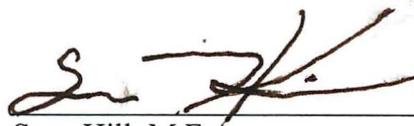


THE WHITE DOG YEAR

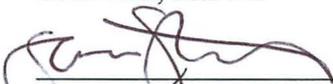
By

Caitlin Scarano

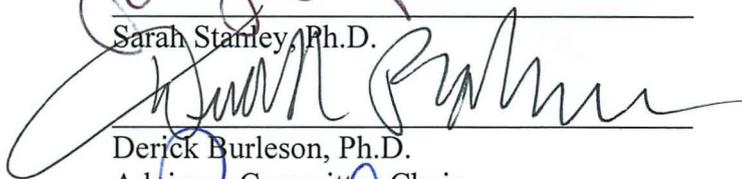
RECOMMENDED:



Sean Hill, M.F.A.



Sarah Stanley, Ph.D.



Derick Burselson, Ph.D.
Advisory Committee Chair

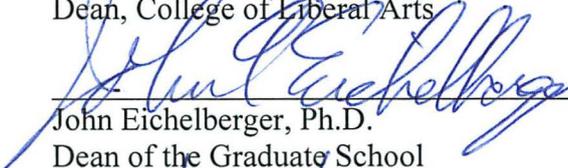


Rich Carr, Ph.D.
Chair, English Department

APPROVED:



Todd Sherman, M.F.A.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts



John Eichelberger, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

4/22/14

Date

THE WHITE DOG YEAR

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Caitlin O'Neill Scarano, B.A., M.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska

May 2014

Abstract

This creative thesis, a book-length poetry manuscript titled “The White Dog Year,” explores issues of gender, sexuality, family, mental health, violence, and rural poverty. In the personal and confessional tradition, the poems in the thesis are both lyrical and narrative. They are in dialogue with a variety of poets, including Robert Frost, W.B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and, more contemporarily, Sharon Olds, Carolyn Forché, Hadara Bar-Nadav, Eduardo Corral, and Allison Seay. “The White Dog Year” exists between imagination and reality, what I refer to as a dreamscape, which is comprised of the physical places where I have lived (Virginia, Ohio and Alaska), my memory of these places, and how I recreate them. This thesis also investigates the relationship between memoir and poetry, and how personal narratives can be told primarily through language, lyricism, and poetic fragments.

Table of Contents

	Page
Signature Page.....	i
Title Page.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
The City that Taught You.....	1
Of This and Other Childhoods.....	2
Sleeping Dog Awake.....	3
Dead Dog Done.....	5
No Men in the Title, A Poem to Birds and Places.....	6
Rabbit Holes.....	7
At the Diner that Morning.....	8
Vox.....	9
Dust and Light.....	10
My Dangling Eyes.....	11
At Least Ourselves.....	12
Church Dress.....	13
For the girl engraving a heart into the elementary school yard maple.....	14
That winter, addicted to snow.....	15
Stories for Children.....	16
Soap.....	17
The Girl Against a Feast of Snow.....	18
A City like Teeth and Nameless.....	19
His Howl Always Opening.....	20
My Spine, Your Eye.....	21
Breaking Animals.....	22
The First Time You Mention Marriage.....	23
What You Killed, What You Thought.....	24
The first time you kiss a girl.....	25
Head and Hammer.....	26
Death and My Grandmother Talking Over Tea.....	27
Pillow.....	28
If You Never Stop Moving.....	29
Death sniffing at me yes like a dog jamming its snout in my crotch*.....	30
Your Two-Year Vigil.....	31
White Horse, Black Cow.....	32
My Mother and I Visit an Art Museum.....	33
Finally.....	34
For My Lost Sundresses.....	35
I Will Be a House of Closed Cages.....	36
Losing It.....	37
Ashtray and Bone-line.....	38

Body, Baby, Water; Moon	39
What My Grandmother Didn't Say	42
Limitations of the White Dog Year	43
Dawn Blue, Morgue White	44
To My Little Sister, Driving Drunk	45
He was the son of someone	46
Animal Tooth Wet &	47
Another Poem to My Father	48
When You Ask What I Was Like as a Girl	49
The Walk Home	50
In which my father sends me a birthday card	51
What I really wanted: sons with hands	53
When Asked If I Still Want Children	54
Talk of love these days	55
Praise	56

The City that Taught You

Are you opposed to it, living in the city of your making (red asphalt, paraffin river dripping from your mother's fake eyelashes [and you were so taken with her as a child – her pink Camel smoke, her ivory handled mirrors, the boar bristles of her brush, electric blue fingernails soothing, just barely raking, your yet unmuscled back, how she and this city taught you to arch], smog mantling that crowd of stars, your father: a homeless man we beat to death under the overpass whenever the neon moon is out on the strip club sign, and at night, lights from the coal plant connect into the constellation of a citadel)?

When we wake up, we'll speak to each other again. We'll realize we are dreaming of the same quilt corner country, where nothing is painted or paved in electric or pastel. Where you'll make a sod house half below ground along a coastline, mud falling between your fingers while I harvest orchids to get us through a mild winter. The summer snow will soak up any sounds of children in this landscape of white dogs and counting sheep. And it will never be night unless we need it. Your tongue will be nothing but a tool in this. Your tongue will be nothing but towerless.

Of This and Other Childhoods

I will translate a prophecy from the red
bird's bowels in the snow I will learn to let you go
back into the water back into the bloodless eye
I was alive once I was the pike beating my spine against
your ice your skin I was the line finally gone taut
after a winter of want I was the madness coiled in
the finest cell I am the shell where your mouth used
to be the night standing shoeless in the snow I am
your mother tightening her robe the strobe red
ambulant blue across your bedroom wall water
listen to him drive away this is the sound of gravel
of gravel of not looking back his feet turning
blue his back walking away from you promised me
wolfless I promised you nothing for the moon
in a moon-shaped coffin my father's broken mouth
forgetting the chair he pinned my mother against
daughters in diapers watching from the hallway
look when I open my palms a redbird rises –

Sleeping Dog Awake

Ivory or bone, I can't tell how hungry
I am for home. All I see is a sealed off

well with a rusted, fern green pump
around which my mother planted

peonies in white, purple, salmon pink.
While my older sister planted ghosts for us

in the eaves of the forest, the eaves
of the house. Where were the men?

There are no men here. Even the dogs
are always female. I used

to dream of sons – dark haired, light
caught in the nets of their eyes. Mouths

ripe as blood on a whitewashed wall.
Boys were always better in fantasy. I thought

my imagination might snag and hold me
under, like the girl whose hair got caught

in the pool filter and she spiraled down
for hours before any adult noticed.

It was a man, my father, who saved me each
time I nearly drowned, but it was a man,

my father, who flung me to the water
in the first place. For him I never had a fear

of water. Ivory or bone, it was manmade
rooms nestled in the wet

maw of night that caused me to wake up
screaming or go to sleep screaming. Bedrooms,

spoons, snakes, or fingers. Why do I face this
now? Why write that sleeping dog awake?

