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PEPPERMINT

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Anthony Isaac Bradley

December 2017

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PEPPERMINT

English

Missouri State University, December 2017

Master of Arts

Anthony Isaac Bradley

ABSTRACT

This collection contains poetry introduced in a critical way via a theory-based creative nonfiction essay. The work included is a meditation on what identity means on both an intimate and a larger scale, and how the two might be affected by the choices we are faced with from a young age. Elements of pop culture are used alongside rural elements of the surrounding areas to illustrate changing or stagnant viewpoints on topics such as masculinity, gender norms, and queer expression. *Peppermint* is a document of my mind as it once was, and how it has been shaped up to this moment.

KEYWORDS: poetry, creative nonfiction, gender identities, motherhood, sexuality, queer theory

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Sara Burge
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

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Approved:

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection would not be possible without the help of many, many people.

Here are a few.

I would like to thank Jessica Glover for convincing me to try on the poetry shoe, and Marcus Cafagña for helping me to take baby steps away from “so what” poems. Thank you to Dr. Lanya Lamouria for listening, and showing me just how great a teacher can be. Thank you to Dr. Erin Kappeler for guiding my work. This English Department has kept me alive.

I am in debt to Sara Burge, in a big way. I would die 4 U, obviously.

Natalie Byers, Steven Wright, Christine Deken, Aron Reeves, D. Gilson, Davy Tran, Jennifer Murvin, and Nemma. You own my dumb, needy heart.

I dedicate this collection to my mother.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

This is something I can't write about: my mother tripping over her own feet and crashing face-first into our living room carpet. I can tell the story in a factual way, how fast she was moving, how this is the only time I remember her chasing me while laughing. I can't describe her laugh, though I would like to. It's not something she gave easily. I can, however, describe the aftermath in great detail.

My mother was not a reader, nor did she have any desire to write. I have friends whose mothers were at least slightly embedded in academic culture, and most of them are currently following that same path, whether it be teaching, or just a few words here and there for fun. Some of us actually want to follow in our parent's footsteps.

I certainly tried, but only in the literal sense. I don't know how old I was at the time, but I remember trying on the large, plain slippers that she left in the bathroom. I didn't stop there, trying on her slip and big-as-my-head brazier. Later I would attempt to preserve these moments through the interpretation of poetry.

I don't know if I'm one of those men who look for replacement mothers or not. There could be a moment of dislike should I meet someone who reminds me of her, or where I'm from. As an undergraduate, I avoided a mention of Stoutland, Missouri. I treated my hometown in the same way my word processor does: as an error marked in red, nonexistent until I chose to accept it into my dictionary. I am not unique in having an isolated upbringing—or in wanting to escape. Artist and author Spalding Gray wrote that “We exist in a fabric of personal stories. All culture, all civilization is an artful web, a human puzzle, a colorful quilt patched together to lay over raw indifferent nature” (ix). In

this collection of poems, the idea is to lift the quilt enough to expose the raw underneath, which feels like an escape to me. I would not—as many near Stoutland had been—become trapped by the indifference and isolation that fueled the farming way of life I’d witnessed.

Although it took years for me to incorporate the details of my hometown into my writing, I’ve never been afraid to touch on the time spent with my mother. In fact, the woman makes her way into many of my personal narratives. One of my mother’s biggest contributions was creating my need to be honest, or blunt. She spent so much time fighting outside influences, deeming them harmful. Trends involving expression. Fashion, sex, individuality. Perhaps she meant well, but the painful irony is that the isolation was decidedly more destructive, at least to me. The evidence of damage is there, and I have a need to be honest with it, and myself. One of Robert Pinsky’s “poet responsibilities” is the following: “We are supposed to mark the evidence, as well as continue the art” (427). He’s referring to documents of the times: *Newsweek*, *People*, *The Atlantic*. As someone who uses poetry to understand and assert an identity, I have marked my own evidence of being, the good and the bad. This has not always been easy, or led to successful results.

In my poems prior to this manuscript, there was a bit too much “shock value” to my diction and subject matter. During a workshop Dr. Jane Hoogstraet would spell out my chosen profanity when quoting lines from my poems, instead of simply stating the words. At the time, I found this to be silly; we were all adults. In hindsight, this helped me to realize that perhaps I wasn’t using suggestive language or themes in the most effective way possible. Personal preferences aside, I began to weigh every word, to be

sure that my choices weren't distracting from the poem's intent. In "Before the Movie," the final line is "All the normal, boring tender shit." With its placement, the off-color word is meant to bring the reader back to the reality of the speaker.

