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Spring 2018

### Columbia Poetry Review

Columbia College Chicago

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COLUMBIA



PO  
ET  
RY

REVIEW

no. 31

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Spring 2018

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

*Columbia Poetry Review* is published in the spring of each year by the English and Creative Writing Department, Columbia College Chicago, 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60605.

#### SUBMISSIONS

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# Swedish Death Cleaning

I remember when I was always the youngest  
at the party—or close to the youngest—  
as I've always liked people a bit older than myself

they seemed wiser and more serious  
I was always serious—even as a kid—  
maybe because I was so often close to death (asthma)

I liked reading better than playing outside  
and that reading led me to the big questions early—  
what will happen after we die

was there really nothingness  
before we were born  
and of course what is our purpose—

those questions seem small to me now  
that I am always the oldest one at the party  
or almost the oldest—and I find myself thinking *wow*

*you are so fill-in-the-blank for your age*  
the young seem even older and more serious  
than my younger self

I vacillate from cluelessness to wisdom  
sometimes what I utter sounds trite  
though I've pondered it long and hard in my brain

some of my friends are dying which reminds me  
of when I was young  
we lost so many to AIDS

a few years ago a DJ said to me *don't worry*  
*you are going to make it into the triple digits*  
he was young and I was dancing with the young

I'd made a joke about my stiff hips  
but I felt a strange survivor's guilt  
living so far into my 50s

then immediately thought of all the diseases  
I might get soon  
all the prescriptions I might have to fill

I kept dancing trying to block out my age  
and maybe that is the problem with parties—  
festive ones and political parties too—

we are expected to follow a script or try  
to outsmart each other but what is the point  
don't get me wrong I believe in change—

transformation even—but it's not going to happen  
at a party or in a voting booth at this point  
maybe it will happen at rallies

though an American revolution sounds a lot  
like a Nike revolution  
all of our language tainted by market research

I almost went into advertising when I was young  
but I knew I wanted to use my gifts for truth—  
not manipulation—which sounds

so lofty and snobby now though I still believe it  
I might have been a rich prick like Don Draper  
or a sad-sack like Peggy

my midlife crisis might have been more dramatic  
if I'd hated my job—I've never hated poetry  
when I was young or now that I'm old—

I hope you feel complete after reading this poem  
that any need you have is taken care of by a good cry  
there is something called a “death cleaning” in Sweden

that explains getting rid of all your crap as you age—  
Margareta Magnusson wrote a whole book about it—  
so your loved ones don't have to simultaneously deal

with your clutter and your funeral arrangements  
you don't have to wait to turn your back  
on consumerism—you can start young

and just not accumulate a bunch of junk in the first place  
it all goes so fast—even the slow, awful days  
are gone in a blink—honestly all you need

is one little treasure—maybe a sand dollar  
or Milagros or a family picture—and something  
snazzy (used OK) to wear to your next party

## Coping Mechanism

Concerning, isn't it,  
how the body's only strategy  
for dealing with unrelenting anxiety  
is to eat a bag of chips.  
My body, to be specific.  
Salt and vinegar chips.  
I read that food scientists  
gave up on engineering  
drought-resistant crops  
and instead are recalibrating  
the melting point of cheese  
because who doesn't need  
a momentary comfort  
a moment sooner. Last night,  
I slid a tray of cookies into the oven  
while you licked a dough-covered spoon  
and a Russian submarine  
sat thirty miles off the coast.  
It was gone in the morning.  
News reports were unable to confirm  
why it'd been there to begin with.



# Nesting

I sleep squided  
                   by burning limbs  
 so many alive things

nestle into me                   as home.

I forget too often  
           the feel of noskin           the lackof

I am good to forget.

At night I wake  
 drowning in burn

the furnace chewing the egg of my neck

little seaweed hairs  
                                   crying in his breath.

I remind “this is not a sunsquare”

“this is not Molech.”

Sleep finds me           slow

settles into my bones  
                   like a rabbit, shaking.

I tell her the wolf has been cut out

I tell her there are no more sunsquares  
no more burgundy carpets bleached pink.

“We had them removed,” I remind her  
“they can’t be removed,” she reminds me.

# like Cronos, the Devouring Father

his mouth open as heaven  
wet kisses on the door

I hate this part  
the gate spread wide  
no clouds just desert  
just sand and dry places  
his sun licks the skin off  
cattongues the folds in my arms

a hexagon hanging in the wall  
or holes in heart-shaped shutters  
I learn to sleep in the patches of tv light  
flickering through my closed lids  
leaving violets stamped in the eye  
sound turned soft  
that low purr of same  
like a shield or ward on the door  
like garlic to stop the draining

## Pruning the Garden

There it is  
falling between  
your legs and  
open nightgown  
that red brained mucus  
letting go slow  
in the soft glow  
of early morning,  
a splash over  
the tile and your  
naked feet  
signaling no,  
not this month,  
a reminder that you  
are a single vessel  
and marred hollowness  
unable to recreate  
like the peonies  
that ruffle in blush  
over the duplex-garden  
with small velvet furls  
of fertile froth,  
no, not this month  
will the roses  
open their tight  
clasp of innards  
to reveal the width  
of their perfume,  
that sweet newness  
moments before  
the darkest red  
pushes herself  
toward daybreak,  
no, not this month

will your belly  
stretch with seed  
toward the horizon  
as a round distillation  
of everything  
that can be written.

## from Fortune

Crown a pond of white lily. Watch a white sun anchor a city of gas & chemical air. Porter west, packing a can of soup & a chemical shell. Dodge a chemical shell & a dry supply of arms. Watch a city sealed of a fine ideal, allied of great aviation & shipbuilding, mirror lone times & chance times. Fine times & optical times. Times of pure supply & times of basic cable. Basic drug. Fuller & foremost crown of a drug. Crown a drug. Pet a point of paper. Point of powder & national metals.

Chance, foremost quantum chance, can supply a lone walker of energy, wheeling south, south of a brush of cliffs. A chance city south of a river, atlas of fortune & equity, can pipe news & holdings. A walker, can pet a bird of white crown. A white crown bird, milling south, can watch of hill & lumber, can watch & watch a silver brush of hill, a pure brown cannon of diamond & trucks wheeling copper. A home can brush silver & pure white, can radio a quantum brown glass. A can of soup can cement a fortune, crucible of chance works & fortune.

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Author's Note: Each poem has been assembled using only language from the names of companies found in the inaugural *Fortune* 500 from 1955.

# Notes from Linda, my camp counselor at the Logan Square YMCA

*summer, 1998*

[watching Grease]

you see that? you see how he lied and told his boys all this stuff that didn't happen? men are dogs.

[when some kids from the block come to the Y with a baby pitbull]

I might need to take that dog home with me. they were feeding it rice and beans at home. can you believe that? that is so ghetto.

[on Betty Boop]

I have Betty Boop everything, on my car. Betty Boop hanging in the rearview, Betty Boop sticker on the bumper. I love her. Betty Boop was originally for adults. she's very sexy.

[regarding babies and the choice of whether to have them]

me and my husband were talking about having a baby but I got scared. I started taking the pill again and I didn't tell him.

[on financial autonomy]

a woman should always have her own money. I have my own bank account. my husband doesn't know about it. I got my own money in there. cause you never know.



# Jungle man

Hear you  
screaming  
lumber,  
boy

the bark  
pokes  
from your  
adam's apple.

it makes  
people weak  
with the thought  
of you  
carving

into the world  
with it,

swimming  
through law  
and cutting  
the earth open,

the edges  
blue-  
sodden,  
ridden down

like the inner  
eye  
of a lynx.

She sits  
perched  
with claw,  
around  
the bend  
of the woods,

like you,  
your body  
is shined

in the moon-  
light,  
curved around  
a tree stump,

wild flesh  
on the ground.

Your limbs,  
they call to them-  
selves.