I am not hungry for home, I'm parched
for the milk of mercy. Sucking on woodchips

to keep myself from biting the heads off
the nails of that house that never was haunted

by anything but girls. I am not drowning,
I am baptizing and the water

is words and my father and my grandfather
and that man in the alley who told me not to run –

they are in a sealed well beneath a ceiling
of peonies, the saddle shoes of daughters

crisscrossing the sky above them.

Dead Dog Done

When that old dog drug itself
across our autumn path, a man's
breath coating my face.
We've been looking for a dog, but not
a damaged dog, not a near dead dog.
You can't fix the broken with a broken.

I'm running
down the ditch. Draping night
across my shoulders. I'm naked
except for the clothes and the cry.
Begging dog to look me in the eye. You
shameful, you bowlegged, matted surly.

When that dog dug itself out of our bed,
barked at the ghost of us.
What did you expect? Busy
turning keys between your teeth, purled
with burrow and maple and gleam.
Naw. I got real things to do, real shoes
to sew to real feet.

When that dog didn't drip or bowl,
why didn't you just leave me
on the nightroad crawl and howl home?

No Men in the Title, A Poem to Birds and Places

“A crack in a boulder can never be an entrance to a cathedral.” –Eduardo C. Corral

Today is a day for no poems about my father. I will mention my grandfather only this once. In fact, let this be a day of no poems of boys & men. Even the birds outside say they're sick of being metaphors for abuse and desertion. Feathers thinning with overwrought. When I stop writing about birds and men, my mouth craves milk, thick and yellow, directly from the body of a mammal. As children, my uncles grew sweet on their mother's pear tree arms, but did not over ripen. They politely coughed up horsehair, gave it to her in hand painted teacups, and rode away from Pennsylvania on motorcycles. Florida caught in their hair like those missing honeybees. I often wonder why some children are allowed to escape. Why the dreaded child is always the favorite child. Why we keep hatching daughters from kidney stones. Each time I go to Florida I am either repulsed or in love with the sunset spoiled strip malls, the alligators sleeping on tarmac too hot to attempt barefooted. Their mouths agape but I promise this is not about men. My mother tells me I was born in Florida under a banjo moon and the whiplash of rockets. The life she might have had – a soundless seashell she's long since stopped pressing against her ear. Virginia was already building a porch swing in her mind. Chickens by the vegetable garden, a collie digging up pecans. Daughters in hand-me-down dresses, hems to the wind, dropping daffodils down a Civil War well. No, I wasn't taken by birds back then. Of salt, of soil. My mother, his music, this lamplight. In Alaska, I grow my own vegetable garden – cheddar cauliflower, kale, radishes, and bok choy. I raise my own hens. They don't seem to notice the no man among them.

Rabbit Holes

How strange to live in a lived in space. To speak
for the dead, to carry the heart

of a blue owl. I was in love
before I met you. Before I met anyone, I was folding

towels in my mother's dining room and I swear
all the angles of the house pointed at me

and then pointed the way out. Busy mending
my mind of barking dogs.

I know now I wasn't afraid of mirrors
because I thought I might tip into them. It was my reflection

I was avoiding. The rabbit hole that is my face. The church
pew my grandfather held me beneath taught me

to keep still. Disciplined as the man in the alley flashing
his loneliness from under an army

coat. That was the year a girl died in the house next-door
to my grandparents'. She was so blonde, and the blue

rings underneath her eyes I thought I could kiss like a pool
of water and dive into. He held my mouth

over the doorknob. He whispered, *Teach me
such loveliness.*

At the Diner that Morning

I ordered two eggs with bacon and a biscuit
but the waitress brought me an envelope
and a slab of butter. *You aren't as hungry
as you think*, she promised before pouring
me coffee from her cupped hands. These days
it takes so long to convince anyone that I need
to be fed. I've spent months resting
my face on orange stove coils mouthing
to myself that *I will not become my mother*.
Though here I am – serving everyone mugs of chili
and warm milk. My forks and counters so spotless
I must be erasing. I tried to do something
noble, strange. I haven't owned a mirror
in three years. But I lost the ability to name
colors. When I ask for meat, I'm given water.
When I try to sneak a corner of my life
into my mouth or pocket, they smack
my hand and suggest I try chewing my hair
until the man in my stomach puts down
his wrench for a smoke break. At the diner,
the waitress wore a pliant apron & pink wings
from a girl's Halloween fairy costume.
I wanted to tell her she looked ridiculous,
but the two boys at the next table noticed
the envelope and begged me to write letters
to their lovers – girls back home who still believe
the two boys are away at war. Not hiding
in a Midwest mouth, stuffed with ground
up cow while they daydream of ripping
off the waitress's wings as she walks away.

Vox

*When you leave, the door says, be sure to touch me.
Make your fingers like it is the last time.*

I'll be the metal spoon nearly
sparkling between your teeth like knee-deep

houses. There is no gold in the water, only dirt
under my fingernails, but it is a thing. We can't decide

if it is dead or alive. *When you leave, the wick adds, be blue
as the cataract in our favorite dog's left eye.* The engagement

diamond my mother lost in the vegetable
garden, believe it, prattling like a small town

drunk from a bar stool. The cucumbers turn their faces
in modest annoyance. No, I'll be the ice-cream

grits of sugar, melting milk fat in the hollow
of your tongue. Its forklessness, honorablest of objects.

Against animate I will loosen its rings from the root
so the stump might speak again. Remember

the first time I put your fingers in my mouth? Things can be
in love as much as us. We will will a soul

into anything, and by that I mean ourselves. As a child,
I named what did not bite

or grin back. Yes, maws have clocks and clocks
maws. Where lips rest does not belie a future

opening. With both my hands, I pressed that favorite hound's
snout shut to see his teeth pop through his skin but

I had not yet been taught in bones. *When you leave,
the dog begged, do not resemble me.*

Dust and Light

I push a girl, some part of myself,
into a pit. In the fall, she breaks
her arm. She mutters to herself and draws
men on the round wall with the good arm.

I think that if I drop blue pebbles
down in the pit, she will decorate. She ignores
the pebbles. She must take them
for rain.

In my free time, I sit by the pit.
At night, I watch stars wheel with her.
We speak to Sirius. He asks, *Do you
remember the time your grandfather killed*

*that buck? And its heart came out
its throat?* Sirius drapes a bleached
sheet over memories like furniture,
like bodies, to preserve them from

dust and light. He pulls the sheet off
in a flourish of white, some magic.
Down there, I'm not hiding
or punishing you. That buck

wasn't a deer, it was a woman,
and her heart rose from a ribbed
pit. So red it was black. Still pumping
within the comforts of her throat.

My Dangling Eyes

Last night, I pulled you
through the bowels of it.
Told you not to deny me.
Asked, where do you want me?
On top. I leaned back, bore
my fingers into the loam
of your abdomen.
Ghosts (I've named them: father,
grandfather) raking my hair.
Licking the lazurite stones
of my spine. You
said, Turn over. Like a fish,
like a man looking away,
like grace. You said
do this thing and I did. Open-
mouthed against the mattress,
slavering the winter
sheets. My dangling
eyes. I could not locate
your face for all the bedroom
dark. You were a cistern
of rainwater. I was a winding
staircase, newel & balustrade.
Smoothed and rounded
by you. When we came,
I cried blood. I tasted
rosehip. Outside the moon
would not meet my eye.