My freshman year poems (I still have them, under lock and key) are loosely held together. They were made from pieces that didn't fit as intended, often containing multiple poems hoping to be one. Looking back, I realize I was trying to take on too much; there was now an outlet, and I went for it, clumsy as my attempts were. I had begun to spit up, with no desire to stop until my belly was emptied. My intro poetry teacher, Jessica Glover, was the first to bring light to whatever was happening with my writing. With her encouragement, I continued, so much so that I switched my focus from fiction to poetry. Glover identified my motifs as *food* and *sex*, and she was not mistaken. In this body of work, poems like "Backstage Pass to Goya's *Witches Sabbath*" show the established comfort with these themes: "Over dinner— / leeks and barley—when he regales her with stories / of other mothers gathered on velvet ropes, who begged." There is food to be had, but "leeks" the word is as unappealing as the thought of eating the thing itself; "ropes" and "begged" allude to imprisonment or bondage, with possible sexual overtones. Attempting to bundle such loaded diction is not something I would have tried in the past. Reaching a level of personal acceptance was integral to my growth as a writer. I tried to avoid these topics whenever possible, as I was wary of obsession.

Yet these motifs—like paternal, "motherly" imagery—have only strengthened the included poems. The "sex" in my work can be both the physical act as well as the related issue of gender. Though the two are not the same, gender identity can be as fluid as two

(or more) bodies communicating, doing what comes natural while still adapting or learning in some way. I think I was afraid of being myself, despite the writing outlet.

I have spent the last few years focusing on gender embodiment. Poems like “Really” and “His Mother was Sick” are about this exploration, the one-toe-in-the-swimming-pool idea, whether this involves crossdressing, or any small subversion of binary roles. I do recognize in my father the idea of unrelenting masculinity. My father is a man beat about by work. His back is damaged from the constant repair of farm machinery, and his hands are covered in infinite scars. He has, however, kept an almost-full head of hair, while I have not. Every injury he suffered adds up to *man*, meaning he will die like his father: using a hammer on some resisting contraption, despite the attachment of a mobile oxygen tank. With fathers, hands often work as a representation of the men themselves, as seen in Jericho Brown’s poem “Prayer of the Backhanded,” which offers a portrait of abuse, father vs. son:

And forgive my forgetting
The love of a hand
Hungry for reflex, a hand that took
No thought of its target
Like hail from a blind sky,
Involuntary, fast, but brutal (8)

Like the speaker in Brown’s poem, I am drawn to the physical details: bone structure, and the clothes that emphasize or hide. *Peppermint*’s thematically central poem, “Why Don’t You Put Her in Charge,” observes the whole “body” as something to be molded. One of the first cinematic characters notable for gender fluidity, Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley embodies characteristics of both binary genders. In this poem, set in a high school gym, the speaker’s struggle to be both is evident:

I thought if something crawling, muscular
Cornered me in the showers
Maybe curious, hungry

I would want to look

Like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*
Greased in space

Waiting on the mystery of another being
Its dark and curling places

Without permission to change
I ask my body to grow taller, to be masculine

Sprout a longer neck to be feminine
Roll my hair for a frame

The speaker prays this is an option, to take on both—as defined during the Eighties—masculine and feminine qualities. He doesn't know that non-binary options exist, because no one has told him this, nor has the world at large offered the encouragement to pursue this way of being; the theme of becoming sexually desired, yet monstrous is embodied by the diction (“dark and curling”) that matches the hyper-weird, sexual alien designs of artist H.R. Giger.

I had recognized cinematic monsters as a symbol of power. Giger's creations were decidedly sexual, with phallic heads and graceful prancing. Here was power and confidence belonging to an outsider. In this fantasy realm, there was the risk of death, but I wanted to—as Ripley would later—be accepted into this world of slick killers. As Ripley looked like no other hero—or woman—I'd seen on film, both her and the Alien became inseparable, blended into a comfort, an ideal, but with a risk.

When searching for a companion, there was no getting around risk. It all had to be in secret, and the attitudes I found in public were always (I thought) going to be contradictory. Speaking on his youth, James Baldwin wrote:

On every street corner, I was called a faggot. This meant that I was despised ... What was not clear at that time of my life was what motivated the men and boys who mocked and chased me; for, if they found me when they were alone, they spoke to me very differently—frightening me ... into a stunned and speechless paralysis. For when they were alone, they spoke very gently and wanted to me to take them home and make love ... I was moved by their loneliness, their halting, nearly speechless need. But I did not understand it. (684)

Nor did I. Verbal abuse was not constant in my experience, but random; unexpected, with no chance to brace against such barrages (if this is even possible, I don't know).