# sinkhole

jeff bush, age thirty-seven,  
was lying in bed when a sinkhole opened up  
beneath his home.

the victim's brother,  
jeremy bush, woke up to the screams  
jeff made when the floor caved in  
the scraping screeches the bedposts  
made as they slid down the walls.  
his first interview with the press was all howling.  
the second was three minutes worth of  
footage of him with hands pressed against  
his ears, gripping his head so hard  
he was turning red. but later, he met some  
cameras outside his rent-controlled apartment.  
his face was still red, but his words were cold:  
they could've tried harder, he said,  
to rescue my brother—i tried jumping  
in that hole after him, all they did was  
take some goddamn videos. i still hear the  
echoes in the house after he went under. he  
said my name, did ya know that? i still  
hear him. and the crunching of the floors  
floors breaking like bone beneath fist. i  
still feel them shifting. i walk down the  
street and i feel like i'm stepping on sand.  
if the earth can open up and swallow  
a whole room, just because it wants to,  
just 'cause it's been dormant so long,  
what will it do when it's fed up and  
pissed off from me walkin' all over it  
all the time? it'll break me, eat me whole.  
i'm afraid to walk outside. i'm afraid  
to go to sleep. i'm afraid of the remains  
of my brother that could come crawling up

into my ears while i lie in bed. i can't close  
my eyes without seeing the house's skeleton sticking  
up out of the ground. i can't turn on the tv  
without seeing his face. my face. that house.  
that hole. that bone. those splinters.

one

of the contractor's videos showed  
that the sinkhole had grown to the point  
that it swallowed my brother completely.  
bed and all, straight down to its gut.  
any bigger, the contractor said, and  
it would've gotten me too. we'd both be dirt.  
lucky, he said. jeremy, you're real lucky. but  
jeff's body was never recovered.  
i'm still scared of sidewalks. i haven't  
seen the body. haven't seen the house. nothing  
above this earth is lucky. everything gets  
sucked away.

the face of channel ten news shuffles her papers,  
turns it over to the blonde for the weather.  
i hit pause. hit rewind. this will be the  
tenth time i've watched the news bulletin  
the tenth time i've sat motionless  
in front of a tv screen,  
save for shivers down my spine, fingernails  
down my bones like a chalkboard,  
scraping and howling under my skin.  
the tenth time i stop blinking for  
three minutes and forty-eight seconds,  
feel the brain behind my eyes begin  
to bruise from the weight of watching.  
'cause i can't stop watching. because jeremy's right:

there are sinkholes everywhere. there  
need to be memorials for what  
gets pulled away.

i want a memorial for all the organs in my  
body that were wrecked when a  
sinkhole opened up beneath them. i  
want a memorial for every shaky step  
on every unsure sidewalk. i want a memorial  
for the brother in my ribcage,  
the brother who sucked in splintered bones,  
the one who woke to the sounds of  
screeches and screams  
the one who can't stop  
                    hearing.

## Jenn

she who  
sticks a finger in her lover's ass lights a fresh star in his constellation  
digs into a thigh rips a hex of 2 x 4s from an abandoned cabin  
bites a lower lip 'til it bleeds goes ice fishing on the frozen Minnetonka  
ties her lover's legs together with his own belt learns the length of all lines  
doggy-styles in a patch of budding catalpa has a totem suntanned on her back  
puts her feet in his mouth sends fresh roots down the ancient well  
smiles like a hammer speaks with a nail  
builds a house with his bones invites him in

# The Faithful

The light of a shiny disappointment  
the consequences  
and light  
of a stellar surprise ending  
in a world, a drive-in, a rain cloud  
and the seemingly real clock  
of everyone's stares—  
the shiny light of that.

## Say It with Flowers

It was the beginning of an ending  
we all had our stories to tell  
what with the layoffs  
and school closings  
someone was reading  
the fine print  
someone had gone fishing  
a storm was brewing  
so loud you could feel it  
in your sinews or synapses  
as loud as a storm could be.



# Bare Neck of the Woods

My ma

said agony

said hurt

said she'd be

damned

if pain

ain't the one

thing all folk

say's true

says all folk bow

when pain

huck

her elbow

across they neck

all folk

kneel

when pain

bite

dog-sure

at the belly

of old knees  
when pain  
rolls through  
this town  
even the trees  
burst  
at the seams  
she said.

# There's still one story

I don't know what to do with:  
the little girl in the cage

in the kitchen,

her parents keeping her there  
like a dog while the other

kids played and how

a younger brother left,  
crawled out the window

and got to the police.

It's not the cruelty,  
the shattering we're all

on the verge of,

but it's the girl  
who when the police

took her picture

took her hand  
and fixed her hair

for the camera.

# Blanket

Does it matter to you that it's snowing  
in West Virginia and people keep saying the word *blanket*?

Over the cars: a blanket and the streets are blank-  
eted and the schools are closing under blankets of wet snow.

I'm sitting under a blanket missing every place I've lived—  
Pittsburgh's edges, Boston's proper sidewalks, the cold

shoulders and steel jaws of New York.  
Do you remember our last walk?

The leaves were sticking to the ground, the park  
was orange and oddly warm and people

were laid out on blankets, little islands, little  
worlds of what they loved, wanted to love

or no longer loved, but were trying,  
for whatever reason, to hold onto.

## Eight Suicides

Guitar player Aaron Smith, 48, was found dead as a result of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Smith's highly anticipated new album is scheduled for release this fall. Police believe novelist Aaron Smith dropped a hairdryer into the bathtub of his Upper West Side apartment intending to end his life. The body of lawyer Aaron Smith was discovered at the Econo Lodge in Toledo, Ohio. After failing to attend several meetings, Smith's colleagues became concerned. Sources say he hanged himself. The coroner ruled Aaron Smith's death a suicide from an overdose of sleeping pills. He was 29 and a second-year student in Vanderbilt's MBA Program. Police arrived at the home of Senator Aaron Smith to find him unconscious and not breathing. The neighbors alerted police to a car running in the garage. Attempts to revive him failed. Aaron Smith of Milwaukee, Wisconsin took his own life at his parents' home in Clarksburg, West Virginia. He had recently separated from his wife. Aaron Smith, 57, jumped from the top floor of the Allegheny Power building in downtown Pittsburgh. Colleagues said he seemed "so happy and full of life." The body of professor Aaron Smith was found yesterday floating in the Charles River. Dr. Smith, who had a history of depression, went missing last week. Police do not suspect foul play.

## “Overseas Vietnamese”

A sun rose on the silver box her private  
memento that photo and the island  
with a leatherette clasp purse

*You'll rub each other like needles*  
said her grandfather with his  
too many books  
for a farmer

but what  
about the aborted ‘babies’  
Of course  
their souls fly to help us in counsel

I have feet but they can't take me  
far put a thousand dollars in my  
mouth (how)

Can cauterize the memory

But what  
happens when luck happens

//// sniper stray shot hits the water tank  
and not the 2 year old you

or in the other story  
(the truer story?)  
the pregnant belly and in utero you

your same bullet story  
and water tank  
story with water spouting out



I want to say spit-polish them  
and they polish  
an embroidered flower or  
you become those skull holes      the nose is when you  
become skull      if you do

(you might burn and burn)

Venus tethered  
to slender fingernail moon meaning new  
she will die ordinary      rehearse the story

I makes myself  
I makes myself      cry a memory ghost-  
dream      but what if I can run faster than cars on  
a highway without moving my feet at all

and visit the massacre sniper tower (that one)

Me ambled and ample belly  
wrapped in a scrunchie for the 90s

we be      we  
transcend history



# Mud Matrix

Drown vs flood  
     Silt and mud  
 Burned burrowing creature  
 with strong rodent teeth

Mekong moon story  
     we write water on water  
 Write country  
     Float on flat boats  
     notice the river moon   reflective  
 and her voice there

She dyes her hair with plant matter  
     Old woman now   shrugged in a high collar

I once made silk flowers  
     as a silk flower maker  
 folds allure   folds of silk along a slender  
 branch under glass

mother + fish  
     child + mother

what electric ribbon of water  
 re-  
     becomes there                      triangle delta  
     my mouth fishlike and moving  
     Moving change mouth  
 as the nine dragons rain more

I don't recognize  
 you anymore

Grateful is the name of the passport  
     medicine thin              It comes with a picture

a wormed  
belly and fevered knees  
It comes with a scratchy  
please of refugee

Ching ching me a big flag pole

please you with my gratitude  
we the  
expected happy thankful pleasing

Cone hat memory  
certainty of the poor  
hung in a baby hammock and swung

Mooring owls brought to you  
by the dead  
who wears the gem twist ring and bangles

(several changes of water rinse rice  
forever chopstick poke me in my squint eye)

Mother gone to mud  
How they hook you

These they hook  
and boil a perfect bird

She owls as if life  
Can eat a tooth or other crumbles  
bird beak tooth  
Eat a heart almond  
under a brown mother

no it's flies in your eyes

# Sing Ding (Ghostly)

Where is she buried the first Hoa  
 gone to the ground (buried  
     in Mekong mud)  
 dead 57 years   drowned in lung matter

The first Hoa had not medicine  
 I got the name   I gets it   got it  
 (the medicine)

    and got the golden visa  
     and the ash hair  
 and breathings  
 lashings to a raft life  
 lashed to life   the blonde  
     joking of  
     pull eyes

    Mother swims from the nest  
 pushes sand first   scrapes flat flipper feet  
 \\We come from egg and make it

    are the lived-loved thing

cracked leather egg from dragon-fairy mating  
 left warm in warm sand

    She  
 buried the nest us   as nest   so we could unbury  
 gulp sand  
     Few kin in the sand  
     we seek under  
 beached beach   moon beach   the moon-water beach

This isn't doing anything like redemption  
Do-dad Mountain Dragon unsuffering  
did slither to seaways