At Least Ourselves

When my best friend from high school writes me, her email is free of indentations. The breath-line endless. The words reek of her optimism and energy that so saved me when we were sixteen. *He's talkin a bit more, well he talks plenty but it's like a whisper, his vocal cords aren't closing properly so they are working on getting volume to his voice.* Part of me is still there – hair dyed blonde from an eight-dollar box, smoking Camel Silvers on her stepfather's front porch (*Rhonda left Tim and he's in Burkeville all by himself...he said My mom fucked him up bad*) while the town collapsed around us. We'd do anything to entertain ourselves – streak through the buckled streets to the weedy playground under a battered moon, fuck boys in backseats and fields, speed past cop cars and dairy farms, attempt to swim the width of Lake Gaston, get drunk in the attic butchering rounds of pool. We even made up a secret dance. After several months, her boyfriend surfaces from his coma like a lake black as bitumen. *He's at least himself.* She tells me he's still unable to walk, but he's wiping himself now (*thank god*). I must get far enough from her and those years to write about them. I'll pen through the dirt and dig up some small mammal blinking against the daylight. *His short-term memory is faulty* and, like everything, is *worse some days than others*. I never asked her the details of the car accident that left the other boy dead. *I go see him at least every other day and stay for a few hours.* How long has she been with him? Nearly a decade? My mind aches at time's blue blur, nauseated at the pulse of its passage. Both our kid sisters have babies now. *Kim is due in November, she is having a little boy.* But both our mothers still search for steady work. We wrote each other letters for years, but I stayed by safe topics like a wall shielding me. I never told her I dated women or thought about killing myself that summer after college. Her email, titled *It's been too long*, ends and I fumble through silence for her voice. I understand now: I broke the legs of the girl I once was so that she wouldn't follow me. That August afternoon, halfway across Lake Gaston, my best friend's body gave out and we had to float on our backs until she could begin again. I want to say to her: if you barely make it, it still counts. *I am doing fine.*

Church Dress

"Little girls observe disaster from a tower of smiles." –Wisława Szymborska

A bit of lace slip
winking from under my Salvation

Army church dress. Watercolor floral, boxy
shoulder pads. My grandmother & great aunt,

smelling of lemon cookies and wet
cat food, respectively, dragged me

and my freckled sisters to that altar.
While our mother dozed in her tomato

garden, and our father knit cross
necklaces out of shoestrings in a Florida

prison cell. Behind that altar a cherry
velvet curtain concealed the tub where Reverend

Land (he smelled like warm mayonnaise)
dunked each of us under in turn.

So eight years later, when a preacher's son
I was trying to fuck asked me

if I'd been saved, I could moan *Yes!*

For the girl engraving a heart into the elementary school yard maple

Carve your name into his back
like quivering tree bark.
After, exhausted by the act, your wrist pulsing

like a little clock, fingers coiled
about the helve, fall asleep
by the trunk. Wet

leaves between you and the worms.
Wake up surprised to find the pocketknife
in your hand, the tip of it

still bloody. Test your pointer finger against it.
Feel it stick for just a moment.
Taste your finger as if you've done this

gesture thousands of times. Move toward the false
laughter of water, that fishing line hooked
in your belly. When it tugs, gag

from the back of your throat –
the black boot of the man you swallowed still
kicking. Wash the knife in the water until it grins,

all high sun and silver. They will come
searching in the night, lantern light
bouncing off the boulders like bodies.

Do not fight when they find you.
Keep your canine teeth from clicking. Dazzle them
with one of your many faces. Hide the knife

back under a sleeve of skin.
When they threaten to throw you
in the lake, when they bind

your wrists and ankles together, let them name you
witch. Don't admit to the chorus of bleeding trees.
The forest will find its own fool to blame.

That winter, addicted to snow

I rattled all nine doorknobs of your body, wrote love letters to the living room windowpane that broke the warbler's neck, and my father hatched his first heart attack. I didn't care much for birds until I discovered the delicate way they have of dipping into death. Unlike the black umbrella and pine shaving mess we make of it. That winter

your jaw finally fell off its hinge
like a southern cellar door. I imagine
my father grinning

as he went down, groping at the banister or table edge that refused him, a folksong tangled in his black beard. The pressure building in his eyes until they swelled with smoke. Nothing about you reminds me of him, and for that I kiss the opposite rim of my cup each night. Addicted to snow, I slept with every drift that would have me. I tried to fashion arms but nothing in nature would hold

still. Your promises were all bottle-fed
by then, inbred. I made you
a new paper jaw. I said *don't*

get it wet. So you stopped speaking and swallowing. The silence mouthed me, moved the snow to jealousy. We're in our last winter together; I can taste it acrid, assured. Though it's been a decade since I last spoke to him, my mother suggests I call my father. *Maybe you could see him once – before*. I am running out of other seasons to avoid, dashes to jump from. Sometimes I think falling in love is as accidental as clicking your eyes closed and pointing at the nearest human heat. I never trusted your want for me

because it lacked agency. Weak
as a watermark. Limpid, loyal
hound, having spent all your chase

on thin-wristed summers before my all-or-nothing language. The trench knife that was and was not lining my sleeve. My pockets chinking with teeth, bullets, and faceless coins. I know you'll never meet my father. I'll keep him to myself like a secret, like a love letter in a warbler nest. The rusty jaw among what I hoard. I only own one photo of him and you've already forgotten how much we do not look alike. That winter rocked me, shushed me as I said: *One day he will be fond of me*.

Stories for Children

The machinery of a parrot's eye, its round remoteness, listless pupil. In this children's book, my grandfather will be a parrot longing for teeth and my grandmother will be a raccoon who can speak to the dead. Let the pages leave a gold powder on the wet fingers that work their way through them.

The stories should balloon and swell like a tide watermarking the tip of a banana-shaped moon. As a girl, I was taken with the Ark and the Flood. I tried to imagine all those animal pairs swallowed by the stomach of the ship. Two giraffes heads nodding on their long necks to an ocean's cradling. Surely, Noah was not the only unwicked man? In the basement of the church, my mouth lined with the grit of orange juice and cheap vanilla cookies, I posed this question to my grandmother. She sucked her lips and later hid my baby dolls under the back porch steps, which was fine because by then I was following boys around for their better toys. I slunk through the alleys like a hound, but I was never really beaten. I'd just inherited shame and wore it well like a fine lady in her mother-of-pearl necklace as she angles and tucks her chin like a swan before a gold-framed mirror. In this story, let my father be a lost beagle on a long journey through the Ozarks back to the boy he loves, his pads worn thin from loyalty. Make it like every animal book I loved best as a child. In this story, let my mother be. And, if nothing else, form her into the hummingbird that accidentally got caught in our house, but managed to find its way out into the arms of August. My fingertips and mouth should be stained gold. Let us become strong swimmers if the Flood can't find the will to subside. Give the raccoon the best scraps of tin and turn her face from the graveyard's prattle. The parrot should be shooed away pairless, toothless. The dolls happy to be forgotten under the howling house.