Yet the finite reward of companionship was often worth the danger. Other times, it was not. The poem "His Mother was Sick" comments on the idea of putting yourself in another's hands, juxtaposed with the idea of paternal safety, as the speaker prepares to sleep with a stranger while his elderly mother naps in the adjoining room:

I was only afraid
of hearing this woman cough
through the door

as I was being nursed
to her son's breastbone

The speaker is afraid of everything: the chance of discovery, and the possibility of being taken advantage of. Baldwin's confusion and fear was outweighed by his need for contact, and emotional fulfillment (for himself and others). "His Mother was Sick" illustrates the speaker's fears becoming reality: "I pulled at his hair to say / I had never been so weightless, / never done this before—," while also conveying that the need will always outweigh the risk, and that one must continue looking, even when haunted: "and

if you were to ask, / he will never be / my first / but his breath slips in / when I'm holding
tryouts / for that stout medicine / peppermint." Because in the end, this is about the
attempt to understand.

I had little understanding of personal identity as a youth. I recall being frozen while my classmates undressed around me, fearful that of being caught the moment I summoned enough courage to glance up, and around. At the same time, I was thinking about what it might be like on the other side of the gym, where the girls were changing as well. Back to Sigourney Weaver: the "mystery of another body," the iconic image of Ripley carrying both a child and flamethrower. This embodied the two sides of the locker room. In both attraction and emulation, I found it difficult to "choose," as the binary held stimulating aspects. If a god was overseeing us, I wondered what the deity thought of my desire to be on both sides of the changing room, should they be listening.

Make no mistake: queer identity poems share this semblance of reader/listener participation, and an author's fear of perceptions. There is a moment in William S. Burroughs's novel, *Queer*, where Lee muses on the pitfalls of confessing his identity to a random bartender. "I'm queer, you know, by the way," Lee imagines saying, with low expectations on a good response, or any (35). In this moment, the truth is that not everyone wants to understand, or can: "The [bartender] yawns and changes the subject, and you don't know whether he understood or not." *Who wants to know?* This question can lead to an inner hesitation when it comes to writing the truth about oneself, at least in the beginning. I once workshopped a poem based on my relationship with a transwoman, this before I came to realize I was pansexual, well before I was comfortable with myself. The act of presenting my experience under the cover of poetry—as a way to come to

terms, and reach out for acceptance—was a turning point for me. It was only a year earlier that I found a copy of Andrew Sullivan’s *Virtually Normal* in the library, and was ultimately too afraid to carry it to the checkout. Poems like “Public Safety” illustrate these old, clinging fears about expressing queer relationship or identity in public:

When trying to get laid
one teenage boy should not say to another
that there is this place downtown

where we can stand in an ocean
of heavy foot traffic,

playfully wrestle and tug
at our rubber limbs like any straight couple
blocking the sidewalk.

Spot the difference between a social kiss
and one held back
in order to remain spectral.

Dare to go further

The line “Dare to go further” is meant to prod the speaker out of hiding via challenge, as much as it is a dare for readers. “Public Safety” is the final poem in *Peppermint* because it speaks to my disbelief in the complete safety to be myself in a public setting. The constant demands of the poem (“Someone say it again. Continue as boys / and stop shaking.”), while aggressive in tone, hopes to establish that there is the possibility of change.

I have yet to completely overcome this fear of public life, even with the constant encouragement of LGBTQ community efforts. I suppose it’s the cynic in me: can there be such a thing as “safe,” especially in the current year? With writing, there’s a built-in safety device: the author will not always have to see or hear their audience. This is a bit

of courage, at least until the realization that once a work is published, it is no longer the author's. Stories of assaults floated about my high school, both physical and verbal. *The preacher's kid was gay*. He was *effeminate*, and thus ostracized from most student groups. Having effeminate tendencies myself, this taught me two things. One, I needed to puff my chest and act as "manly" as possible. Second, this was a boy that I could test my heart out with. We played footsies once, during the regular Wednesday chapel services. We never spoke about it, but he did invite me to a sleepover afterwards. I was learning how to operate and survive in an atmosphere of intolerance. The writing wasn't there yet, and I was still hanging on to old definitions.

Peppermint explores the concept of masculinity, as I understand it currently. In many conservative households, the men keep to their roles, and the women to theirs. Yet my mother was the dominating parent, often chasing my father from the house, then ranting about his absences. I grew up quiet, saying very little. At family gatherings, I would spend hours between a wall and the back of a long sofa. Who was I to mimic? My father shot guns as a hobby, and came home covered in creek mud. My mother stayed home and took out her frustrations on us. More important than *who* to imitate was *why*?

I began to separate myself from these roles. When I played footsies with the preacher's kid, I knew it was something my father would never do. And this is how memory can trick us: there's no way to confirm what my state of mind was when, without thinking, I tested out my first boy crush via the fumbling language of my foot. I recognized there was a need to get closer to another human being, another body. Something I had never seen or imagined my mother doing. Holding for comfort would never be her hobby. Expressing the need for contact in-between exploding my G.I. Joe

toys in the grass was not something I found easy to do, so I sought to emulate across the board. Any style or way of being was fair game. I looked to Prince, or David Bowie. I hoped for a combination that led to something permanent, as well as an escape.