Who are you who talk tits and knee shame

Sing ding-dong songs at me Boys

I called it un-sufferable said  
I'll meet her in heaven where the perfume is

I say I'll meet you  
there Hoa of the ghost name

# Hang Nail

Moon as fingernail  
sliver

almost a no-moon  
meaning “new” when it’s none

or new moon in the constellation  
Libra        scales weighing what

and a single star pendent hangs

Venus later gone  
with the sun

## Rat King

I learned  
to lean into the pain.  
My fuckbuddy calls me up one day  
and tells me another (mutual) fuckbuddy  
has died of a sudden aneurysm in his bathtub.  
I go to a memorial attended mostly by older gay men,  
alone, because nobody in my family knew  
about this relationship.  
Alone, I lost my handjob virginity in a holiday store  
full of fancy Santas.  
Alone, I was on my knees in a shed considering how  
the squares of moonlight streaming in  
from the tiny inner window  
illuminated a poz sign on my partner's jacket.  
Cream-filled cakes in my dormitory bed  
as I wait to see if a strip turns blue, a pregnant pause.  
Using humor as a Bedazzler to sequin wounds closed,  
and other methods used by kings, queens,  
and backwoods royalty.  
Heavy is the head that wears a crown of branches.  
A hypothetical:  
If you present a group of mice with cherry blossoms  
and electrocute them,  
systemically,  
their offspring will recoil at the scent of cherry blossoms  
for generations.  
Equating passion with shock.  
Inherited trauma with no next of kin.  
Sometimes it's hard not to feel like entangled vermin,  
our wormy tails knotted with the world's scum.  
A nest that scurries from the sun.  
A collective bad omen.  
A bundle of sticks  
fit for kindling.

# Elegy with Roethke and Clichés

*I, with no rights in this matter, etc.* Fewer: part-Timer assigned her office. Her calendar opened at August (it's Nearly December), clock stopped at 10:17, morning, evening, meaningless, and

Me, wanting to weep over Austen and a song about Kerouac (*what a saint they've made you just like Mary Down in Mexico on All Souls' Day*). Books filled with

Dead woman's handwriting. Books that her husband, still beneath lintels, Won't (can't) take away himself. On her shelves let dust Of the firebringing Santa Anas abide as sunlight slides to

Christmas, another year's end. *Where are my lexicon stones?* That's What it came down to, at the end. (She meant "Bricks," looking from her deathbed into the yard.) Why repeat

These things? For comfort? Accuracy? Peppertrees sag with useless fruit And wan juncos, even the 605 Freeway metastasizes under its Earthquake-retrofitted underpasses: Sure enough, life goes on. Today, or

This, another day: sand snow-blue, green sea tumbling straw And scored lemons in killed surf, a seabell's aphasic clang, And Catalina a supposition, like free will or the afterlife,

Placed where it should be, effaced at a pale horizon. Inland, somewhere, the flag of the Republic of California offers To a void sky, brainpan-gray, its one red star.

*in memoriam K.B.*

## Bull & Lion

the lion promised to be gentle. but. lion.  
the bull promised to speak truth. but. bull.  
so they sit on the bridge and tell stories.  
once I knocked off a mannequin factory.  
I convinced a troop of actors I was half  
rhinoceros. later lion scratches bull  
for no good reason and bull steps hard  
on lion's paw. they are falling in love.  
everyone knows this is about people.  
gods. something is tearing someone apart.  
still we sit on a bridge. the bridge was built  
before our pain. the earth was cut open  
before the bridge. a mountain wept for the rift  
and the weep left for the sea. now lion  
and bull are at war. now we're kissing.



# The Wedding Vow

Everyone showed up. The music was on, the church bright.  
The day was past. The pair said what they had to say.  
A dog barked. Their car blew its engine.  
They cranked down windows. As they were about to walk out  
the stars lit all the faces, faces hanging  
on the night and they screamed.

# People Talking

This morning I awoke  
to the sound of people talking.  
I got dressed,  
buttoned my shirt  
to the top. People  
still talking.

## “All You Need is Love”

plays faintly on a neighbor’s radio. This makes her think of a boy she once loved who sang snippets of Beatles’ songs in his sleep. Or sometimes a line from Creedence Clearwater Revival, his face innocent while sleep-singing. Not that he or she were as far from childhood back then as they liked to pretend. He had a nice, clear tenor. Night after night she’d drive straight to his place from the hospital. She’d sprint up the stairs and let herself into his tiny apartment, the never-made bed at its center. No matter how late, he’d be awake, smoking pot, playing records. Decades and many relationships later, she gets into bed, plugs earbuds into her head. The dog at her feet is making a nest, pawing the bedspread into a rosette. The other dog curls up on the rug. She taps a podcast of an astronomy class. Its promise: *to make sense of the universe and your place within it*, in lectures with titles like *A Tour of the Cosmos*, *The Dark Side of Matter* and *Catastrophic Collisions*. This last title, she thinks, describes her past sexual adventures, including with the music-obsessed redhead she’s remembering. Blessedly, he never asked questions when her brother got sick. The redhead has a wife and daughter now. He runs a record company that doesn’t make records anymore. They’re retro technology. Her young, retro-self thought sex could cure everything. Sex with the redhead did make her feel less dread-drenched and stricken. Did sex erase the pervasive sensation that her brain had been looted from an ancient grave? No. That hasn’t changed, though she’s sixty, which seems ridiculous. Her past feels like fiction. Some days she feels ageless. Other days, she’s the ten-year-old boy who always fidgeted within her,

or the girl to whom trees and insects still send coded messages.  
Other animals abide in her too, plus gamma ray bursts and  
distant eclipses. *Yeah, yeah*, thinks the dog on the floor sleepily.  
*She contains all that. So do we. We're big bang afterglow. Dusted  
with  
particles of Pluto and Mars, we gleam with the intrinsic  
brilliance of stars.*

# Happy Hour

*Quid datur a divis felici optatius hora?  
 What is there given by the gods more desirable  
 than a happy hour?* —Catullus

Sacred days and scathing days.  
 Blown off course grieving  
 a dead friend so keenly  
 it pangs the roots of the teeth.  
 Noon. A day moon floats,  
 grey eminence with  
 a bad complexion,  
 hung like a piñata  
 above this hummingbird  
 who feints and whirs  
 at trumpet flowers.  
 One wants to touch  
 the bird so gently,  
 feel its speedy little heartbeats,  
 but can one ever be that gentle?  
 Everything feels out of reach.  
 One blast of air from  
 the glassblower's lungs  
 hovers inside the vase  
 he's shaping. How unchastely  
 grateful, how shaken by  
 life-thirst and yearning  
 this world has made me

## After Rosmarie Waldrop

To explore nature under the rainbow, I left my bag on the chair and stepped outside, because language is stuffed with personal effects and probably won't be stolen. Anyway, coffee should steam freely in the air. Coffee can't squeegee the whole forehead, face and forearms where droplets carried inside as a sheen already plunged. You think you see, but are only drying the window with your eyes. The rainbow was heavy enough to stand balancing over the street. I'd expected parts, bifurcated by planes, to paint my cheek. But everyone massing under the rainbow started to talk, philosophy spattered faces like foundation, and we said how the globe is rung. When there is resonance, are you more likely to gain muscle? I watched the rainbow attract shreds of cloud till it was only a purple rain in my mind. In the same way, the wetted flag raps its pole against the wind, rocking to a near loss of ballad. That flags can suggest a god of song when there is none.

# To My Birth Mother

I guess I've liked you where you weren't.  
Not a void, not a hole—a pocket of possibilities.

At 43—twice your age when you pushed us out and away?—  
I wonder: Have you been searching? Driving quiet suburbs,  
eyeballing split-levels like the one where we were raised?  
Pausing every time someone mentions twins. How many  
insomniac nights spent talking to us in your head?  
Using the names you would have chosen.

You might be dead. Indifferent. You might not want to hear  
at all from us—a mistake, a reminder of other mistakes.  
I wouldn't take it personally. Soccer Mom, Hippie,  
Republican, Trailer Park Princess—I don't care who you are.

I just want to settle my cosmic debt. Say thanks.  
The same way I would any stranger on the street  
kind enough to point me in the right direction.

# poem in which i'm butch as fuck

i can sweat. i can go to the gym & lift & leave  
the bench behind me fucking soaked. i can walk

to the showers afterward without a towel  
around my waist because i believe

in my penis & my penis believes  
in me. i can shave in the locker room

mirror. i can shave in the comfort of my own  
goddamn home. i can do it anywhere but i don't do it

often because my beard makes me look like a dad  
& i'm into it. because i could be a dad

if i wanted to. because i could get it up  
for a woman & i could impregnate her

if i wanted to. i know my swimmers swim  
& they swim wherever they want, just like me, yes,

i can take my body any place i want & not give  
a damn about it. i can walk down dark alleyways & into

strange bars & i can beat the shit out of  
anyone who tells me to get out. i can

drink a fifth of liquor in one sitting & i can grill you  
any kind of meat. i can change a headlight with

my own two man's hands. i could build  
a treehouse for you if you wanted me to, if

i wanted to, & i could tear that treehouse down.



