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GHETTO BIRDS AND OTHER THINGS THAT LURK

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

Mary Frances Henn

May 2018

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GHETTO BIRDS AND OTHER THINGS THAT LURK

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Mary Frances Henn

ABSTRACT

This collection is comprised of poetry critically introduced by a narrative essay. The pieces included explore place, trauma, and the female experience: what modern domestic life looks like, what life looks like in the urban core, how substance abuse impacts familial relations, and especially, what it means to be female in relation to these things. Often, the intersection of these themes becomes central to a poem; the borders of these subjects blur, leading to overlap in the record of personal experiences and observations.

KEYWORDS: English, poetry, prose poetry, urbanity, childhood, trauma, addiction, feminism, domesticity, excavation

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Marcus Cafagña
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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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.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who has given me everything she can, and to all of the women in my family, living and deceased, who are with me every time I sit down to write.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I heard the term “ghetto bird” used in context, I was sitting with a coworker at lunch, complaining about another police helicopter hovering outside of our building. She said, “Oh, you mean a ghetto bird?” Though the phrase was not entirely new to me, this was the first time I had actually realized what it meant. It was in the middle of summer, and I couldn’t keep my class of elementary students out at recess because the helicopter kept circling, so close to the ground. By the time I mentioned something at lunch, it had been at least the third day in a row there had been “ghetto birds” outside during the middle of the day. It wasn’t until years after that moment, that I decided to write a poem about a “ghetto bird” as a bird of prey. Coincidentally, I came to realize that, often in my poetry, I use images of flight, images of birds, and write about themes located in the urban core. It wasn’t until even more recently, however, that I decided to title this collection of poems under the name, *Ghetto Birds and Other Things that Lurk*. This title, hopefully, works to highlight poems inspired by my time in the inner city, poems that reflect both themes observed and themes witnessed.

In a general sense, I tend to write poetry about place, trauma, and the female experience: what modern domestic life looks like, what life looks like in the urban core, how substance abuse impacts familial relations, and especially, what it means to be female in relation to these things. Often, the intersection of these themes becomes the center of my poems; the borders of these subjects blur, leading to overlap in the record of my own personal experiences and observations. For me, poetry largely functions as a record of personal histories kept in an artful manner—it is in this way that I have

cultivated the poems in this collection.

The first part of this collection is comprised of some of my most recent work and represents a direct reflection of my time spent in the inner city. These poems might be best classified as a series of work poems, based on my teaching experience in Kansas City, Missouri. In this sense, my writing explores the urban traumatic experiences and familial relationships outside of my own home, which complements what is outlined in the latter part of the collection—events witnessed inside of my own household, throughout childhood. I began teaching in the inner city through a summer reading program, right after I had graduated high school. Though this was not my first time in the inner city, it was the first time that I found myself in the position of “adult,” in relation to the students I worked with, which provided a new and particular perspective.

At eighteen, I found myself standing in the middle of an empty classroom, surrounded by twenty-plus first graders—no air conditioning, no running water, no desks, no chairs, and not even a whiteboard. I had been hired to participate in a non-profit organization, designed to provide high-quality education to families in the urban core of Kansas City. After a week of creating makeshift lesson plans and activities, while dealing with the heat-induced nosebleeds of six-year-olds, I was exhausted. I felt like walking away from the job. By the second week, however, I had begun to learn the names and stories of children affected by drugs, violence, and poverty—some of whom relied on the program for a daily meal. It was then that I decided to stay. I decided to stay, not because I felt like I was doing a good deed, but because the testimony of each student brought me back to the situations in which I, myself, had grown up. These stories with which I felt a strong sense of connection have manifested in many of my poems as a sort of reflecting

surface upon which I see my own personal history as part of a broader tapestry—one threaded by trauma, grief, and resilience.

The poems here are candid and personal. Many attempt to play with line and spacing, with the objective of transferring a particular experience onto the reader. Most often, I use whitespace to indicate a shift to a new image and, sometimes, a tonal shift. If a particular image is surrounded by whitespace, the image is meant to be read both independently and within the larger context of the piece. What I have tried to do is create a sense of urgency and create work that is both revealing and moving, while cutting to the core of personal experiences that relate to larger societal issues. In addition, strong female voices are weaved into the background of all of my pieces, as inspiration and as subject matter. Stories passed down, stories witnessed, stories relived work together in these poems.

Furthermore, certain sections reflect upon aspects of childhood and distress, while, at times, employing the concept of “home” as metaphor for the psyche. Nearly all of the women in my family have experienced abuse, in multiple forms. There was a time, when I was younger, that I stayed with my grandma, after my father had been physically abusive. I often find myself obsessing over her house, where the décor was a mix of trends from the 1950s through the 1980s. The colors of her home were dark, muted, acidic; they seemed to bleed. The colors were, to me, now something I would associate with the idea of a “post-war” scene, or a scene of ruin, where her décor seemed to mock the destruction we’d faced in our own lives. Her home, in memory, creates an atmosphere both seductive and dull or muted. One of the sectioned poems in this collection, “Still Life: Through an Embroidery Hoop,” is inspired by this setting. In the first section of this

piece, I tried to mix images of my grandmother's kitchen, marked by macramé and acidic countertops, with images invoking both sexuality and physical trauma, like a bowl of strawberries placed in the lap and beet stained lips. From this section, the poem moves into description of embroidery work that I did with my grandmother, a traditionally feminine activity, detailing it in metaphor. The third section reveals an image of a photograph, signifying permanence, or the lasting impacts of trauma. Meditation on the photograph moves both outside of the home, but not beyond it. The women in the photograph were trapped, are trapped; at least, that is what I hoped to convey.