Poetry is my rocket, my model escape pod. Or so I tell myself. I often proclaim writing saved my life, which is amusing to some. *You can't be serious*. Octavia Butler stated that she had two choices: "I could become a writer, or I could die really young—that because there wasn't anything else that I wanted" (Butler). I look back and know I had little chance of survival without a creative output; my long-term depression would've seen to that. I often forget how old I am (due to my dislike of numbers, or possibly ego), but a look over my trajectory identifies what was left behind, and what came along. The poems in this collection are meant to pose more questions than statements, as I see no definitives regarding my own truths. My complication of parental relationships. The expectations of a "single family," in the heteronormative sense. Through writing, I learned to use the anger that attached itself to these situations. Ron Padgett writes in his poem, "How to Be Perfect": "Don't stay angry about anything for more than a week, but don't forget what made you angry. Hold your anger out at arm's length and look at it, as if it were a glass ball. Then add it to your glass ball collection" (23). At this stage in my writing life, I have quite the collection, and I'm open to sharing it. I am moving on via questions, content with knowing there might not be an answer.

This collection hopes to continue what others have begun. Not the facts, but the ideas. The truths as I know them, because for me there are no definite answers. Carl Sagan wrote "Even an incomplete attempt constitutes a reassurance and encouragement" (323), and *Peppermint* may very well be an incomplete portrait of me, but it is a

continuation: of exploring gender, and what it means to go against social constructs, and to put them down. In “After Love,” Alex Dimitrov writes: “In the first poem I wrote after you left, I killed you. / My hand met the back of your neck / and lead you to water, where I held your hair— / under—one last time” (44). The killing Dimitrov speaks of here is for the speaker’s benefit. This is not real-world violence, but an attempt to both end and understand the symbiotic relationship of people, and the memories of both. Memory is chaotic, but with focal points, a central aim. Consider D. Gilson’s words, from his essay “Get Rhythm”: “Memory, like [a] song, like [a] poem, is conflicted” (15). The events of my youth are conflicted; I hold dearly to the details I have retained, the sensory values: the colors of my mother’s busy dresses, the smell of our weekly beans and ham (just don’t ask me to eat it). The way my skin pulled in on itself after lying in the bathtub for hours, as I explored myself without an instruction booklet. Then, the not so cherished: the feel of my mother’s fist; the sound of her destroying the kitchen. It’s possible that there is no way to make sense of these memories, but these details can only be preserved in a storage of my own choosing. Even the ones that appear to be unobtainable, like my mother’s laugh. My hope is that what’s salvaged will be shared—without fear—to future readers. If not, then the title of this collection is apt: something to get a brief taste of before it dissolves.

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PEPPERMINT

Before the Movie

there is an advertisement with two men kissing
and someone behind us starts talking
sinners and hand baskets. Settle in—

we are gathered here today
to escape and embrace. For new experiences,
for *Star Wars*.

To silence our phones and not disrupt
others who are here to enjoy themselves
while I grip your hand a bit harder

between the seats. Keep low. After all
we can go home and blow off some steam.
We are out

once the lights come up. Never mind when we stop
for takeout and the teenagers
in line behind us whisper

how faggy it is for you to stand so close
and order for the both of us.

There is no need to fight
about quiet, or when to settle for peace
on a quick trip that's not meant

to resonate. Choose a battleground.
We can keep to ourselves.

Whatever happens in our bubble,
our vacuum. Whatever separates us
and them, there

we can hold hands,
share a bowl, kiss on the couch.
All the normal, boring tender shit.

Wait One Week for Results

You're given both rectal and throat swabs
after they learn that you kiss
the ones you like. You are not a Bottom,
but you allow the Q-tip

one half-inch of personal space

like it's your ex who convinced you to try,
once. Early on. You said Yes

to his testing your limits of control.
Forget power moves, just lie on your stomach
and breathe. Remembering
this, you confess,
as you so often do: I'm only a Top.

There may or may not be a frown
from the nurse that could say,
Aren't you pansexuals all versatile?
Or shouldn't you be? Wait.

That's another ex talking. Or any number
of Grindr dates. It's certainly not you
with the longest swab going down
your throat, obviously

meant to test the gag reflex
of the patient or, as the receptionist said,
to collect history. Who knows.
You often think

only one of the two is make or break
when asking another if they want to wake up
beside you more than once.

