people own parts of it. My mother hemming prom dresses and bridesmaid dresses late into the evening after a full day of work and making dinner, the beaded skirts laid out on the dining room table, pearly pins held in her mouth, all so there’s enough money for all the things there’s never enough money for in our family—was it so wrong for her to want me to look like what she thought marriage material was? What she thought was desirable? To want me to step into an easier life and be less of a burden on her checking account? Backward, yes. But not all poorly intended. She owns a part of that story, and there is an inherent erasure in my writing about it; I don’t know all the parts she owns.

“Ladylike” takes on the question of how we learn gender roles as we progress through life, beginning at a young age. I knew anytime an adult said, “that’s not very ladylike” or referred to me as “young lady,” I was in some sort of trouble. What does it mean to be like a lady? In the poem’s first section, the speaker recalls being a small child and learning that there

was something about her chest that needed to be covered, unlike her brother's body, which was more acceptably formed. In the small moment of being told that she needs to put a shirt on to run around outside, the speaker learns that to be a *girl* means to be a little less free, a little more vulnerable and vulgar than being a boy.

In the second section, the speaker discusses the shame and confusion of getting her first period—the period is described as an “unwelcomed guest,” as an intruder on her formerly less-sexed self—a new responsibility to look after that the speaker would like to give back. The harshness of the mother's reaction, which includes body shaming and pointing out the nuisance and financial strain of her daughter getting her period at a young age (“She hands me/ a pack of pads & tells me they are expensive / & I'll never stop needing them, to be careful / of staining my school clothes”) heightens how unappealing it is to the speaker to step into this world of “womanhood.” I am putting “womanhood” in air quotes because many different types of bodies can participate in womanhood, not just those who get periods.

In the third section of this poem, my speaker takes on a new form of shame: the loss of a thigh gap and the advent of thigh chaffing. She longs for a mother figure her body can relate to, her own mother too thin to understand her predicament, the shock of blood trickling down a thigh after walking in a dress amid the humid summer heat of Charleston. While writing this section, these lines from Lucille Clifton echoed in the back of my head: “i had no model / ...what did i see to be except myself? / i made it up” (Clifton 3, 6-7). Clifton's poem is about the lack of models (for success? survival? joy?) her speaker has as an African American woman facing systemic oppression, which is not a form of oppression my speaker experiences. My speaker is concerned with creating a model for existing in her own body when she feels unable to relate to her own mother's model for womanhood. Lost for answers, she turns to prayer and asks

to be “done with the body.” She considers the models of Adam and Eve and asks not to be modeled after either of them, but to take the serpent who tempts Eve as her model, admiring its ability to shed skin “when it suits [her] / & slither her own way.” This speaker has asked to be done with the constructs of gender she has inherited and to formulate her own way.

When I was creating the image of a woman “slithering her own way” I thought of the ending to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall Paper,” in which the narrator describes herself as “creeping” around the room where she is confined for “hysteria” and prescribed a “rest cure” by her infantilizing husband (who is also her doctor): “But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way” (101). This narrator’s rebellion against her confinement is to “creep,” such an unladylike gesture to combat a very lady-based diagnosis: hysteria. “Hysteria” is derived from the Greek word for uterus and was believed by the Ancient Greeks to be caused by a woman’s womb wandering around her body, searching for semen. I love how Charlotte Perkins Gilman counters this highly gendered diagnosis with such a creaturely movement; the narrator is, in a way, unsexed. I was trying to achieve a similar moment at the end of “Ladylike.” The speaker has never felt very “lady-like” and has never felt like being a lady held much appeal, so she imagines herself as something other: not a man, not a woman—a serpent.

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I have been putting off writing about Section II of my manuscript because it contains the most vulnerable poems, the poems that I know are most likely to be labeled as *confessional*. I dislike that label because it implies that a speaker is asking for forgiveness, and I do not think that is what these poems (or, most poems given that label) are doing, unless it is forgiving oneself. In Lucille Clifton’s poem “i am running into a new year” she writes:

it will be hard to let go
of what i said to myself
about myself
when i was sixteen and
twentysix and thirtysix (7-11)

I think that is the project of these poems: to seek self-forgiveness for the ways that women are often taught to blame themselves for men's harmful actions toward them and also to recognize cycles of trauma. In Cathy Caruth's seminal work in trauma studies, *Unclaimed Experience*, she sets out the theory that traumatic experience creates "a locus of referentiality," in which the wound of that experience continues to speak "not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way its violence has not yet been fully known" (Caruth 6). Caruth states that this "wound that cries out" is formed by part of the traumatic experience that is "unassimilated" and "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). To some degree, this theory is what is behind much of what we hear about trigger warnings these days, though I believe many of those conversations are misguided. The trauma wound that cries out (the "locus of referentiality") operates outside from a victim's rational self and small things that remind the wound of the traumatic experience can cause the person to relive parts of that event. Many of the social media battles over trigger warnings deny the complexity of triggers, the many tiny parts of that "locus of referentiality." It could be a scent of Old Spice bodywash, a Yankee baseball cap, the taste of Miller Lite, the thud of work boots, an unseasonably cool breeze, hazy dark sky with a yellow moon.

I wanted to write about trauma in a way that acknowledged its complexity and simultaneously avoided victim blaming and showcased women's agency. This section is book-ended with poems about Lavinia, a tragic figure from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (based off Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) who is a doe-like victim of brutal rape and mutilation

(including the dismemberment of her hands and tongue, which hinders her ability to articulate who her assailants are with written or oral language). After her assault, Lavinia's figure haunts the play, often being present in scenes but not speaking. Although Shakespeare (and, obviously Ovid) comes centuries before Caruth's contributions to trauma theory, Lavinia seems to be the embodiment of Caruth's theory: she haunts the stage and play with her unarticulated shame and grief; she is the play's "locus of referentiality," its "wound that cries out." She also is re-victimized by her father (King Titus Andronicus) based upon the agreement of the male leaders at the table, Saturninus and Titus, that "the girl should not survive her shame" (V.3, 41). Does the implied mercy in Titus's killing of Lavinia not also suggest that it is better for a woman to be killed than to be raped? To what degree is rape, which is clearly an abhorrent and inexcusable act, given more power by patriarchal values of women's chastity and virginity? Part of the destructive power of rape (though not all of it) is that this type of violation diminishes purity, which has long been a measure for distinguishing a woman's worth. It also violates and can diminish her sense of ownership of her body. My poems about rape and trauma aim to take back the body.

In this section, I aim to look straight on at Lavinia, to articulate her shame and grief and anger, to take her out of the background of a play about violent and vindictive men where the plotline is the shape of her body. I also have aimed to create a speaker who looks full on at herself. Not long ago I was meeting with a bright college student who was working on editing her poem. One the main challenges was that she had tried to make a poem about rage end prettily by tacking on an extra stanza; I asked her, "What if rage is the point?" I am often asking myself that question when I write, too.

In addition to the Lavinia poems that bookend this section, there are also a series of “Drunk Bitch” poems staggered throughout. It was my hope that these poems would highlight the speaker’s agency within the collection and balance the poems with a victimized speaker, such as the speakers in “On Relearning Spanish” and “Harm’s Way.” For instance, in “Drunk Bitch Dreams of a Luminous Stream,” it is clear that the “Drunk Bitch” character is fully capable of being her own menace. The title wraps around into the first line “& pisses herself.” There is nothing very precious or virtuous about a drunk bitch who pisses herself while dreaming about a “luminous stream.” I wanted the “Drunk Bitch” to not be too pretty of a damsel. “Drunk Bitch” is meant to be messy and self-destructive, as many traumatized people are. In “Drunk Bitch Wants to Fuck Like a Man,” it’s clear that “Drunk Bitch” is relying on an unhelpful definition of manhood, a definition wrapped up in virility and conquest.

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And what if anger is the point? Of course in writing about what it means to be a woman and trauma and the body in 2020, there is a grotesque, orange figure skulking in the background: Trump. While I am sure some could criticize this collection for engaging too overtly with the political, the political becomes quite personal when we elect a president who speaks over his much more qualified opponent, calling her “such a nasty woman,” while she explains her tax policy position. When we elect a president who brags about his entitlement to “grab” an actress on a soap opera “by the pussy,” a man who repeatedly speaks vulgarly about women—we have to contend with the destructive force of that language. Trump is in many ways a mascot for toxic masculinity, the masculinity of virility and conquest; he is an entitled bully with seventy-four million Twitter followers and nuclear codes.

This might sound ridiculous, but after Trump’s election, I could only really do three

things: 1) Eat foods with melted cheese in them (queso, quesadillas, grilled cheese...); 2) Write. There was a little voice in my ear (not a literal “voice” so much, as an impulse) that kept saying: *document, document*; and 3) Read dystopian novels and poetry (in translation) by Eastern European poets (especially Tomaž Šalamun and Czesław Miłosz). So I did, as best I could. It was a bleak time for me and most of the people surrounding me; the days after felt funereal as I zombie-walked around the University of North Texas. Most of the poems in the third section of my manuscript come from my attempt to document that time period—trying and failing to wrap my head around what his election meant. To me, it meant that 62,979,636 Americans either hated or did not care about women (Begley). My poems “Five Days Before the Election,” “Some Threads from a Depression,” “Blank Sky Pills,” and others try to capture the overwhelming despair, rage, and betrayal I felt about that election. These poems participate in the tradition of poetry of witness. Assuming we make it through this time period into something less bleak and dystopian, I want to have something documented to look back at—something to look at and say, we were here, we did this, it was awful, we should do a different thing now. I also have included poems that explore forms of resistance against toxic masculinity. For instance, “I Believe ~~At~~ Freaks Will Save Us,” looks at feminine companionship, karaoke, and dancing as models for resistance. Alternatively, “Mouthy” is a persona poem from the voice of a woman with vagina dentata who is seeking vengeance on men after a date rape encounter (which is basically the plot of the movie *Teeth*); this poem takes on female rage as a form of resistance.