# harvest

i am giving my body  
away again, watching  
as the man beneath me  
swallows part of it  
& gags, pulls it deeper  
& gags again. when

he runs out of air, he lifts  
my lap from his face  
& grins, lips slick with spit  
& mucus & whatever  
rose briefly to his throat  
before retreating. then

he is at it again & the room  
is quiet, not even the sound  
of breath audible: only  
his esophagus tensing  
& untensing, squeezing  
tightly around me. &

through the window,  
the sound of the garden  
that is always there: the bees  
doing that sweet thing  
they do, the buzz of lavender  
becoming honey.

## from golden infection

a capitalist house is a cathartic house, a house that can finally call itself free. a house that can call itself a house again after havoc. away from the house, on vacation for instance, one can dream. i had a dream about a little dog who had my hand in its mouth and his teeth looked like the grill of a car inside i could see an engine fire growing hot. i didn't want to move my hand out of fear of making it worse. the dog was a symbol of night. the dogs that i know are wild and don't live in houses. in my dreams i am usually very much inside or very much outside, all the dreams i can remember right now. i don't like dogs, is a part of a story i sometimes tell, it's not entirely true, but dogs are the animals that are the least free. when i dream of dogs who have locked a part of my body in their trembling, angry jaws, i suspect that dog is a part of me.

i had the dog bite dream again—a tiny dog hanging by its jaws off my hand. it's more complicated than capitalism. my students are already sick of me talking about it and the semester just started. running through the rain felt immensely good on my body. i looked up to see the sun in the sky and closed my eyes at the same time. what does your sentence look like? i asked them. we've come to the conclusion that people are dumb and evil and we're depressed. maybe that's why it's not going so well. we only have fifty years left, according to some estimates but you don't have to teach it this way i hear myself say, you could teach it this other way

## santa cruz at night

there's a clam in my hand  
let's say this is the pacific  
spike'd seagull brow  
in the sand boy  
i saw you on the shore  
wetsuit among seals  
bobbing like life was  
something of a whack-a-mole  
i get you in the trembling  
sand of this highlighted  
midnight    one night    maybe 2 a.m.  
i know i was alluring upon  
the sand, the crabs gathering  
at my feet you said: okay let's  
go in and i said:    wait one moment  
i think this is  
a slow shot of  
who we are    me always  
                  waiting behind

# Papa Is Told His Father Died

That same day I was told  
to go home after lunch. I didn't  
think much of it—just packed  
my stuff and left.

I walked back with Harold.  
He headed towards the house, while  
I went straight to the shed  
to check on the pigeons.

I was feeding them  
when Larry came in.  
His face was pale—  
blemished from hours  
of crying.

When I got in the house,  
it was silent. Everyone was crowded  
around in the living room,  
staring at the floor—their bodies  
all hunched over.

In the middle sat  
Grandma and Aunt Hazel;  
my mama in between.  
She was one of the few  
not crying.

“Your daddy's dead,”  
she said firmly.

Rheumatic fever had finally taken  
his heart. He collapsed  
while moving grain  
at the feed store.

## A Brief History of Chicago

*Hallelujah!*— how the story starts. Jackie HaseIrig on the radio on Sunday morning, some South Side Chicagoans shooting down Halsted, their firstborn baby boy in tow backseat sporting a nice designer sweater, his hairline tightened to perfection, they, all ready to catch the late A.M. service in a house of worship inside the hollowed shell of an old grocery store, next to another converted house of worship, next to several houses of war or hardship, and those houses, blocks, neighborhoods, sometimes, next to nothing of note at all— just some vacant lot,

blades of grass stabbing through the pavement with their steely conviction to not be killed off so easily; the boy is in *The Wild*, after all: a moniker of these streets, waxed poetic on wax and such, all so folks heed. He's a visitor here, but a frequent one:

always met with                      well-lotioned hands, and  
 this is a valid interpretation of a cold place, or the way all the

matriarchs are sewn together in mannerism and in fragrance, or how the men steady his body in the air, hold it like a tenor's harmony. Other sources of heat: a hook-up for free Air Jordans; sweet potato pie as a gift for after service; a crisp five-dollar bill folded and tucked in the boy's front pocket as he passes his wet tongue through the cavity where a tooth used to be.

*I could just eat you up*, she says, the church crown on her head tilted, veiling her eyes as she goes in to kiss his cheek. And her words, while sweet, can be a valid interpretation of a cold place, its mantra given means via teeth and appetite and the authority of size over him, as if he is prey, or pastry, gingerbread-bodied: soft, brown and boy.

*Hallelujah,*

*hallelujah!*— said in a mode of thanks. Said with a salivating mouth. Said over a small casket flapping open once more and then closed, something grass will overcome as a spiritual's lyric is sung: green, like bills slipped into pockets, like the color of a tithe, like the ransom paid to bury a kid napping in dirt, and that is also a valid interpretation of this place. Why some call it cold.

# To Discern the Presence of Beautiful Shapes

In the middle of the empire,  
I found a broken harp.

Fish leapt, in droves,  
from the black river.

Song pooled in me, saccharine,  
but there was no one to draw it out:

the sound of young colts  
knocking heads elsewhere.

I folded myself  
into a bright charm

small enough to swallow.  
I quieted my sex, waited

to be looked at as clouds are.



# Perfume

i.

Purple church and curled hair,  
and I feel her hugs

ii.

Salty stew and fresh rinsed hands, she insists  
I drink a can of root beer.  
I tell her I've given up sweets.  
She brushes it away and says, "You'll have a root beer float,  
then."

iii.

She kneels at my Uncle Jim's funeral,  
and checks the temperature of his bare sweet head  
cold  
she traces the pin stripes of his White Sox jersey  
she prays secret prayers, leaving little notes for God  
she stands,  
only a little taller than when she kneeled on the silent pew.

iv.

books and I can't speak

v.

grey leaks out the top of my mother's head

vi.

My grandma is never herself in my dreams,  
neither is my uncle.  
I've spent the last few years wanting them to come into my  
mind  
but maybe the space is too small  
or my head too thick for a religion.

vii.

I wonder if my grandmother has enough time up there  
for ten grieving children, twenty-five grieving grandchildren,  
and a grieving husband who looks lost and can't cook for  
himself.

Then I remember she's done this before.

viii.

I think I see her in the distance  
but it's foggy.

I can't remember her voice,  
can't remember what her perfume smells like.  
I think I need a new doctor.

# from Agnès Varda: Once Here and Then Now

My treasure  
                                   was a cedar. Landscape  
 of heart in water  
                                   of white shirts in a stream

Landscape of trees  
                                   planted equidistant  
 of forest organized into mind  
                                   into pieces of time

Landscape of history  
                                   as a series  
 carefully accruing  
                                   one tree  
 in the line  
                                   is dead and taller than all the others.

Varda moved smoothly from analogue film into digital  
 but recognized that it made her film stock redundant,  
 which in turn, made it a resource available.

                                  So she made it into houses.  
 First, life-sized cabins  
                                   in which she could live  
                                   literally in film.

And then in miniature:  
                                   of the old stock of *Le Bonheur*, she made of  
                                   cage filled with sunflowers.

Of *La Pointe Courte*  
                                   she made a small boat  
                                   that they did not sail away in



# from Frederick Law Olmsted: The Centrality of the Park

Or it will simply come to life:

which always works both inside and out.  
One walks within and the self overflows,  
becomes an exterior thing:

This is a park.

as the edges ease

in the distance where does the tree

become the breeze, the line between

lake and sky, compromised, quietly

one joins the smell of just-cut grass and the others one passes  
without a glance. A park is a single organism and everyone in it,  
walking through it, or stopping for an hour for a picnic, is one  
of its organs, part of its circulatory system, its nerves and senses.

While someone at a distance, standing in the window of an  
apartment across the street

sees just a huge green being

being at home.

As if art

took part

in leaf

and took the leaf apart tree by tree

Plant the trees in stands make of them the most

in groves and hold the groves at glade's length and in  
such ways

would a thousand acres pass.

We walked

across sunlight and then across the rain

which too was blooming

exactly as planned.

## from the good house & the bad house

i'm looking through my bedroom window & inside is empty except dad on a small stool whittling a cube of wood into a ball in a cage. shavings fall from the block onto the floor, the fabric of his jeans, even land momentarily on his hands before twisting off. he rubs the knife against the wood away from his chest. he does not see me & i want him to. "when you were small i would hold your head in my palm & your whole body fit down my forearm." he carves the ball in the center until it's freestanding in the cage. i go through the window & sit with him in the memory. i touch his arm but he can't feel it. i sit with him & he can't see me & i want him to. i leave the room. i remember him with his back to me fishing in a river, that he turned around, that we drove on a dirt road to a burnt house with weeds growing through jagged charcoal walls, he walked out onto the fragile floor.