Backstage Pass to Goya's *Witches Sabbath* (*The Great He-Goat*)

He's holding court like it's 1981
and he's Prince on the Dirty Mind tour,
flowers in his hair. Or rather, leaves, and at least
one disciple questions
how the Great He-Goat plucked a headdress,
hooves as his only means to stitch together
a to-die-for look on this Sabbath.
Could be his mother dresses him,
rubs his fur down with spit, excises his nose hairs.
Servitude for being human. Guilty
of giving birth to a rock star. Over dinner—
leeks and barley—when he regales her with stories
of other mothers gathered on velvet ropes, who begged
to donate children to the hangman of dawn and dusk,
does she catch an echo of first bleats, feel his hot licks
swirl her youthful meat for a gift of strength
she was once so willing to part with?

Mercy

The foot of the bed smells like dog (yours)
but it's only cat and I this evening,
expecting no one.

The dog is dead and it's been years since
we lost our shit in the Honda.

Outside the vet's rotating door,
you know the one.
Not that any of this was our fault.

Or the dog's
for trapping his brand of funk in
my sheets (also yours)

just before we made it across town
for the mercy shot. My guess? He saw this
in a kicking dream

and left behind a reminder. If true
he'd be pleased to know I can lean into,
inhale the cat (nobody's)

then leave the house and still
he clings to my heels, questioning—
like my parents, my friends

—where you ran off to.
Both of us trying to navigate the mess,
marking as we go

the permanent fixtures: what's mine and what
I've come to claim as mine.

Something Bit Me

while I was sleeping. It was you, reminding me
of God Only Knows and dancing
drunk with sore legs.

I ate bacon for you, despite permission
to pass on your cooked dish. My own sin
of (repeated) vegetarian betrayal.

Now I'm awake. I can blame you for this,

though you'll never know: another 2 AM
with puncture marks. Here I go
fitting new excuses into the openings.

My Mother Sends Her First Text Message

—thanks to Ron Padgett

Somebody I think is dead was alive

until my phone glows,

*Just letting you know Forrest passed away
a few days ago.* Here, my mother—who knows I'm often lost
—wants to remind me of a man

I once saw from my father's tractor

during a High School summer, when strangers pay

ripe farm boys to cut and get
cut while forcing straight growth into a round,
or a square. *Forrest.* I can't picture,
but I can lump him in

with other men I left behind: thick

hands and faces pinched by the sun's. The illuminated
Midwestern model, which is to say
overbearing. I break down

what was sent. Like my students do, I pluck,
then arrange words into conclusions. *A few
days ago.* So really, no emergency. The how?

An unsolved mystery, or one

to grow cold. Still, with so little to go on,

I can read along the margins: *I know you're too busy for us,
but.* The family trait
of self-deprecation, the expected

nod towards sacrifice. Because, with *Just letting
you know,* there was an attempt

to prepare me for when a working man dies—my father.
How to deliver the news? There is the rhyme

of *know* and *ago*, back to the sound of adolescence,

my mother stepping into the familiar

to admit for the first time that we are
far apart, and all of this is up for interpretation.

Summer Labor

You love to watch a man
minding the earth
because he is a dog
panting red behind a machine.

You will shout, let him hear
how much you love to drink a man in
from the doorway of a clean house.

His mud shoots around your bathtub
because he is a wild dog
who cannot keep still.

With the gift in his mouth—
you love to watch a man
whose tongue lies rough.

His guttural means to speak.

And because he is a dog you hold him
to the foot of your bed.

Don't pretend he will stay.

New Lease

The one time we had sex in a cemetery
I was able to stop thinking about where
we were going to score money for another week.
For the electric, for fast food.
We played in the mud
long enough to forget the lease we'd signed
on a new, overcrowded four-story. No,
I wasn't considering the dead when my hands
were in your hair. I had the remaining scent
of wet laundry unwrapped in my nose, pressed
on your shoulder, between bra strap and armpit.
It was raining like the second act
of a movie, meaning there might be a third
for these two shining bodies,
our drips and pops eliciting jealousy like moisture
from anyone near the heat of this natural bedding.

We could come out of this on top.
On the way down you asked what love should be,
if not disrespectful. I think it was the flowers
stuck to my back that convinced me
we would never get caught.

Text + Body

Your skin was milky in the pictures,
belly button curving inward like a drain
to black. Your shoulders, lighter than the rest,
phosphorus among the other captures
as you sent me cuts of the body:
your neck, your boyish hips, your thighs.
I tried to piece you together in my head
each time the phone danced in a circle
to tell me there was more of you. I sent you mine,
cramming each gangly limb
into the air to bounce flesh off cell towers.
At last you sent your face, hair moping
around your cheeks to show you had been lying
down the whole time while I stood like a boy
who had just discovered a twist of the arm
could produce a ball of muscle and that being naked
was okay—as American as two lovers
showing off without ever planning to touch.