This section also contains poems like “Essay on Guns” and “On Cruelty” that interrogate forms for masculinity within what might be considered the “Trump demographic,” which is also the demographic I was raised amid: lower middle class, white, relatively uneducated, hardworking folks who felt like politicians had stopped caring about them. I wanted to try to

imagine, both empathetically and critically, the definitions of masculinity and morality that were driving these (in some ways “my”) people. When writing these poems, I drew on the narrative and tough-voiced style of the quintessential Michigander poet, Philip Levine. In Levine’s “What Work Is,” he writes of how emasculating job shortages can be for working-class men in a culture that celebrates men for being breadwinners: “We stand in the rain in a long line /waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work” (1-2). He describes the men waiting in line as being worn down by their daily physical labor and having “the same sad slouch” (15). Presumably, the emotional demands of having to wait for work—of worrying about going home emptyhanded and if the foreman at the end of the line will say, “‘No, / we’re not hiring today,’ for any / reason he wants” (20-21)—also has a toll on these men. In the final third of the poem, Levine asks for a reexamination of emotional connections and tenderness between men, the speaker reflecting:

How long has it been since you told him [your brother]
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? (33-36)

Here, Levine calls for a kind of tenderness between men that is not often celebrated, especially in images of working-class men. They are meant to be tough and stoic, to work hard all day and unironically drink at a dive bar after their shifts, to watch the game on Sundays and cheer loyally for their team (even when their team hasn’t had a winning season in years). They are expected to follow the path set in front of them even when there is no winning. I tried to capture a similar tenderness between men to Levine’s at the end of my poem “Essay on Guns,” which features two conservative men discussing the death of one of their sons due to a gun accident:

Dad would stand at the telephone
& shake his head in the sadness
of men who've been raised not to say
I ache I ache I tender I can't see
the sky through his death. The grief

of a father is a little like a bullet wound.
So much pain gushing out the body
it stains the whole world red.
Can you blame a man for wanting
a little anesthesia.

In this poem, the man, who is unable to fully express his grief, turns to alcohol as a form of anesthesia to his inexpressible emotional pain. In a culture of toxic masculinity where often the only acceptable negative emotion for men to express is anger, despair lacks outlets. While a culture that defines women as fonts of emotion and men as stoic leaders is damaging to women, it is also is also damaging to men. One way to counter toxic masculinity is to take the complexity of men's emotions and their need for expression seriously. I am trying to bear witness to this emotional complexity within my work.

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My collection ends with poems about the body in pain and poems about trying to fit into a domestic partnership. I did not particularly want pain to be part of my subject matter in this collection, but it is very noisy and hard to ignore. Pain is a little like Donald Trump.

Strangely, two days before the November 2016 election, I met my husband—I think what drew me to him was how unlike a Trumpian idea of masculinity he was, which I have attempted to celebrate in my poem “First Aubade.” My husband presents as what many might call effeminate—he's a pretty and kind and highly intelligent man, very far away from the voices on the television that kept saying Trump's comments were “locker room talk,” that were validating his behavior and speech as normal for men. I didn't want to touch Trump's example of manhood with a ten-foot-pole—so I didn't. But the language was still there. The angry face and orange spray tan and combover was still shouting its vulgarities. I admit insulting his appearance is

playing into his rhetoric of insulting women (i.e. calling Rosie O'Donnell a "pig"), but it's somehow more satisfying than anything else I can say about him.

"Early Aubade" was inspired by Kim Addonizio's "First Poem for You," an unrhyming sonnet with a feminine speaker who gazes adoringly at her masculine beloved, naming the shapes and locations of tattoos that she has memorized on his body—"the neat / lines of lightning pulsing just above" (3-5)—and recalling how she loves to "kiss the pictures" (9-10). While Addonizio takes on the form of a sonnet, a traditional form for writing about love and desire, she is pushing against tradition through her speaker's celebration of the cis-male body. While I struggle to think of examples of other poems that lustfully discuss men's nipples, there is no lack of imagery of nipples and ample bosoms in poems about adoration toward women. With "First Aubade," I wanted to use the traditional form of an aubade (a morning love song) to turn a lustful feminine gaze toward a male beloved, like Addonizio does.

Also strangely, I woke up covered in hives the day after Trump's election. I have always been a bit of a sickly person but am not prone to hives. I joked to friends that I was allergic to Donald Trump. Over the last three years I have had a strange proliferation of ailments and injuries. As somebody raised by a mother who went through a "Christian Science" phase I have an impulse to connect chronic pain and illness with the sickness of our current culture, though the skeptic in me is not very convinced of that argument. I was a sickly child. I took poor care of myself in my twenties. I am somehow in my thirties. Trump is president. I am married. I never quite expected my world to take this shape, but it has. Whatever the explanation is for why pain and illness and Donald Trump all decided to happen in my life at the same time, a challenge is created by the physical obstacles to protesting that are caused by pain and illness. As Johanna Hedva writes in "Sick Woman Theory:"

If we take Hannah Arendt's definition of the political – which is still one of the most dominant in mainstream discourse – as being any action that is performed in public, we must contend with the implications of what that excludes. If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed *a*-political – simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street. (Hedva)

As Hedva artfully points out, it's hard to be much of a political organizer while curled up in the fetal position. It's hard to be much of anything. It's also hard to write, but easier than leading a march. Pain, in this way, has led me back to writing as a form of protest.

Pain can interrupt daily tasks and cares little for one's schedule or goals, a bit like a child wailing I imagine, though I have no children. Playwright Sarah Ruhl begins her essay collection, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, with a short essay in which the following interruption bursts in mid-sentence: "Sorry. In the act of writing that sentence, my son, William, who is now two, came running into my office crying and asking for a fake knife to cut his fake fruit...please forgive the shortness of these essays (Ruhl 4). Pain has the social filter of a toddler but less of their amicable qualities, none of the cute cheeks and cuddles, and its songs are all death metal.

Pain is never fully translatable to other people. In *The Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry writes:

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language...Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (Scarry 4)

I have begun the project of writing about pain largely because of my failure to communicate my pain adequately to doctors with language. Poetry can get closer wailing than the controlled Midwestern speech I was raised to use (*nobody likes a whiner, don't be a martyr*). Much of the past decade of my life has been swallowed by head pain, sinus aches and migraines. The first two ENT's I went to (one in 2012, one in 2018) seemed disinterested in my sinus pain. One sent me to a neurologist to deal with my migraines, which indeed was one source of the pain, though

not an explanation for the dozens of rounds of antibiotics nor the rounds of steroids nor the perpetual green drainage streaked heavily with blood nor the need to irrigate my sinuses with a saline rinse several times a day for years. Neither bothered to look inside. The third ENT I saw in early 2020, perhaps notably the first one who was a woman, heard my symptoms and looked inside. Last month when she showed me the inside of my sinuses I nearly wept: the CT scan revealed two main issues: 1) I have a polyp nearly an inch-long in my left maxillary sinus that needs to be removed and biopsied and 2) My deviated septum has caused severely enlarged turbinates that are blocking airflow from my left nostril. I didn't know the word turbinate. I knew I'd barely been able to breathe out of my left nostril for years, and I could see it: a diagnosis, a surgery, a form for my pain and a person who could understand it.

As with patriarchy and toxic masculinity, pain can make it feel like one's body is not fully her own. It comes uninvited and kicks its feet up. Pain shapes many of my poems about domestic partnership, particularly "Dread Myth," "All the Heavens Were a Bell," "Tapping Therapy," and "Another Poem About Pain." Pain has the social graces of a teething toddler (or Donald Trump) and has very little interest in anyone's evening plans, as noted in "Tapping Therapy," where the speaker has an impromptu "Tapping Therapy" session over Skype with a friend (a method of therapy meant to lower distress from pain), while her partner goes to a party. Pain is also in many ways an enemy of desire. Pain is unsexy. Pain wears a muumuu all day and sits on the couch. Pain can make one feel like their body is a traitor, as opposed to a site for pleasure—it can make one not want much other than for pain to stop. In "Another Poem About Pain" I write about the toll that physical pain (in this case, a hip injury) can take on romantic relationships.

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The poems about domestic partnership in this penultimate section revolve around trying

to figure out desire and the practical roles that two people in love need to negotiate in a relationship, amidst a political backdrop that so loudly reminds one of the dangers and constraints of accepting gendered roles. How do a man and a woman who love each other make dinner together with Trump Tweeting about Coronavirus or nukes or calling another woman a dog-faced loser? What if I am better at cutting carrots than he is? What if I love cooking and loathe yardwork because I have bad sinuses and sunburn easily? What if I've never even used a lawnmower but am great at grilling? Am I still a good woman? A good feminist? What if he has no idea how to dust? Doesn't even know what a knife sharpener looks like? Hates making beds because it brings back memories of military school? I don't know the answers, but these poems are trying to figure them out.

This collection ends on a poem about a speaker who agrees to marry the act of being alive, "Epithalamion." The title is a term for poems written for the occasion of a wedding, and at the end of a litany of barriers to that relationship's success (ranging from a poor academic job market to trauma), the speaker declares, "*I do, I do,*" echoing a wedding ceremony. In a collection that is largely about negotiating tradition—from traditional gender roles to traditional forms—this final poem takes on the forms of both the poetic tradition of an epithalamion and the cultural tradition of a wedding and reimagines them. That is the task of this manuscript: to reimagine tradition, to build something new out of old scraps. My mother is a seamstress and I grew up with this process: tote bags made out of the cuffs she'd cut off short people's jeans, a quilt made from squares of fabric that had been used to make my childhood dresses. It seems condescending and wasteful to believe that nothing we inherit is useful or beautiful—though some of it has poofy satin sleeves and needs a lot of work to be viable outside of the eighties.