I find often myself drawn to feminist poetry and modern poetry on ruins. Though, I don't often find these two things working together in a single poem. In some of my own poems about women, I attempt to reimagine these more traditional motifs together. I find the notion of "ruins" (human, artificial, and internal) a useful tool for consciously reevaluating the past. Specifically, I find it useful in conveying the realness of larger issues like female oppression, violence, and abuse. Perhaps theoretically, as scholar Cecilia Enjuto Rangel outlines in *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics*, modern poetry on ruins (T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for instance) is confined to the second half of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century and to a limited number of male poets (3). Contemporary society, like modern ruins, however, serves as reminder of a chaotic world—one marked by war and political turmoil, but also conventions and institutions that impact, not only a collective history, but personal histories. Perhaps subtly, I think poetic techniques like fragmentation, for instance, can function to create an atmospheric or tonal distress representative of one's experiences. In a world of constant flux, especially one marked by political strife, I find myself drawn to,

inspired by, and writing poetry that is “fragmented,” in a sense, much like the modernist poetry that marked the era of the World Wars. Sometimes, this fragmentation is displayed in sharp line breaks and through spacing and indentation. Sometimes, the fragmentation appears in narratives that are disrupted and traumatic. In this way, the prosaic block is a useful form for much of my poetry, as it gives a sense of uniformity and construction to otherwise scattered observations, meditations, and memories.

I am also drawn to female poets who write with emotion at the forefront of their process. I enjoy poetry that plays with language and pleasures the intellect, though I am especially inspired by work that contains moving subject matter. Stylistically, I have been stimulated by the work of Missouri poet, Hadara Bar-Nadav, especially her collection, *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*. This collection is comprised of brief, lyrical poems, many of them short prose pieces. Her style is brief, but not simple or bare. Her poems play with the line, spacing, and whitespace; in this way, she creates gaps in her work, moments for reflection, allowing the reader to meditate on what has been said (or not said).

Additionally, her poems often employ a shorter sentence, with a longer line. In her poem, “Prayer Is the Little Implement,” she writes, “Tool or tooth. Carving or cut. Lesion lined in mud. In this way, words are not accretion, like rain where the gatherings glimmer and fall. Fail. And fail a word for the body giving out, as in: your father is failing. Prayers gather and fall. Fail” (Bar-Nadav 11). Here, she writes of her father’s death, employing a short sentence and repetition to create meaning. I have incorporated similar stylistic techniques in my own work, especially in pieces that play with a shorter phrase, spacing, and indentation, and to some extent, I have been inspired by Bar-Nadav’s subject matter as well, *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*, and much of her other work, deals with family, death,

and dying. Her cadence, inspired by Emily Dickinson, is melodic and something I try to produce in my own poems.

I have also been greatly inspired by Jill Alexander Essbaum, whose syntactical concision delivers images that cut to the core of her notions regarding religion, sexuality, and relationships. Essbaum's unique imagery, combined with her attention to sound, allow for a total sensory experience. One of the prose poems in this collection, "Flowers for My Aunt, who Grew Conspiracy Theories in Sunlight and Watered Them with Her Lips as She Told Stories to Children," was written before reading Jill Alexander Essbaum's poem, "She Spent a Year Hallucinating Birds," but did not take its final form until afterward. I was inspired by Essbaum's use of the prosaic block, and, even more so, her heavy use of metaphor. A few lines from her poem read: "Their cackles were black. Each shadow dove and pecked. They / nested in chimneys and chirped at the chime of the church bell. They worked in shifts / ... They laid their eggs in the V's of trees..." (Essbaum 3-5). In my imitation of her poem, I was inspired by her syntactical play, namely, the repetitive use of the pronoun, "they" at the beginning of nearly all of her sentences. This repetition, in her work, and hopefully my own, work to create not only a rhythmic pulse within the prosaic block, but also creates an underlying ambiguity as to the multiplicity of things "they" might represent. I wrote my piece about my aunt, a woman that I have had several odd experiences with. The poem is based on something she actually said to me when I was young and playing outside: that airplanes poison things and people below them. In this way, the idea of flight and birds seemed to fit the piece, both as literal and figurative images. Though much of the piece, like Essbaum's, might read as metaphor, much of it is literal, or at least, description of what my aunt

believed to be happening. Her poem ends: “They jabbed her. When she cried they did it faster... They rolled in rabid packs and woofed like dogs. She couldn’t throw a bone. The / meat was gone. They chased her and they named her and they boiled her tears and bathed her. / Then they ate her” (Essbaum 8-17). The ending of her poem is metaphorical, dark, sudden, and rhyme works to create a faster pace, which propels the poem forward to the last line. I wanted to recreate a similar ending in my own piece, in terms of presenting a continuation of the already present metaphor and reveal something darker. According to my aunt’s logic, the planes that flew above us as children, when we played outside, were slowly poisoning us. The last line of my imitation reveals the idea of the narrator welcoming this poison. Though, in my own poem, the pacing slows, instead of quickens; in this way, it mirrors the idea of a slow poisoning, as opposed to, in Essbaum’s poem, a fast, brutal pecking and being eating.