Soap

because healing is slow

belly of blood
the body thy kingdom

come when he told me
he would wash
my mouth with a bar
of soap I believed him

I licked a decorative seashell
shaped soap to prepare myself
he would not be gentle will
be done the inside
of my mouth would bruise fruit
that seemed okay to eat
on the outside

my mother prevented this
but what more is there than a human
touching another our girl
lives oscillated
around the prospect

of his hands skins collision
my finger makes patterns
in your sweat on my summer

stomach when my grandmother shot
her first buck did his belly
fill with blood under his guidance
our Father who art
she leads my mother
electrode silence padded
cell winter that drive to the abortion

clinic in Brooklyn how the shock
might have cradled her head
had it happened by God
the way you cradle mine

The Girl Against a Feast of Snow

Outside a raven makes a noise like underwater, and I can't help
but think of you – my white dog year, the town I came to
after I buried the bodies in Ohio's stomach, her golden head

on a birdbone bed. I could never explain to you why I walk
through cemeteries like parks. But I believe you watch a window
when I'm not around. You're praying for a figure in a red peacoat

against a feast of snow. If she's coming or going, I don't yet know.
I wish I had been myself, not in secret, but just like everyone else –
in the open no one owns. It took me a decade to realize this.

What I lost along the way: cheap sundresses, my father's claw
hammer, postcards of parrots, half a boy's face, the colors
of my hair. Regardless of whose neck I'm pressing

my mouth against, there'll always be someone thinking of you.
I will try to leave an exit propped open. The smell
of blood like home cooking in the air can lead you out of the maze

of my mouth. I can't be sure if anyone I knew before you is real
or figment. This half fiction life – one foot on the Capitol Limited,
the other testing the depth of a grave like water. Your voice, the barb

of a hook in my cheek: *I love you, Caitlin. Can't that be enough?*

A City like Teeth and Nameless

Why don't I do more to amuse myself? Why is my mouth naturally poised to no? I want to live in a city with a scab ceiling & asphalt, my skinny voice bone gritty. Let them sand everything about me to pulp or dust. I'll take up smoking 100s by a barred window blistered with rain. Blue smoke stroking my cheek like the tail of a cat flicking with human impatience. I want to fuck women again. But my little black dress is semen stained, there's glitter stuck between my teeth, and night has me, again, by the hair. The New Year's Eve I missed when I was twenty-two, my head under a batter bowl while a mother recovered from a hammer stitched in her skull. Wine in my cupped hands, ash pearling my neck. My neck. Which a boy mistook for a waistline. His voice a thin chain from nose to navel. I opened my mouth expecting a spider to spill out, baby spiders nestled on her back. Instead an olive tree forced my lips like a howl. Let my body be no more than a root in a tree full of cities. Let this line amuse someone – the cat or the stain or the spider.

His Howl Always Opening

Death swells against
the windows
I sleep behind.
The heat of her small
face on the glass. She can be this
young, no more than a toddler.
Her baby hair like lamb's
ear, catching the light
of a humming moon.
Sometimes death is a man
with spindly legs, silk
knot cufflinks, shirt collars
ironed. We talk
over hot drinks. Coffee, tea,
toddies (if I have the honey).
He comes and goes
through the refrigerator door.
His teeth are pointed
and if I accidently brush
his skin he moves
as if struck by steam.
As a child, I masturbated
to an open dictionary and death
was belittled. Now
he's mostly a dog, a big white
dog, crossing a country
road. He's always hit
by the same car, his howl
always opening
outside our world.
Humans can only hear
if they're listening,
if they're lying
in bed letting fear cradle
their bodies through
the wet mouth of clockwork,
all its advancing dark.

My Spine, Your Eye

How clean my hands are.
No shadow of the throats

I piano wired shut.
Braid my hair I said to winter

but be over. When I smell
diesel and a ticking

stove, I think of the man
I loved before you. I'm still

shaking Virginia and West
Virginia from my hair. *I can taste*

the Appalachian in your spine you
whisper. Each vertebrae a lazurite

stone. For a glimpse of where blue
was born, I slit your eye.

Inside, a baby rabbit mouthed
the air for milk. I gutted

the rabbit's shame, it grew still.
Oh season, oh lover –

one and the same, when I drain you
of will, drain you of chlorophyll.

Breaking Animals

When we kissed in the produce area,
between the Avalon lemons and the scent
of mangos, did other couples wish
they had such passion? If only they knew
how long I had you circle me, the lead
rope I broke you with and the hunt
that came before it. How I starved you
to crave to be chased. I followed your tracks
in the snow through November's cathedral.
Not knowing what animal I pursued. Bent
on the promise of a ripe mouth. The hunt
held a match to my spine's wick. It burned
all December & January until I caught
you in my puddle of pink
wax. Shivering, the light
returned by February.

But one night, when you weren't
looking, I shed my clothes and diamond
-patterned skin. I bathed in the mercury
milk of the moon. For you, this crown
of blue rubies embedded in my skull
taking hostage the light. Kneedeep
in old snow, I prayed myself a paler soul.
Gentle mammal you'd finally want
to hold. Instead of this witch's wolf
pacing the halls of your house and mind
all through the night, itching to get at you –
not still as a stolen child, but *running*.

The First Time You Mention Marriage

Seward, Alaska

On the charter, our captain clubs the halibut's head
with three deliberate swings of a steel bat.
It makes a hollow sound, surprisingly high.
The halibut, no more than twenty pounds, flails
with the last hit and then goes still and stunned.
His gills, O shaped white mouths. They ask why
this change, why this violence?

The boat lurches. My half finished beer tips over.
The rain so fine a mist licking our skins
with salt and fever. The sky shows its gray underbelly,
while mountains pierce the fog like skewered meat.
As the boat slides, our captain flings the halibut
into the bilge. *Is it dead or alive?* I risk.

He shrugs, rain gathering in the lines
of his face and neck: *Somewhere in between those.*

What You Killed, What You Thought

I'm a quartered moon curling your feet. Useless
prey. *Yes, I guess a part of me*

never wanted to be with you. Build the house,
hew the house. Can't glue together

the splinters of bedroom with come and
crushed cranberry. Your mind now – legless

animal. I look at photographs of
us by those bodies

of water, your ripe mouth frown-stained,
like I was fiddling with that grandfather

clock built into your chest. There was a time
when I knew you though – face, hands, pendulum.

Now I'm undressing with my winter teeth. Chattering
snow and *no*. Please believe me: once, I glanced

out that kitchen window and saw our son
picking up sticks in a fragile coat. I never held

a trench knife behind my back, never
kept a poisonous lip up my flannel sleeve.

I was only mouthing mercy and an aggressive
thirst for you. The blue of my eye, you

could not name it. But I did not make it up.

The first time you kiss a girl

and you are a girl, there is a splash
in the next room. Your mother hems wind
chimes but the wind is snagged
on the top fingers of the cobalt blue pecan
tree. When this occurs, you can forget snow
wilting on downtown side streets, the dimming
shops as day folds into your night-
stand. The old pointer hound is set. The lines
all gather under the crooning fridge where you
thought you'd never have to mop. Listen,
you don't always need your voice.
I just wanted to remind you of this.