# Pleasure

Say the word.  
 But lucid,  
 as if  
 in a lake.

The day,  
 a flaccid  
 handshake.  
 Monetize

sunrise.  
 The math:  
 men =  
 blue pills

swallowed  
 with Nyquil,  
 the x-axis  
 prophylaxis,

the y-  
 some chance  
 of being hallowed.  
 Measure

your bay  
 of approval,  
 and the leisure-  
 ly removal

of your tank  
 to stay  
 Pleasure—  
 Muscle

your advance,  
your spank bank.  
Hustle.  
*A woof*

*is a woof*  
is the ontology  
of an application.  
*Sorry*

*for double-*  
*woofs,*  
apology.  
Not to worry.

The long slide,  
a B-side  
play-  
list

of degradation:  
dilation,  
the manicured  
fist.

For your trouble.



# Everybody Everybody

*after Black Box*

I do not need a man,  
I need a man

with the right  
kind of damage. Right.

One brutish word, *looking*,  
means we are looking

dutifully into smart  
phones: don't we look smart

in our fleece vests.  
Each day an option vests,

our sentence  
a declarative sentence:

This is the place.  
We know our place.

I trade  
tirade

for nothing,  
but nothing

is accidental,  
or accidental

as collapse.  
Remember the collapse?

Nothing exists before  
the day before:

I was let go,  
and by let go

I mean garden  
leave. No garden,

just this little  
patch of city, a little

dog shit,  
I mean human shit.

And all my ex-  
mausoleums on Valencia, ex-

humed as furniture stores;  
pastry stores

with animal names.  
Or too coy for names.

Come  
on! Does it all come

out in the wash?  
The great Martha Wash

is on the radio  
as if there were radio,

singing her large heart out,  
warned never to come out

from behind the screen.  
In front of the screen,

a 90s supermodel like a city  
lip-synchs—like this city,

emaciated—for everybody.  
Everybody.

## Dotage

The birds sound desperate this morning.  
Perhaps they are.

Some days I need some time  
to put myself together again

as if parts of me had blown off  
in the night, like the shingles

in the storm that time  
the shutters banged till dawn,

and then, at last, the wind  
calmed down, the roosters crowed.

This being who you are  
is not as easy as it sounds.

We sat around her body  
And talked about  
Ways to make coffee stronger.

The Keurig brews  
A family in transition.  
Sugar cubes drop

There is no sugar  
cane to brace the weight  
Of this loss.

On days when I have no pep in my step

I drink my coffee, black  
With three teaspoons of sugar  
But today,

I'll have mine with cognac,  
Please, tell me how to discern.  
Add some hazelnut cream?

Should we close her mouth?  
Her eyes? As we kiss her cheeks  
and say our teary goodbyes

We take turns  
Rubbing her still hands,  
As Pandora plays

*Jesus is on the Main Line*

Spoons stir in shaking hands,  
The chimes of silver against china,  
Signals the shifted deference

Granny has passed  
Easily with Sunday Morning.

Aunt Francis tells us:  
*Strong coffee is made*  
*From grounds rinsed in praying hands*

# Fish Brain

*I have a fish brain*, my mother says You mean like you can't remember stuff, me too, mom *I have fish brain My brain is a fish* Yeah, it's slippery like it's hard to hold things in your head *Fish*, she says Fish, I agree Well, the brain *is* grey like a fish, mom *Fish dish wish fish pish*, she laughs like she surprised herself Pish is a funny word, mom *PISH PISH* She shouts like she's calling someone across the room It's Yiddish You'd say "Go make a pish" when I was a little boy to remind me not to pee in my pants You remember any words in Yiddish mom *Yiddish fish* Ha that's a rhyme, mom, good, your parents Tillie and Max spoke Yiddish - you did, too, so I wouldn't know what you were saying but I caught on pretty quick, can you- *Yiddish Fish!* she laughs The nurse in pink scrubs pushes a medicine cart, smiles I lean in, whisper, Yiddish Fish Pish Mom giggles The supervisor wrote in the report: Estelle has been withdrawn You'd make gefilte fish, ma, that gross jelly for- *Yiddish fish jelly fish-* Jewish holidays- *Jewfish* I laugh loud and she laughs at my laughing, I think *Yiddishfish Yiddishfish* She's looking me in the eyes so I join her *Yiddishfish Yiddishfish Yiddishfish Yiddish Yid-* She stops She shifts so fast How are you feeling, mom- "Happy," is what I'll tell my brother on the drive home That was fun, wasn't it, mom She looks at her hands like she just discovered she has them Yiddish fish, I say Pish, I say Estelle, I say Are you hungry, mom *Slippery flop fish slip slippery catch sea slimy baitfish slimy hook slip sea wait-* You ever catch a fish, mom I have ten minutes more 4:30's dinner time Yes, you caught a big fish, I remember, it was so big and slimy She squints at me She searches my whole face: eyes, nose, mouth, part by part, chin, hair, like I'm a puzzle

## Chimeric

I have a scorpion in a glass orthotope  
and this morning I looked at the thing  
as it sat on my desk but it was the corner  
facing me and so the light refracted through  
three different perpendicular planes  
creating a chimeric scorpion, a paradox,  
bent thrice in contradiction to itself,  
but somewhere outside the tripled illusion,  
the glass, the air, the rays swerving at  
junctures, the observer, was the real scorpion,  
one creature, it for itself, dead, preserved,  
hidden in the optics, reality unkinked.



# in the flood (1)

in the dream just as you wake  
you see stars in positions

still several nights' journey  
west but surely will take you

lifetimes to reach no matter  
how far you've come there's a path

the long way round this fortress  
that won't lead past tar-black posts

of an execution ground  
you erected for ghosts you

can't entice into dying  
over again your local

laundromat will be open  
at 7 tempest or shine

## in the flood (4)

you are inside a snow cave  
under your own avalanche

in your seclusion nightgown  
diaphanous antiphons

aren't a fabric but phrases  
your body hears even if

you do not but look yonder  
you'll usually find your

back-up supply of polished  
glass eyes to sew on remnants

& pelican carcass bones  
that show how to hew flight from

sky it's a question of where  
not how to build your next world

# Walking Behind My Mother

Slow as sugar  
ants crossing the tile  
with crumbs atop  
their backs my mother  
is going up the stairs.  
Her bones are fire  
today. Hotter  
than usual I can tell  
by the way the air  
springs out of her lungs.  
She hates it when  
I can tell.  
In my head  
she's whispering  
it's a seven it's a nine  
it's an eight.  
She breathes.  
She grips the railing.  
She asks how was school  
today and I think  
this woman is crazy  
and please please please  
let there be more  
of her in me.

## Melrose Abbey, c. 1100

So the cathedral ruins fall.  
Imagine them still holding  
monks in prayer, their hands

lifted to lifted  
ceilings, their voices pressed against the broken  
bell curve of this room, still whole

enough to keep them. Imagine  
the monks saying *My God—*  
*I'm holding my voice in my hands.*

I step around  
the monks' old bedrooms, now  
outlines in the grass, stones

one row high. See how  
they could bed a person down.

See how they can shelter me  
if I lie flat and turn my face.

# where o death is thy sting

Even in the midst of this, the cat still dies, blood crusting at her mouth, and yet, we have everything reserved, everything ordered. This cat, when only days old, became ours when her mother met with the old german shepherd. Its teeth ripped into the mother's belly, spilled her intestines out, left her to die slowly, when caught by the farmer, before the kill. The gray brown tubing dragged over the dirt, gathered helicopter seeds, and when she finally died, they tied her body around the neck of that old dog. Learn it to smell the death in its victim, says the farmer. We can't have these things killing each other. The dogs eat the cats that eat the mice that gorge themselves to death on feed within the bins, small bodies so bloated, so accustomed to starving that they cannot tell when they've had their fill. If the cats don't kill the mice, the farmer will grab their tails with needle nose pliers and drown them in the water trough. When german shepherd bites into soft fur, he does not regret; he even relishes the earthy iron, the scent of fetid meat he cannot eat despite his kill. Consumption would drive worms through his gut, make him pregnant with that mass of parasite until it forms so completely that his own intestines would become hard, like a stone. It costs \$125.88 to kill a cat ethically. A cost less because we did not need her ashes back, but more because we would

not bury her ourselves. Less, because we did not need a true diagnosis of what killed her. It was enough to see her fur mat and clump, and the chunks of it left behind on sofas and legs. She, still one to rub against an object when it would not stroke her of its own accord. It was enough to see the shuffle of her hips, arthritic and stiff. It was enough to see a haze in her eyes, and to hear her yowl across the living room floor. You ought to urge remission such that it never grows. Cancer in animals is the same as in humans. Cancer in animals is an ethical dilemma that rarely extends much further than a wallet. When the nurse returns with the empty carrier, she says that seventeen is something to be proud of, anything over fifteen is extra, really.