Traci Brimhall is another poet I find myself reading, in recent months. Her poems, like “Stillborn Elegy,” a poem comprised of couplets, have a particular way of staying with me. Brimhall’s attention to the line and form make for tight, impactful poems; she does not overcrowd her poems, but instead maintains a steady control throughout her work. In this way, she writes about moving subjects, stripping them down to their essence, so that what normally might be too sentimental remains sophisticated, artful, and powerfully effective. “We offered benedictions for a child we may have named Aja,” she writes, “meaning unborn, meaning the stillness that entered us, / which is the stillness inside the burnt piano, which is also / the woman we untie, who is the mother of stillness” (Brimhall 13-14). Her repetition, here, is beautifully measured; the images are simple, yet striking. In my own work, I try to produce moments like this, where austerity allows for

reflection, without saying too much. Indeed, most of my own work is geared toward brevity, in an attempt to, as Brimhall does, present only the necessities, or at least, present an effect that looks that way.

Sharon Olds, which might seem like an obvious influence, as she has inspired so many poets of today, has impacted, at least subliminally, my own work a great deal. Though, the book that I return to time and time again is her debut collection of poetry, *Satan Says*. When I read *Satan Says*, I am not only moved by her cutting, honest language, but the content of her poems. I feel deeply connected to *what* she writes about, especially her relationship with her father. I have not found much poetry that matches the uniqueness of her descriptive accounts of familial relations and trauma. In the same vein of confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Old's post-confessional style has been in a constant in my mind while writing about my own experiences.

On the other hand, I first felt permission to write about urban life and trauma after exposure to Lynda Hull's lyrical poetry on American urban life, poems which reflect a sense of loss and ruin. Her depictions of life affected by drugs, prostitution, and urbanity is detailed in an almost delicate, simple way, that does not work to decorate tough emotion, but cuts to the heart of it. Her style is something I both admire and aspire to, though the density of her work is something rare and difficult to achieve. Hull's poetry possesses a deep honesty, and it matters; her work is observatory of both events representative of her own private knowledge and own emotional history, yet speaks to a greater public history. In a similar fashion, I want my work to function on both a personal level, while also speaking to a collective history.

In a similar way, Michael Mlekoday's *The Dead Eat Everything*, helped form my conceptions of what is "allowed" in contemporary poetics. I picked up Mlekoday's book randomly when I was in Minneapolis. I was walking around the city, when I stumbled across The University of Minnesota campus. It was still summer, so nothing was open except for the campus bookstore. I went over to the poetry section, which was quite large, and randomly pulled out Mlekoday's book. His poems felt familiar. He writes about the inner city with a short line and quick pace—something that quickens the rhythm of the reader's heartbeat. I felt excited when I read his work. His poem, "Self-Portrait, July," opens, "Fresh water is to salt water as— / fuck that, I grew up in the inner city. / Halal meat markets are to blades / what we all are to blades: / methodical and ordained. / The first time I had a gun pulled on me / was not the only time" (Mlekoday 10). His blunt, provocative diction, quick pace, and honesty are captivating. It wasn't until recently that I allowed myself to write about working in the inner city. For some reason, if I had been asked a few years ago why I was avoiding writing about the inner city, I might have said that I didn't feel like I had a right to write about it or that my experiences there wouldn't make for good poetry. Some of these experiences which reference drug use, prostitution, mental illness, etcetera. Now, however, I am not only interested in reading poets like Mlekoday, but have been inspired to write poems about my own, similar experiences.

I am also inspired by the notion of poetry as an expanding, multimodal genre. Contemporary poets seem to be experimenting, more than ever, with form, the line, syntactical expectation, and more importantly, different modes of expression. Literary magazines, recently, are more often publishing poems that incorporate literal images, are printed in landscape across the page, or play with form in a striking way. In terms of

multimodality, poetry seems to be transforming in a progressive way. Expressing through multiple modes allows for more effective communication and transfer of meaning, helps poetry stay relevant and artful in contemporary society, and creates new methods for successfully teaching the craft.

Poets like Matthea Harvey and Claudia Rankine in their respective collections, *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?* and *Citizen: An American Lyric* demonstrate some of the constructive effects of multimodal poetry. With digital resources at our fingertips, various art forms can come together to create work that is especially progressive and moving. Image (particularly, a digital one) paired with text (poetry) allows for a more direct transfer of an artistic message or experience. This transfer can be especially useful for reaching a wider audience of readers, teaching purposes, connecting socially and politically, and simply, communicating more effectively. In a society where nearly every statement carries weight in a greater cultural, historical, political, or social context, poetry like that which appears in Matthea Harvey's *If the Tabloids are True What are You?* can be especially relevant and exciting. The book combines image and text, the ordinary with fantasy, tradition and invention, while highlighting important social issues. The visual images contained within this collection of poems enhance the text and provide additional meaning. Claudia Rankine's use of poetic prose, multimodal text, and a continuous editorial process, in *Citizen*, work to reinvent a new, hybrid form that contains and creates space for historical recording that transcends, not only the page, but, in many ways, the limitations of time. Often, I find, it is not so much the words on the page, but the way in which the words are ordered and what appears alongside those words, that forces readers to consider not only the manipulation of language and syntax, but the total

atmospheric content of a poem and, on a larger scale, the way in which (and the context in which) a poem is perceived and felt. This notion is something I held in the forefront of my process as I wrote and edited this collection of poetry. It is my hope that the poems here immerse the reader in the realities I have experienced and witnessed.