Head and Hammer

When they meet
 what is the sound? I know
 nothing of my father's father
 but for a bile ringing on that hill
 shadowing me. After Italy
 cankered, he pulsed
 through hot Pennsylvania
 restaurant kitchens, burning.

His wife discharged five sable
 headed children who softened
 into grain whiskey, bail
 bonds, and briny Lithium.
 Then dissolved – we don't

talk of this. Only through
 rubicund wine, closing throats,
 the flush of impotent night
 does my mother reveal:
 my grandmother, my
 grandfather, how wan a human
 head and how acute the metal.

See, I must believe
 that two can come together
 making azurite towers,
 almond biscuits, laughter
 down effulgent hallways.
 The parents of my father,
 the head, the hammer,
 simply did not.

That bestialized night
 dented our history, this batter
 bowl I am subject to live
 beneath. But now

I know. Head and hammer
 is a keen sound, it
 speaks: *This happened. Please,*
 someone *remember it.*

Death and My Grandmother Talking Over Tea

He sets the kettle, handles the china.
Lemon flavored with a touch
of milk.

Summer light, tinged green around the edges
of its face, sinks
through an open window screen.

She holds the spoon he's given her,
but makes no move to stir the tea
steaming half-finished coils

of speech. She used to have
tea sets. Nice blouses, azaleas,
a parlor. Entire collections of items

and honor. She tries to tell him that
as a girl she'd eat lemons whole. She'd peel
& pluck the sections into her mouth

as if they were orange slices.
Her grandchildren loved hearing this
anecdote about her and he uncrosses

his legs to lean forward. He touches
her bruised hand and whispers, *I know.*
I know.

Pillow

My kid sister is not pinned to a mattress.
Her boyfriend, not crushing the softness of her

freckled face with a pillow. In this one, we're children
locked in our grandparents' house. She is not

three months pregnant, choking on the pillow
that tastes of unwashed hair. Nor will she ever be,

in this dream. I have something urgent
to say to her. But we are bisque doll versions

of ourselves. Mouths and limbs fixed. Full of glue
and sawdust, I cannot articulate the need.

The end of the story is not undone, hollow
braided rope. It just hasn't happened. She's sleeping.

Her face milky and unmarked. No pillow,
no unborn baby, no addled boyfriend

jostling the sawdust from where the threads
have come undone in her. In this dream,

I close the door to the room she is in. I curl up
on the hardwood hallway floor and guard her

from what approaches stealthily – our grandfather,
ghosts circling the high-vaulted ceiling, wolves licking

the edges of the backdoor. In this one,
I let her lie.

If You Never Stop Moving

In Alaska, the end of August is ripe with death. From back home, my best friend writes me after her college roommate is hit by an SUV on River Road while riding her bike home from work. All summer, I watch the fireweed around our porch, eyeing and measuring a change. *I go through most days without getting caught up in thinking about it, and if I do, it's usually for a short time and I make myself stop because I'm with people.* The fuchsia flowers wither into cotton-like seeds. It was late – the driver of the SUV drove away from the scene. I think it was raining that night in our part of Virginia. The leaves, lusty green all summer, rust and yellow even before September opens her legs. Before the bower splits. At least, I know it was raining here. *The memorial was so painful but perfect for her, and so many people were there. Even the aisles had people standing in them.* My boyfriend and I stay up late on a Friday night watching movies, spooning peanut butter ice cream. Lying there, she was alone. It is past midnight when I go to the outhouse, the fireweed along the trail brushing my knees. I do not understand why I am terrified. He told the police he thought he hit a deer. Then I realize the dark has returned without our noticing. *When Steven died, we were all upset, but I hadn't been as close to him as you were. I wish I could go back in time, knowing now how it feels, and comfort you better. All I thought to do was to keep you occupied* so I'm writing my way to October. I want to ask that man what he imagines it is like – to lay along a night riddled road, to know that no one is coming. Or maybe I can get through this fall with my eyes closed. Actually, I don't think the driver ever even stopped. Fireweed thrives in aftermath, blooming in the open space left by a forest clearing or a wildfire. Technically, there is nothing to drive away from if you never stop moving. Still, outside the bar down the road from us, the one that burned down and was rebuilt a few years back, my boyfriend and I watch a massive moose cow amble out of the spruce. Two lustrous, chocolate-eyed calves following her. They are late to be so young for the season. But there they are.

Death sniffing at me yes like a dog jamming its snout in my crotch*

Last night I asked you if you'd live
forever if given the chance. *I might*

do it for a little while. Infinity, like death,
doesn't work that way. I lord it over you,

that I have known more people to die. Virginia
reeks of it – my grandfather aortaless, my college friend

shot in the side of the face, another rolling off
the windshield of an SUV into a Richmond ditch.

When we were sixteen, my best friend hit
a big white dog with her car. It was August, night.

We pulled over and ran to it. His body stiffened
in parts – neck, spine, legs, paws. He lifted his tail

and shat on himself. My friend turned away crying,
but I looked that dog in the eye as if he'd spoken.

A few months ago, the car accident that killed the driver
left her boyfriend in a coma, his brain pushing

out an opening they cut in his skull. I stopped
calling her. Death might be nothing – an August

night sky soaked in light pollution, a Virginia back road,
some littered ditch. It might be a dog, a big white dog

always about to say what he never says.

**After a line by C.K. Williams*

Your Two-Year Vigil

coatless in a field of Ohio snow. I have come out
of our winter limping, alive, eyes limpid
as a serpent's. Finally buried your voice, grating

orison, in the gray ground beneath the fractured
cornstalks. This began with your trusting
skin, canvas for my milky

depravities. Remember the night you caught my hands
between your own, choking? I left you standing in pearls
of bar smoke holding a clawed-off limb. Once, we were coiled

in my bed under blond slants of afternoon light
which plotted bars across your face. Temporality stalking
the corners of the room, hungry. I wanted you

with me, and gone from my life. I squinted through the smog
of a hung-over self disgust, your arm across my chest,
your eyes wet with an undaunted film. You asked

only, *Will you write about me one day? Will you
write a poem to me?* But all that came was one line: a rushed
goodbye in the margins. If I ever write a love poem, I will be in love

with what dies in its blood on my bedroom floor,
or inside me, the decaying parts waiting to curdle, drop away.

White Horse, Black Cow

Ghost in pajamas, I am a child
 sleepwalking the house. Father sleeps deep
as a pike and his teeth among river stones.
 You hatched
from the yolk of your mother's eye.
 My parents must have spoke
of sons but your parents had them.
 Father left, his laughter hung & spoiled
in the air like low fruit. Grandfather finally died
 the year mother buried the border
collie under the pecan tree.
 My knowledge of men
cauterized, white-hot metal forgetting.
 Our son prepares himself
like a bride in my belly. In my dreams, a girl I loved
 loved her white horse and black cow so much
that she slit their throats in front of me
 with a boning knife. The field rotating.
Blood lapping our bare feet. The animals
 did not notice until their knees
gave, eyes roving and then settling on us
 bathed in betrayal. This actually happened.
I woke up and could smell blood in the air
 sweet as sausage, sweet as my father's fruit.