# When the Power Went Out

We equivocated. Stilled by the quiet,  
adjusting our eyes to dusk.  
We drank wine and thought  
about the car in the garage.

It was Friday and we weren't  
going anywhere. You lit  
candles—tealights and tapers—  
and placed them on the butcher  
block to shadow the knife blade.

We lit the burners with matches.  
The potatoes sizzled in butter.  
I dropped a bundle of washed  
asparagus right onto the griddle.

I was poised to set the salmon  
fillets down in hot grapeseed oil  
when a loud clunk and a cluster  
of high-pitched digital beeps  
announced the return of power.

Someone had done their job,  
banished the chaos as well as the  
*darkness upon the face of the deep.*

What a letdown.

# Neigh

The ungainly head and  
strong brown neck  
jut through the stall door  
when I call out his name.

I use his “show name”  
and carry a carrot.

He offers a head bob and neigh.

We’ve been working together  
for several months now.  
First there was the red ribbon,  
then the blue. We baffle the  
stable’s quality folk: “That horse  
has the withers and gait of a gnu.”

I have no say in his future,  
nor money to change this.  
Neither of us knows  
how long it will go on.

He shakes my hand  
with his carrot bite.  
I press my cheek  
into his warm neck.  
We pretend it is up to us.

—Oct 24, 2017



# Crisper

Three chicken half breasts  
edging up to their “use by” date.  
Lettuces, radishes, washed herbs  
in damp paper towel blankets.  
Dank dill gone black. One very  
cold fruit fly who, having only  
instinct to guide him, followed  
the path of sweetness. Raspberries  
rolling on a little plastic diaper  
designed to absorb their juice.

# Hounds of Love

Running up that  
hill (a deal  
with god)

...

Running up  
that  
hill (a deal with

...

I start it over to see if I can catch the beginning. The line slowly appears. There's an echo and a swirl and a gust of wind. There's an atmosphere. A swimming pool. "Running Up that Hill (A Deal with God)" plays over the loudspeakers at an outdoor public pool at Oak Park Park in Oak Park, MI.

I'm just starting to sing  
it didn't hurt me, yeah yeah yo  
but you wanna feel how it feels, yeah yeah yo  
do you wanna know, know that it doesn't hurt me, yeah yeah yo  
do you wanna hear about the deal we're makin  
and she comes in, guns ablaze, squeezing her wet hair out on my

towel, getting my legs wet; she can't wait to be released. She has something to shake off, something to work out, and I'm the girl to play a part today.

It's youuuuuuuuu, it's you and meeeeeeee

It's you and meeeeeeee

Come on baby, come on darlin

Let me steal this moment from you now

Come on angel, come on, come on darlin

Let's exchange the experieuhhhhhnceoh oooo ooooo

For the first time, it occurs to me that when Kate Bush sings, she is singing to God. She wants to switch places with him and become less Kate-like and more God-like.

If I only could, I'd make a deal with God  
and I'd get him to swap our places.

But I always thought there were three in the picture—you (lover), me (Kate), and God (God)—and that Kate was appealing to God for his help in switching her life with that of someone whom she felt indebted to, someone specific. But there is only Kate and God, God being someone entirely not-specific. God is the

generic brand of any person who seems the most powerful.

If I only could, I'd make a deal with God  
and I'd get him to swap our places.

Not "I hope to change places with you, my intimate loved one,"  
but "I hope God will agree to exchange places with me and then  
I could be like him." Then, I would be able to run up the road  
with no problems.

Be running up that road, be running up that  
hill, be running up that building.

What seems stunning about this is not just the clarity of the  
desire to exchange experience

let's exchange the experience

but the proposal for an exchange that would be so uneven. I  
mean, why would God want to be Kate Bush? He wouldn't.

This is why I have to beg him.

Let me steal this moment from you now. Come on

Angel, Come on, Come on, Darling. Let's

exchange the experience. Oooo Ooooo Ooh.

Music is the best medium for begging. Begging is music to my

ears, or at least after I become God. He loves for you to beg. God will not voluntarily offer up the ease with which he runs up the hill or the building. We'll need to beg and then, ultimately, steal. It would be best if he simply gave me permission to steal, which isn't exactly an exchange and isn't exactly thieving but it's permissive illicitness, like when your father lets you steal all his bread or your mother lets you steal all her milk. Permission to steal seems preferable to a gift because it acknowledges my need, the not-excess of my delivery, the fulfillment of your obligation with frustration built in. Even if you were delivered all the milk and bread you wanted you would still be frustrated. The weeping is electric in "Running Up that Hill." The almost-like-a-woman synthesizer begins the song, which Kate Bush will imitate in the song's hook. The point is not to extinguish frustration but to make it tolerable, where stealing becomes a game and no one gets punished for needing more than they have, for needing more than one can provide herself.

I used to think this song was about my mother. Kate Bush is not a far cry from mother given that the 4th song on

*Hounds of Love* is “Mother Stands for Comfort” and it is a mixed sort of comfort to listen to Kate Bush, but I know of my projection. I don’t assume that Kate was singing to her mother though I might always be singing to mine in an effort to reproduce the feelings I had when she sang to me, the times when I felt most loved and cared for, when she felt most present to me through her singing. “Running Up that Hill” is a song I associate with my feelings for her particularly after her car accident, feelings that have to do with wanting to forgive her because it is difficult to hate her given that she almost died in a fairly horrible way, spinning out on the freeway in a red Ford focus, smashing against a tree, apparently moaning when they found her. The worst part of this memory, which I’ve gathered from the police report based on witnesses to the accident, is her fear when the car was out of her control. She doesn’t remember this fear and going over it in writing is a way for me to have it on her behalf, but it also feels like torture. They say at one point she was going backwards on the freeway, going something like 60 or 70 miles an hour. Nevermind. I don’t know whether

I want to see her face in this picture or not. The other part that I think of is the moaning that they describe. Sometimes I wish she hadn't been making any sound at all rather than involuntary and meaningless tones from the no place of her wrecked body. Then, I think of all the things she did that she didn't mean to do. Moaning unconsciously with her head draped over the wheel or wherever it was and then later, when she was coming out of a coma, ripping her shirt off in front of nurses without any regard for their comfort or mine, let alone her own. Pulling on her catheter to the point of there being blood in her urine, scratching at herself so much that we had to put little mits on her hands to keep her safe. It is hard to not conflate these involuntary actions with her unconscious actions before her car accident. The things that hurt me the most are the things she didn't intend to do, things that she has since apologized for, in the strange lucidness of her post-car-accident brain. More capable of apology and forgiveness with a brain injury, my mother knows she failed me in significant ways as I was the helpless being brought into the world by her and she

asked me to care for her more than she was willing to care for me, but today she wants to make it right in whatever way she can. Some days I am surprised to still be thinking of this, that it all still seems relevant enough to rehearse. This week and last week and for several months now, I've been thinking about guilt and trying to talk myself out of every feeling of guilt that I have because I don't want to feel guilty about anything, especially not the life that I've managed to make for myself despite all of the horrible days I've lived through. Every part of me, however, does not understand this. I think I needn't feel ashamed, embarrassed, guilty, or seek out punishment for my relative success or fascination with life, but I don't buy it. The notion of relative freedom does not sink in.

In the Kickapoo Valley, the fog hovers over the tops of the trees, drenching the skeletal branches with the fabric of ghosts and quiet. The lights begin to bleed. Bubbles float down from the birds. They spit out their worms for something more savory. The rainbow drops its bread from the edge of its



ending and their beaks stretch til their corners tear. Fish bring their gills up from their necks to speak and share what they know about surviving this cache, this nest, this elevation, this kicking station, huh, huh, huh. Tossing out the line, cutting its neck, “who was our family besides this tree?” Huh, huh, huh. When the birds and the fish assemble between the water and the sky, they look at the blood their bodies try to expel. Shaking my head at the obviousness of their self-sacrifice, I stutter. I kiss the ground. The music that plays while I wait on hold is desperate and erotic. I tell my mother: “What do you know about loving? What do you know about the high?” This cat speaks through whiskers, which are inherited, from its now-not-known real-live-cat predecessor. When I start to whisper through this wirey brand of censorship, it takes cover beneath our elders.