Having had the experience of working for Moon City Press, while studying at Missouri State, I have also admired poets who have been awarded our Moon City Poetry Prize. Recipients of this award, such as Kerri French, Jeannine Hall Gailey, and Sarah Freligh, have impacted my own writing and reading of poetry. Each of these poets write about subjects unique to the female experience and the female body; they each write in a way that is personal and revealing, which is something I admire and try to produce in my own work. I have read and reread *Sad Math* by Freligh, and I am continuously struck by her attention to detail and the way she leaves the impression of memory through narrative structure and metaphor. Working on Moon City Press has not only given me the opportunity to read and meet authors published by our press, but it has also given me an understanding of the work that goes into running a small press and publishing a literary magazine. Through this work, I have witnessed writers excel and put forth important, moving writing. Furthermore, I have been able to develop skills like copyediting and text selection and refine my own skills and process as poet.

In addition to reading and meeting new poets, working on a small press has encouraged me to study the history of small presses and, on a larger scale, the history of modern poetic trends in America. I have been able to read and study some of Missouri State's archival material—the most fascinating of which included a series of small, hand-bound poetry magazines published in the late 1970s and into 1980, called *bits*. During my

first year of graduate studies, I conducted extensive research on the magazines and history of the press, tracing its roots to other poetic trends in modern and contemporary American poetry. The early works of poets like John Updike, Robert Bly, Mary Oliver, Stuart Dybek, and Ted Kooser were published in *bits*, though the magazine is mostly forgotten about. I found that the *bits* magazines fill a gap essential to our understanding of the evolution of the poetic image in late twentieth-century America. In my research, I sought to place *bits* magazine and Bits Press in the greater landscape of American poetic movements; I found strong connections to Imagism, the American haiku, Surrealism, and Deep Image poetry.

Through this research, my own work was affected in a number of ways. I gained a new appreciation for the witty, short haiku-like poetry that makes up the majority of the work published by Bits Press. Though my own writing doesn't often incorporate the element of humor, after reading archival material from Bits Press, I became suspicious of excess adjectives and modifiers in my own work, learning to cut and trim parts of my own poetry in favor of succinctness and clarity. In addition, through my research, I was able to restudy and revisit modernist poets tied to Imagism. I reread poets like Ezra Pound and Mina Loy. Rereading Loy's "Songs to Joannes" allowed me to reconsider the poetry of female modernists. Loy's poetry, to me, achieves a timelessness affect through fragmented description of female sexuality and experience. Loy too plays with the line, spacing, indentation, and whitespace. Perhaps one of the first poets to so heavily experiment with such techniques; her poetry, on the page, dictates a particular reading experience. Studying her techniques encouraged initial use of such methods in my own poetry. Looking forward, as I continue studying poetry and writing, I hope to produce

and examine work that pushes the boundaries of the genre, especially in terms of re-imagining poetic possibilities through different modes of communication and across digital platforms.

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GHETTO BIRDS AND OTHER THINGS THAT LURK

Still Life: Through an Embroidery Hoop

I.
I find myself in her kitchen, seven years old
untouched, silent, and sitting
on top of a wooden trashcan, my lap
a table for
strawberries picked washed rolled in sugar
 too sweet
their mud-spattered vines dangling

Her lips the color of beets
rinsed, eroded
food for an infantry of men

Her fingers long bones laced to her mouth
she chews celery instead of fingernails

A macramé sack with colored beads above the sink
dances with her hips
 to be woman
grown cropped rinsed and thrown away

How the colors bleed
acid green countertops
harvest-gold trim
wood paneling
unsettling

Our lives painted
in the wake of
 abandonment
post-war living

II.
When I am with her here in this
 space I pull thread
 through needle
licking the frayed tips as she

reclines in a cloud of plush and warns me
When you get old, you will lose sight of the small things

her swollen feet pointed toward the sky

Through an embroidery hoop she weaves dull scenes
 of an empty field purple irises sometimes birds
 all of them half-done

Though by this time her body
already a magnet for mutated cells
has polarized against her

We lay to rest our tired voices
 in a grave of unspoken language
 marked petals that carry
our mutual wishing
for a reincarnation free of the body

We work diligently
focused on small things

sometimes with wings

III.

The polaroid on the fridge tells us of our mothers
in the backyard, yellow-stained and smoking

While we ran barefoot treaded haunted grounds
unknown to us played on the path marked
 by our mothers

heavy wade—
baby on hip and another
dragged by the ankles

Their bodies legs delicate little hands
 with so much witness

contained in quiet
cupboards and laid down
 like stones

Still think of the willow tree
that pulled us under its swollen eyelids
and knew fate
before we did

**Flowers for My Aunt, who Grew Conspiracy Theories in Sunlight and Watered
Them with Her Lips as She Told Stories to Children**

for Jill Alexander Essbaum

They flew planes and drove through neighborhoods disguised as lawn keepers. They moved through and over our yards like white crows, gliding and dropping waste as they soared. Their wingtips pointed toward the sun, they moved above the clouds, only to be seen on holidays and birthdays. Their shadows crept and stayed over houses, permanence until her next visit. They moved according to schedule, doing their work in daylight as to avoid suspicion. They laid their spawn on our grass, in our trees and gardens, on our noses and in our mouths. We could tell it was happening by the rapid decay of vegetation, she said. The perennials and daisies, she pointed to the necks, bent as if in prayer to be spared or granted mercy from the inevitable, were already dying. They moved in time to crops growing, to the vision of children playing, and they slowed to the rising population of infected—eggs of a new generation reaped and sowed. They flew the narrow routes of our veins. They were determined, she said, to make us sick—chemical warfare: the bleeding, blistering, unsettling of our throats. Each time a plane passed, she pointed to the sky and turned to look at us; there was nothing we could do to stop it, only be cautious, take care of ourselves. Even now, I remember her eyes, strong and wide, a warning from another world and my tongue pressed to the floor of my mouth—dried, speechless, unrolled and ready as a landing strip.