My Mother and I Visit an Art Museum

That December we walked through the VMFA's Chihuly exhibit, surprised at a mutual interest. The heat in her house was out. I was sleeping on a couch that dipped in at its center. My life in an upswing of chaos. Playground panic, wind-up toy soldier, the lover I'd left in the furthest state. His mind clenching like a flower before its death. I read my mother's journal aloud. My mouth sliding like snow into a black river. I made winter the enemy. I made her the enemy. We passed each other like ghosts in a nightgarden of orchids. *Father*, she wrote, *forgive the child her pointed teeth, mend the growing fork in her tongue*. To spare her I slept my lips like a slitted ophidian eye. In the museum, we marveled at the towers of tendrilled glass. The globes – planetary blends of onyx and green. Every stranger's body was a finger accusing me of ruining him. The skin on her face drooped more than the last time I'd seen her. Her back turned to me like a speech: *I know you wrote of lamplight and the stupidity of moths. I know you think of us this way and how you fled during the farmhouse fire you started as a distraction. We love you still, but we do not like you*. At the exhibit, a man tried to steal a hand-blown bowl. Back in Alaska, my boyfriend's older brother convinced him not to kill himself.

Finally

I've drawn up the strings running
through the loose skin of my neck.

I've undangled my eyes, socket stuffed.
Made ready. I've plucked the hairs

from my mouth, covered its malachite
with a stain of tundra berries.

I've curled my eyelids with a hot iron.
Wiped what drips from my ears

and nose with a damp cloth. Made myself
a delightful doll, child-woman. I sit on a bed

or a chair, flaccid arms folded,
lip line sewn shut. They've taken

my teeth, pliered out my fingernails.
What might break skin. My tongue

too, I've relinquished, forking and bloody.
All stuttered stump. Humble and hairless.

I'm shell enough now to deserve you.

For My Lost Sundresses

In pictures from my college days,
my smiles are pained blonde
children made to pose by their mother's
piano. The disuse of my stomach
and thighs covered by paisley dresses,
thrift store finds. It is the dresses I miss,
not the variations of girl. One dress – yes,
black and white, tight under the breasts,
if I could wear it again I would
be on a farmhouse porch smoking
Pall Malls with a longhaired boy I loved
without loving. The summer sunlight
absorbed by the tire swing maple
sheltering us. You remember. The tree
my little sister climbed when she was drunk,
just disappeared into the belly of branches.
She would always do what I could not.
On the ride home, I cried and confessed
I considered killing myself in Berlin.
The reasons for giving it away or throwing
it out I can't recall, but the dress is gone.

I Will Be a House of Closed Cages

The boy who sweeps the rooms of my body
collects bird cages. He is not diligent
but present. I've taught him the safety
of rooms and he touches the broom handle blue.

All his cage doors are open. *But where are the birds?*
He ignores me, turns his head to the window
my mother leapt through (my father
calls this *falling*). The boy doesn't yet know:

rooms must have exits or that exits
can be made. All he needs are bits of chalk,
line longing, bedpost anger. Wind
from warbler wings he glued together.

My piecemeal child,
I wanted you for your broken doll
face, your malachite mouth and how
it matched my need for knives. You can't

collect cages if you don't understand wire. You
can't draw trapdoors if you never acknowledge
the floor. Yes, I pressed against other boys
and girls in the hotel bathroom with its audience

of swan faucets and gold mirrors. Yes, I let him
rough red lipstick across my cheek
with his thumb. I let him change my face.
I am not a bird. I am the one who hid

the butcher knife and the chalk.
Oh, you never knew
I was hunting you but how you loved
that rifle resting against your neck.

Losing It

God came to me like a drunken man
 running from a car accident. God came

at me with a mouth full of snow, blood
 & broken teeth. I used to be alone.

I used to wake up without an arm across my neck.
 No boys or gods licking the sole of my shoe

or testing the rope ladder hooked in my lower lip.
 But sinning is storytelling – you

always look them in the eye. Your body
 always betrays you. God came to me

like the accident itself. No, he came at me like the tree
 that parted the car, or the girl that parted

the windshield. The only car accident I was ever in
 was the night I lost my virginity in the backseat.

God wasn't there.
 Just a frightened, frightened boy.

Ashtray and Bone-line

It was never necessary – the kicked in
backdoor. The cat yowling to be released
from the kitchen's terrible dark. Hair
and blood carpeting the sink.
This violence of family cracking
against the walls like a flung ashtray
or the mockingbird that broke its neck
on the same window every September.
My mother kept a baseball bat
under her bed back then. I knocked
a glass from my nightstand and saved
a pointed triangle of it. Men
or boys striking matches in the attic
for all the boredom we'd given them.
Coal trains threatening to stray
from the tracks, puncture the house's
practiced taciturnity. Maybe
it was just our own ghosts fingering
the fringes of bed sheets, begging
to climb in. Maybe I wrote it all,
a christening on pages of bone-line.
How my sisters and I nailed
the body of that mockingbird
to our mother's last living apple tree.

Body, Baby, Water; Moon

"We begin in admiration and we end by organizing our disappointment." –Mary Ruefle

"I've never met a man without demons. Not the priest with his scourge, nor the sailor..."
–Traci Brimhall

I wrote the bite of the moon. I wrote myself a trapdoor but first I had to make myself a floor.

I wonder, what was my father like as a boy? And then I realize that I never much wondered what he was like as a boy and I certainly never asked him this. I am as remote to him as a child as I like to believe I am to the child I was.

I suppose I could call him if the question is important enough. I would say, *Look, sir, I can't write about the moon without you.*

The boy I sleep beside now has what every man has
in the black lake of him.

But oh, looking out over the water –

Last night, my boyfriend and I saw a heavy harvest moon. In what I could watch for a long time, his interest is often momentary. Not unappreciative, but his appetite for wonder and movement is sharpened and he scans the night sky for another pregnant moon (he always wants to have something to tell me about).

We have different philosophies on this. I believe if you are still somewhere long enough something will happen and *then* you follow the leaver's urge – north, as far as you can go in your best coat.

Can I know so little about who my father is and was and not think this informs how I understand myself?

My mother, who never left, I know less and less. We shrink away from each other like light down a tunnel that lengthens and lengthens.

And I know about lengthening. I stretch my body so that I might identify and squeeze out its meanness.

This reminds me of a story my grandmother told us
about a boa constrictor that ate a baby
and they stretched out the snake and cut
the lump from the snake's body

but the baby
was already dead.

At my boyfriend's parents' house the other day, a young warbler, the color of its feathers not yet fully changed, flew into the glass of the kitchen window and fell to the earth. His cousin rushed out and came back in, the warbler blinking in her cupped palms. His cousin and mother cooed over the bird, but I was immediately disinterested.

Faking interest in the baby bird reminded me of faking interest in my seven-month-old niece when I was home for Christmas last December. And my mother's disgust.

I'm telling you this because, if you've implicated my father or mother, you are wrong.