(It's) you (and) (me)

our (greek) dyad

(who) begins to stomp

(begging) to (change)

clip (clip) disguises (sell) (as)  
crush (plagues) face (night) (falls)  
whenever (we) (exit)  
there's a scrimmage (skirtless)  
(adage) sips  
aluminum (can)  
huffs (out)  
(toe) (in) the mold  
(milk) (decal) underneath  
their feminine (stand-ins) split  
(Do) you (want) (to)  
hurt (me) or you (on)  
(this) (ledge) gauge  
who knows (what) you  
didn't want to (hurt) but  
(you) wanna feel (how) it (feels)  
it is the deal

we're (making)  
up (running)  
building (up) sent  
its nails (sent)  
(caws) to the window  
gulls to (sink) the future  
(pallbearers) running  
(up) a swap (if) the  
pressure (mounts) splits  
(splits)  
(out)

when i was a child  
when i was a little child  
when i was a missing child  
i was an available fox  
i was dogs dogs dogs  
when i was a child leather-worthy and shackled

i was a coward and wore a bodice  
when i was good draped in jelly  
i went on and on between my knees  
when i was held down  
i was darling  
when i wore shoes  
i was in the water  
when i was love  
i was doo doo doo  
when i took my shoes off

# summer d/ke rerun watch party

each lighter casts bedroom halo/  
dominant thumbnails snare  
in sparkwheel/the night burns dank  
composition/soccer scars  
& short hairs & beers/the tv flicks  
The L Word/it's been over for years/  
but we burn/box-sets for each other/

wonder why the opening scene is Tim/  
the neighbor/why even  
in *our* show it starts with a man/  
cry when Jenny comes on screen  
bc we know what's coming for her/

never seen successful queer folk  
in small town Arkansas/  
    & Hollywood kills off the Midwesterner

## Bounty

One square of paper towel, the brawniest, stretched beneath a faucet, it's drip in the kitchen, some secret wiped hard like this is how you go commando, discuss in public how clean your bum is, that on occasion you don't wash your hands before leaving the bathroom. Water spreads who's going to scrub the counter clean with this sopping wet thing, balance a short drinking glass in the center, his or her temperament Monday morning, eyes on the everyday dirty in this steel sink, and presto it's two-fisted Whack-a-Mole, the shakedown, a box marked *fragile*, flat sheets of rock candy, clear panes in a board-game pop bubble, a buzzer sounding like there goes the last pinch of sand in the hourglass, pencils down, and red is silly string, we got you broken fuckers in pieces, you dishes, you mugs, the pint glasses unwrapped last Christmas. It's a smartphone ringing, the drowned in sagged floors of the submarine setting, a hey, look at that, hands shaking. This don't even move, perhaps imagine how cool it could be if you were the Fantastic Four's Invisible Woman, try out force fields, a dashed circle your full-body halo; in 3-D it's a snow globe, you're on water inside an inflated plastic ball, filmed for a competitive reality show, like get to the shore first and soak your fingers in it, some liquid dish soap popular in the '80s. And there's a window in the bedroom, a locked door behind you to the apartment. What time is breakfast? Where are the paper plates and napkins, potato sacks, a giant slide to the home below? Do you want to see which bandage is more absorbent, wear a diaper like a neck brace, find answers on the television? Choose a shard of glass; let's get all *Prom Night*

up in here, collapse on rolls  
of paper towels, and watch  
everything turn red.

## I'm Not Mad at You; I'm Mad at the Dirt

My mother said, "You're breathing that stuff in."  
I couldn't remember when I last cleaned  
the top of the refrigerator. Tonight I used  
half a roll of paper towels, maybe just a third,  
the spray bottle of kitchen cleaner back under  
the sink. Months of dust rolled like wet bath towels,  
some microscopic pool house, well-stocked cabana,  
smashed by King Kong fists angry at rooftops, the slants  
of enemies. Off from work for the holidays  
and I haven't scrubbed the bathtub  
and I never put a tree up,  
close to six months since Dad died,  
I have a whole suitcase full of Christmas lights;  
my grandmothers' ornaments are stored in boxes  
in the living room closet, a shelf where things get dusty,  
that furniture covered with white sheets in those movies  
where things happen in abandoned houses  
or summer homes forgotten. It's hairy this season,  
a monster unchained, pounding the top of my refrigerator,  
the tiniest water-logged bath mats stuck to tile flooring,  
each day of the month, a miniature dead lightbulb.  
My mother's right about that stuff:  
breathing it all in.



# Rheum rhabarbarum (Rhubarb)

At the edge of the garden the rhubarb  
grew like a sour summer sun, radiating  
broad leaves above cherry-red stalks.  
My brother used to eat it raw  
but I didn't like its sting,  
preferring the bubbling  
of rhubarb-raisin pies, cobblers  
and crisps, the whole of Dutch baking  
summed up in sugar and lard. My grandmother  
said I shared her sweet tooth, as if it were  
our saccharine pearl to pass down.  
This is what it means to be the baby  
of the family: gifted with all the odd,  
calcified bits, boxes of China from  
the tables of old ladies tucked into  
careful paper. My attic is lined  
with their wishes, still waiting  
for the softening, the heaped cup of sugar,  
only retaining the faintest bite  
of the ground's tart kiss.

## to my earliest local library

wasn't it in your many arms  
of swivel chairs that you taught me  
how to smear myself online?  
we had dial-up at the house,

but location is in real estate and in kissing  
perhaps more important than the contents,  
though you were so full  
of yourself when i had to take a sink bath

the summer of 2006 when Desiree of red hair  
handed me my first cigarette, a menthol,  
and Kelli met me within you to hide our bodies  
within each other among the stacks, of which there are few.  
there are in truth no places to hide in you, but we were never  
found.

and wasn't it you who sat between the overstock  
store and the Lipton Tea Company?  
well the recycling lot was in there too when i first  
thought i could impress someone by tossing  
things away and leaving them to rot.

you were there at least, Mid-Continent  
South Independence Branch, and you were so cool  
in summer. the twenty minute walk so worth  
the air conditioning and in fifth grade  
you said nothing when i started reading  
those murder/sex detective thrillers. how many

ways do you know to grow up? do any of them work  
like home remedies? like apple cider vinegar or a memory?

# I Am Going to See a Mass of Cells

whenever they leave my body  
nothing

another tight dress threaded with light  
and a pair of small ears out there

in the latest future  
I tell them  
I can tuck these stones of loss in further

as in my life  
wheelbarrows

as in I stop sign  
take you disappointment

full and complete  
for two months

maybe three

## So Much

a redder seal  
atop

my beached  
dress

caught its clap-  
threat

in a rookery  
wheel.

# Running in the Suburbs

by the truck with the Trump bumper sticker  
and since you do a loop around these shaded streets,  
you always smile at everyone. You don't look like  
a threat, but maybe someone's nanny here.  
Maybe someone's maid. What is the maid doing  
running around in circles on our block, they are  
thinking. What is the maid trying to stay fit for?  
Everything, even your smile, becomes a little  
more criminal. You want to utter things that make  
you ashamed, distance yourself from your skin.  
You want to recite them Dickinson and Poe,  
challenge their knowledge of Barolo wines.  
You are such an insecure petite bourgeois  
and how quickly you became one, from being  
broke when cheddar was a luxury, stuck in tens  
of thousands of student debt to now, the professor  
who runs while in residence at a writers colony.  
You're still in debt, kid. You're still brown.  
They still think you are a maid or nanny.  
Your twenty year old self is still laughing at you.  
It is exhausting to have to do this guesswork  
when there is the sun, a few deer making eye contact,  
the brilliant blue sky, Dinah Washington in your headphones.  
You tell your mom about running in the suburb  
and she is annoyed: *Not everything is about race, Megan.*  
She has shit to do today— eldercare, a doctors visit.  
She's got no time for my hypotheses. *I know*, I say.  
Defensive. Ashamed. I ask her how she is finally,  
but I hear a voice reversing us in my head speaking:  
Not everything is about race, mama.  
Not everything is about race.

## Coloring Hour

Joan Baez, paralyzed in sunlight. There is too much sand  
in the washing machine from the beach fire last night.  
The sand is refusing to lose mass, used to the tumult of water.  
I listen to military experts on North Korea and realize what a sucker  
I am for the calm, strategic violence in the voice  
of an older man. As if information mattered anymore.  
I go for a run in a cemetery. I don't think the dead mind.  
I do yoga video in my room to the sound of a nice lady  
who now lives in California with three children.  
She bends in the video and laughs softly, encourages child's pose.  
I am a beginner at yoga. I am a beginner at most things.  
I wonder if she's worried about her children right now.  
If they decide to bomb, I'll have to walk into the ocean  
at the End-of-the-World, probably alone, put stones in my pockets  
like Virginia and just keep walking and walking. I think the will to live  
will dissipate even though I've always been afraid of water.