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Addendum

The looming threat of coronavirus (COVID-19) highlights the intersections between the domestic and the body. The virus is a reminder of our permeability and interconnectivity. It is an imposed form that makes us rethink and restructure our daily lives. It arrives unwelcomed. As many people (including my husband and I) embrace social distancing as a means of slowing the spread of this highly contagious and dangerous virus, eating in and buying groceries in bulk instead of in frequent small trips, working from home, avoiding gyms, movie theatres, parties, etc.—the dangers and comforts of cohabitation collide. Particularly with social distancing, my husband is by far the person most likely to get me sick and the person most likely to care for me if I become sick. We are smooshed together into one (thankfully comfortable) house, occupying different rooms as we work, binge-watch different television series, and come up with new domestic projects. I am planting a garden tomorrow, a domestic task that allows me to get a little fresh air.

His body, this home—they (along with our two dogs, Daisy and Tinkerbelle) compose the shrinking sphere of my daily life right now. A loved one's body becomes uncanny in times of severe sickness—it is at once strange and familiar. I am reminded of a poem by Bob Hicok, "Her my body," where the speaker reflects upon a breast cancer scare that his partner has and

exclaims: “I have one way / to be happy / and she is that way” (31-33). On one hand, “Her my body” as a title could come off as possessive, and I suppose in a basic sense it is (saying that another person’s body is one’s own). However, the poem is more about fearing the uncontrollability and unknowability of what happens to a loved one’s body and how devastating it would be if something bad happened to it. Unlike breast cancer, coronavirus is highly contagious, making the connection between bodies even more pronounced. If my husband doesn’t use enough hand sanitizer after he goes to a convenience store for a small daily thing, if there’s a small tear in his cuticle from washing his hands too much lately or he touches his face, if he does everything completely right but is unlucky—as a person with a compromised respiratory system, I could be in serious danger. I also know that I could be dangerous to him. A time of plague turns domestic space both into a sanctuary from the outside world and a petri dish for the inside world.

Although my manuscript was essentially completed before the coronavirus and the virus is therefore not a topic I directly address, I am interested in how the virus makes one’s body no longer their own—which is a major theme in my collection. Limited gender roles, patriarchy, sexist comments, capitalism, toxic masculinity, the cis-hetero-white-male gaze, trauma, physical pain, illness—these all can make it feel like we are not fully in control and ownership of our bodies, like something is encroaching. My poems are invested in using the poetics of embodiment—a poetics centered around telling stories about the body through immersive sensory details—to reclaim the body. Although a virus cares very little about me “reclaiming” the body, I think the poetics of embodiment can help one to process the emotional toll of sickness and other affronts to one’s sense of bodily autonomy.

PART II
STILL HOUSE

FOR REVIEW ONLY

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.

—Adrienne Rich

FOR REVIEW ONLY

This Book Is Your Book

from my grandmother's cookbook

Mrs. Homemaker,
You belong to one average husband.
Stagger your numerous functions:
health and happiness
the state of family meals, hunger
a long view filling stomachs.

Increase resistance.
Keep your youngsters;
they will help work.
Your own work
your husband. To help deal
with your problems planning
buying, cooking, expressing
the dignity of the homemaker
learn the whys and hows
of your needs: flavors
colors and textures.

Busy homemaker,
one week in every month
learn how to stretch the garden.
Leftovers may release
housemakers to rule
in certain ways.

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Narrative

Saint Agatha holds her breasts
two jiggly vanilla pudding cups
red berry nipples plopped
upon silver platter. What I can't see

is the blood, the knife marks. This gory waitressing
her task for not consenting
to open for Quintianus. *Oh purr yes*
he begged, but she was a shut clam.

This is supposed to be a better ending:
to be a carved Christmas turkey
but pure in the eyes of God. Once, I believed
I could save a woman, called

campus police when I heard screaming
in the dorm next door, listened
to a lamp crash, a desk thrust over, thuds
of a body becoming pocked

with night sky's worst ink. The door unlocked
to a stranger in her underwear
her lip split, meat showing. Her assailant:
a college linebacker in need

of a haircut & a better God. She asked me to stay
near her while she pulled her bedclothes
over her bones. The cop turned his back
dutifully. I held her as he asked

scripted questions: *did she know the man, did he
penetrate, did she say no, had she
been drinking, had he been drinking.* Agatha
this woman was so small, barely five-foot.

Small arms, small legs, small breasts. I thought
she was brave to banshee
scream to wake the neighbors but it didn't stop
his rabid, mangy want. Agatha, I want

a painting of you with your breasts
as mangled outlets on a cutting board
a man with a white apron drowned in red.
I want someone to tell the truth.

Window Shopping

*

Maybe I could get married
if it meant that neckline—if it meant a deep plunge
just a freckle shy of the navel
could be more goddess
than *Jersey Shore*, only then
could I say yes, drape
your lightest chiffon
down past my toes—yes, I will drag this ivory cloud
behind me like a glorious wheelbarrow
for everyone
even my mother, to see
I've woven flowers in my hair.

*

But I am as uncertain of the designer
as I am of white dresses. My mother wore one
down the aisle at twenty-one
& I never stop hearing about it:
the smallest size in the bridal shop's sale rack.
She did the alterations herself, took in her own waist.
I am always the teenage girl being told
Mom's dress is too slender for me.
There's always a measuring
tape wrapped around my waist.
I am holding my breath:
this is the story of a tailor's daughter.
Mom's wedding dress
chucked in the goodwill box *for someone
who can use it.*

*

Once, my love stared at the pink numbered ribbon
as I wrapped it gently
around our pitbull's neck
to check her collar size, & he exclaimed, *Oh, that's how
you measure bodies!* He'd never seen
a fabric measuring tape, only
the hardware store's stiff yellow.
Perhaps he imagined holding a string to a yardstick
to learn a human's true girth. Perhaps
he'd never considered it. The pup relaxed into my arms.
I kissed her forehead, said
Who's a good girl!?

*

I'd like to consider not knowing seam allowances
the shame of growing
beyond a dress's furthest edges.

I'd like to consider
not knowing size charts, how many
inches in a size eight waist, a size four, a nothing size.

There were the years I could model
neon mountains
of bedazzled prom dresses

while my mother examined
hems she'd sewn for other people's daughters.

There were the years I was too full
to be useful.

Perhaps I could unknow them
like maps of cities I don't live in anymore.

I could order a pain au chocolat at the coffee shop
stir cream & sugar in my dark roast
& smile the whole time.

Perhaps in Texas I've found
the right distance: six state lines
away from my youth, I could love a chiffon gown
in the window enough

to take a picture. I could gasp
like the first time I ran fingertips down
a fabric bolt & thought

how queenly.

What Is Left to Say About the Body

Hottest breath of July & the phone is ringing.
It's a landline. I am alive
in another decade & about to find out

that he is not. That he will be the first
not living body I have pressed my mouth
against. Who dies of asthma

anymore? The answer is a body
named Charles that went by Chad.
A saxophone with no wind in it.

At a movie date, *Save the Last Dance*,
he reached for his inhaler after reaching
up my shirt for the first time. After,

I stood before my bedroom mirror
shirtless, searching the small mounds
for evidence of transformation.

When his mother found his body
on the floor, his hand was not holding
the inhaler but cupping the air around it.

No, that's inaccurate, the air was
cupping his skin. The air was a heavy
blanket the whole town kept trying

to peel off all night. He could only
be touched & did nothing to the world
after that. He had no verb left.

Ladylike

I.

In the backyard with my brother gathering
brush to burn
in a smoky pile with December's desiccated
pine, Dad says I have to
put a shirt on, though the summer air is syrup-
thick & my brother
roams bare-chested & I am six or seven & helping
tidy the wild
& we have a wood-lined lot & a long gravel drive
& there is nobody
to see it, but I am a girl in this heat
& always will be.

II.

At a football game wearing khakis I am alarmed
by the blood-riddle, stuff
my panties with toilet paper, tie a sweatshirt
around my waist & shiver
in the autumn dusk. I tell nobody
my body's been visited by this
unwelcome guest. At home I scrounge
my closet for the single maxi-pad
dispensed in health class, smuggle stained clothes
out with the kitchen trash.
Mom is certain it is drugs: what am I doing
with the bag, the trash, the night? Nothing.
I am doing nothing, I say again & again.
She fishes out the evidence: the bloody
nothing my body has released into the night.
& then she sits me down to tell me
she didn't get her period until nearly fifteen
& mine has barged in early at eleven
because I am fat, my blue jeans & bras
already grander than hers. She hands me
a pack of pads & tells me they are expensive
& I'll never stop needing them, to be careful
of staining my school clothes. I tell her I'm sorry
because I never know what else to say
for being fat, for not being a boy, for bleeding.

III.

The first summer of my adult life
without a thigh gap

& I've moved to the South to learn how raw
flimsy skin scarcely touched

by sun can rub itself. *Like hamburger,*
I want to sob to someone

over the phone. To a mother, but not mine—
a fleshier woman

who can understand this new betrayal.
Blood smears down

my legs walking home two miles
in a gluey August heat

in a pencil skirt. Not my period, not
an almost baby refusing

to voice its cries into hospital air, no new
era opening, just too much

softness. O how I wish to be done
with the body,

Lord. Or I wish to be a serpent not
an Eve, certainly not

another Adam. Please, let me slip off
my old skin when it suits me

& slither my own way.

Easy as Pie

My mother taught me to feel the dough in my hands & sense
its readiness with my fingertips, to know when to say *yes, this will do.*

The dough in my hands must sense I am a fruitless woman:
Don't you know when to say yes? Just follow the steps in order

you futureless woman. It's a simple task. I've been raised
to follow her steps in order, first the ring & then the stroller.