Finding the Source

When he was born,
my aunt wanted him
as her own—
remedy for what
she couldn't bear.

I wonder
if he feels that
still— gloved fingers
and the blue grin
of hospital lights
pulling him into a world
not ready to receive him—

if he goes back
in his dreams
to the moment of being
plucked from our mother—

if he feels his little hands
and eyelids sinking
from the weight
of an unborn child—

if somewhere
sewn into his subconscious
a doctor with cold hands
and red-faced forceps
is burying the scar,
a means for finding
the source.

I wonder if he remembers,
even momentarily,
not belonging to our mother—

if when he swallows a week's dose
and curls into fetal position,
he remembers the edge of
my aunt's touch, of his twin
in his mother's arms
and being far away.

Satisfaction

At 16, I watch a group of young nuns take their vows. The day before, when made to confess my sins to a heavyset man in thin linen and black leather loafers, he asks, *have you ever masturbated?* The baptismal font at the rear of the church, like some man pissing into a urinal, is too quiet to quell my *yes*. The admission pours out like cold pieces of bathroom tile. With his hands on my head, he feels his way through beads of sweat, marks me with tepid water, promptly washes my stains away, and tells me to pray a decade of the rosary—believing with every word he’s forgiven a sin. The organ music swells, he looks at me with a half-smile of relief. Incense moves down the aisle, tripping in the light. I walk out of the small wooden box, my cavity hollowed, a cathedral with no absolution—his burlap sleeves already starting to sublime themselves away in the white cloud. As I watch the nuns walk down the aisle, one in a wedding dress, to a tall, decorated bishop, I hear a language different from my own. He speaks in Latin and chops the girls’ hair with dull sheers—neck bent, head down, kneeling.

Of a Mother, After a Fall

On Sunday, I made up the couch—
laid towels and a sheet over its entirety to
keep the blood and whatever else
would pour from her body off
of its surface.

On Tuesday, I helped her bathe,
watched her naked and bruised—
stitch after stich, popping and dissolving—

every part of her coming undone to heal,

to protect him. *He had been through a lot.*
But so had she, and so had we all— her words
a veil over the black and blue of it.

A Night of Home Videos

He killed her slowly, frame by frame: each touch, each brush
of the shoulder, a glare in the lens of previous days—

before, we didn't know what he had done, or not done, by waiting
in a background of velvet-upholstered chairs that stretched over
his head. He tucked himself into corners, sat behind
muted-floral curtains as we painted quaint pictures of girls
in front of his piss-tinted glasses— their big frames, kept
secrets and a cigarette crotched between his ear while

he watched his daughter, before she died—
her tanned legs in short shorts
and the end of April, reminding us
of her stillness

in his truck, as he drove across the country,
one hand on the wheel.

She Has

I.

My tillandsia drinks in a wine glass
above the kitchen sink, film gathers
around it. There is no death here.

II.

Dinner.
Before we've
had enough,
it's over.

—where the 8-year-old
girl, on her knees, begs
to be hit until there's
nothing left to want for.

III.

This time,
he takes her
from the kitchen,
where he snaps
wet tea towels,
wringing their necks
in anger, to the
bathroom, where
he spills her
blood across the tile—
cold and still wet,
he has nothing
to clean his mess.

IV.

When the young girl on the big screen emerges
from an alleyway where two armed guards led
her into shadows, her dress is torn from knee
to crotch. Her legs are covered in blood and soot,
as though emerging from the trenches;
you will be her, hoping your date doesn't see
the memory move across your film-reel eyes.

Hit & Run

When they hauled you away in gym shorts and no shoes, I was glad she was gone. Where they handcuffed you, I remember, is where you kept a litter of rabbits with their mother, making a temporary shelter from a cardboard box and blanket after the ice storm. You took old celery and tomatoes, left them in the box until one day they were gone. You were old then, but still your skin split open by the bite of separation and the possibility of them away from their mother. On snow days, we'd sleep all day at home. Not being there, she didn't have to remember how you slept in her bed until you outgrew it and feel again the emptiness, the absence of you.

A Blue Scarf to Wrap Around Your Mouth

Your eyes: pressed raisins into dough.

Your cheekbones: salt on his thumb.

Your lips reconfigured.

And that family the wealthy one
there to watch us crumble.

with their shit together

This time my greatest fear unable to put you back
together again.

Limbs pulled and broken the blood cries loud enough to leak
into the borders of our dreams.

No one said anything, but even the neighbors knew. Bringing over gifts that Christmas,
and only that Christmas, but late, after it happened: a blue scarf and a cheap, sequin coin
purse. Items to say,

*It was us who called the cops and it is us who will remain silent, like you now—
though the residue is so visibly left behind on your face, his hands, the kitchen floor
if you look closely enough.*

Filled

fresh biscuits
greasy with margarine
grape jelly lips dough
plastered to the roof of mouth
words caught
somewhere between two halves

when you were young
you made sculptures from
food tiny people and villages

for a while you'd stay
at the table hushed
avoiding eye contact
while your imagination took
you elsewhere
before medicine time
the birthday I spit on your cake
before
would you really could hurt yourself?

you used your index finger
to spread jelly across two faces
not a butter knife

That's odd, I said, so odd and

soft
to the taste

unable to escape the house
you made of bread

Orange Juice

When he came back and saw what he had done, something inside him was broken open. The horror of it, I suppose. The ugliness. The bones of her face rearranged like a jigsaw puzzle—reconfigured and bruised. I remember orange juice. He brought orange juice. She was in bed still, the next day, and he showed up with a handful of vitamin C and sugar and no *sorry*. His face said something. The skin between his brows scrunched together like folded hands. Maybe not an apology, but at the least, surprise—like he didn't remember the night before, like maybe he wasn't there. Maybe it wasn't him. Something in his eyes folded over, leaned into us on the bed, and said *god, forgive me* without sound.