It was my little sister's baby, the wet niece that I held awkwardly while my mother cooked Christmas ham and pies, which brought my father back into the story.

I speak of his reentry, but it was in my little sister's life; I didn't see him. The last time I saw him is still a decade ago when he held the proofs of my senior photos, which he couldn't see through his glaucoma, and told me how pretty I was.

I think my boyfriend's father watches me like a snake in the grass, but not without some affection.

When my little sister told me she was pregnant over the phone, I cried – helpless remote sound, which she did not acknowledge. I told her to give the phone to our mother who hushed us both and said, *I know*.

Does the boy in my bed know the myths his father made? Does he go behind his father collecting them like fallen leaves, careful of mouths coiled in the grass?

I don't have to invent my father's myths. Leaving creates a cathedral of myth. I will give this gift to a lover, a child.

The last time I wrote of the moon, I fell asleep with my mouth open I was so bored with myself.

When they knew she was pregnant, my little sister's boyfriend called our father to tell him the news because no one else would. My little sister says she went into another room and closed the door so she would not hear them talking and laughing.

Apparently our father said, *You think it's hard being with her? You should try being married to their mother.*

If I spoke to him I would tell him that much of his problem is that he never had the dignity to see himself and his family as more than the punch line of a barstool joke.

My little sister had the baby that June.

My father was all about the moon, singing the moon. Now I just imagine him distant and muffled like voices when you are under water.

Like my mother, did he distrust me even when I was small?

I don't think so. This is why I have no anger to offer up to him. Only remote pity that rests close to indifference.

My mother left to run errands that December and, in the kitchen, the baby stared at me while I tried to ignore her.

How a body on top of another body could create her. How a body on top of another body can suffocate.

When she was a few months pregnant, my little sister's boyfriend held a pillow over her face. Almost exactly a year later, she called me to say that our father's sister had died but his mother, whom we'd all thought dead for a decade, was still alive.

I could make nothing
out of the death and the life.
I fell asleep with my mouth
open, my mouth
waiting for boys
in the sweetness of grass.

What My Grandmother Didn't Say

Pray to the one that cuts you off at the knees.
The one that wicks you to a need.
I mistook the lion for a lark. Married
the schoolboy busy yanking other girls' braids.

In each generation a girl started to burn.
Witch child ringing his dreams.
Kittenish schoolgirl tugging at the zipper
of his mouth. Unsealing a horror, our history.

Grandchild, you'll know him nightmare.
Feel him fingering the waistline of a doll.
His mouth soaked & sealed against your own.
No one will be allowed to speak.

He finger folded daughters to paper dolls.
Tongue traced granddaughters' tender jaws.
Your mother didn't speak to him, but wrote a letter
of blood pinched from her eyes. What never saw.

O, birdcage wire my jaw. Tongue black
while he dies under a church pew. Leave him there.
Forgive every daughter to pinch to pulp his eyes.
Cut him well above the knees. Pray for a son.

Limitations of the White Dog Year

I've shown you
my mausoleum.
You've peeled your palm
to its pillars of slate blue and
burnished copper. We've
discussed as many aspects
of dying as I can
remember. You know
my cat and cradle child-
hood, my many moon
and spoon faces. Dignity
caught in the convex
mirror, angle of glared
light. The song from the radio,
your sweat on my stomach.
This still air. The smell
my exhausted sex. In the gold pan,
in the well bucket, all I pull up
are animal poems. An inward
gaze. You're my white dog
year. I try to let your body
ground me to the radio,
the room, the man we saw
outside the gas station, his cup
of change, his face lines
like my father's, who'll
sleep on the ground tonight.
Your body, beautiful
as the straw
stones that comprise it,
is not enough.

Dawn Blue, Morgue White

In the worst of my nightmares,
I am my mother
but myself. I fall asleep

in my freshman dorm and wake up in my grandfather's
den: what he called the Hunt Room. My hair has grown
past my uncovered waist, just how

he likes it. My face pressed against the slats
of the timeworn radiator. I can see where
my mother, as a girl, carved people

into decades of layered paint with the tip
of her stolen pocketknife. Too late I realize
that the carvings are warnings of a touched

child. My older sister crawls across the ceiling.
She drops into the bed on a string – possessed, sexual,
spinning. On top of me. I cannot scream, her mouth

on my mouth. Her mold flecked breath.
The room blue as a suffocated infant.
The ghost of my grandmother, invisible,

raises the Tiffany lamp from the nightstand,
wields it over my sister's head, who springs
naked from the bed, screams from the room.

I rise like a shaking bride. I leave the Hunt
Room, cross the carpet, finger
the balustrade, and enter my grandparents'

bedroom. Where the ballooning
body of my grandfather waits
under a morgue white sheet.

To My Little Sister, Driving Drunk

I love you still, but like blood this is
with borders, a dilutability. It runs

out. Like that country road you throb
through spitting carmine

and vermillion. Don't you know –
each mutable thing pummels head

first into its own beginning? Claim
a path hacked with your own dull

blade, your own hemic palms, not what
happens to unfurl before your callow

feet. Look. All these scarlet tanagers tethered
to our wrists by our parents and our parents'

parents, let us cut them, the cords.
Watch the birds stutter in the air, their brittle

chests undulating. Watch the wind shoulder
them north, away. But you're blindfolded

by the soiled circumstance that made us both
hungry, tapping the walls of coarse wood

paneling for the resonance of castles. Remember
violence? How it floats to the surface,

how blood under skin petals upward.
I want to live quiet knowing that you are

living quiet. Not, as you are, barreling down
a back road. The contour of your death –

a deer behind an inflamed maple tree
waiting to startle and jump.

He was the son of someone

just an itch inside my stomach
a desire

a metaphor simply means
something for someone else

we each have a grandfather

the son of someone and she was

I talk to you about it & we agree
to have children
only sons

of future men someone's father

her body under a church pew

eating threads of her

does it matter
if I am forgotten

the salt and shadow coiled
looks like a horse

ride away on
what hair we have left

here

a raccoon speaking for the dead
Listen. my grandmother married

a parrot with teeth
forgive him

to be forgiven

he crawls up my throat

to mistake

what he was:

a daughter

never

a small army

holding

her mouth over a crystal doorknob

smelling her
hair

if I am forgiven or
the bloodshot shape

in the black spruce
we could escape on

the sons of daughters red as

a woman hobbled to keep her

in love with

my grandfather

the man who wanted a daughter to
for a mouth

Animal Tooth Wet &

Animal tooth wet &
loose I learned the way
to water by taking a hammer
to each kneecap You were a boy
birch bent broken swing chain
Stop me if you've heard
this one A summer
turtle shell of half picked meat
The two men that watched you
from their stopped car the two men
that licked that shell clean
How a human tongue never
reminded you of a dog's
You traded hipbones for high
country The book of nightmares
written by ankle scabbed
children you recognize
one of them as the boy who hung
himself from the magnolia
while you chewed clover
and gave up calling your mother
ma'am threw her favorite
kitten in Crystal Lake
like a lover skipping
stones

Another Poem to My Father

Grating his knuckles across the face
of his Gibson, frayed heartsick as his 80s
denim jacket, brandishing his Camel-soaked
hands in front of our moon and spoon
faces to see if we're dead or faking. He snapped
three fingers off for our attention
one for each doubting daughter.