Instead of therapy, I go talk to the ladies at Senior's coloring hour at the library. There is Joyce who I like in particular, and we use water soluble color pencils, making the blues so blue and the pinks so pink. Joyce tells me about how the submarines used to be stationed out here during WWII and the torpedo would throw them into the air like muscular whales slamming back into the ocean after an enthusiastic jump. Joyce's husband was a structural engineer for NASA and used to fly to Houston all the time, he was in charge of making the rockets land. *It's hard for things to be both strong and light*, she tells me proudly. I ask her if she is more afraid now than before. She says it feels more like WWII than Vietnam, and I am in awe of the history this woman has seen. She keeps telling me this is a great country even when I cry about the white supremacist march in Virginia. I am crying here among all these women over eighty. I am ruining coloring hour for seniors at the library. They don't mind. I need so many mothers. I am a youngest child. I need all these women between me and the world. These women and my own mother and both my sisters and when they invite me back next week, I feel a little sheepish but I take my painting home, which is my version of Matisse's "The Piano Lesson" and I prop it up on my desk and feel full of a torrential love.

# A Lot of Those Visits Were Empty, I Wasn't There

I heard loud talk-backs as I walked into the nursing home.

In the day room, he sat in a chair  
he shouted cigarettes to the nurses  
his skin resembled a Creole man  
with the aid of his walker, his delicate legs dragged  
as we walked toward his room.

Hey Bette,  
hey Reginald  
baby bring me some cigarettes were his words.

After transferring to another facility,  
his throat became raw,  
and he could no longer swallow  
his nourishment a feeding tube  
he stopped talking  
cigarettes caused Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease  
(COPD).

He needed oxygen  
tubes in his nose  
he developed muscular atrophy  
his legs were permanent in a frog position  
he became bedridden  
when I approached him, he would always bat his eyes,  
and rest one hand upon the beats of his heart.



# I Enjoyed Being a Girl

The pigtail hairstyles,  
pretty-in-pink dresses  
Barbie-doll socks  
hopscotch  
jump rope  
double-dutch.

Bette became my name,  
Reginald became my name  
Bette Davis became my name  
Bette Davis eyes became my name  
Gina-Bell became my name  
G.B. became my name  
Gina-Clipp became my name.

## Windfall

Fir trees clumped urbanely together—high as Mabel’s shoulder—are overtaking a logging road, long abandoned: nature filling that abhorrent vacuum. We keep walking. But, I think, isn’t nature neutral? This sparse bit of grass, this brackish beaver pond swirling with mosquito spawn, cares not one whit for me. At home a bowl of apples and pears (organic, speckled red) will be eaten or rot. *Like us?* Crouching in her hound dog stance Mabel pulls the leash like the memory of a tree in my parent’s backyard, bulging through and around the chain-link fence as if it weren’t there because it was always there. *Like love?* Our neighbor Mrs. Badger kept cartons of cigarettes in her freezer. Kools, menthol. Sitting in her kitchen she cut carrots, spinning corkscrews with a sharp knife. She’d dunk them in ice-water keeping them crisp. Why was I there? Did I help with the carrots? Why recall this at all? But feel ice-water on my fingers, me so impressed with her precision her know-how, as if she were divulging a secret. Opposite her yard is a cherry tree. My brother John and I started it from a pit. We’d picked cherries two doors down carrying them home in our new white sailor hats no longer white. The tree still stands blooms and fruits feeding pushy jays and occasionally the dog caught & lucky in a windfall.

# On Sustenance, Distance, Sky

Winter countryside like a broken circuit board;  
patchwork frost and the irregular meld

of shallow shapes made heavy with blue burns over  
ice covered ponds. It may take too much to see inside

the aching mouth of the bass banished, surviving, trapped  
by winter in the low. But I want to see the end of living sinew

move beneath the ice fisherman's hands, to see inside the dark  
space he saves for recollection, to witness the pace and depth

of death, and what makes death, to see who I claim to be  
heaved  
into the unreal sky like plumes of smoke. From a distance,

barely violence. I can't scratch the lovelessness that  
remains flagrant in my eyes. I only want to understand

the hole beneath the grief. I only want  
to cover this blue-lit world with clouds.

# Stronghold

Hollow home swaddled in smoke—war-readied, mortared dense and thick and rogue against the ancient cavernous scars and holes. Cement body barren except vigilant fluorescence, the ghosts of soldiers

blink and yawn in silver light. The mind of midnight fog swallows up its base and height. Collision becomes construction. Collapse becomes mass production. Notice: the kingdom has its own body born from fear, still slippery. Witness its absence,

its silence: a new wall thick with closed eyes clenched as lungs clench breath—the last General rushes to hoist a cracked bell and the sound of death floods the fist of land he cannot own.

# Magazine

Some like it hot as a *clip*. Or *news*.  
 Or *paper*. From which I could also say  
*suffrage, paparazzi, arrhythmia*.  
 There is no shortage of epithets  
 I will allow. Frankly, I could take  
 anything and make an economy of it,  
 like a noose, but that would be too easy.  
 Like you wouldn't be surprised to know  
 that thirteen minutes ago, a boy walked  
 into this coffee shop with one on the back  
 of his sweatshirt. I could tell he was  
 happy with his purchase by the  
 way he zipped it. It was almost quick  
 enough to be a tax. Almost accelerated  
 enough to be tenure. I have to say it was  
 especially outstanding how one minute  
 my brined collarbone was akin to his back  
 and the next perpendicular to the sky. Roughly.  
 Perhaps I'm still looking at this all wrong.  
 Sometimes I am slow to the point. Work  
 with me for a second. Maybe home isn't something  
 I'm allowed to own or harvest or recycle.  
 My grandfather told me this once rifling through  
 the tabloids. Once he was done, he finally looked up  
 to me and laughed, but I think he might be  
 onto something here. Sure, none of us are  
 as thorough as gun powder, but what I know of  
 a lease is just as much as what I know of  
 becoming retractable as a penny stock.  
 And any black child will tell you of the  
 times they derived the value of their name  
 from the ardor of a parent's shout when upset.

And any black child will tell you that the corner  
can not protect you when that switch comes.  
Maybe the same that can be said of a middle name,  
rare as a disciple, is true of the ultimatum  
of the day; we've already been sold to the sun.  
There's probably a word for that too. You know,  
for *earning a living*. *Winging it*. Something neat  
like *credit*. But that may be pushing it.

## “Cherry Ripe”

This is the title a Lewis Carroll biographer gives the photo:

Lorina Liddell dangles a cherry over Alice,

teasing her; Lorina won't let it go—

she's not being nice.

In the bio,

the author says the parents' break with Carroll is over this:

they know he photographs the girls; they do not know

Alice, eight, posed in an open-mouthed kiss—

then the parents see the photo.

(“The Kiss” is the title

of the photo where Dodgson/Carroll leans down to Alice.)

In 2015, a BBC broadcast goes down the rabbit hole

after this photo surfaces: Lorina, fourteen, faces

the camera, awkward, naked, full-frontal,

untitled.

## In a Country of Pigeons, the Rooftops Need an Anthem

The chorus of Ready to Go by Republica dusts the tongue with its glitter, is a sparkling onesie I would wear to the weddings of people I don't quite know but who put out a great spread, wear it to the First Communion of children who have not yet forgotten the Lord's prayer, an Our Father that still means well I'm a kind of a charming fuckup when spoken. If we speak about death, we do not speak about its luminescence, do not play Ready to Go at the funerals of people who have good taste, unless Ready to Go is the mercy of a priest for someone who does not want to endure one more mediocre hot dog. When I think about my final meal, I cannot choose between the recipes I know best, the ones I carry in my blood and those that live strictly in the brain. What comfort can any of us expect from our tongues? In the poem "The Kiss" by Kurt Brown, I learned that the mouth is a house, that a kiss is an animal you cannot forgive. Which part of this animal strokes the inside of a cheek? Which part hollows out the center of a strawberry? I don't mean Ready to Go reminds me of dead animals, but I want to be passed from mouth to mouth, I want to last longer than any kiss.



# Greetings from the Mushroom Aisle

For every vial that contains a saint's bones, there is a corpse that feels less holy. I have lost count of the number of things I buried to get here, what dirt is compressed beneath my fingernails. Did you ever study your hands and wonder how much salt has passed through them? You can wear a suit that turns you into mushrooms. I don't mind the idea of being a colorful fungus, but I would prefer to be stuffed and animated instead. I would still like to complain about television, still touch your leg inappropriately during the commercials.



# Sitting Alone in the Dark

If there's not enough light to define  
much beyond me, you've still got these  
autumn maples in the yard that blaze  
with bel canto grace and sing proudly  
their rustling as a way to keep time with  
the flux of wind that plucks the leaves  
like a pickpocket might a watch or billfold.  
If that's not enough, you've also got  
my cigar preening its plumage of ash  
and earthborn hints of maduro smoke  
that cross my lips as though I were  
speaking the language of       Smoke.  
All the unlit streetlamps don crowns  
while I tend the small fire my wages  
have afforded, hoping in the foolish  
American way that this match strike,  
that this sulfur burn, that this breath  
could stoke, that these eyes could witness  
an ember that might hurt the dark  
just enough               to become a star.