If Only She Knew How to Swim

In high school, I said I liked the final scene in *The Awakening*, where Edna walks into the water. Said *I get it*, said *I understand*. Another student, a girl, said she was selfish to leave her children, something about she shouldn't have ever been a mother, something about doing things and not expecting consequences.

My teacher told me it wasn't a good way out. No, I thought, but it was the only way.

When I drove my brother to the hospital, it wasn't the first time he said he wanted to kill himself, but it was the first time it looked like he might mean it. It wasn't the first time he took too many pills, but the first time he wrecked the car afterwards. It was the first time he passed out and woke up unable to speak, the first time he sobbed, on the floor, called out for our father in words that didn't string together, rocked himself back and forth like an infant—

to the rhythm of creeping waves—I watched him drift further away.

Pepper Jack

While waiting, I sit next to a woman—
neatly kept, small frame, with a military-style watch.
As I move closer to her, she raises a slow half-grin, like
perhaps we've met in a previous life.

She asks how I am, I lie and say, *I'm fine, thanks*.
Then she mentions the rain, and I wonder
if I remembered to roll up my car windows this morning.
The glass behind her is rough with raindrops
and makes her blonde head a silhouette
against an uncertain sky.

When I have nothing left to say, she asks
if I like pepper jack and holds out the cheese
she is eating. The distance of her long,
manicured fingers from my mouth—
enough to leave me suspended in doubt.
I'm unsure if she is offering,
or curious.

Lessons

- I. I am in second grade,
my teacher writes a word problem
on the board, asks us to solve it
in our morning journals. My hair
drops from my head, from a 3-foot
chair, to the floor. I have a crush
on the boy across from me.
He pulls at my hair.
- Our teacher leaves and comes
back
- crying. She turns
on the news in our classroom.
- We watch
the towers fall.
- II. I am in third grade,
the secretary, over the intercom, says
something like, *the Pope is sick*
Or *the Pope has died*, I don't
remember which, but was code for:
turn off the lights, lock the door,
- and hide. We sit in the back of the classroom.
My teacher passes around a basket
of rosaries. We begin praying,
our fingers move along the beads,
- our words muffle the distant gunshot.
- III. In high school, I go to mass.
There is a priest who rides his motorcycle
through the gymnasium.
- A student shaves his beard for charity.
- He gives a homily about sin and forgiveness.
His fingers move along the side of the podium.
- He is in the hospital. They say he's sick.
He started his Harley with the garage door shut

because he was caught
with fingers in his pockets.

Overlooking a Playground in June

when there are no words
there are
sounds we invent
to fill the spaces
and still
the mouth
its movement
enough
if all else confused
in heat

across catcalls and glass
we walk to get there
to get here
where

from a hill
I can watch
them move
for the sake of moving
and still see cars pass
as if I can stop
whatever might come

A bullet. More glass. Still no words.

she comes
incoherent to pick
up her grandson
the words falling
from her mouth
as if it were my job
to pick them up

*it was more
than meth*

surviving

*the system his siblings
in different states*

*I can't afford
to speak of them*

In the Basement of a Parish Hall

At 18, in the smolder of June, I worked in the parish hall of a rundown church. In the heat, it was turned into makeshift classrooms. Here, I waited. I waited for children, but mostly, for parents to come and retrieve what was theirs. I waited. For mothers, who came down the stairs—the peeling linoleum and rotting glue sticking to the clear six inches below their heel. I waited to watch them glide carefully, in thin gold jumpsuits and plastic jewelry—their hair slicked back with oil and glitter on their eyes—their magnificent skin. I waited. I waited for someone who isn't supposed to be picking up their children past 6 p.m. ascend from the outside, through sweat, to come and find me.

Adoration after Crypts

Upon visiting the Capuchin Crypt

bury the butterflies
made from scapulae

cover the legs and shoulders
respect for the dead

I touch him in the streets
feel all of him
all the living parts

cover the relics
we will never meet again

they say
what you are now
we used to be
what we are now you
will be

my jaw has forgotten
the rhythm of his name
and my own

Knots

I'm standing, facing the mirror, brushing the knots
out of my hair, listening to the TV through the bathroom door.

The 700 Club and talk of faith healing move me closer
to the door, to leave, to turn off the TV. But instead, I listen—
feet clamed to the tile, knees pressed against the cabinets. Every part
of me sagging and heavy.

My roommate comes in, says she's just been to the vet. Her dog,
the one she found on the street, the one she saved from being hit
by a van, might have lymphoma. She moves out of the door frame.

I let the brush scrape my nipple. I want to tell her I have to have surgery.
Instead, I say a silent prayer to myself, pressing the spikes of the brush
into my scalp.