It's a simple task. I've been raised to peel thin skins of peaches
off in small rings, to roll out the delicate Crisco dough

& peel back parchment paper like a Band-Aid off a small girl.
But my delicate Crisco dough is too weak for the juice of peaches

like a soaked Band-Aid on a small girl. With readiness, her fingertips
covered in the juice of peaches, my mother taught me to feel.

Parthenogenesis

When my mother was young, she feared
she was such a good Christian girl

God might grow his new son inside her
like we plop seeds into the garden

without asking the soil its thoughts
on plumping up pumpkins & peas.

& who would believe her? Sister
of the town's worst poison-headed

hooligans, she tried to do enough
good to make up for their transgressions

joined a church that forbade dancing
finished her homework, said her prayers

as if a family's fate balanced on a seesaw
& she could keep her brothers from

flinging off through the stratosphere
& never returning to her on earth

from ether's heights. In New England
Aquarium an anaconda has borne fruit

of only her making. No contact with males—
her body wanted a child & made one.

Wonder of wonders, a child with only her
DNA, slithers into the world. I haven't

conjured any miracles out of myself yet
in this lifetime. I fear I never will

be a witch or martyr. That I won't be good
or bad enough to warrant progeny

or remembrance. I used to want to turn
my pain into wine stains & watercolors

but now I want it not to touch
anyone, to keep it from brushing

my love's arm. What if all I want
is quiet, a dog at my feet, television

remote in hand, half a turkey sandwich
with light mayo & orange cheese—

who will sing for me? Often I hope
nobody will. I'd like a good long sleep.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Rescue

Dreams still shake my darling
into whimpering, kicking her legs
into the air, howling at what isn't
in the room. She nuzzles her snout
into my armpit, kisses my chin, wraps
her small, dense body around me
like a giant slug. I want to know the face
of her devil. In daytime she shrinks
at the voices of loud men, the thuds
of their heavy shoes. In this way
we understand each other. She likes
to sun in the backyard, shows off her
soft belly to the sky. She likes the privacy
fence, patrols the perimeter like a proud
soldier. Nothing in, nothing out:
she maintains order against the wild,
rubs her grey coat against the rosemary
& pisses on weeds, slaughters lizards.
She sits with her head in my lap
& I consider her muscular jaw,
the size of her teeth, what carnage
she could make of me but refrains.
We belong to each other: she licks
my face. I scratch her bum.

Everything Is Going Okay for Once

& I am waiting
for the handsome man to climb
through a trap door in the floor
& take my spring clothes
to the dumpster,
snap my glasses in half
because he can. I am waiting
to find my kitchen shelves
emptied, bike hawked
to the fastest bidder, a note
saying: *You deserve me,*
signed the contract for this taking
with your body curled against mine
through the hurricane.
You chose me for a night
so I give you night,
a house freed of light bulbs
& batteries. I am teaching you
how to love me with that
beggar mouth. I am waiting
for him to tell me another story
about breaking a man's
nose into blood & holler
for looking at his dog funny.
I am waiting for him
to show me my body
with the bones removed.

Dream of Crossing

I take a New Englander to Lake Michigan & wait for her
to exclaim it looks like an ocean
but smells wrong. She's right. She's spent years in the purview
of oysters & lobster rolls.

I press my nose into her blue hair, breathe its history of salt.
Make a meal of it.
Pull the clothes off her body because it's better to let sun
learn all the pale parts.

Warm hand of wind caressing the milky slice
of a ghost spaghetti strap,
the tan line a memory of days when modesty was king,
a memory of days of kings.

Bless the barbells in her nipples, septum ring, outline
of a woodland creature
on her bicep. Bless it all. The way I love her is & is not
sexual. The way I love her

is older than either of us. In this dream there's no man
in skinny jeans explaining
feminist theory to us. In this dream when our eyes lock
it is not to say *Save me* or

I can see how exhausting it is to keep nodding your head for him.
Boston, Minneapolis, Earth—
all the places we've drank the sky together so far off I can't
quite remember the feeling

of her boots brushing my calf in a basement dance party
the question of a fur coat's past
warming her shoulders as she tugs me out into the cold
for a smoke. In this dream

no men grab our hips when the bass bumps hard.
No cocks press against our asses
as we try to sing the nineties to each other. In this dream
we are as naked & safe

as we'll ever be. If I were to press my mouth to her thighs
if she were to moan my name
it could not be as intimate as it is to stand silently
together digging our heels

into heaven's coast. But it won't stay, quicksand
in the sky. We are sinking
back into our bodies: a wide yawn of land separating
our homes, well-meaning

boyfriends hogging blankets as we shiver awake beside them,
a series of incentives
not to walk into the night's remaining dark & follow
the stars to a midpoint

where I could grab her face & say, *I only want children
if they have your eyes.*
We drink only wine for weeks & then only milk.
We ask & ask to go back

to the bright beside each other, but the waking world
has its plans: the costs
of flight, our day jobs & night jobs, & the many names
for women like us.

ONLY

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The Poem as Bougie Beauty Products

A Michigander with subpar makeup skills,
I've been asking all the southern belles
how to keep Texas from melting
foundation off my face & revealing
who I am to the world. One belle says
to hairspray my face to keep my disguise
in place, one recommends a good primer,
one swears by "baking your face"
with a heavy layer of translucent powder.
All agree it is time I stop buying makeup
at drugstores. Ulta, Sephora—appropriate
places for women my age, my new job
& new house with two walk-in closets
& a jacuzzi tub. It's important to look
the archetype—suburban woman
with a retirement plan. I am starting
to see where the crows will dig their nails in
around my eyes, where the sun has done
its mean work. In profile I look like
my prettiest aunt. Like she's lightened
her chestnut hair & tried color contacts.
These are my grandmother's good
bones beneath my skin, her round eyes,
her forehead I've only seen in pictures.
I am painting cheekbones on doughy cheeks
etching charcoal across my lids
to make them look bigger, cake concealer
over life's blemishes—I never thought
I would make it to see these beginnings
of lines. I paid my shiny twenties for them.

On Poinsettias

The church came pre-decorated with red
petals for my mother's December wedding.

A red hot bargain for a waitress
who lived on bargaining. Imagine

so many red petals running through me
like other people's children race

through fields. Call me a red hoarder.
Red lover, red arbiter, piggish red

rover burgling the almost-lives of
ovum. For centuries women used the red

of poinsettias to expel a wrong red.
(When I say expel I mean abort.)

I stowed this knowledge inside
my reddest meat. A woman said it plainly

in a poetry reading nine years ago.
I want to speak flowery. A red rage

frightens me in Texas. There are old spells
one must hold tight. One must know

the flowers (poinsettias, rue, penny royal),
for what to do after the IUD expires,

what to do in this country of red-faced men
arguing if Penny should rusty knife red

dirty dancing die again. What to do if the men
get to say yes, again. If all we have left is red.

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Calling Her Names

Call her crick in my neck
I thought the chiropractor fixed Call her wolf
 that picked me up by the scruff to keep
 as a play thing
a play, I can't figure out my lines, where the audience sits
 a plush purple chair in my past with cigarette burns
where my death sits where she screams out
 at a man throwing me around a living room
dance party poor swing dancer where she screams me out
 of a cab the man caught pouring
his martini into mine again & again Beauty
Bar Chicago Call her the love
 that eats me for breakfast Call her the love
that asks for my hand in tornado
 & barfly in stomp out the room until
it's time to be a better song Call her chaos-
lover Call her burns the whole damn house down
 after eviction Call her house Call her
changed phone number Call her I can't
 pull scrap metal from a field & build
a getaway car can't play fiddle with toxic strings can't play
 dead anymore all her disaster porn
Call her *I'm too fucking tired to look anymore* Call her & say
 it's okay you're okay it's okay Call her my name

Drunk Bitch Dreams of a Luminous Stream

& pisses herself. Drunk Bitch drops her drink in the lap
of a slightly less drunk body & is sure she's found love
in his smiling shrug: *Easy, Tiger*. Drunk Bitch finds love
in the staggered English of a gyrating Italian man but loses
her keys & coat ticket while trying to find the beat.
Drunk Bitch's hips lie about her age & relationship status.
Drunk Bitch sees every park bench as a balance beam.
Drunk Bitch says she used to be a gymnast & isn't lying
but wasn't ever very good. Drunk Bitch is limber
but bruises easily. Drunk Bitch has never broken a bone
but has broken five cellphones, three necklace clasps
& the hearts of a squadron of decent & indecent men.
Drunk Bitch's stagger summons lust from the loins
of unimaginative men. Drunk Bitch sips the future
& burns the past. Drunk Bitch ladles rum punch, spills red
rumors across her blouse, & swears she's not drunk
tonight, just clumsy. Rumor is Drunk Bitch swallowed
the salt of a man in the bar bathroom. Drunk Bitch sloppy
paints her toenails pink until she feels pretty enough
to text old drunk lusts. Drunk Bitch is as Drunk Bitch does.
Drunk Bitch kisses like a vacuum mating with a wet sponge.
These days Drunk Bitch stretches her luck till it pulls.
Drunk Bitch causes a commotion, leaves a house
party on a stretcher. Drunk Bitch gets up to get drowned.
Drunk Bitch floods the life of the party in Drunk Bitch tears.
Drunk Bitch clicks her heels three times & wakes in a new
home with no clothes or cab money. Drunk Bitch watches
strangers in their underwear make coffee, eggs, sometimes
banana waffles. Drunk Bitch still has this one good trick:
she lies down like a corpse four days with drawn drapes
& groans *Lazarus, Lazarus*. Drunk Bitch is the resurrection
& the knife.