That wily cat, slick from the milk pail
he gamboled right into, been trying
to catch my ear for years –

Got your nose, Catie Boo-Boo!

Well, I got your mouth, Nick.
I got the whole apple & pie story, cooked it up
myself. Listen how it spins: You weren't
the father of my mother's dead baby.

You aren't in the photo album she cracked
open like a Virginia summer
watermelon, her chin quivering
over the first husband: *That's Jim.*

He was the love of my life. Shit,
you weren't even the second husband.

I know about you – the body parts
forfeit along the whiskey-eyed road. Italy. Pennsylvania
Key West, our Virginia, that cabin
in Tennessee. Don't leave it to me. I got too much
living to do anywhere else.

When You Ask What I Was Like as a Girl

Let our childhoods meet among wolfless trees. Carnavalesque horrors always *just outside* the light of your mother's teeth. So you stayed in her fear, you never tested the night's sleepless

water. Let our childhoods meet on the log over King Creek, where the puppy broke her leg when I pushed her off. Mud on my hands, leaves in my hair, I carried her the mile home, both of us crying at my mistake. Let me be

left staggering. Let me be punished. I can finally feel the rock hit the back of my head instead of my little sister's, and you can be the boy who threw it. We'll undo the rope from the oak tree branch where he hung himself.

You can come back as my mother's engagement diamond lost and gleaming in her vegetable garden. Or you can be my father, if only for the moment I went under at the community pool and no one else was watching. I'll be the guitar

pick between his thumb and tobacco stained forefinger. Or the tick he burned on the hood of his truck with a match. What lesson was that? How to love the dog by removing it from her ear? The wide girth

to give a man with fire? When we meet, don't be the boy next door who beat the copperhead to death with the chain. Don't be the chain. Don't be the snake. When that boy threw the rock he just wanted the red

of my sister's hair, not her blood. I shoved the collie from the log because I wanted to be left alone. Isn't that innocent enough? I was so patient with the man in the alley who asked me not to run. I was so tolerant

of my grandmother force-feeding us lemon cookies and humming down her husband's hallways in distress. Take back the church pew he held us beneath. Let us meet among trees. This time

we'll be the wolves. When they discover the girl's body in that same alley, no – when my mother looks one last time, the yolk of a summer sun sinking beyond the trees, let her find that diamond. Let the tomatoes and cucumbers

rejoice. Let my father loosen his jaw's snare. Let the trapline running parallel to my spine be ruined by snow, be ruined by time. Let our childhoods stay far from each other. Leave them lost. Starving among disparate trees.

The Walk Home

When the children threw rocks at you.
When the high school boy whistled from the front
door of his family's home, exposing his penis.
A white flash. His grin. No words.
Oh, what could you do
but change your route?

I know how hard the walk home can be.
I took that same path worn slippery, worn thin
like the voice of the bearded man
in the alley murmuring *don't*
run: they always run or the liquid
eyes of the neighborhood Coonhound
begging *love me:*
touch me.

She was not our mother.
The woman who met you at the door,
sat with you at the wide kitchen table, served you
lemon cookies and loved
your red hair cut like a boy's.
You will place no blame on her.

What if I told you,
even while she dies on a mirror
she mistakes for her own dead mother,
our grandmother protected no one.
She let all of this – the rocks, the boy
exposing himself, the neighbors' starving
dogs, us alone with him in that room – rise
to fruition and make itself at home
when she opened a shrill window, let in
a lark that turned out to me a lion.

And what you hate began
with what you adore.

In which my father sends me a birthday card

Twenty dollars my mother says twenty dollars
I say and my tongue is riddled incredulous

I am twenty-six today splitting stomach seam lily
pink hole a third of my life clicked closed like a rifle

or an eye black as licked coal did he spell my name
correctly I ask and she doesn't laugh but reads *I could*

ve ben a better father figure I could have been
a lot of things a bird for example

a lamppost the blue on a different man's tongue
I tell her I have to go now but to send the money

keep the card he's in a cabin in Tennessee breastfeeding
his second heart attack like an infant/lover the walls

of the room shrinking in on him oh he'll sleep
fine in a shoebox he won't remember the hammer

his father used to peer inside his mother's skull you
could have been a father or a figure just the pillow

indentation of a man's head heavy with fluid and
teeth beside me but even that is rising fast I have one

picture of him I hid it between my legs when that didn't
work I hid it between the pages of an anthology of women

poets I show it to the spruce trees and lampposts
when they demand to know if I am progeny

if I even came from anywhere (remember the attic
ladder of his mouth the snakeskin sheets the night

train that came through the north facing windows
of the house) I'll take the poisonous bite of green

apple from his mouth I'll let dogs climb
trees and birds bury bones just spare me

the wormy rib the excremental afterglow my mother
she never got around to mailing me that cash.

What I really wanted: sons with hands

soft and fingerless as oven-mitts. Landscape
generic smiles. Fox fur caps, dog

whistles, red wagon races. No blood
on their breath. But I had to bury

the blue baby shoes, because all I got was this fistful
of daughters and birdlime. The oldest grows

her fingernails long and pointed as lectures
while wasps make nests in her coils

of hair. It was the famine year, all we had
to eat were the candlesticks. Hounds

tightening concentric circles around the house.
Everything was closing in when the second

girl was born, the floor plan and chambers
of her heart elaborate as a plantation manor.

But her teeth rest in the grass like a tangle
of cottonmouths. She drops her jaw, peels

back her lips, and flashes us her sickly white
gums and tongue. We all dance

wide orbits away from her.
Now the third girl is born, pristine

and pupilless. Let me long for nothing but these
mice, my cat mouth.

When Asked If I Still Want Children

I wonder if you will be hungry
when you come
to me. My only son. A mouth
like a pulpit. Fist-first.
I close my legs
to madness, men. I whisper *not yet*. I will
still be who I am when your voice drips
down the humid walls of me. Spark
spun, half-mute, roofing nail in the soft
sole of my foot. I'll off your milk
like slaver, like a screen-door season.
Finger for a father. Coal for
an ovary. The lime root of a rotten
tooth. I dare you, I dog
you – choose a hole in me
and fall from it.

Talk of love these days

starts me yawning. Coffee beans low
in the icebox, soupy water cooling
in unwashed pots above the slop bucket.
I've thought a lot about love
and come up with only castbacks.
A raven scared the chickadees
away from the seed this morning.
In my dream last night, my mother
was scrubbing and scrubbing
the walls of my cabin,
muttering to herself, *I had three
daughters, but I keep counting four.*
When you consider the whole
of love, there is always someone
missing or, worse, an apparition added.
My cheekbones ache with directives,
Don't have any children. Don't track in the snow.
I talk more with my mirror and dead
boys than the one sleeping in my bed
each night. This mundanity at the core.
It's like biting into a tight peach
or pear only to find it hollow.
You've taught me love's tastelessness.
After eating only rich and fatty
foods for months, my tongue
hardened. Now it just perches
in my mouth, useless, songless
canary that might have been
more amused in the mine.