Stranger

A grey stain
across the sky
refuses birds—

she returns,
delivers her sixth bastard,
this one she won't hold,
doesn't recognize—

she is a cuckoo
in a nest of ash,
her skin marred
by light seen
under burnt spoon,
her belly hollowed—

she becomes
an outline of herself
and withholds milk,
the last territory
she can claim
as her own—

Crystal

She left two; crying, hysterically bruised. She shook. Like a busted cooling unit, she buzzed and grunted, maybe in anger, but mostly in the high wearing off, wearing her down. She moved in quick beats as the heat moved across her forehead, down the side of her face, settling between her tits and the belly they rocked on. Her breath was heavy iron. Missing teeth did not hush her, but left out words, recognition, cereal, a shower, a bedtime story. The two, twins, a burden, most mornings, turned up hungry.

In July, in the heat, she is baptized. Through sweat and holiness, she speaks in tongues, in a language abandoned and forgotten. She pulses. Side to side, in praise, she sings, screams at the twins. On second thought, maybe it is the anger. Maybe it is frustration that leaves her on her knees.

In the night she prays, mouth hollowed and filled again. At night, with her hands cupped, she holds crystals. At night, she summons a priest and begs him to lick her wounds, to be healed. In the morning, she leaves her twins with me.

F.A.S.

This one came screaming, not so much a sob, but more like the sound of a newborn—the sound of being ripped from a mother’s womb into a world much colder than expected.

His father carried him over his shoulder, into the cafeteria,
and I watched as he fought him, scratched him, pecked him.
I watched as he tried, with black fingernails, to scrape away the dirt from his eyes,
as he tried to see, to be alive. He clung to his father, his warm body, as though
it were something he had lost before.

In the first days, he cried for hours and threw himself to the floor, making a tiny ball
of his shaking body. In the first days, we fed him, and then we left him. We left him
until he stopped, until he didn’t make a sound.

How he shook when he screamed. His tiny shoulders like the wings of a new sparrow
trying to move. Like a bird he was, only whose mother had nudged him from the nest
and refused to look down.

Sip

I'm sorry for being a bad mother.

She's given up, and for the first time, I find myself in the smoke of black coffee and the mascara settled in cigarette lines on her face, her eyes empty as we sip in our lips and swallow our tongues. We catch glimpses of women wading into still water. I see her strength in retrospect—the pancakes, the fried chicken, the beatings, the sunglasses to cover a face without makeup, a night of drinking, a night of *his* drinking. We feel the current pull us under. We fear purpose and not finding it. We move far away to become ourselves and come home to recover what we left, like a child we aborted. Not even bleach can remove the stale blood from unpainted walls that continued to shrink us. I should tell her, *it's not you, I just don't know how to be happy*. But she knows this, she's just *sorry*. For a while we sit, still—each of us wondering how to breathe, after being held under for so long.

Ghetto Birds

Against the heat, they beat
their wings circling
flying the same path
again and again.
They're hungry
for something
alive, something trying
to be alive.
They wait perched
until their prey trapped
jumps two stories
from a broken window,
into the street, where
their song becomes music,
background to children
 swarming
 across a soccer field
where goals are cracked
cones with metal fence nets,
too high to climb, and
footsteps fall in time
to the wind. Grass blades
swing heavy to soak sweat
and blood, from noses
and lack of water.
On the street, a man hacks
as he sells ice cream and pork rinds
and pushes his living uphill, toward
the church, where he finds shade
and drinks from a paper bag—

which will find its way to the field,
from the bus stop, over the fence,
where the caw blends
into the street corner,
where
they run
move
 move
 we run
from one end to the other
 not moving
 under their wings

Portrait of a Starving Brother

Sweet face. Sugar eyes. Cake lips.
Cinnamon tongue. Rolled quietly.
Glazed. Eyes drip. Arms gripping
summer. Fingers latching cigarettes.
And sugar. Silent summer. Drinking
water from the creek. Smoke like
steam rises to the roof. The roof of
the shed where we'd sit. You sit. Glass
trapped. You lean your head through
the window. I wake to the sound
of vomit hitting cold linoleum. Rust.
Blood. Hiccup.

Your eyes rolling. Your eyes
latching to walls. Pale and stripped.
Your stomach turns. Eyes wide and
glossy. Tongue flat and unrolled.
Drool drips like water from the
corners of the ceiling. Cracked. Metal.
Salivating. Glands throb. Neck. Chest.
Lungs. Fuming.

What Went in His Mouth but Didn't Come Out

He ate the baked ziti.
Said it was good. Said
I ate too much pasta.

I made dinner because
I wanted to feed him.
I wanted to watch him
eat—wanted to make
him full.

We went to bed after.
His head on my chest,
his hair resting against
my chin, his breath of
garlic and meat, he said

his mother stood in the kitchen
with a knife to her neck,
sobbing when she found out
his father had been fucking
their too-young nanny.

I remember the knife in my hand
as I cut the tomato, the garlic,
the smell of her on his tongue
before dinner. I remember
cooking to satisfy my own need,
the thought of her in his mouth.

I remember his eyes saying,
I could never do this—

or maybe that's what I wanted them to say.

I remember how he ate quickly
and thinking if it were happening,
like me, he couldn't stomach it—

maybe what they really said was
please don't make me say it.

Where the Living Are

I measure time by the number of empty
water glasses and write my name
into sculptured carpet, drowning
 in the lace curtains of the living room.

She fries bacon and warms white bread
in a pool of milk, balancing a cup of coffee
on her thick thigh, smoke heavy
 on the chest, she drinks in the living room—

where every poem I write about her begins with her
calling me to her lap and turns to dust and elegy
 stirring above the mantel of the living room.