His Mother Was Sick

in the guest room,
out of sight, he said, and unable
to hear my first attempt at love

with a strange man
or not love
another word

I was only afraid
of hearing this woman cough
through the door

as I was being nursed
to her son's breastbone
I would be quiet,

keep my ears to myself as he undid
my cowboy button-up,

dead-lifted me,
held me
with his mouth

I pulled at his hair to say
I had never been so weightless,
never done this before—

travelled three exits
to learn how to say *no* and of course *yes*

only his sculpted muscles
continued when I asked him

to put my feet on the ground

I had hoped
to picture him as bliss
as sweetheart

owning my kitchen, half-asleep
in gym shorts

large hands baptized in yolk
I would tie myself

around his waist

like my mother's apron

she told me
it was no good

to live with a man, impossible
to find one worth trusting
but I always thought
I could

do better than her

and if you were to ask,
he will never be

my first
but his breath slips in

when I'm holding tryouts
for that stout medicine
peppermint

a new body
I find his hands
and they're still warm

Really

I never wore my mother's lingerie
I stole from the neighbor's wife instead
Plucked a red velvet brazier
I was a boy
Soft from long baths
Pretending the hands weren't mine
What could happen in another man's grip
I heard what happened
How a *fag* was beat to death
Near our busiest highway
Heard he deserved it
I hid my red velvet
Under the sink
Under the rubber plunger
I kept living
Took a lover
I said no kissing but yes
To the rest
I asked if he liked dress-up
And he said *No fems*
I fucked him
Pretended his hands were mine
I was delicious
I said I
Said *I love you*
I wrote for him and about
Made his bed
I was his secret brazier
Ruby stockings rolled up and rolled down
Flung myself over him
I hid from all of you
Bred then bored him
I don't blame him
I knew who I was

If You Honk, We Drink

the frat house declares, with all the luster
a hand-painted banner can achieve pinned
to a two-story home where
living among the dancing, sex party ghosts
of past members must be some kind of epiphany.

The porch is crowded with babes, hotties
and shorties, sometimes just plain girls
who are expected to be DTF as I pull my Cougar street side
and honk and honk until a babyface with slapstick gums
realizes I'm shooting for alcohol poisoning
and launches half a King of Beers

at my windshield. Driving home, I try to guess
how long the honking will continue. If when I pass
tomorrow there will be bodies piled like a widow's
junk mail. The tragedy that rush hour
could bring this house.

If Dead

I would miss cats. My cat.
Animal kingdoms,

but never people. Though off the record,
there is a slim chance—I mean miniscule
—chance of missing you.

As someone dead, I would offer
no hints. No scheduled visits.

Clarification would fall
on you, and you would have to agree *you* are
who I'm thinking of.

Otherwise you could be anyone.

Mother, Father.

The lover who hid someone else
in her weekend pockets.

You meaning someone as important
as the last bit of winter

holding me indoors. If this becomes you
and I were to venture out

then not return,
I hope you would understand who I need.

Three Extra Dry Martinis in Boston

—with Sexton & Plath

I will say this: I've worked to outgrow the kind of boy
who knows every gory detail,
even if their nonsense makes me
feel young. Boys who will lead anyone interested

to the body. On empty farmland, or rolled somewhere
in a ditch—a favorite hangout

for your boy, Death. Anne, would you believe
avoiding this romanticism
gets easier with every man-made wonder.

Hot take: your boy, like the rest of us, same
as an afternoon table for two on the coast,

was a bore. Guilty of legend-building
and conspiring with gods. Butting into every narrative
with a tired agenda and need

for attention. Perhaps you knew, felt sorry
for him and offered a cuddle, like Sylvia did. Does she
know I can take Google for a drive,

find the child's body
of work? There are no secrets left
since your boy's CV is public access: Automobile,
alcohol, gravity. Yes, love. Overexposed

on Subreddits, Dark Web. Nothing new
and all the blood looks staged. Your boy is no good
at realism, and I'm hard to convince.

I mean I want to outgrow a boy who lies about dignity

when there's no evidence. Yet, like you two,
I'm desperately in the entourage.

Memorizing keywords
for every mood that falls, just to remind myself
how going all the way on a livestream

might not garner enough upvotes to make it

worth the trouble. Search *Doorknob*

plus *Tie, Plastic Bag* plus
Garden Hose plus the voyeurism
of your goddamn boy.

Choices that either age with me
or against me. I don't look good in purple. I don't
want to be filling skinny jeans at forty, holding
my ticket for youth's great closer.