On Trying to Relearn Spanish¹ for a Doctoral Requirement²

The app on my smartphone wants me to translate
*la mujer*³ *come una manzana*⁴. Easy.
But it does not say if the woman has chosen the apple.
It does not say if it's the only thing in the kitchen
of a low-A league Yankees apartment⁵
or if she picked it at a Kroger, felt it with her hand
& said yes, I will put this one in my body.
It does not say if the apple was sawdust in her mouth,
or the most crisp, sweet flesh of a Michigan autumn.
It does not say if the men surrounded her,
seven quartered in a two-bedroom apartment.⁶
If she thought they were handsome
& wanted to touch their hard
throwing arms. It does not say if she stopped
wanting to. It does not say if a man
introduced her to his teammates as *mi mujer*.
It does not say if she scribbled pictures of weddings
or funerals across the last dregs of dusk.
It does not say if she thought herself
una mujer or *una niña*. If she told her mother
she was off to a slumber party. Something
about pedicures. It does not say if the apple skin
sticks in her teeth, slices the gums. If she bled
on the soft white of the apple or maybe
the goodwill sheets covering an air mattress
next to an air mattress next to an air mattress
with her friend's mosquito bite tits & a man
who gets so drunk he pisses in the fridge.⁷
It does not say if she was a virgin
or if there's more than one way to tear a girl.⁸
It does not say if, perhaps, she found half a worm
or condom & knew something
wriggled inside her that she hadn't asked for.⁹

1. Memory is a mean drunk, always throwing her glass at the wrong targets. The language is not the problem. The problem, of course, is men & the things that remind me of them. I want to read Pizarnik in a hammock so loud the neighbors think I'm on something. I want her all over my tongue, my throat, my teeth.
2. How many pearls, how many laurels does it take to redecorate the past? Cheers to a doctorate in distancing. Cheers to how alone Texas stretches, the endless bright sky.
3. I learned this word in the first book of short stories I loved, *The House on Mango Street*, which Cisneros dedicates to *Las Mujeres*. I was fifteen & hadn't been raped yet. Just a scrawny little white girl, but I knew Cisneros knew something about me, about how

afraid I was of lemon heels & grown men who watched my legs too long & called me names that weren't mine—*Hey Buttercup, Hey Princess, Hey Babe.*

4. What would this story be without an Eve to blame?
5. It does not say how the white American players were able to afford Hummers & Escalades, but they did. & the players from the DR & Venezuela all lived on chicken & rice & were very lonely stacked on top of each other by the invisible hand of capitalism. The first time I saw the room full air mattresses I thought, *Oh God. Oh God. God.*
6. But sometimes it was sweet. The men called each other *Primo* & raised Bud Lite cans toward the drop ceiling & spoke too fast for my gringa ears.
7. Maybe that's not fair. Maybe we've all been too drunk. Let's try a revision. Let's say he gets so drunk he shouts Neruda: *Solamente es un soplo, más húmedo que el llanto, /un líquido, un sudor, un aceite sin nombre.* Let's say I couldn't translate the beauty. Let's say I still can't.
8. Weeks after, when I dipped the tampon in hydrogen peroxide to sting myself clean & raw, was that a spell?
9. It fails to mention that I named it Esperanza.

Some Things We Carried

We carried twenty-eight days of pills in small plastic dials. We carried the dates of our last periods. We carried lipsticks & pressed powder compacts. Sometimes we carried keys to buildings we didn't live in anymore. Sometimes we carried mace & feared it'd be used against us. We carried smartphones that carried the news, the weather, maps, emergency contacts. Sometimes we carried each other. Sometimes we carried a woman, the wife of a young professor, after she broke down in the cocktail bar over a brown derby. Sometimes we carried her black eye. Always we carried her story, the new baby with a wicked throwing arm, a glass bottle of breast milk. We carried how leaving was impossible. We carried how she was his student before she was his wife. We carried the scream of a woman in the college dorm, the sound of a lamp crashing against the wall, her ex-boyfriend on the football team who'd come back to claim her, the blood on her lips as we held her & waited for paramedics. We carried our mothers who carried us. We carried how they left until our fathers stopped drinking. We carried each other's pregnancy tests & Plan B & Monistat in CVS bags filled with things we didn't really need: extra toothbrushes, deodorant, iced tea. We carried the names of children we feared having. We carried tampons & Xanax & books of poems. We carried our youths. We carried the first men to pound fists against walls next to our heads. We carried wanting to be wanted like that, like they'd break us if we weren't theirs. We carried fear each time we left. We carried our luckiness. We carried what we hadn't been charged to endure, our good teeth & bones still in place. We carried bar tabs & a series of credit cards. Sometimes we carried condoms & sometimes we carried risk. We carried each other home & said that was safer than not carrying each other home. Sometimes we carried the gentle tastes of each other's mouths. Sometimes the carrying was so gentle.

Drunk Bitch Wants to Fuck Like a Man

How lush the night draping its inky curtains
over cheekbones & pedicures. July
licking its way around every ripe calf

& thigh, wet hug of sweat
& cotton. Tube top, short shorts, cheap
bar magic. Say *Please*. Say *We are made*

of curves & glisten. Your sweetheart
is not your sweetheart. I am
the beginning & the end of this

story: Listen, it's nobody's fault. All winter
we wore the curse of the Midwest's cold
shoulder, puffy coats & chaste long-

underwear. Let's show the warm patios
of Ann Arbor how it looks to take
what we want: this dream of plenty

& plenty of dream. Muddle regret
into an old-fashioned glass. Be simple
syrup sugaring the burn. Say *What if cheating*

is the most honest thing humans do. I'll ask
the softest skin of your neck what
its name is. I promise I won't remember.

Learning to Leave a Bad Thing Alone

I loved the story of his neck too much:
the failed noose last spring, the x-ray saying
everything's fine fine still works fine
proof against my dead friends
who choked & broke alone, the ones
I said I was done writing about.
When he mentioned his high school
nemesis, the truck set on fire,
how his Dad made him work
all summer to pay back the damage,
or the face of his ex's paramour
bashed in with a board outside
his California apartment,
how the police agreed with him
—don't poke the bear—
it wasn't a threat, not exactly.
When he sped off, deserted me
in a city 120 miles from home
sitting at a table in Barnes & Noble
with a latte & a Dean Young book
certain I was texting other men,
I wagged & begged on the phone
like a dog chained in the rain all night.
When he came back, I was shaking
on a bench with perfect posture
trying to look like I wasn't
the kind of woman men abandoned.
When he pulled off the highway
down a side road, parked
on the shoulder, I thought,
If this is how I die, God, so be it. But
that wasn't my ending. He held me
while I wept & cursed & wept & cursed.
I felt him get hard through thick denim
& liked it. Back in his family estate
I idled with his head in my lap all night
watching zombie movies on the couch
& knew he was my punishment.

On a Facebook Picture of My Highschool Best Friend's Preteen Daughter

I don't know why I didn't get pregnant
How many nights in beds beside each other
did we fuck soundless? Not for pleasure

but for men. how many sardine apartments
of minor league baseball players, hotel rooms
for road games. How easily could we

have had the same last names like the sisters
we are. Your ex-husband's cousin
with the fastball temper. The chair he threw

across the hallway when I wouldn't put out
anymore. Sometimes I wish I was the teen mom,
how a child can become an endpoint

to recklessness. I think we were both reaching
for an out. The last time as we were
I met you at a game on a college field trip

where none of my new friends knew
our story pulsing beneath the billows
of a blouse you'd bought to cover

what you were afraid to show the world
yet: a curly-haired girl with weak lungs
waiting for you to press your ear close to

her choked chest & ask whatever inhabits
the stillness of a room to fill her alveoli
with years of breath. A girl you won't want

to tell about me, about how we loved
to wade into the deepest waters & play
chicken with Poseidon. Sometimes I imagine

she's mine, linger in the Target girls' section
& try to guess what size of pink, what style
she wears now, the feeling the first time she refuses

everything I call cute & wants a halter-top.
How sudden it will be that she walks
into the dangerous heels of our youth. Or doesn't.

Harm's Way

After the Halloween work party
wearing a black slip, a picture of Freud
taped to the front (*a Freudian Slip! hahaha!*
a brainy skank!), after I proved my dominance
at flip-cup, after the turtle-necked
Amelia Earhart asked if I was a stripper
(*hahahah!*), after how my body looked in lace
& I said I used to teach in the Ivy League
& drank faster & didn't say when
I was sixteen I traded my body for beds
all summer, a pretty Black Swan drove me
home. Probably he was smoking
menthols on our shared porch
belly gurgling with stolen wine,
a chef's easy loot. Probably I walked
sloppy in my heels, a chicken
with my head hacked off bumbling
senseless. Probably his long arm
draped around my shoulders harmless
as a dead snake. After he left my torn
stockings atop the washing machine—
I asked if he'd used a condom after I asked
if he'd fucked me & he looked down
at his feet, scarred from spilled roux,
& said no he didn't like using them. I said
very little for a very long time until
I woke in my skin in an abandoned city,
my parents' garage piled with boxes, my body
spread like an X across a queen mattress
marking what's mine in the dark.

Drunk Bitch Tries Her Hand at Recovery

We recover our bodies from welcome mats & the entrails of night.
We recover our keys & wallets from what we swear will be the last bar,
the last time waking up to the shaky red dawn & knowing it's inside us,
the shaking, the red, the cursed sky.
We know we are what the dawn hates
as much as we hate the dawn.
Sometimes we don't recover everything. Our coats wander off
on the backs of strangers, our debit cards swept up & trashed,
our heaven spayed, our heaven trashed.
Sometimes we're what's recovered
from the sharp rocks of gorges, from our bathroom tile, from our beds
if we're lucky. Sometimes we are lucky & recover
condom wrappers & say a little prayer to that
little bit of sense. Sometimes we are unlucky
& recover condom wrappers & say a little curse
to that common bit of theft. Sometimes
nothing gets recovered. Sometimes our life
is a maxed-out credit line, a bargain with a jackass God
we've created in our own image. Sometimes we say
fuck you & kick a wall until our toes break.
Sometimes we break the wall & the landlord levies
a fine that we've earned. Sometimes we earn
fines we don't talk about, that aren't in the books.
We bury our unrecovered, their organs ruined by the God
we've made: God of blackout drives,
of blood vomit & shits & lying to doctors,
God of falling over at work parties
& ruining nice clothes, God of ruining.
We bury our unrecovered in closed caskets
when we can. Sometimes it's best to burn them.
Sometimes the family insists
on leaving the caskets flopped open—
give the undertakers some real work.
We see how fast a face can gray.
We say, He looks godawful. We pray
on pavement-scarred knees
that there is a heaven for the selfish.
We try to walk it off but can't get rid of ourselves.
We sing hymns to a better God
& sob. We eat dry sheet cake in church basements
& sob. We sob in the bathroom & sneak sips
of burning quiet. Sometimes we bury ourselves.