He brings in beans and peppers she's grown,
before the bugs can eat them, and I notice,
as she cooks, she gets tired and sits,
 periodically, in the living room.

Here, she teaches me to cross-stitch, and I watch
as her patterns get sloppy and sick. I pull thread
 through needles she can't see, in the living room.

Here is cancer, its shedding clings
to the wine-red velvet of her chair.
White blood cells dim with the light
to kill her
 headache in the living room.

There's a pit, in the back room, where she watches
TV, eternally coughing and hacking, she rocks
 away from me, in the living room.

Ruined

In Pompeii, there are ruins that aren't ruins—
 paint on infertile walls tourists can touch
the woman, fragmented and laid in flowers
 watch her melt
 as if there is not still digging to do

Faces hot and dust-covered
ashy shadows line the streets
without innocence or grief
for the dead, the mummified—
 their silence, cataclysmic

We breathe in black sand
we take what's not ours

From Vesuvius, we take pictures of the fields—
the flowers as they fume for the woman
brought up out of ash and debris

In Our Last Minutes, We Left Words
for Carl Phillips

And in the end, in the last minutes
of our togetherness, we were quiet.
There was nothing left to say,
no way to beg for absolution
or more minutes. And we knew it.
Still, we sat long enough for the wind
to change directions and scatter seeds
across the lawn, long enough
to change our minds

in the silence, I thought of our first date
at the Chinese restaurant on the corner,
your parents, the way my name fell
out of your mouth in accent, my parents,
how the right side of my memory
foam mattress will begin to rise.

Sometimes the thought of having
failed something puts me at ease.
Sometimes the idea of having been
through it remedies the anxiety
prior to. Sometimes, in October,
when the air is broken glass,
I breath in and something inside
me is cut open—swallows
swarming a silver sky—
an image of you before it's over

and how not knowing then, when
I wouldn't be able to remember
the good of you. She said
it was like mourning the loss
of a family member, but it's not. It's
a different kind of emptiness—

in not doing, not saying *let's try*
again, the empty shell of being
forgotten, or the fear of. The fear
of being left. So many times I
thought silence was a way of keeping
you, of growing you to miss me
and that you would not
leave. Could not leave.

In the Lobby of a Hospital Called Two Rivers

When we walked him inside, I didn't. I couldn't.
My mother did, and if both of us cried, he'd know—
somehow be more aware. We sat on the couch, in the lobby,
and she couldn't stop—the lines on her face
doing acrobatics as she muffled the noise.

I observed the wall and its paintings, cheap and generic.
I couldn't understand how a place like this wouldn't have
something more inspiring, something more real. I watched him.
He seemed calm, like maybe he wanted this. Maybe this felt safe,
like maybe he was elsewhere, observing some memory
of Disney Land or an early birthday, somewhere,
anywhere but here. Maybe he knew if he cried too, she'd take him
to the car, wouldn't ask questions, and take him home.

I watched them take his belongings: his phone, his jacket, his shoes.
I watched another mother try to bring a stuffed dinosaur to the front desk,
for one of the workers to give to her son. She said he slept with it,
that he needed it. They said it was a hazard, that they couldn't take it to him.
I thought this was sad. But I was distant. I wasn't there. I wasn't her.
Though, she didn't cry either. Maybe we both agreed it would be

some way of nodding *yes, this is real.*

Before It Dies

1. Almost anything can be kept in the freezer
2. My great aunt used to have carrot cake delivered to her door around the holidays.
3. Sometimes, when I'm with other people, I think of you and how, after everything, I'd prefer you.
4. Most things I want to keep but have no use for, I shove to the far corner of underneath my bed.
5. She kept the bags—we found at least 30, after she died—burlap with large carrots ironed on.
6. I let a plant die after months of tending to it daily.
7. —Ice cream past its expiration date, vegetables, bread (but it shrinks and gets soggy).
8. My mother reused the bags when she harvested her garden—she said there's no use in waste.
9. I try not to, but wonder if you ever prefer me too.
10. Dust-covered ornaments line my dreams: old shoes, a few hats, a box of things you gave to me.
11. Maybe she was lonely after her husband died, maybe they ate the cake together.
12. One day, one of its leaves started to brown.
13. I should put them in the Dumpster but it's far away and the walk there—those things in my arms—remind me of you.
14. We took kitchen appliances, after her death, only the nice ones.
15. I threw it away before it had a chance to die.

Once I Thought to Learn Spanish

The sky works yearlong for snowfall. I take my clothes off without thinking. I dream us in Granada, sipping *cortados*. When I'm cured, I'll dream of *chupitos* and a letting go finally, as the goose-winged clouds do.

But here, in different *lenguas*, I don't understand why we work so hard to love each other and our failures. And how, even sober, all love is naked.

The Space in Taking
for Leslie Harrison

I said *forgive* to forget
the space above the sink, below
the mirror, where the wooden
door gets stuck every time it's
pushed open—the space where
I'd knock your toothbrush off
the shelf to reach mine. Some
nights I dream of myself standing
in front of the bathroom mirror
and watching my teeth fall
into the sink. Someone told me
this means *you're keeping something*
that *you're not saying something to*
someone. I said *forgive* to feel
the space between loving and
and an empty bed—a way of burning
the remains, what once was, a way
of losing the ashes.

I woke up with black hands.
I meant *forgive* with the intent
of *love*, not forget.

I wanted you to feel the space too,
between the apartment and your car,
the space in the stairwell and not
coming up, the space in wanting.
I said *forgive* in the space
of trying to take something back.