Look, it's late, and I'm pretend drunk.
Your boy is—again, predictable—out all night,
past my bedtime. Maybe I'm just jealous.
If I could afford a martini in Boston
I would surely order three, throw

my head back for a good pipe cleanse. Honestly,

I'm over it. I went to meet our boy
once, but grew tired on the long walk there.

It Can Be Okay

To keep from losing my shit
there is a woman
pouring juice on the other side
of a diner window
who will distract me with her colors.
She only looks at her customers
and never her feet because
she knows every cog will continue
their motion when ignored. She needs
to maintain, keep pace. Fortunately
for me, she tells herself this

(I tell myself this) while
never looking in this direction,
where all the footprints are—
carbon and otherwise—leading
to this healing space of hers
which, since this is a daydream,
is somewhere on the moon.

Because I Still Want to be Prince

—thanks to Elizabeth Bishop

I lie to my parents about singing in the shower when they ask
what I've been up to. Just this morning I sang "Lemon Crush" for ten minutes
while washing an imaginary pompadour, a cosmic afro. Imagine telling my mother
about my first outing in a woman's blouse—size S, but not petite. Cropped top. In line
at the Quick Stop I knew the man behind me in the way older men are stand-in fathers:
frowning just because. He knew
my sleeves were cut strange, that I hoped to be a sexy MF who could forget a first kiss
once the number
turned astronomical. Upon hearing *Dirty Mind*, I choreographed my manhood.
Shaky, like a boy applying eyeliner for the first time. I am too much
or too little. God knows I want to be
androgynous under purple, with the strength of a farmer who has carried both machine
parts
and human beings. I am tired of the gender of things. Falsetto above
chest hair clung to lace, I just want to move.

Stand Here and Wait

Next to a mock barn door built
next to the cafeteria conveyor belt, across
from more children trying to breathe

in half-Windsor's. Stiff collars,
waiting to be broken in under a banner
of simplified verses my mother—

who I'm standing next to—tried to teach me.
Holding my hand,
she looks like the only woman I know
on my coming out day. The woman who said
your friends will leave you.
The woman who told me

the good news: men were bad
and women were worse.

But I won't let her leave me
next to the others in the classroom
who already act like veterans of God's army,
facing this Rapture of parents. I tell her again

I'm sorry for hating her
up to this moment. Next to
the clown face of Jesus painted
beside his complacent lamb,

she doesn't come off as such a destroyer.
Her voice lower than I've ever heard,
she tells me everything
I don't want to hear.

Why Don't You Put Her in Charge

In the showers, the boys talked girls
Soft movie stars
Or idols and not both

They said Sigourney Weaver was a rock

Lean chest, cut different
Better to fall in love with Kelly McGillis
And be Arnold, or Sly

I could only picture
Sigourney Weaver wearing white in *Alien*
Undressing to put herself on ice

For futures
Stained glass god plus goddess
Wearing white underwear in zero gravity

Think gym class and cold jets
Undressing behind the barn after class

My underwear was just underwear
Never enough to conceal
The hairless momentum of long and lanky

I thought if something crawling, muscular
Cornered me in the showers
Maybe curious, hungry

I would want to look

Like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*
Greased in space

Waiting on the mystery of another being
Its dark and curling places

Without permission to change
I ask my body to grow taller, to be masculine

Sprout a longer neck to be feminine
Roll my hair for a frame

So that I can say

*I have an exquisite face
I am as pale as a peppermint*

Boys take notice
Men take notice

My underwear is spotless, my heart a clean muscle

Glossy like a magazine cutout
Of Sigourney Weaver in cotton

Surrounded by men who behave like boys
Misunderstanding the alien

Whose bare feet slap the deck
Whose mouth parts, legs shine

Like Sigourney Weaver with flamethrower

I am outnumbered
Waiting to be as loud as I want

Until then, find a place in the wall to curl
Open the door, disappear against stars

Please think of me as ready to learn

I am one hundred years into the future
Looking for a good monster

Tall in Reeboks
My wares, my uninvited cargo

Today

My cat smothered her kittens
while I was at work, so of course

I thought about my mother.
I thought about how she could be kind

on the rare day she didn't
hate my father, when we would gather

to watch George Romero movies
and laugh at rubber chickens

being plucked from a man's belly.
Every mother is cruel,

so I will not accuse her of pioneering.
Know that she held my hand

when we decorated my brother's grave
and she kissed my forehead

all the times it mattered—
when no one else was looking.

In Love

with Robert Blake as Perry Smith
who strips to pose in an airport bathroom.
One foot in the sink.

Overblown and muscle-bound,
a drip of water hung

between nose and lip.

With his tighty whities and black leather bangs,
you bury history
like a gun in a purse. Forgive his murderous

hands. Scrub the ammo grease
from his secretive palms,
cup his face and absolve him.

Hide the weapon. Burn the farmhouse.