A Few More Lines on Lavinia

After they rape her they hack her tongue & hands
so she can't articulate
who's wronged her & how. This is an old part
of what it means to be a woman.
I am nearly thirty & still shake sometimes walking
alone to the 7-11 late night
after my roommate uses the last of the last
roll of toilet paper. A Slurpee
in hand for good measure & a pickup truck
honks at me crossing I-35,
as if to say *I see you & could take you but won't*
as if to say *look at what*
a nice guy I am. Nice guys keep me up at night,
write rock albums about how nice
they were to me, how I had no good reason
not to stay theirs. Lavinia,
I hate watching you suffer on stage because I know
it doesn't end. Your shame,
the shame of having walked alone in the woods
in a woman's body. Better
to be a wolf dressed in a grandmother's nightie,
better to eat the men alive.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Five Days Before the Election

& I don't want to feel the earth today because a rich man is in it
who says he has the right to grab

the most *mine* thing I can imagine but maybe wouldn't want to
because maybe I am almost thirty

& have grown stately in myself these last three years,
watched ass & breasts become

rounder worlds & said *okay, I can inhabit more
cells, can be the earned size*

of my grandmothers. & it is American to consider
that he has a right to lead

America, to gather the wrinkled hands of bankers
& show them all the nooks & crannies

cloaking hushed treasures, teach them how to strip
the quiet armor women don

when we are tired of eyes following our legs
up staircases. I want to lie

down in a river bed, to let the water rush over
until I am a cold nothing,

touched only in the urgent pity of rescue
divers dragging me

back to earth. I want to let a man, a stranger, worry
over my body, what makes it

tick & gasp. I want to name each thigh dimple
& raised vein, each flake

of dry skin & stubbled hair, lest someone think
they were ownerless,

run their hand up my skirt on a bus like it wasn't
a valued thing thieved. I want

to be precise about how rich I am, how bountiful
my folds of skin: this museum

of a pussy, this grand opera belly. Let the government
erect a fence around my yards

of legs, lush country of bush & blood. Let me be
a closed border, a private club.

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Some Threads from a Depression

“*She who died of her blue dress is singing.*”
—Alejandra Pizarnik (trans. Yvette Siegert)

*

Lately, the world only speaks to me
like this: the slow
failure to shove a thread through
the eye of a needle
& each day, a new mending pile.

*

I made a promise I wanted to keep:
to never speak to her.
To leave my dead self swallowed
in the heavy blue
I swallowed. Four years after suicide,
everything I touch echoes
her song: *Drown a little dream with me.*

*

Small tufts of her hair on the pillow
each dawn so familiar
I could weep for the scent. Oh, isn't it true
all the world's lavender
grows only for her? Maybe this is a love
poem. Hasn't her belly
gently pressed my spine each night

*

since I left her? Some nights I wear her clothes,
the yoga pants I woke
not wearing: the hospital replaced them
with a backless gown
& catheter. For a year I wouldn't touch them,
convinced the fabric smelled
of death. But I didn't throw them away,

*

Honey. I know you've been here through times
of rape & wasting, unknotting
the world from my back. I don't know where
this old thread leads either.
Is each soft strand more offering or omen?
I want to say something

about the razor bites at my ankles. I want to say God,

*

get this bitch away from me. But this sob song
suits me. Bluest. Water falling
from a showerhead, enough makeup to make
a blue face smile, a vintage blue
dress that twirls. Oh, how I know each stitch by heart.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Blank Sky Pills

My mother used to tell me sleep would find me
in my thirties, as if sleep were a gray hair waiting

to sprout amongst the strands of youth.
I have no gray of my own yet. August in Texas

burned all heaven's sheep, nothing to count
toward sleep. I want to call my mother & tell her

the weather forecasts were wrong, again, the drugs
not working. That I am thirty & drenched

from brain to belly & it's her fault somehow.
I was promised these rough birds would stop

their clamor songs. Too much Donald Trump
& lesson plans & how do I keep the same body

next to me when there's so many lovely scents
& thighs in the world & too much, too much.

& then, one day the dosage doubles, an extra
antelope-sized pill, & a clearing opens between

my ears so wide my whole being could spread
across it like a bed of soft grass & it is good, so

good, luxurious— a fuzzy robe I keep donning
from sleep to work to dinner to sleep. I keep waiting

to get found out. For someone to ask, *Why*
are you wearing your bathrobe in public? Are you confused

by the meaning of business casual? & recommend
something smart like a blouse & pencil skirt.

& I'd say, *Yes I am very confused by meaning.*
But nobody minds how slow I slink behind

the soft. Somedays I barely raise my arms
to wave across the street at familiar

faces, friends. The arbiters of happiness
assure me this is better than the un-drugged

sob sky. All this soft on soft, a padded room
within the mind, no sharp edges to bruise

my thoughts against. Isn't this what it means
to be lovable? Such a becoming shade of bland.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Under His Eye

I.

When I open the front door, the new rescue pup cowers at my feet in a pose that says, *I have done a wrong thing, I am ready, just do it.* Someone's been ribbon-dancing in the living room with her roll of shit bags, again. She stays like this, her head bowed down, body flat to the ground, silent, eyes closed, until I say softly, *It's alright, Tinkerbelle. It's just shit bags.* I stroke her ears, & she wags back into herself. She knows a bad thing about humans but licks my face, shows me her belly.

II.

O Saint Christina how
do I get up there
in the cathedral rafters

body pressed
against the boundary?
At least a bee trapped

in a closed car is trying
to push against a solid.
I need to desert the internet

Kavanaugh's confirmation
something like sin. O Saint
Christina, to be astonishing

might be the only rational act
for a woman. To throw
your body into a furnace

a mill wheel, the paparazzi
& see if it's true, God
has blessed you.

III.

This is an old story I am trying on:
Let my hair be a bonnet of wriggling
serpents, venomous & poised to strike
at slightest suggestion of aggression.
Let my gaze make statues of men caught
mid-act. Some would be beautiful in form.
The baseball stud with muscled shoulders
when I was trying to nap off a spinny
drunk at sixteen while a party danced on—
the one who said, *Nobody out there cares
what happens in here*—I would like his
stuck-stone body, dick-hard & grinning
placed prominently in my front yard
hedged with unpruned, wild wild bushes.

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

I Believe ~~At~~ Freaks Will Save Us

The sloshed insistence of two birthdays
to celebrate on the Friday night after
we've elected a man for President
who is accused of raping a child
& everybody has huddled numb in black
funeral garments for three days of no makeup
or laughter, sitting in bars & saying very little
with our mouths, a ritual we agreed upon
in the silent rage of our bedrooms after
we decided it was important to dress & witness
each other, to embrace & press our eyes against
shirt collars, to gently tug a jacket sleeve
& say *unbearable, who are these people*
who voted for that monster, how could they...
But tonight I am holding a beautiful woman
closely as we belt, *I'm a bitch, I'm a lover*
I'm a child, I'm a mother, & it doesn't matter
that we're both offkey, that we only know
the chorus & flub the karaoke script:
we're living in our bodies possessed
by the good glow of this witching hour
that raises us up up up into the most graciously
holy thing, a room full of women singing
& dancing unconcerned about who's watching.

Mouthy

Fantasy after Watching Teeth (2007)

Men come to me with their ugly
ploughing & I shout, *Hail*
to the weed-wacker, Motherfucker.

O yes, O I need the red, O my poor
dizzy head , O it spins, it spins me.
I am such a wretch without my iron

supplements. I find men's sausages
make the best lozenges. What
on God's red, tender earth: no,

I am never like a cat
licking a saucer clean of its cream.
No, blood is not like that.

I didn't understand it at first.
I've always been a picky eater,
fed cabbage & radishes

to the family corgi.
My second mouth
balks too, spits back

unsought accoutrements.
Tell me something.
Have you deserved all the sugar

plums & arabesques
you've eaten? Have you
snuck into the kitchen, licked

fresh batter from an unwatched
spoon without asking the baker
if she'd like to share?

Essay on Guns

I don't remember the boy's name
but I remember him swinging
through barn rafters with his brother
& me & my big brother, who was afraid
of heights but watched from the sideline
as we all didn't fall. The boy's dad,
my dad's best friend since before
he was my dad, showed me their pig,
said they were fattening him up
to make bacon. I felt no mercy pang,
only disgust to eat such filthy animals.
This is not a story about vegetarianism.
This is about the boys I didn't see
or think of again until the bullet
misfired. The rifle they'd found
in their neighbor's garage,
up to the mischief of teenage boys
in farm country. With so much
wide open land, what prize is there
in spotting a rabbit, in disrobing corn?
I know that feeling but not the one
of holding my brother's body
with a hole in it. Not the feeling
of taking off my shirt to sop up blood
& feral howl for help *Oh God*
Oh God Oh Fuck. I don't know
if the brother who lived, who first
held the gun not knowing it held death
in its chambers, grabbed his brother
plus the intent of the gun in his arms.
Or if he jumped back, heart ticking rapid
as a hummingbird, tried to breathe
with his head bobbing between knees.
Or if he bolted to the house phone,
feet pounding prayers into the earth.
I don't know if he was a cussing boy.
If he cursed God or cursed himself.
If he still does. I know his dad
drank the car away. When he called
Dad would stand at the telephone
& shake his head in the sadness
of men who've been raised not to say
I ache I ache I tender I can't see
the sky through his death. The grief

of a father is a little like a bullet wound.
So much pain gushing out the body
it stains the whole world red.
Can you blame a man for wanting
a little anesthesia. For not wanting
to sit still in the carnage: his hands
that once thrust two small boys up
toward the sun. That once had two sons
to whoop the mischief out of.
It was a kind of love. It was living.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

On Cruelty

Outside Quality Dairy on Holmes Street
Cousin Joey has successfully bought
M&M's & soda pop, probably
asked the cashier her first & last name,
probably said, *He is Joseph Randall*,
unphased by her eyes darting toward
a customer behind him, her smirk
asking: *What's wrong with this dude?*
He slow or something? Joey
probably said she's got pretty hair
like he always tells women,
even if they've botched
experiments with Clairol & faith.
He's headed the four blocks home,
his janitor collection of keys
jangling in his front pocket,
wisps of brown hair thinning
across his wide forehead
like his daddy's, & nothing's wrong
until the gun. & he's shouting,
*Joseph Randall does not like the man
with the gun.* & the gun is asking
for his money, & he's saying,
*Joseph Randall does not like
the man with the gun.* & the money
isn't the worst thing thieved.
Joey's brain, a loop replaying
his worsts: Joseph Randall
does not like the man with the gun
all day cleaning the DART factory,
all night in my aunt's little peach house.
& I don't want to picture what desperate
brutal face would hold up my Joey,
so I don't ask questions. I must be like
the police. Mom calls to tell me
Joey can't hold his job because
Joseph doesn't like the man
with gun. Because he's everywhere.

Spell for Undoing a Life Sentence

My mother is not sitting in a high school classroom
while another girl presents the week's current events.

The current events are not a dead body. My uncle's friend
doesn't tell the gas station clerk to give him the money.

Nobody is threatening to shoot. It's not a small town.
Nobody is on drugs. The cashier is not afraid.

Nobody has a gun. My uncle is not half a kite
on mars rushing the red atmosphere,

half pumping gas into the getaway car. My uncle
did not buy the gun. Nobody is the shooter.

The cashier's shirt is not red with blood.
The cashier is not a ruined planet.

My uncle's planet is not siphoning into
a county cell. My mother is not listening

to a girl call her brother a monster. My mother
is not seeing her face locked away. My uncle does not

have her same nose, ears, eyes. My mother isn't seeing
her monster. My uncle is not a runaway. Is never

afraid of his father's bloody belt. Is never shaking
for a fix. My uncle's fix isn't shaped like

a dead boy. My mother doesn't run
from the classroom. My uncle is not a room

she gropes about each day like she's just woken
to find the furniture's shifted without warning:

her screw up brother not next to the pool at her father's
house with the most evenly cut lawn in America,

not a whiff of pot smoke & God knows what else
is burning in the garage, not a monster wearing her face

chasing her around the house with a bread knife
anymore. Not a joker handing her a joint

laced with rat poison to show her his bad
skies & splendors. Nobody is relieved he's gone.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Portrait of My Mother, Age 56

Mom searches food labels for cancer as she passes
the age her mother's brain grew crooked branches.

In a gray minivan in a Target parking lot, she tells me
she never made a plan for retirement, never thought
she'd last that long. & I don't shout

Look at me I am living I am doing this for you,

don't lower the window to Michigan's frigid progress
to ask the stars how far out the story reaches with
the two of us idling alive. I nod knowing

I wear the big eyes of her ghostmother. Mom waits
for me to leave her. Three years ago I tried
to swallow a bottle of small moons & didn't call her
to say the hospital's new names for what's wrong
with me. When I finally told her on the phone
weeks later she asked if it was an accident & I said
no so she never asked again. So we are silent
now beneath the yellow glow of parking lot lights:
we are accomplices or we are strangers praying
to gods who live on dying stars fading, flickering.

Souvenirs of the Twenty-First Century

The powers that be are conspiring to make the ugliest children. On television America drops the largest non-nuclear bomb on Afghanistan, calls it the “Mother of All Bombs,”

“MOAB” for short, in case we need to speak quickly about the distant mountain with its head blown clean off. Putin claims to possess a bigger device, “The Father

of All Bombs” aka “FOAB” aka “Big Daddy.” I hold the small pouch of my belly & am grateful it is not conspiring to make anything. Medical science

has made it easy to not bring new bodies into this fizzling America that makes it difficult for so many bodies to receive medical care. Thank you, Invisible Hand. Thank you,

Free Market. Thank you, Congressman Burgess. Thank you, Mr. President. I won’t give you the possibilities of the 200,000 eggs left inside me. Not one banker or pianist.

Not a single soldier. This morning I woke to a vase of week-old roses on my nightstand, that too-sweet scent of beauty leaving, & I didn’t want to get up, pulled

the bedspread up to my chin & sunk into morning’s best ether. At the edge of waking America dreams itself better: children on top of children kicking their chubby legs

inside me. All the roses the land can feed & no bombs raising dirt into the air, no bombs opening the soft skin behind the knees of bodies beloved from hairline

to toenails, no question of bombs painting the sky with ashes of apartments & strip malls. I wake to work & take my waking slow. If I could I would

run my hands along the sides of my pitbull & sip my coffee until the end of America. I’d take my time.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Dread Myth

A woman is abducted & winter is invented:

I am six pomegranate seeds cold
this November. America lowers itself
into a dirge that goes like this: *Grab them
by the pussy. You can do anything.* I can't
stomach the news, research
kinder animals. Today I learned zebras
live in harems & felt jealous
of how they surround their weak & wounded.

A circle of stripes blends together
into a fence with no opening, protecting
their defenseless. Not that I want to share
my partner but I want women to surround me
when I am the weakling—this bloody nose
year, this migraine's dark orbs, this gut
broken open by medicine year. I make
my own chicken soup, stroke my own hair.

My love never learned how to
play nurse, though one summer

I sponge-bathed a high fever off him,
held cool rags on his neck & fed
his fire-throat popsicles. Something tender
rules me whether or not I accept it.

I can write Persephone immune to Hades'
lure, say the seeds go right through her,
stain her lips red & nothing more—but the trees
still stand naked. The sky refuses to abide
my revisions. One friend says to eliminate
gluten & dairy, one to anoint myself
in essential oils, one mails mysterious bottles
of herbs. I would like a friend who says,
*Fuck it. Cook a filet mignon in a flood
of butter, eat it half-raw, chug a cheap beer. Stay
underground. Buy thicker curtains. Nothing to see
here, really.* Dread is opening a deep cave
in me. I fear it won't spit me back whole
this time. Doctors keep proposing names
from their books for this grotto, but I'll choose
my own: Charon, sweet Charon, yes Charon.

Nothing in My Name

& still the daffodils
poke their heads up early—& it's true
what they say about daffodils: pleasure

dancing, an endpoint to the loneliness
of winter's gray & barren. Three dogs
lap at my shins as I cross the threshold

into a life that feels borrowed from a woman
who's the wifey type: leftovers in Tupperware,
a box of dresses unpacked & hung

on pink velvet hangers, a closet that stretches
from end to end of a guest room
I've colonized in his small house that's big enough

for two. No lease in my name, my mattress
& whatchamacallits stored in his garage
in case love ends & empties me

into a studio apartment, into being glad
I kept the moving boxes & extra toaster.
Even in the den of love, an exit strategy.

& here I am at thirty,
a stranger to myself, julienning carrots mediocly
because he's asked me to, because I am better

at some small tasks. This is the good life
my mother prepared me for: to be precise
with a dulling knife. I watch his face chewing

across the dinner table, brush crumbs
from his beard, pass the salt, pour
my third glass of wine. I don't know why

but some gestures repeat until
they form a kind of stillness:
this is as kiss & this is a thigh & this is—.

Sonnet with Begging

With such great speed Daisy becomes a beast
we do not know: a chihuahua's head pops
out a fence's cracks & our pitbull, still leashed,
lunges, teeth first, muscles & fight. *The cops*

a man keeps shouting, a boy, really,
in a wifebeater. *They'll put that bitch down.*
This pup, my big-spoon & vacuum, *nearly*
human, we like to joke, *the smartest hound*

around. In a selfie she licks my cheek
as I squeeze her lean trunk & don't think
of a snapped jaw, severed tongue, blood leaking
through towels. We've loved her through mud & stink,

held her through night seizures & fevers &
now we hold her *animal* in our hands.

First Aubade

Running my right hand down the chest
of a new lust for the first time astonished
by the softness of hair, the coffee brown & early greys
of it, the continued rising of lungs beneath ribs
he tells me were broken by an idea of masculinity,
a military school for wayward boys where he was
too slender, too epicene & kind to escape unscathed,
where he built a business out of cigarettes to cajole
meatheads into protecting him—this is what it means
to try at wanting. I vow to search for good
magic tucked behind healed ribs & a questionable
tribal tattoo. The chorus of dogs barking outside
the bedroom door is singing our morning song.
I am begging them to teach me the trick
of eagerness. I used to know it. I kiss his forehead
& his eyes flutter open. O, those eyelashes, so dark
& full, like a mascara commercial— I don't know
how I'll get over them. This pretty man: pretty cheekbones
& pretty thighs, pretty beard: O, to be a sculptor!