I can be complicit, honey.
Back pocket me and forget I'm there.

When to Talk Dirty

After playing Magic the Gathering,
I put my mouth on
him for the first time and he said
nothing as he spilled
because we were not alone. I needed just one *Oh*,
an *Uh*, a bellow of some kind
to make me feel useful,
believe the days we spent jerking in
the shower were not just distractions
before applying our bodies to the university,
before I decided loving
another man was as hard
as my mother made it seem.
Just one *God*, an *Oh-fuck-don't-stop* before
we retired to our pillows
to sweat and stink like teenagers.
When his aunt caught us, he didn't offer up
a *Jesus*, a *Christ* as I flew to my car,
sparrows catching view of my bare ass
for the first time
since I undressed in kindergarten and ran
out the door as the teachers pleaded
Oh Lord, and *Stop, stop!*

Two Shaving in the Bathroom

Clippers oiled. On my knees like I am
used to it, she straddles my arm
big and bad, hair between her legs Samson strong.
Like the story, I fear for her strength.

Hanging on porcelain, she moves for a view
of my hands that shake
despite their age, anticipating the future. I buzz a tuft
and she laughs from its walk down her thigh.

I breathe it away, continue. We both know
this is not something to get off on.
Shaving your lover
takes precision, smart fingers choosing

when to push the electric button. What needs
to be taken, and how much.
She is revealed now, the incisions on the inside of her hips
close to healed, recovery time

halting plans for personal hygiene.
I leave a thin strip, ask her if I did good.
She rubs my own shaved head, moves me
against her belly to say *Of course*.

Cardiophile

My 24/7 broadcast
Our boxed-in apartment bedroom
Your stethoscope

Slide to where you need to hear
Bend your arms
Out of your clothes

Tuck both knees to the sound
Of our doors opening

The weight of a bell on your breastbone
My acoustics then yours

Ball your fists
Listening is all you
Want to do

The weight of
A bell on your breastbone
The weight of me

This familiar orchestra
You said it would be like

The galaxy of the womb

One galloping boom
Repeated to thousands

Six Lines about My Mother

1. Pioneer—the first woman I tried and wanted to leave
2. Cannot watch scary movies like she used to
3. Mantra: *No peace when a man is around*
4. Formerly a bony teen, she can follow my lankiness
5. Intimidating, with or without chemo
6. With no need to run, she forgave Missouri (unlike me)

Tank Tops and Boxers

When I am dressed (or undressed)
like this, I remember Sam Jackson being executed
in *Goodfellas*. Right in the back of the dome
as he's hustling to get ready.

I think it might be easy to appear vulnerable
when half-dressed, like caught
in an in-between world. At least naked
I know where I stand, or why. Poor Stacks,

he lets his killer use the coffee pot,
as a distraction to buy enough time for pants.
Be ready. When the moment comes

I plan on an afterlife coming out party
as-is. My tank top will be forever.
And who doesn't want to be late
for their own funeral? Please, one for my head
should I stop rushing out the door.

Public Safety

From this window
I see boys trying to get laid and they don't care
who knows.

When walking but not
talking and just smiling they are trying
to get laid.

I am right there
with them, only I am counting every year

I was afraid to see

boys my age.
Of the same tongue
and navigational pull.

At churches, outside gas stations—
I heard about boys who sounded
out words

only to lose their tongues,
eviscerated with arms around
and chained to a fencepost

like youth to temptation.
Boys out for shelter

lured away by short breaths
promising L-O-V-E.
Four fingers in the back pocket
and a thumb that won't fit. Close whispers.

Just a goddamn kiss on the neck.

Bodies ready for a how-to
tucked away,
folded into man-made graves.

Busted like teeth. Boys like playthings.

Boys like death.
When trying to get laid
one teenage boy should not say to another

that there is this place downtown

where we can stand in an ocean
of heavy foot traffic,

playfully wrestle and tug
at our rubber limbs like any straight couple
blocking the sidewalk.

Spot the difference between a social kiss
and one held back
in order to remain spectral.

Dare to go further

when everyone is watching and some men
do not care to see
others trying to get laid.

Or taking hands. Buying dinner at the local.
Or simply saying, *I want you.*

Then I hear someone say this
is a new year.

Whatever a man does in the privacy
of his home. Whatever two men want to do

when their stomachs rumble and their idiot hearts
attempt to reach out.

Someone say it again. Continue as boys
and stop shaking.

This is a new year.
Please say it again: this is a new year.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

“Text + Body” appeared in *Atticus Review*

“If You Honk, We Drink” and “When to Talk Dirty” appeared in *Nerve Cowboy*

“Today” appeared in *Sleet*

“Two Shaving in the Bathroom” appeared in *Slipstream*