Self-Portrait, Very Ugly

Some nights I wait for him
to fall asleep, my arm wrapped around his chest:
big spoon. This is how we fit best together.
His slender body shudders as he travels
into dreams. He warned me of this the first time
I slept beside him. Some nights as he jerks
out of consciousness I steal my arm back, quietly
slink my body to the edge of the king bed
& tip-toe myself into a good sobbing place.
In the guest bathroom mirror, I examine
how big my skin has become. I spent a decade
being very thin & feeling big & now I am afraid
I'll spend a decade being very medium
& feeling big. No, I am afraid I'm already too much
whale for him. I step into the bathtub half-
clothed, t-shirt & panties, curl into the smallest
ball I can make, my too much thighs pressed
against my too much chest & sob noiselessly.
This is how I will lose him: sinking alone
in a bathtub with no water. Returning
to press my salty eyes against his back—
this is where I fit, this slope between shoulders
I burrow into, making myself a home.

On Want

Capitalism is ruining my hair but insists
I keep it long. My love likes it hanging

past my shoulder blades. So does my Dad.
He used to get angry when I cut it
to dust my chin. Mom explained once

she thought it was a sex thing,
liking long hair. Lust won't speak to me.

Buried in drugs that keep me less angry at—
it's hard to say exactly what—I want so badly
to want again. My clit, music-less,

seems to be the problem. No, the problem
is the heaviness of pills or the problem is

I have never been a steady animal, skittering
my way from job to job, state to state
love to dread, & now there is his house

& herd of hounds & Costco membership
& the loud part of me that says shave

your head, wild the night, drink the bartender
keeps waning. This emptying sky keeps me
up at night. O Moonless—O Dallas

Light Pollution—O God—curse me, bless me
leave me, end me. I don't care what you do

but hurry. I'm a liar. If nobody strokes my hair
I werewolf. I devour the hours & forget all
but the scraps of cloth still stuck in my teeth.

Tapping Therapy

I Google the word *muumuu* & am very sorry
my life has come to this
desire for shapelessness. I am a blob
of pain in the recliner this summer
my hip on fire, pleading for a river
of opiates. & it gets worse:
it would not be wrong to call today's sack dress
a muumuu. The doctor says
to ice my ass six times a day until
the bursitis calms. Carol, my sweet
psychologist friend, Skypes from Oregon
to talk about pain, about bad stories
I've stored in my hip too long. She tells me
to tap my face & chest & say
I can love myself with the pain, with the stories.
& I sob for my uncle's bad hip, his never
enough opiates or alcohol, embalmed middle-aged
corpse, my own young wildness—the overdose
paramedics
who dropped my body
like heavy groceries
down a steep stairwell
& gave me a new crooked
gait. She says I have wound shame
into a small ball
& stored it in my hip for years.
& she is right.
& my sobbing is right, but I don't know
if the muumuu is right. If it's a form
of acceptance
or quitting. My love comes home early from a party
& asks what I am doing
why I am crying
& touching my face. I say I'm busy
doing a weird thing
with Carol. He wouldn't understand her
methods, would want something more scientific
than this beautiful woman
instructing me
to tap my face
& let the old stories close.

All the Heavens Were a Bell

Last summer pain took a fifth of my body
weight, seared a no in my stomach
with its endless please ibuprofen please
sumatriptan I would do anything please
to not revolve around this igneous planet's
swelling gravity closing my books, pulling
me into bed, shutting off my lights.
Tornadoes reopened pain's red mouth
in my brain this week—it's natural,
my neurologist says, for weather to do this
to you. In olden days, naturally I would have died
young. Always a sickly child,
I wouldn't have lived to bear this lonely
eruption. At least you'll have a good excuse
for Botox, a friend says, & I am supposed
to laugh on cue because I am a woman
with smooth skin covering the blurring
throb of this God who rules my days,
says today will be your day of rest—
& so I take my Sabbath
how it is given to me: like lava
has captured me in a quiet, daily
ritual. I stay frozen at the kitchen table
head in hands, coffee cup half full.

Another Poem About Pain

Doctors, YouTube yoga instructors, etc.
tell me not to do things that hurt, so

I beg a man to scatter two bags of ice across
my bed, so I can wiggle my arms & legs

& make a numb angel. I want to feel
sexy, again, Google *sex positions*

for hip injuries. They say not to
do things that hurt, so I settle

on a blowjob & feel useful.
This is the new trying:

lay my body down on a bed
for seven days & seven nights

& expect no miracles, only
the steady throb of continuing.

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FOR REVIEW

Thirst

I. Song

Lips to hips, I must be dreaming
to take, in my mouth, his wrinkled fruit
& think this love could be redeeming.

If I take off my clothes in a grand routine,
trim the hedges & tidy the roost,
if I let lips brush hips, can I keep this dream:

thigh's bright sky, want's salty creaming,
his pleasure bounty surging my throat
in a carnal love that eschews redeeming.

At the edge of the body's gleaming
rough feet clutch dirt like dandelion roots.
Yes lips, yes hips, I can't stop dreaming

of O body! O thicket! O please! O sunbeam!
I'll wear his t-shirt like an armored suit,
enlist in a life worth love redeeming

its stretchmarks & crooked leaning. Tell me
is the body more boobytrap or parachute?
With my lips to his hips, is it just dreaming
to think love could be redeeming?

II. *Ghost*

Lips

take his wrinkled fruit
this could

take off my clothes
trim tidy
lips hips keep

his want salty
surging my throat
his carnal

rough feet the body's
dirt
lips hips I can't stop

body please
his t-shirt like armor
a life redeeming

stretchmarks crooked leaning
the body boobytrap
lips his hips

Socratic Method

How much lavender can your dusk hold?
Do you even have dusk? Or lavender?
What about holding? I used to
when I lived far from here. My family

lives with a different sky. Do you
have family? I don't know
how to go on when the sky is like this:
endless Texas bright. Nothing

wants to live here. The grass burned
dead. No rain until the firmament
cracks open. No rain until floods
& lightning: a dark green fear spreading

across the horizon. What kind of clouds
do you have? Do any of them mean
hold close the ones you love in a walk-in closet?
Sometimes it can be good to be afraid

of the weather because it means huddling
together. Sometimes closeness is a kind
of prayer. Do you have prayer?
Do you need to ask favors of the invisible?

I think I'd like to see you & know
if you are kind. My kind is sometimes cruel.
Once, my brother held a pillow
over our brother's face because he cried

too constantly in the night. Because
there was too much closeness,
a shared bedroom because there was
poverty. How does your kind

decide who gets to eat & who gets
to be eaten? Do you eat? Sometimes
my past eats my hunger at dinner.
I sit across a table from a handsome man

& my father says I shouldn't eat
anything but salad, no dressing, grabs
a handful of fat on my stomach
& warns it will only get bigger.

How often do you speak to your past?
I'd like to imagine a relationship
where I close my eyes & there is no voice
repeating: *Someone ought to just put you out*

of your misery. If you have a place where
memory is a quiet blanket will you
please swoop down from the clouds
& swaddle me new in your world?

But not too long. My love once drove me
to the top of a mountain so I would trust
him while feeling terrified. Or he drove me
so I could see how far the earth stretches.

Maybe he thought I'd like to look down
the great green slope licking the ground.
Does your kind have love? It scared me
how the roads swirled up the mountain,

how there was no rail & I could see
this life, telling him which shirt goes
with his jacket & kissing his bald head,
ending without my consent. I'm sorry

I can't explain why we keep doing it:
pull a body into a body & say this
is the best we can do as humans.
But it's true. It's true every time.

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Epithalamion

In dreams the wedding is disorganized
& this is the problem:
nobody can find the woman in charge

of catering, a shortage of vegetarian entrees
forks, gaiety. The cake, all wrong, gaudy
metallic roses, none of the promised

chocolate beneath the icing's bling.
My dress is worse off: too poofy
bedazzled. The groomsmen, bare-butted.

In dreams, a wedding. No starving bear
of a job market, no freezes on partner hires.
In dreams we're the kind of people

who can agree to futures with joint
bank accounts & matching aprons
or underpants, matching permanent

addresses. A Showcase Showdown
I've shopped 'til I dropped, decorated
a house from ceiling fan to doormat

in dreams. In this dream the failed death
six years ago knocks on the door
& says, *Sorry lady, wrong house.*

Sorry I was looking for someone else.
In this dream nobody I love, not you
& not M, finds a body without

its tenant, a broken lease of sorts
with whoever tends the after
life. In this dream no drown song

hovering, no dogs barking at my body's
lousy smell-poem: all soap & dry
& no human salt-musk. In this dream

I can promise to keep a still house
can guarantee there's no banshee
coming for dinner. There are new endings

endings I haven't already tried on
& worn around the hospital wishing for someone
to bring me clean clothes. Here is my hand

my gallons of blood that chose to keep rushing me
into today. I almost missed this:
your breath on my neck. I'll take it. *I do, I do.*

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Notes

1. "This Book Is Your Book" is an erasure of the introduction to *The Modern Family Cook Book* by Meta Given (1961 edition).
2. "The Poem as Bougie Beauty Products" is after "The Poem as Mask" by Muriel Rukeyser.
3. "Elegy for Lavinia" is loosely based on Zbigniew Herbert's "Elegy for Fortinbras"
4. "On Trying to Relearn Spanish for a Doctoral Requirement" quotes from "Agua Sexual" by Pablo Neruda. Here's a translation published in *POETRY* (June 1960): "It is merely a gasp, damper than weeping, / a liquid, a sweat, an oil without a name."
5. "Some Things We Carried" is after Tim O'Brien.
6. "Drunk Bitch Tries Her Hand at Recovery" is after "Drunks" by Jack McCarthy.
7. The title "Under His Eye" references *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.
8. "I Believe ~~At~~ Freaks Will Save Us" borrows a line from Meredith Brooks' late nineties hit, "Bitch."
9. "Souvenirs of the Twenty-First Century" has a line that is an homage to Theodore Roethke's "The Waking." The poem is after "Souvenirs of the Twentieth Century" by Carlos Drummond de Andrade
10. "Self-Portrait, Very Ugly" is after Frida Kahlo's painting with the same title.
11. "On Want" contains an homage to "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas.
12. "All the Heavens Were a Bell" borrows its title from a line in Emily Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain."