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At Least Buy Me a Drink First

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AT LEAST BUY ME A DRINK FIRST

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Ali Renee Geren

May 2019

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AT LEAST BUY ME A DRINK FIRST

English

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Ali Renee Geren

ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poetry that focuses on relationships and how those relationships shape our identities. The collection begins with a critical reflection on the poems in the piece and the way that they interact with pop culture and other contemporary poetry. Although the piece is not divided into sections, the poems deal (primarily) with three types of relationships: romantic/sexual, mother/daughter, and patient/caregiver.

KEYWORDS: poetry, relationships, quentin tarantino, pop culture, identity, lgbtq

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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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This is for Quentin Tarantino. Someday I'm gonna look directly at your dumb face, and it's gonna be the best day of my life.

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INTRODUCTION

I come from a family of people who work almost exclusively in the medical field; they are nurses, primarily. I, too, have worked as a nurse's aide for nearly 10 years now. In short, my family are not people who value academic work the same way they value a trade job. They are much more apt to value hard work and good work ethic over a collection of degrees. Because I have chosen to dedicate my life to an academic setting, I sometimes feel disconnected from my family; while I can share stories from my time as a nurse's aide (and do, frequently), I feel that my family misses half of my life. A lot of the struggle that I find with sharing my work with my family routes back to accessibility and the accessibility of poetry – in 2005, former poet laureate Louis Glück said “I have never been one of the people who feel it essential to increase the audience for poetry. I feel that the people who need it find it” (Glück, qtd. in O’Driscoll 89). This attitude of poetry being only for poets is not, in other words, a new idea, but it is a dangerous one. The word “accessible” has become a sort-of curse word in contemporary poetry – to call something accessible is to call it dumbed-down – intended for an audience who doesn’t want to put the work in to understand it, like the *Christian Science Monitor* who reviewed Billy Collins’ book *Aimless Love* and called his work “too accessible, too obvious” (Lund). There’s a sense in contemporary poetry that poets should not lay everything out for their readers, that, as Glück says, “if [they] need it [they’ll] find it,” implying that poetry – good poetry, anyway – is something that readers should have to work for.

Because of my desire to involve my family in my work, and perhaps somewhat selfishly, I want to create poetry that is accessible, as introducing myself as a poet often yields one of two results. “Poetry,” they’ll say, “I don’t get that stuff,” or they will pull out their phones and read

their terrible rhyming poetry to me. I could argue, then, that the world is divided into three types of people: people who write poetry, people who think they write poetry, and everyone else, people who “don’t get” poetry. The vast majority of my family belongs to this last group. I can hardly blame some of them; in the Summer 2016 edition of *Rattle*, Susan H. Maurer published her poem “Ant Logic.” The poem, in its entirety, is as follows: “ant logic ant logic ant logic ant logic / ant logic ant logic” (Maurer). The six repetitions (seven, counting the title) of the phrase “ant logic” make up the poem, prompting at least some readers to wonder about the exact meaning of the phrase “ant logic.” Of course, we can ask that question of any poem, contemporary or otherwise – what does the arrangement of these words and phrases mean? What do the phrases themselves mean? “Ant Logic” is low-hanging fruit; I am certainly not the first person to decide that this poem doesn’t make sense. It’s an easily accessible example of the dichotomy that exists in contemporary poetry today, revolving around one question: why do we write?

Contemporary poetry often sees itself split into two camps: poets who write poetry to express emotion and create a narrative, and poets who write poetry to push at the boundaries of the art itself. Of course, these two poetic groups are hardly mutually exclusive – it is entirely possible to write poems that express emotion, tell a story, and push at the boundaries of the art itself. This debate really comes down to two questions: why do we write? and for whom? There isn’t a right or wrong way to write poetry – although “Ant Logic” is not the type of poetry I prefer, it is still a poem, and it is still published in *Rattle*. There is, however, a difference in the audience – who we write for, and who poetry itself is for. “Ant Logic” would (probably) be panned by introductory poetry students, but Maurer probably wasn’t writing for introductory poets. It would certainly be dismissed by my family (and Maurer probably wasn’t writing for

them, either). To dismiss Maurer's poem as 'experimental' banishes poetry to the neglected back shelves of the library – something written by poets for poets, with the understanding that if a reader doesn't understand what's going on, then they shouldn't have read it anyway.

This is why the experimental nature of some poetry creates part of the "I don't get it" mentality so prevalent in the general population (including my family); it isn't easily accessible or understood, so they have no interest in it. This is not to suggest that accessibility should be equated with "easy" – certainly there is value in the pursuit of difficult things, and, as someone who has studied poetry as an academic discipline, I can offer an explanation for what Maurer is doing in "Ant Logic," even if I have no personal interest in it. In other words, I am not in the "don't get it" camp, but neither am I going to go out and buy Maurer's books. There is absolutely nothing wrong with experimental poetry, but when the general public searches for poetry, finding poems like "Ant Logic" fuels the fire of "I just don't get that stuff," which allows for the easy dismissal of poetry by the public.

Of course, it can be easy to divide poetry into either experimental or traditional, but the simple reality is that the two aren't mutually exclusive and that there isn't a way to police what the general public reads. This brings us to the question of craft, as the argument of what poetry is intended to do is fueled by craft – the way that poems are constructed is as important as the content itself. As Robert Creeley said, "form is never more than an extension of content;" the way a poem is constructed is as much a part of its meaning and purpose as the words themselves are (Creeley, qtd. by Olson 2). Take, for example, Sharon Olds's poem "Red Sea." Olds is one of the most prolific contemporary poets; if we were to "sort" her according to the traditional versus experimental camps, she would be firmly in the "traditional" category. Olds writes poems that evoke emotion and express, with a clearly structured narrative. At the same time, her poetry

forges a pathway through the poetic frontier; her second-most recent collection, *Stag's Leap*, continues in the style Olds's readers have come to know her for, but still pushes beyond those boundaries. Consider, for example, the poem "Red Sea," which has an entire section of single words, outlined across from each other:

...two columns

of words keen and catcall to each other:

relinquishment,	fastening,
abjure,	trice up;
forfeiture,	colligate,
disclaim,	padlock;
free,	ligate,
abandon,	yoke,
desert,	surcingle,
secede,	belay;
quit,	solder,
yield,	snood,
leave,	enchain,
release,	bind;
	clinch,
	latchet,
	suture,
	peg;
	splice,
	wattle,
	harness,
	nail,

much work to be done. And Love said, to me...

(Olds 11-33)

One of the hallmarks of Olds's work is accessibility; Olds confronts readers with stories of the taboo, stories about abuse and about sex, about masturbation and the death of her parents. "Red Sea" is about the devastation of her marriage, but it incorporates a visually experimental element – its form is an extension of its content.

The other side of accessibility – the unfortunate side – is that sometimes it can read as watered down. In September, I read at a library-sponsored event with three other poets: Marcus Cafagña, a respected contemporary poet; Brandon Henry, another Masters student; and David Harrison, a respected children’s poet. My mother and sisters attended the reading; it was the first time they had attended a poetry reading at all. After it was over, I asked my mother what she thought. She said that she enjoyed my work the most (of course), but that her second favorite was David Harrison’s children’s poetry. Initially, I was surprised, and I asked her why. She told me that it was because she understood Harrison’s poetry; it was easy for her to listen to, and (to my private horror) it rhymed, which she liked. I don’t say this to discredit Harrison’s work or my mother. The entire experience was an exercise in accessibility – how do we create poems that are easy to understand but that still use elements of craft? My argument is not that we start writing exclusively children’s poetry (I use expletives far too much in my own work for that), but that we don’t get too wrapped up in the nuts and bolts of poetry that we forget that part of the reason we write poetry is to share an experience and to help someone feel the emotions we felt at a point in time, at least for some poets.

In other words, it is completely possible to write a poem that is accessible to adults without sacrificing craft or form. For example, in my poem “Delinquent Motherhood,” I create a poem definitely intended for adults, but is still easily understood in terms of dramatic situation and emotion. I write: “At seventeen, I bought a pregnancy test / for my friend Jennifer, who had been having sex with her / quarterback boyfriend,” (lines 1-3), thus establishing the dramatic situation clearly. Still, the poem does not exist separate from poetic craft; I break the line on “pregnancy test,” and the words “At seventeen, I bought a pregnancy test” constitute a complete sentence. Breaking on “pregnancy test” creates tension. Is the speaker (who is 17) buying a

pregnancy test for herself? No, it is revealed in the next line; the test is for her friend, someone who has been having (presumably unprotected) sex. The poem continues:

If one in ten
of the girls in my class hadn't needed one,
or hadn't had sex with their quarterback,
running back, forward starter, ten-point-shooter
boyfriends, perhaps I might've been more
concerned, but to me, she was just one delinquent
among twenty-three others in our class who made a bad decision
that spawned a slew; Jennifer dropped out of school
and moved out of her mother's house.

(lines 3-11)

This section gives us greater insight to the dramatic situation. The speaker's friend is not alone in her predicament, and the speaker is not concerned about Jennifer's situation because she does not see Jennifer's situation as unusual. As the speaker says "she was just one delinquent," which indicates both that the speaker knows other "delinquents" and that the speaker herself is not a delinquent. After line 11, the poem opens up into the speaker's own situation, which includes her and her mother gossiping about the speaker's brother (who is paralleled with Jennifer's boyfriend/husband in the poem), and the speaker's questions about her own situation and sexuality.

"Delinquent Motherhood," like a lot of contemporary poetry, is autobiographical. In Spring 2016, it was selected by Sarah Freligh for publication in *Moon City Review*. I was excited about being published and didn't stop to consider the implications of my (conservative, Christian) family reading this particular poem when I told them that I was going to be published. When the edition of *Moon City* was published, my mother read the poem alone, in her bedroom,

and spent the next week texting me Bible verses. I did not have a conversation with my mother prior to her reading the poem; her reading of the poem was my “coming out.”

While this experience was traumatic on both sides, my mother proved to me (and to herself) that she *could* understand poetry, despite her insistence to the contrary. She very clearly understood “Delinquent Motherhood” and the intricacies of the poem; after she had had time to live with the shock of reading about her daughter’s bisexuality, she told me that the thing that bothered her most about the poem was the way she was portrayed in it; as someone who judges and gossips. This is true, of course, of both my mother and myself – we are terrible gossips, especially about the small town I grew up in. One in ten of the girls in my graduating class (roughly 200 people) were pregnant or had children by the time they graduated (if they graduated at all) and now, approaching our 10-year reunion, I am an anomaly, being unmarried, not a divorcee, and with only a cat, no children. But my mother worried about the way the people who would read *Moon City* would see her – people who would likely never meet her, or know anything else about her. It also bothered her that in the poem, I talk a lot about not being able to tell my mother about my sexual identity:

I do not tell her that I kissed a girl.
I do not tell her that I liked the way her lips felt against mine;
I do not tell her that I kissed her again, and again, and I do not
tell her that I never want children, not in so many words,
and I do not tell her that my plans involve, for the most part,
this girl and lots of cats. I tell her none of these things; ...
(lines 29-34).

Several times since, she has said something to the effect of “You know you can always tell me anything, right?”

My relationship with my mother aside, my point remains: I want to write poetry to be understood, not just by people I do not know, but by my family. Although I will never show my family the bulk of my work for various reasons, it is important to me that, if they ever read one of my poems, they would know what it was about, and not feel excluded from an environment that already works to exclude people without graduate degrees.

Good poetry does not exist in a vacuum; Quentin Tarantino roughly quoted Pablo Picasso when he said “I steal from everything. Great artists steal; they don’t do homages.” Part of creating accessible work is creating work that not only is understandable in terms of language, but that interacts with other mediums. In December 2017, just after Christmas, I watched *Inglourious Basterds* (sic) for the first time. I followed this with every Quentin Tarantino film that I could find – prior to December 2017, I had never watched a Tarantino film. After this nearly rabid binge-watching, I started writing poems that directly interact with Tarantino’s work. My Tarantino poems often confront the issues I find in Tarantino’s work, as well as the issues that his female characters (and the actresses who play them) face.

It was hard for me to admit to liking Tarantino’s films; while Tarantino himself has never been accused of sexual harassment, his initial refusal to condemn Harvey Weinstein’s actions and his continued work with the producer is enough condemnation. To call Quentin Tarantino my muse would be incorrect, though I do admit to a fascination with his work. Part of the reason I wrote the three Tarantino-focused poems in my thesis – “Impossible Things,” “\$5.00 Milkshake,” and “Tell it to the Tourists” – was because I was (and am) a fan of Tarantino’s work. The other part is a response to Tarantino himself and focuses on a deeper look at the relationship between art and artist. These poems also ask the question: can we disentangle Tarantino from his work? or does my appreciation of his films make me just as complicit in

Tarantino's behavior? My Tarantino poems attempt to answer both of these questions, with a focus on the events in my own life. "Impossible Things" creates a literal dialogue between the speaker and the Bride, the protagonist from the *Kill Bill* duology:

The Bride and I decide to get our lives in order after the new year. *Decide what's important*, she says, *what's really important*. This is hard, for me, but she makes two lists "People to Kill" and "Fucks to Give." The second list is blank; she made it to make a point. She never half-asses anything. Mine would be blank, too, if I could pull off a banana-yellow tracksuit and a samurai sword.

(lines 1-8)

The Bride becomes a role model and a life coach for the speaker – the Bride walks into the speaker's life and tells her to get her act together, essentially. In the next strophe, we find out that the speaker is mourning the loss of a relationship:

My lists don't come as easy. I call one "Things I've Lost." The Bride laughs and brings her sword down, slicing through the paper. This is excessive. *You can't think about what you've lost*, she says, but I do. I think of him, of the two of us, two parentheses in the sentence of our bed, our relationship like space between words, the breath before the giving up.

(lines 9-15)

This clarifies the dramatic situation from the first strophe; the Bride and the speaker are making New Year's Resolutions, and one of the speaker's resolutions is to stop devoting time to a relationship that has ended. The Bride tells the speaker explicitly that she "*can't think about what [she's] lost*" and even cuts one of the lists the two of them are making in half (lines 11-12).

Later, the Bride confronts her own relationship with Bill; the poem also addresses Uma Thurman's relationship with Quentin Tarantino:

I tell her
about that awful article about all the awful things
Tarantino did to Uma Thurman, and all the coals she walked across
in the name of good art and a paycheck.
The Bride says *that's pretty fucked*, and I agree with her,
because it is; pretty fucked that Uma's blacklisted, hasn't done
a real movie in years
(lines 36-42)

"Impossible Things" is autobiographical in the sense that it references events from my life. The "he" to whom the speaker refers in the poem is a real person, and while the Bride and I did not have an actual conversation (obviously), the poem is about the helplessness that the speaker feels in the wake of being left. For the speaker, having a conversation with the Bride is about regaining control of her life, taking it back, as evidenced in the final strophe:

She adds
Tarantino's name to her kill list. Art for art's sake.
Under that, she writes the name of the other half of the sentence of my life;
two parentheses, squaring up. I think about her slicing him
in two, two perfect, impossible pieces of him.
(lines 45-49).

How does this relate to accessibility? Part of writing accessible work is writing work that *connects* – "Impossible Things" is understandable to anyone who is familiar with the *Kill Bill* duology. The use of the word "fuck" in the poem is a nod to Tarantino as well; "Impossible Things" exists in a conversation with Tarantino's work. Of course, accessibility is not dependent

on the incorporation of pop culture, though I have found that acknowledging Tarantino's influence helps me write poems that not only appreciate the films, but also make a statement on Tarantino's behavior. Beyond that, Tarantino's films create an experience that allows viewers to get involved without feeling like they have to know the intricacies of his references. In a way, Tarantino's films represent what I want my poetry to become – an experience that allows readers to enjoy poetry without feeling like they need to know all about poetry. This is not to say that Tarantino “dumbs down” films or film-making; those who have watched several of his films can find nods to other films and influences throughout.

For example, in *Pulp Fiction*, John Travolta plays a character named Vincent Vega. In *Reservoir Dogs*, Michael Madsen plays a character named Vic Vega. Tarantino has said that Vincent and Vic are brothers – which is an added bonus for viewers, but this information is not critical to enjoying either *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs* separately (Alexander). Tarantino's films are works of art, but they are still enjoyable as pure pieces of entertainment. While it would be a stretch to say that I want to be the Quentin Tarantino of poetry, I do want to create an experience in poetry that allows people who know nothing about poetry to enjoy my work but that does not alienate other poets.

Although she doesn't write in response to Tarantino films, Erika Meitner writes the type of poem that I want to write. She discusses politics, religion, and pop culture in her work, and she does so in a style deemed “ultra-talk” by poet Denise Duhamel. The hallmarks of ultra-talk poetry are conversational value and approachability. According to Duhamel, “‘ultra-talk,’ [is how] we would want to sound if we were smart and sassy during every conversation” (Duhamel, qtd. in Andrews). For example, in Meitner's poem “WalMart Supercenter,” she writes:

God Bless America says the bumper sticker on the racer-red
Rascal scooter that accidentally cuts me off in the Walmart parking lot
after a guy in a tricked out jeep with rims like chrome pinwheels tries
to pick me up by honking, all before I make it past the automatic doors
waiting to accept my unwashed hair, my flip-flops, my lounge pants.

(lines 1-5)

Meitner writes like she is chatting with a friend, but her work also goes beyond just the arbitrarily named “girl-talk.” Her poem is approachable because the majority of her readers (regardless and, perhaps, in spite of academic achievement) have been to or are at least familiar with a WalMart Supercenter. I did not see the “racer-red / Rascal scooter” (lines 1-2) but I can immediately recall similar encounters. Meitner makes her speaker sympathetic, too – she is going to WalMart, so she wears “unwashed hair, ... flip-flops, ... lounge pants,” or as my mother calls it, proper WalMart attire (line 5).

“WalMart Supercenter” is about the experience of humanity that WalMart is – Meitner chronicles the adventures of WalMarts all over the country in her poem. She writes, “In the parking lot of the McAllen Walmart, a woman tried to sell six / Bengal Tiger cubs to a group of Mexican day laborers. A man carjacked / a woman in the parking lot of the West Mifflin Walmart,” which says more about humans and humanity than it does about WalMart (lines 18-20). In other words, in “WalMart Supercenter,” WalMart is a means to an end. Meitner’s work is accessible because she writes about an experience shared by most people who live in the United States; it is poetry because she uses these various experiences to make a statement on humanity, to talk about the way that we treat each other. She drives this home with her final lines:

A couple tried to sell their 6-month-old for twenty-five bucks
to buy meth in the Salinas Walmart parking lot. We who are in danger,
remember: mercy has a human heart. Mercy with her tender mitigations,
slow to anger and great in loving kindness, with her blue employee's smock
emblazoned with How may I help you? Someone in this place have mercy on us.
(lines 46-50)

“WalMart Supercenter” is funny in some parts – “God Bless America says the bumper sticker on
the racer-red / Rascal scooter that accidentally cuts me off in the Walmart parking lot” – and
heartbreaking in others – “In the parking lot of the LaFayette Walmart, / grandparents left their
disabled 2 year-old grandson sitting in a shopping cart / and drove away” – but at its core it
wants to be understood and strives to create emotion and reaction within the reader (lines 1-2,
34-36). In the same way that my mother could understand the winding up and unraveling of my
poem “Delinquent Motherhood,” so too could she understand the way “WalMart Supercenter”
creates a snapshot of humanity.

I do a similar thing in my poem “Tell it to the Tourists.” “Tell it to the Tourists” creates a
female-led remake of Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*; I cast a number of A-List stars in a movie I
call *Reservoir Dames* and detail the ways the movie would mimic the original but also differ
from it. The poem, at its core, is about the female experience, the way that women’s work is
judged more harshly than men’s work, at least in Hollywood (though I feel that this probably
extends to several areas). The poem is summed up in the final strophe:

At the end, when Madame Orange and Madame White
roll around on the floor, bleeding together, you'll hope
Sandra Bullock (who else) won't shoot Jennifer Lawrence,
in the end, but she will. It'll hurt; critics will say *Roberts*
should have spared them, like Orange and White
should have ridden off into the sunset, a lesbian Bonnie & Clyde,
Sandra Bullock at the wheel of a yellow Cadillac,
titleless Jennifer Lawrence, sprawled out in the backseat.

(lines 37-44)

For me, writing accessible poetry involves several things. Discussing cultural issues, as I do in my Tarantino poems, is certainly a part of it, but writing about things with humor sometimes, with sincerity at others, is also important. Paying attention to the emotion we attempt to evoke is important; paying attention to the way our form and content inform each other is also important. Perhaps at the heart of accessibility is honest emotional expression – the ability and the willingness to express a human experience to others in the frankest way we can.

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AT LEAST BUY ME A DRINK FIRST

Impossible Things

“If I had to make a list of impossible things that could never happen, you performing a coup de grace on me by busting a cap in my crown would be right at the top of the list.” –The Bride, Kill Bill Volume II

The Bride and I decide to get our lives in order after the new year. *Decide what’s important*, she says, *what’s really important*. This is hard, for me, but she makes two lists “People to Kill” and “Fucks to Give.” The second list is blank; she made it to make a point. She never half-asses anything. Mine would be blank, too, if I could pull off a banana-yellow tracksuit and a samurai sword.

My lists don’t come as easy. I call one “Things I’ve Lost.” The Bride laughs and brings her sword down, slicing through the paper. This is excessive. *You can’t think about what you’ve lost*, she says, but I do. I think of him, of the two of us, two parentheses in the sentence of our bed, our relationship like space between words, the breath before the giving up.

So I call my list “Impossible Things” and the Bride can’t say anything about that, just sheaths her sword and writes another name down on the kill list. Impossible things. Like the Bride and I sitting in my living room. That’s the point; the new year is about a list of impossible things. Someone she loved killing her, or trying to. His walking out and leaving me with the lease and the bed I couldn’t sleep in for six months. The Bride is made of tougher stuff than I am, wouldn’t let him still haunt her. He’d be dead by now; the five-point palm exploding heart technique.

I think about Bill saying *you’re my favorite person* after the Bride killed him. Sometimes I think Bill got a raw deal. I make a new list called “Favorite People.” The Bride rolls her eyes, like *okay, fine*.

“Fucks to Give” is still blank. A point. I tell her she’s a shitty metaphor for femininity and letting men control us; an irony. There’s that scene

where she's not wearing a bra, her breasts bouncing everytime she moves. I told her I couldn't stop watching, hypnotized, her nipples like two stars pointing north, can't even remember what the scene was about. Did I really ever think I was straight. I tell her about that awful article about all the awful things Tarantino did to Uma Thurman, and all the coals she walked across in the name of good art and a paycheck.

The Bride says *that's pretty fucked*, and I agree with her, because it is; pretty fucked that Uma's blacklisted, hasn't done a real movie in years; pretty fucked that I'm still this fucked up over someone I fucked, once, for three years.

I make a new list. I write "Fucks Given." The Bride uncaps her pen, she writes *Did you like my nipples* at the top and I think *yes*. She adds Tarantino's name to her kill list. Art for art's sake. Under that, she writes the name of the other half of the sentence of my life; two parentheses, squaring up. I think about her slicing him in two, two perfect, impossible pieces of him.

Split the Difference

We meet and split a turkey sandwich and a bag of chips.
I don't like turkey, but I'm starving, so I eat it anyway,
picking over the chips and leaving you the broken pieces.
I've always been a whole chip kind of girl.

It's three in the morning, so I don't know what to call this meal
we split, divide out evenly. We buy our own sodas,
but I take a sip of yours because mine is gone.

You wear exhaustion in your eyes, dark circles,
shoulders heavy. *The ER isn't a place for pussies*,
you say, tearing your half of the sandwich in two pieces.

Maybe it makes me a pussy but I avoid
that messy hive of humanity, buzzing in the hospital's belly;
a place for adrenaline junkies, for crazy people,

for you. I prefer the quiet order of hospice; the soft rhythm
of finality. I am habit-prone, attached to routine;
we split these differences over turkey and chips and stale bread.

Heart Trouble

We fought for three hours last night,
until all the words dried up and I was so tired
all I could manage was a vague *Fuck you*
before I dragged myself to the center of our bed,
exclamation point or line in the sand.

Sometimes, I think about what I would do
if you came home one day and told me you
had a brain tumor or cancer in your blood or heart
trouble, if we put a timestamp on this skeleton
of a romance. *If you want to be happy, be*, I think,
and I wish I'd said that instead of the half-hearted threat
I hurled your way. I'm bitter, and selfish, but if you died,
I could pretend that I'd loved you until the end,
sit vigil at your bedside; white satin for mourning.

The truth is I have not loved you wholly since that night
you fell asleep before I did, Tolstoy open on your chest.
You're a pretentious bastard, and I fell out of love with you in pieces.

This morning, you dress for work, and I pretend to be asleep.
All I can think about is you coming home and telling me that you love me,
you'd always loved me, and you were dying in two months.

Tectonic Plates

Moving out of the apartment we shared almost makes me miss you.
Mostly because we should be arguing and, if you were here,
we would be. How to pack the Willow Tree figurines,
which box to put the pictures in, which kitchen utensils
we can live without for two weeks.

I have the argument with the cat instead,
who looks up at me and offers a plaintive meow,
agreeing that the Willow Tree figurines and the pictures
will be fine in the same box. *Right, I say, I knew you were smart.*
It's much less satisfying than screaming at each other
over the kitchen island about tissue paper and boxes.

Three days after you left, our neighbor asked
what had happened to you, and I considered telling her
I'd killed you. I always played antagonist and she sympathetic ear;
that I'd murdered you wouldn't be an impossible truth.

He moved, I tell her. East.

Let her think Boston. Or New York—New Hampshire, maybe.
Let her assume you stayed close enough for me to consider
moving with you, shifting my bones around to fit with yours again;
a fresh place for us to shake and settle into.
China feels too far away for me to say you moved there.

It was too quiet without you so I started wearing work boots
when I was alone in the apartment. Something to make the walls shake,
an earthquake of my own. I stretched to fit this place,
shifted around until I belonged and now I'm moving.

The Willow Tree figurines and pictures make the box too heavy;
I pick it up and the bottom falls out. The noise makes my bones ache.

Powerforce

After you left, I didn't cry until I had to vacuum out the indentations
the wine rack left in the carpet. You took it with you,
maybe because it's a family heirloom, or maybe because you thought
I drank too much. I prefer the former, because it's easier
to think of myself as robbed than it is to think of myself as left behind.

I cried because I couldn't figure out how to change the bag on the vacuum,
and briefly I considered texting you or calling you,
but all of the strong, independent woman parts of me united
and I wrestled with the case for fifteen minutes, vision blurred
because *fuck you for walking out, and fuck you for taking the wine rack,*
and fuck you for never showing me how to change the fucking bag.

When we bought the vacuum, you asked me what color I wanted,
and I said *green*, because I thought the orange was too bright.
You bought the orange to spite me, and I hated it even more.
The vacuum breaks, two months later,
the front popping off when I shove it in the closet,
cord unraveling, a length of rope.

I won't deny the relief I felt, throwing it away;
all these pieces of you vacuumed up. Eradicated.

Last Flight to Aruba

I dream us in Aruba, on a beach, which I hate,
and spend the entire time bitching. Remember
that spring I went to Cancun with my family?
Remember how I messaged you, told you I felt
like we were both sexy-mysterious now, international
lovers? How *James Bond* of us, of me;
I was talking to you in China and a girl in England at the same time
and I felt like an international hottie, like some seductress
with a webcam, spread eagle on the resort bed
with the windows open.
In Aruba, my dreams, you burn and freckle,
and I just burn; we spend our days complaining
about skin cancer, eternal pessimists.

The last time we fucked I didn't know it was the last time.
If I had, I think I would have gotten up
and walked out before you could come, planned a sexy
singles vacation, somewhere on a cruise ship,
flirted with the captain, come back to an empty
apartment and the bed you left half-made.

In Cancun, they made the beds every morning,
and gave us fresh towels. They refilled the minifridge,
and I mixed those tiny bottles of rum with diet coke
and told you and that girl that I was
open and wet and aching
in a resort room and she could have me if she just
and you could have me if you just—

I dream us in Aruba, on the beach, and you're
walking away again, you're always just
walking away.

Girl

after Denise Duhamel

I meet her at the movies, by accident. Neither of us planned to be there at the same time, but here we are. Briefly, I consider dumping my popcorn over her head. *You're in the bathroom*, she says, smiles so big I can tell it's forced. I consider calling her out on it, *that's not even convincing me, sweetheart*, but I've been told I'm a little too harsh, so I keep it to myself.

I want to ask her how your mother is, but I keep that to myself, too, making awkward small talk with your new girlfriend while I wait for my new girlfriend, who is also in the bathroom, coincidentally, and this isn't how I wanted to come out to you, but here we are, and here our new girlfriends are, and aren't we a pair and later, when you text me *did I ruin you* I don't know how to respond so I just write

guess we'll see, let me know when she's single
and I don't mean it, I don't, but I've always been too harsh for my own good, and I didn't want these parts of my life to intersect, but here we are. Here we are.

Sorry for What I Said When You Watched *Wonder Woman* Without Me

I wonder how your new girlfriend tastes.
I thought about it once and everything just kind of *ached*,
so I tried to stop thinking about it, but it was like

I couldn't, too caught up in love
or whatever that feeling I get at the grocery store is,
putting things in my cart I don't even like – this is, somehow,
your fault, even though it's not, not really. I've been working on
taking responsibility for my actions. I'm not very good at it yet.

She and I are different, and I get it; we were never
married, only almost, and almost doesn't count, not really.
My mother still asks about you sometimes.

I wonder if your new girlfriend tastes like I did (or do),
I wonder if you find pieces of me in her and
I wonder if it makes you miss me the way that I miss you when

I pass those peanut butter crackers at the store that you loved (love)
but that are really fucking gross, but a part of me still reaches for them—
muscle memory, I guess, or parts of me that still want so badly to love you, still,
even after. Same difference.

Cheesecake: A Primer

A is for almost – the quiet space you live in, still,
even 5 years after, my body still clinging to the fragments of you.

B, for bleed – the thankful rush I felt when I was late –
only late, not ever pregnant, the gentle disappointment
that we'll never admit to, not even here. B is for *Be more careful*,
as in *we will*, as in *I will*.

C is for cheesecake on the floor; both of us half-
naked and for the cheesecake you rubbed across me,
across the great expanse of us, cheesecake ground into the carpet,
cheesecake that took days to get up, which was

D, for delicious. D like you're dessert, a promise kept and remade and broken,
delicious into devastation, into the destruction of us,
the way you burnt us down, the way I kept the flames going, even after.

E, for eager – our too-sweet mouths and you and *cheesecake* at two
in the morning – the soft delight of us, of eagerness in the way
I missed you before I knew you, and after, when you left me alone
in the kitchen, with a half-empty bottle of vodka –
eager in the way my lips tingled, half drunk and *wanting*.

F, for *fucking*, for me half-raw and wanting.
Of course f is for fucking, the slap of flesh, for *flesh*,
for freedom in the soft space we made,
for *fuck* when you came and *fuck* when you left.

G for the guts it took for you to get up
and get out, get going, for gut-punch,

and H for the way your hand felt on the center
of my spine, for when we spent the night on the living room floor
with the cheesecake and the soft press of your fingers
in the cheesecake and in the carpet and in me and the *hallelujah* I felt but never said;

I for ice storm and ice cream, and J for *blame it on my juice*,
Lizzo cranked up and crackling, a woman scorned, which brings us to

K for karat, the ring I never got, but that I saw, once,
and dreamed, one time, and L for laughter,
spilled between us when the cheesecake
ground into the carpet; *laugh* into *liar*, into *leave*.

M for meetcute and N for nice, for neat, for near miss, for no and never, for name, for *say it when you tell me you mean it*, but

also O for obedient, for the wife you wanted but couldn't bring yourself to ask for; P for *please*, for *please stay* and *pissed* and *piss off*.

Q for quiet, for the way the quiet crept into the soft spaces we left behind; the soft devastation, the way the quiet pressed in on me, alone in the dark.

R is for rug burn, for RumChata cheesecake, and S is for *sorry* but also for *stay* and for *so what*.

T for *teeth*, for the way yours scraped across my belly—the cheesecake in the dark, the way I could only think *teeth teeth teeth* over and over, and how much I loved your teeth, and you, which is also

U for *I miss u*, the text you sent when I was making out with my first girlfriend, the way you knew it would piss me off, leaving off the other letters, the way you knew I would lose my shit but never say anything;

and V for *vodka*, for the half-empty bottle of *New Amsterdam* that I hated but drank anyway, and W for *waste*, for the years I wanted to say I wasted, but couldn't, because W is also for *want*, for the way I wanted so much, the vast expanse of us.

X for Xerox, for the copy of our life that I keep, a secret, just between us, something I revisit a million times over, and no one ever has to know, and also for Xanax, to take the edge off.

Y for yield, for the way I couldn't give up, but did, let it go, for the way I couldn't yield to you until you left; and Z for zero, the great sum of our differences, an expanse I can't cross, and won't.

Split the Order

She snuffs out her cigarette and says
wanna do something, wanna go somewhere?
and it's six in the morning now, and I could sleep,
but I follow her to the river, too full and cold to swim in.

We wade in anyway, gravel that gives under our feet,
and get smashed on cheap moscato and Oreos,
drunk enough that the water doesn't feel cold.

She shrieks, because the water is cold, and because we are
twenty-three and terribly young and stupid, and that is something to celebrate.
Standing with her arms raised in the middle of the river, water pulling at her clothes,
she slips and goes under, plastic cup of moscato tumbling merrily down the river,
blonde ponytail floating on the surface for one-two-three heartbeats

and then resurfacing, she's out of breath and laughing,
gasping in that cold-water way. Her white t-shirt sticks
to her skin and she shivers; it's enough adventure for one day
and we leave the river the remainder of our early morning snack.

She laughs it off—*youth is to be squandered*, she says,
another cigarette dangling from her lips—but I can't shake it,
thinking that we both could have died, been swept downstream.
They never find some people who wash away
and for a moment it could be us, drunk and stupid,
slipping under the water, all of the traces rinsed clean.

Nine in the morning, sitting across each other
at IHOP, she kisses away my darker thoughts, cigarette smoke breath,
her laugh curling down my spine. We split breakfast,
pancakes and eggs, bacon and sausage, feast for the survivors, laid out
like we have something to celebrate.

\$5.00 Milkshake

"I said goddamn...goddamn." -- Mia, Pulp Fiction

I feel dangerous and terribly sexy,
twining them around my finger like bubblegum –
like that scene in *Pulp Fiction*
when Mia and Vincent are sitting in the restaurant,
before they dance, and there's something between them
and you want them to fuck (of course you do) but instead
they just dance; it's like that, this coy flirting
I'm doing with both of them, like a bizarre twist,
sexy in a way I'm still learning.

I've never liked sex a whole lot but they –
the two of them - make me feel like Uma Thurman
in black lace and a velvet jacket.
This Ozark summer is too hot for all that,
so I trade it in for a black negligee, send them pictures.
I feel ridiculous but beautiful, art for art's sake.

In the summer, I sleep without blankets,
my thighs sticky with sweat and the way that I think about them –
a duo, a unit, looking for a third. I wonder about their marriage,
wonder about my own as-yet-undetermined marital status –
the almost who left me raw, a burn sitting
at the kitchen counter with a glass of water, half-empty.

Mia Wallace snorts heroin, overdoses, seizes and vomits,
Vincent gives her a shot of adrenaline, right to the heart –
I'm gonna go home and jerk off, he says.
Mia Wallace, oozing sex, *I said goddamn goddamn goddamn*.
The summer heat is a blanket and I'm suffocating.

She says it's sexy when I talk about movies,
but not Tarantino. He likes Tarantino –
here is my pressure point, here is the soft pulp of their marriage,
this place I can squeeze, or be squeezed into.
A catalyst- their girlfriend. A unit.

I say I don't like labels. I feel dangerous and beautiful,
mysterious - Jimmie's black wife, Tarantino shouting the n-word,
boundless, like playing a character married to a black woman
makes it okay to say something that requires that much emotional lifting.

When I meet them for the first time,
I wear a sundress that barely covers my ass.
I order a five dollar milkshake, I twirl my hair,
I look for the soft pieces of them.

I kiss them both, after, brush my fingers
against the smooth skin of my own thigh,
think about Mia bloody and covered in vomit,
want them but can't bring myself to take the next step,
gotta keep all this to myself. A secret - Mia and Vincent
and the shot of adrenaline, straight to the heart.

Open Invitation

Her name is *Harmony* and she has a Scottish accent,
and she comes with the promise that she (not it) will remember things.

Harmony is beautiful; her makeup never runs,
but if her operator finds this off-putting, they can change it.

Harmony is completely customizable – tit size, skin color, the way
she sounds when she cums – she’s never faked an orgasm –

and I think that men (her intended consumer audience)
find this sexy and erotic, and not at all reminiscent

of the lazy-jawed sluts they fucked in an hourly-rate room
at Motel 8, botched boob jobs and raccoon eyes,

slimy red lipstick reapplied in the bathroom,
yes, baby, fuck me harder, like that echoing out

into the hallway, shame curling like hairspray,
too thick to breathe through, or the wives and girlfriends

who hold grudges about forgotten birthdays
and anniversaries, the candles in thick icing that ran,

once, burned the house down, and if Harmony starts nagging
her user about dishes or laundry, he can just turn her off –

or on; Harmony is always on when her users want her to be –
she will orgasm if he sweet-talks her or touches her

just right or not at all and if her user doesn’t want to mess
with the emotional debris of female pleasure, he doesn’t have to;

Harmony never gets too attached and doesn’t care
when he doesn’t text back. She just deletes, automatically – she’s a robot.

Harmony is always receptive and always wanting and she’ll never
say no – her mouth doesn’t close all the way and she’ll remember
things about him. She promises.

Sushi & a Diet Coke

The barista tells me that her favorite holiday is Dia de los Muertos. Mine is Christmas, & she asks if I'm one of those crazy Christians. *Even worse*, I tell her. *One of those crazy Capitalists*.

She laughs & I ask if she's one of those spooky goth girls, & she tells me she's a hippie. I don't really think of hippies as synonymous with Dia de los Muertos, but I get her number, so I don't say anything.

She says she saved me in her phone as crazy capitalist. I don't save her in mine. The last girl I swapped numbers with, grew on me; dust in the curtains. I got too attached, too quickly.

Her name is Kallie. I don't tell Kallie that I went out with my ex to see the new *Star Wars*, that he bought me sushi & a Diet Coke, that at the end of the night, I felt *I miss you* bright in my throat, that I went home, my skin crawling, & took three showers & stayed up until four in the morning, staring at the ceiling, watching the fan stir the dust until my eyes ached & I swore I could feel him pulse next to me, in the bed –

& I don't tell Kallie that it's been at least three years since I listened to the sound of his breathing, pushing me out & pulling me in – I think about the way he made my head spin & everything hurts, all over again.

I still don't save Kallie's number, only text her, sometimes, on Dia de los Muertos & when I'm a special brand of lonely; I keep her just there, on the periphery, the tip of my tongue – free-falling dust, spun around & around by the ceiling fan, eyes aching & it's four in the morning.

It Swings the Other Way Too

Note to self: If a guy tells you his favorite poet is Jack Kerouac, there's a very good chance he's a douchebag. – Ocean Vuong

She asks me if I have heard of Rupi Kaur,
and I want to like this girl, so I smile, and lie
no, I haven't, tell me about her, in the hopes
that this won't end like all the others – Rupi Kaur
has a cult following among lesbians. Who knew.

This girl, she's always talking about politics and socialism
and art changing the world. Tonight isn't any different;
I ask her to pass the popcorn, my feet in her lap,
during her tirade about racism, and sexism, and *really bad stuff*,
it's really bad stuff. It's the fourth rant today, and I just want to watch
Inglorious Basterds, which is my favorite movie, even though
I'm not a Brad Pitt fan. She gets tired of my indifferent
silence. *You're a fucking poet*, she snaps, somewhere
between Hitler and the Bear Jew. *You're supposed to care*
about this shit. She hands me the popcorn. Extra butter,
so it'll go straight to my thighs.

She tells me Trump is ruining America. She tells me it's up to the poets
and the socialists to save it. I tell her that maybe
America needs to put its trust in someone a little less self-absorbed.

On the screen, Aldo Raine and his Jewish Americans beat the shit
out of a Nazi soldier. I toast them with my beer, cheer when they cheer,
take another handful of popcorn.

I don't think you've read my poetry, I tell her, finally,
and I think about our first date and Rupi Kaur,
and I never should have let it get this far;
we were doomed from the beginning, me and this girl;

Aldo Raine carves a swastika into Hans Landa's forehead—
marking them for the next sorry bastard who runs into them,
and I think maybe he had the right idea all along.

Enough Water

April's humidity makes it too hot to sleep, so I lay awake, aching and thinking about our river debris romance; July on the river. At 7 in the morning I text you *I'm hungry*—we make jokes about dick pics and I tell you, *I feel like I've known you my whole life*. The words are a river stone in my mouth. I regret them immediately, but I wanted to know the weight of them. How they tasted, how it felt when they rolled against my teeth. We sit in slick silence, let the words sink between us; an anchor or ball and chain. I want to ask if you know what it takes to crack open my soggy bones; if you can or if I'll just slowly disintegrate, dragged under by the current. When the silence breaks I tell you stories about my father and you pick apart my algae-slick skin until I fall asleep on the phone. It's been so long since I've had hands on me and you are enough water to drown in. I tell you my spine is river grass, my body a canoe on hot days. I tell you I have so much to give. I tell you my favorite color is the way the river looks in the shimmer of July, the curl of the water against my blistering skin. I tell you I climbed a tree once- one time- and fell, arching through the air, landed ass first in the river let it pull me down let myself drown a little once.

Promise Rings and Porn

My mother says makeup is for women who are afraid of what God gave them, and that when I am in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I should be clean-faced, so I go to church in clean clothes and pink skin, and feel holier than the girls in makeup and heels, bolstered by my mother's praise.

My boyfriend and I take the purity pledge, promise to save ourselves for marriage, my unruptured hymen a pact that I keep between me and God and my future husband. He ruins this, four months after we promise to wait, confesses to an addiction to pornography, tiny amplified moans the devastation of our promise rings.

I forgive him twice, once when he confesses, tearfully, to our youth pastor and me and his mother, and I feel the weight of this on me, like this failure is also mine to bear, for not praying hard enough for his resolve, for keeping my kisses too chaste and my hands to myself.

His mother looks like she wants to slap me *don't you know, you selfish bitch, handjobs don't count*, but I guess I was so busy praying for my future husband I forgot about my boyfriend, forgot that I was grooming him for his future wife, even if it wasn't me. There's a part of me that thinks *her* prayers for her future husband should have been stronger than mine were, than his lust for women in smeared lipstick.

He confesses to me, again, that night, and again, I forgive him, wrap him up in my arms, my cheek to the crown of his head, and I think about being clean faced in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All of my prayers are not enough, and he relapses, masturbates to women with mascara'd raccoon eyes, faces dripping in cum, and, after his confession I, with the whole of the church behind me, break up with him so he can focus on rehabilitation, on getting better, on *being* better for his future wife, because she is the heroine here, this girl with the lacking prayers and the husband I have been trying to save.

Vinegar Pantoum Variation

My mother used to mop the floors with it each morning;
I can still recall the sharp, clean burn, strong enough
to make eyes water, greeting Reverend Richardson at the door,
with slippers: *take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground.*

It lingered, after, I could still smell it, sharp in my nose,
and when Reverend Richardson talks about Jesus coming to save us,
my eyes water, greeting him at the door,
our hearts like pay-by-the-hour motels, seedy,

until Jesus came to save us,
in need of cleaning and new management,
and if our hearts are pay-by-the-hour motels, Jesus
has come and gone to mine, his hours long run out.

I needed cleaning and new management
when I was eleven, a good Baptist,
asking Jesus into my heart, *won't you stay awhile*
my knees pressed to the holy ground by my mother's fireplace

when I was eleven, a good Baptist.
There was Moses' bush or vinegar, sharp in my nose,
the grouted brick – clean – sharp on my knees,
and my sister and I in swimsuits by the baptismal,

smelling vinegar again, my face tight with holy fire.
Our *no vacancy* signs lit up, our little lights shining
and I asked my sister, each of us in swimsuits,
if her face felt tight, baked by the burning bush.

Our lights shining, she said it was Jesus' light,
and holy water washing away our sins, because
her face was tight with forgiveness, with the burning bush,
and the water that smelled clean, like vinegar, like my mother's

floors, scrubbed clean each morning.

By Halves

after Denise Duhamel

My mother pushed me out of the house with my suitcase because I was angry;
my sister got all the nice things – McDonalds at kindergarten
orientation; the soft pink shirt with the cats on it from our grandparents
after surgery; rights over where the Christmas ornaments should hang,
even though I was the oldest and naturally bossy.

The purple scrunchie was the last of it for all three of us;
my mother knew purple was my favorite and she gave it
to my sister, anyway, and I'd had enough and so had my mother,
so when I said *I'm leaving*, my mother just said *thank god*, which fell
empty and hollow between us, and maybe it was regret or maybe it was relief.

I wanted to be like Hermione in the *Harry Potter* books my mother read us,
latched onto them like my sister never did, mostly because they were
something I had that she couldn't -- but still she crept in,
claimed them as her own, and even though they were big enough
for us to share, I cried, sitting on the floor of my mother's bedroom
and saying *it's not fair you love her more* over and over
until the words made me sick and I got to stay home from school,
which was all I ever wanted anyway; watching daytime soaps
as my sister sat in school and earned straight A's and learned.

I thought about growing up to be anything but our mother;
my sister followed in her footsteps and my mother is proud
in a tangible way – I watched her cry at my sister's graduation and I cried
when she didn't at mine and for a minute, walking across the stage,
I was eight years old again, and struggling to drag a suitcase
down the stairs of the deck as the sun set and thinking
I'll never go back, only to go back two hours later,
when I got cold and hungry, and my mother made me a bologna sandwich,
but we didn't have mayonnaise so I had to have mustard instead,
even though I was sure at the time she'd have made my sister
a grilled cheese which was our favorite.

In hindsight, I'm sure she would have done the same for me, if I had asked,
but I only cried and told my mother she'd never love us both the same,
and she said *maybe you're right*, at a loss with what to do with me,
since running away didn't work, and neither did disagreeing.
When she said that I screamed; half a bologna sandwich turning soggy,
and my suitcase sitting half-opened on the couch and me,
purple scrunchie-less and open and aching.

Soap

When I was 11, I stood in the basement and screamed *shit* as loud as I could, because it was the worst thing I could think of. What I actually said was *I'm sick of this shit*, but the climax of the sentence was definitely *shit* and since I'd never cursed before, *shit* rose to the back of my throat, pressed there, resting, waiting for the beginning of the sentence to bubble out of my mouth, fall out in a rush, so it was less of the composed *I'm sick of this* and more a tangled *Imsickathis* and then I took a deep breath, clenched both fists, and screamed it: *shit*.

Later, my mother said that it took everything in her not to laugh, but at the time she only paused in her vacuuming and looked at me like *you're sick of this shit—you have no idea you ungrateful little fuck*, turned off the vacuum to shove a stick of Dial in my mouth for a full minute, pointing to the timer she'd set, as if I'd dare spit before time was up. So then any time I thought the word *shit* in my head, my tongue burned
and I didn't dare speak another curse word,
at least not where my mother could hear, not until I was 24,
standing across from her in the kitchen, at night,
when she curled her mouth around *ho-mo-sex-u-al*
like it was a bar of soap, bitter and burning her tongue, like our roles had been reversed, her telling me she's *sick of this shit* and me—
Dial or curse words, just standing in the kitchen
whispering *shit shit shit* until the burning stopped.

Delinquent Motherhood

At seventeen, I bought a pregnancy test
for my friend Jennifer, who had been having sex with her
quarterback boyfriend. If one in ten
of the girls in my class hadn't needed one,
or hadn't had sex with their quarterback,
running back, forward starter, ten-point-shooter
boyfriends, perhaps I might've been more
concerned, but to me, she was just one delinquent
among twenty-three others in our class who made a bad decision
that spawned a slew; Jennifer dropped out of school
and moved out of her mother's house. My mother
said that if I dared be as fruitful as the young parents in my class
she would beat me black and the lesson stuck.
Jennifer is married now, to her quarterback boyfriend.
One baby has become four more and though
I think of a mother of five as fat, and ugly, overworked and haggard;
Jennifer is none of these things, a blonde beauty still,
with beautiful children and her quarterback boyfriend-turned-husband
who works at Eyemart now, 70 hours a week
so that Jennifer can stay home and make children and raise children
and there is no shame in that. Not for Jennifer.
Not for my mother, either, who had four children
and now asks me for grandchildren. *Your ovaries,*
she says to me as we fold laundry and gossip about
beautiful Jennifer and her five children, *are going to dry up*
and fall out. Like raisins. I haven't ever responded well
to scare tactics, and my flippant *I wish they would* only serves
as exasperation for my mother, who was married by younger
than I am now. I do not tell her that I kissed a girl.
I do not tell her that I liked the way her lips felt against mine;
I do not tell her that I kissed her again, and again, and I do not
tell her that I never want children, not in so many words,
and I do not tell her that my plans involve, for the most part,
this girl and lots of cats. I tell her none of these things;
instead, I fold my father's athletic shorts, and my lineman brother's
t-shirts, and my mother looks up from the ironing and says
I think Tanner and his girlfriend are having sex and all I can think
is that my brother's girlfriend is blonde, like Jennifer, and a part of me
wonders if she is destined for motherhood,
if someday I will buy glasses from my little brother,
if his girlfriend will be as lovely as Jennifer is, a mother of five and still
that high school cheerleader beautiful. The thought does not concern me
as much as, perhaps, it should.

Beat It

When I think about Marshfield, I think of my first car accident when I swerved instead of slamming-- the tire bent, curled in on itself, but I thought it was fine until I tried to drive, the steering wheel like a wild thing under my hands. The damages to the other car-- a red convertible with the top down-- were cosmetic, so we did not call the police, only my mother, after, her anger like rugburn, my hands like sound, vibrating too fast to hear.

When I think about Marshfield I think of this:
the four-way stop, singular, a car accident, also singular,
outside of a church, just one, standing sentinel at the four-way stop.
God sees us all, or is always watching, or something
about guardian angels, perched on the steeple of the church.
Before the slamming despite the swerving,
I had my windows rolled down, remember
thinking *happy* like happy was something to be remembered,
a tangible thing, something I could hold in my hands
like a steering wheel, feel it real and firm
and then the sharp jerk of its loss—

When I think about Marshfield, I think
of the four-way, a pulsing heart,
pushing me out and pulling me in
and pushing me out again and I think
about the sound of my hands when they shook—
these vibrations, too fast to hear—my windows
rolled down before impact, happy something I can't
hold onto--a steering wheel alive, too loud, under my hands,
and an erasing, a letting go—

When I think about Marshfield, I think about holding
happy in my palms, the four-way stop heart beating beating beating,
and my hands, too loud for anyone to hold.

Perfect Ten

In church confession, Catholics confess their sins. In confessional poetry persons of all faiths confess how others have sinned against them. –Daisy Fried, as the Poetess.

My sister and I used to take the Barbies into the pool with us,
when I was platinum-blonde and sun-browned
skin and a wild thing—line them up and have them do swan dives off the side
of the pool, pressing our hands against concrete to feel heat.

I always chose the blonde Barbie. They swam naked
because my mother said that Barbie swimsuits were a waste of money,
so we dunked their bare plastic bodies in the chlorine,
told our mother and each other and ourselves that they were mermaids.

I pierced Barbie's ears with a needle stolen from my mother
and two tiny dots of glitter glue. It washed away in summer,
when Barbie dove off of the side of the pool, a perfect ten,
arms stretched towards the sky as my sister and her Barbie cheered
from the sidelines and our mother sipped spiked lemonade.

The holes I had poked in her head made her plastic skull fill with water,
and my mother squeezed Barbie's head until water came out of her ears,
two tiny chlorine waterfalls, squeezed until her eyes bulged and her lips
puckered, until her skull was concave and my mother pressed her thumb
into the top of Barbie's head, popping her temples out again.

We put the Barbies away after that, laid them to rest in their cardboard
boxes, baking in the summer heat of the attic while my sister
and I grew up and apart, tipping either end of the scale, our mother
clutching us, her participation trophies; my sister a perfect ten.

Later, when we cleaned out the attic, we found her;
forgotten and molded from the inside out,
my Barbie with pierced ears. My mother said *see, this is what you get*,
tossing the Barbie out, shaking her head at the black mold
crawling out of her head, curling up into her ratty hair.

Used Spaces

My sister bought a house and called me,
excited at the prospect of remodeling.
At 23, she is at least four years ahead of me in all matters
of being adults, even though, at 25, I am older.

She paints her house in blues and greys,
something soothing, she says, to come home to.
I make jokes about coming over to do laundry, and stealing her WiFi,
but a part of me feels left behind—an empty honey jar,
who forgot that the world is about moving forward
and growing up and getting jobs and instead
got caught up in falling in love and falling out of love
and kissing girls and boys and forgetting to keep up
with my sister, who is a nurse,
filling these barren rooms and naked closets
with pieces of herself.

She paints her bedroom navy,
so dark it makes my eyes hurt, points out
the small patch of lime green she missed, left behind
by the former tenants. She tells me
she is irritated at herself—so much
to do and she's not making progress,
but I tell her it looks great, and it isn't a lie –

the front door is red, and I compliment
my sister on it, tell her I like the bright
red color, red like solo cups and strawberries
and apples and happy, but she tells me
that it is a remnant, left behind
by the people who lived there, before,
and that she's painting it grey, or beige,
something soft, to ease the house she owns into home.
She and my mother go grocery shopping,
and I am left alone in a half-full house
that isn't mine, and I touch the walls and think

that I would have liked them, the ones
who inhabited before, who painted their walls green
and their door happy red; these ones who sold
their used space to my sister at 23.

In the Richmond Airport, I come out to my gay cousin

whose name is Jeremy. When my mother talks about him, she calls him Jeremiah, like there's something dirty in his nickname, something unholy, something she doesn't want to touch.

He does not say that he expected it, or suspected it, only sits in silence, letting me trip over words. I don't believe in coming out, I don't think, I don't believe in closets or processes, at least not for me.

My cousin and I talk about letters and labels, and he tells me I don't have to claim one as my own, which is fine. I don't mean that I'm unique, I mean that I don't really feel like I fit a letter or a label.

In the Richmond Airport, my cousin and I sit across from each other and split a ten dollar sandwich and a package of barbeque chips, which I don't like, but I don't say anything since he's buying, and listening to me trip over words about girls and boys and something in between. It's empty, for an airport. This is a good thing, because I'm crying, which isn't new for me, because the day before, I cried when my cousin (not the gay one) danced with me at his wedding, and I cried when my sister told me that she loved me, and I cried when I smashed my fingers in the hotel door because I'd had too much to drink and the world was tilting sideways and I was just trying to hold on.

Look, the point is—I cry a lot, so crying in the Richmond Airport isn't a new thing for me, but still—I'm crying and I hate audiences and it's good the airport is empty.

Jeremy offers me the napkins from the sandwich and tells me about his boyfriend Zach and how he's still not sure which letter he wants to claim, so it's okay, it's okay if I don't know and he does a lot of talking about psychology and the human brain

but all I can think about is that now my mother and my (gay) cousin know and even though I don't believe in coming out and processes, I think about my mother practicing saying *This is my gay daughter* in the mirror and it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter what letter I claim; I'm already unclean, something dirty in my name, something she doesn't want to touch.

Litany According to the Laws of Speech Governing the Midwest
after Samantha Deal

Picture this, picture you & I, spread open in the Ozarks' heat. Picture us in the grass,
in the gravel of the North Fork river, listen to the way my mouth

muddies it up, turns it into *norfoke*, something lurking, a dark thing. Once,
he made fun of it, the syllables loose in my mouth, a cascade of rocks &

once I knew a girl who teased me about being from the South but I can't claim it;
too much Missouri mud in my blood. My mother says *in Missouri during the Civil War,*

brothers shot each other, & I think about my brother & I facing off
at a protest. *He's still the president*, my brother says, & it hurts worse

than any kind of Indian burn we ever gave each other; worse than you & me spread out
by the mud of an angry Ozarks river, just waiting for us to get tugged downstream,

lost in the current. Sometimes I love you more than I thought I could.
Did you know Missouri was almost the cave

state, a sister to Arkansas, the natural state, even though the only natural
thing about Arkansas is the way it crouches in the cave of my throat, easier to say than

Missouri, even though I'm not from Arkansas, won't ever claim to be from there. I don't have to;
my father is from Ohio, from higher ground, so I tried to sound more like him,

tried to lengthen my vowels, make my o's a little rounder, sound like a proper Midwesterner,
tried to cut my mother's tongue out of my mouth, left *ya'll* behind, sound educated, not like

some bastard birthed from the bowels of the South, something mud-soaked
& still squirming, escaped from heat & humidity, the root of some kind of evil,

but you don't think that, do you, don't call me *evil* when I
press you down into the mud & gravel (no sand here, not yet, maybe someday),

the gravel digging into my knees, the soft skin there, *your* soft skin here
& here & here –& maybe someday I'll be some kind of real Southern lady –

still, the mud runs deep; when I visit my cousins in Ohio, I sound like a bumpkin,
something uncivilized, something from red country, somewhere

they don't know any better, where the brothers used to shoot each other,
where maybe they still do.

Point

In the nursing home, my grandmother and I
play a game only she knows the rules to—
matching spades to diamonds; *the pointy parts*,
she says, and I think about cancer like my grandmother's
smile; I play a club and she laughs—
we've just shared a secret I haven't learned yet,
and I think about her teaching me how to read.

After my grandmother is diagnosed, my mother
brings her home and we drag her through a shower
she doesn't want. It makes everyone feel better
and I am soaked, but closer, somehow,
to my mother than I've ever been;
we've always been mismatched, my mother
and I—pointy parts and round edges.

Sometime between 2 A.M. and 4 A.M.,
a week before my 26th birthday,
my mother texts me, 6 A.M., while I'm sitting
on my bed before work, that my grandmother
is dead. I am not as devastated
as I think I should be; somehow this loss
is much less jarring than her calling me
and tripping over the words
your grandmother is dying.
The sum of this death is easier to digest;
dying is harder to stomach.

When I think about my grandmother
in the shower, I think mostly
about the way she puddled on the shower stool,
the weight of her against me and my mother, outside,
calling directions through the bathroom door, like
I don't know how to give a shower.

Snapshot of the Farm, November 2018

We check my grandfather's cows every morning in November
on the four-wheeler & I take pictures that I will delete later
grandfather shows us the place he fell three weeks ago while he was fixing a
fence when he couldn't get up or get service on his cell phone this pile of rocks & dirt
here at the navel of two kissing Ozarks mountains where he waited four hours
before my cousin came looking I do not take pictures of this place
& my grandfather points out my favorite calf the smallest white one
& he says it won't make it too small & sick to live & my
grandfather says he's just waiting to come out one day & find it
just lying there just wasted away nothing left but skin
& bones turkey vultures picking at the marrow & leather
& the mother just wailing & I take two
pictures of the calf I never delete
its sweet face & butter-soft hooves.

Cement

She says she thinks of it curling into her lungs, weighing them down, sinking them like shoes to the bottom of a river. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. I wonder what happens to the rest of the body, if there are just feet cased in cement at the bottom of rivers. Swimming with the fishes. We read *The Godfather* in the ICU. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. I shave her legs and think about cement shoes. She says she's spent her whole life fighting hair. We laugh. She coughs. I think about her lungs, hardening. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. Dying, or being dead. She wants to be cremated. I think of her lungs surviving the fire, just two charred chunks of cement. On Christmas Eve, she tries to eat a cinnamon roll through the BiPAP mask. I tear the roll into pieces and sneak small bites under the straps. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. Her son comes. She tells me it has nothing to do with her smoking *just bad luck* she says, like slowly cementing lungs are a slowly deflating tire or footprints in a drying sidewalk, some kind of accident. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. I think about it all the time, her lungs like cement, slowly suffocating. I think about it all the time.

Hummingbird

Two in the morning and instead of falling asleep at the desk,
I make rounds, peeking in on each of my patients.
Bed 34 is halfway through a bid for freedom,
gown torn off in protest, skeleton perched
between the rails of the bed.

I try to coax her back to the nest of blankets, but she slaps me,
burning handprint, etched into my cheek.
She's all sharp angles and paper machè skin, but musters
the strength to pinch a bruise into my arm,
and demand that I let her go home.
My attempt at reorientation—*it's two-thirty
in the morning, and it's Sunday. Let's wait—*
only serves to infuriate her, fuel the fire, her furious
bid for life and freedom, but she's just buying time.
I don't give a fuck if it's Christmas Eve, she snaps back;
defiant and naked, she is skin and bone;
her body consumes itself faster than she can feed it.

It's July, but I let the matter drop, curling my hand around her
wrist, feeling the frantic flutter of her pulse against my fingers.
It takes five of us, one on each limb plus the nurse to give
the shot, driving the needle into the wasted muscle of her thigh.
Even so, two of us compare battle wounds; glistening
dentured bites that will fade into jewel-green bruises.

Fuck you all, she screeches. *Fuck you all*.
She's fierce in her paper thin skin,
this fragile thing with fiercely beating wings.

7251

She is thin—I can count the knots of her spine
the ridges of her shoulderblades the lines of her ribs
and I finally understand what they mean when they say
thin as a rail, because rails—this woman is made of them.
She's all straight edges and skin but for the tumor that bulges
out of her neck, lumpy. Yesterday's oatmeal. I cannot take my eyes off of it and I
stare. She looks like an art project, a lump of clay with toothpicks
jammed in like limbs. I want to ask her how she gets her clothes on
in the morning; I want to ask her when she noticed it,
if it started as a lump, still small enough to be a swollen lymph node—
or if she waited until it was stretching the skin of her neck
so tight, she could see the roadmap of her veins.
I want to know if she woke up one day and looked in the mirror
and *oh my god*, but by then it was too late—this thing screams
stage IV, fatal, terminal—her mortality hangs from her neck;
a pendulum that counts down the days-hours-minutes.

As I am leaving, she cups my cheek with a hand that burns cold,
icicle fingers curling around my neck in something that could be
jealousy, but she only says *thank you—thank you for seeing me instead of the tumor*.
She won't live long enough for the white lie I whisper to matter.
The thing that spurts from her neck has sucked all but the marrow from her bones.
Cancer is a starving child; it will eat itself to death.
Yes, of course, I say. My cowardice is bitter. I smile to sweeten it.

Last Meal

working in Hospice, May 2015

i.

Watermelon, out of season,
but his son finds a quarter of one
at the local Price Cutter. It's a poor excuse
for a watermelon; too pale to really count as pink,
but he eats until his teeth scrape the bitter rind.

When he dies, his son sends me a card. Pale pink,
watermelon out of season. *Thank you*, it says,
from the watermelon man.

ii.

Half of a potato, cooked in the microwave
until it is soft enough that it splits under the gentle
pressure of the butter knife. Mashed up, mixed with butter and salt
and then she swallows it in three bites.

The morning she dies, her daughter cries, but
I'm not sad, she tells me, *I'm just so happy she's resting.*

iii.

Five bites of chicken noodle soup from a can. She wanted her mother's,
made from scratch, but her mother is dead and we don't have the recipe
or the time to roll out the noodles, so canned will do. She doesn't seem
to mark the difference.

Later, her granddaughter sends me the recipe
we didn't have the time to find and just says *thanks*.

iv.

The diabetic asks for one perfect strawberry,
dusted with sugar, and we give it to him.
He savors it, tart on his too-sweet tongue.

v.

Blueberry yogurt--he eats three cups. When I meet his daughter
at the grocery store by accident, our carts nearly kissing in the pasta aisle,
her cart is neatly stacked with cups and cups and cups of blueberry yogurt.
It's been three years now. We all let go in different ways.

At Least Buy Me a Drink First

He talks too much, for a phlebotomist,
but I forgive him this fault, and let him
chatter away about the book he's reading while he pokes
and prods and slaps my arms. *Once they stuck me in my feet*, I say,
and I mean it as a joke, but he looks like he might actually consider it,
me stripping down to my bare feet, propping my ankles up
on the counter. It's a weird thought and we have a tiny stand-off,
the phlebotomist and I, until he smiles and shrugs and reaches
for the butterfly needle, the small one. *You just have shy veins*,
he says, and I picture my veins like blushing beauties
at the prom, wallflowers in pink taffeta, scared of their first
time. I look away, which makes him laugh,
and I want to tell him to pay attention, but he slides the needle home,
punctures those blushing virgins on his first try. When he's finished,
we high-five, a drop of blood and a band-aide all I have to show for my part.

Later, it'll blossom into a bruise, last for a week, only to fade and forget,
just in time for me to settle back into the phlebotomist's chair,
and joke about taking my socks off. We'll fall into our easy
routine again—the foreplay and puncture and joke
about my veins as virgins with amnesia, only to draw
and withdraw, bandage up and bruise, and go again.

Rush In

A police officer drowned this weekend, a hang up 9-1-1 call while the roads were flooding. His cruiser washed away. My sisters and my mother and I were driving home at the same time. We made it safely. We were not the hang-up call, the four of us rocketing along those roads, singing along to the radio – ABBA, I think. “Dancing Queen.” It was raining and we were singing and the roads were flooding.

On the 17th anniversary of 9/11, I look for a poem to read to my class, a room full of students who, for the most part, don’t remember it, were only just born when it happened. I was ten, and I remember only pieces – my teacher’s white face, the principal pulling all of us into the cafeteria, drawing us in, the sudden appearance of flags in the hallway; my father, that night, crying in the living room. I didn’t understand.

I still don’t. Still not sure how to talk to a classroom full of students about an event we barely remember. I thought about ignoring it; pretending it was just any other Tuesday, go on about the lengths of lines, the way a voice rises and falls naturally in poetry, the way we write poetry to express ourselves, to interpret and process and this is, precisely, why I cannot pretend it’s just any other Tuesday – what kind of a teacher would I be if I told them that poetry was a way to experience and express and process and then deprive them of the most painfully American experience in the last century?

A police officer died this weekend, in the line of duty, drowned when his cruiser washed off the road. The news said he never even unbuckled his seatbelt. He drowned, buckled into the seat of his police cruiser, drowned, while my sisters and my mother and I warbled along with the rain.

In class, I begin with Martín Espada’s *Alabanza* poem, and cry, halfway through, inexplicably – I’ve never cried in front of a classroom of students, never cried about this day, not ever – it’s never been something I can touch or relate to. I think about the way experts talk about the similarities between poetry about this day and poetry about Auschwitz—poetry that expresses tragedy, that’s about mass, collective loss.

A police officer drowned this weekend, six miles from my parents’ house. A girl I work with at the hospital knew him – knew of him, or knew him – she says she grew up with him. Maybe she did. The ages were off— I’m no historian. Maybe she did. It’s not my business either way, but there was a post on Facebook about the officer who drowned in his police car.

It was terribly overwritten – something very dramatic. If a student turned it in, we would say *too fancy, too overwrought. The language is all wrong.*

It mentioned the cancer of 9/11, but I think of cancer like a slow thing – some slowly seeping poison, not the way 9/11 rocked us, rocked me, rocked my father 17 years ago, not the way *Alabanza* rocked me, not the way I rocked my students, all of them watching me try, desperately, to hold it together, watching me fail, break down and cry, sob, and try again to pull myself together. I'm still not sure how to draw it out of my blood. Maybe I can't.

Tell it to the Tourists

“Time out, Greenbay. Tell that fuckin’ bullshit to the tourists.”
--Mr. Brown, *Reservoir Dogs*

i.

There are no women in *Reservoir Dogs*,
except the waitress in the beginning,
the one Mr. Pink doesn’t want to tip,
and the black girl Mr. White and Mr. Orange carjack.

ii.

When they remake it, they call them Madame.
Jennifer Lawrence would play Madame Orange,
a tough cop who would dress exclusively in wife beaters and leather pants.

She would get shot in the boob, instead of the gut.
It would be a statement about femininity, and the sacrifices lady cops make.
It would also be an excuse to show Jennifer Lawrence’s tits on the big screen.

iii.

Instead of “Like a Virgin,” they discuss
the inherent sexism in Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines;”
the way he assumes. *It’s not about consent,*
Madame Brown would say, *it’s about ownership.*

iv.

They would use the word “fuck” exactly 134 times,
which is exactly half of the number of times it is said in the original.
This would be a statement on profanity, and the amount of money
women make. Nobody would get it, too mesmerized watching women
scream fuck 134 times, watching Jennifer Lawrence’s tits bleed.

v.

Meryl Streep would play the mastermind;
a hardass criminal named Jolene. Everyone
would go to see it in theaters to watch a 50-foot
Meryl Streep scream *fuck* and flick her cigar, missing the ashtray.

vi.

Natalie Portman would be offered the role of Madame Blonde,
but she would decline, citing *morality conflicts*. Mila Kunis
would take the role instead, throw gasoline on some up-and-coming actress,
just trying to get her start. Critics would hate the torture scene:
Mila Kunis goes too far, they’d say, she lacks Madsen’s control.

Nobody likes a crazy bitch.

vii.

Scarlett Johansson would play Madame Pink. She would wear pink lipstick and pink nails and a powder pink suit. Her hair would be pink, too, because *Reservoir Dames* would be set in 2019, and pink hair is acceptable. Celebrated, even. Totally badass. Everyone would want to fuck her, which would be part of the appeal. Critics would say *Scarlett Johansson brings something to Reservoir Dogs Steve Buscemi never could: sex appeal.*

viii.

It would not do well in the box office, despite all the big names it would carry. The world isn't ready for women exacting their revenge. *Reservoir Dames lacks heart*, critics would say. *Nothing at its center but blood.*

ix.

Julia Roberts – the director, and Madame Brown – would tip her sunglasses down, sliding into her car. *We're all blood at the center*, she'd say.

x.

At the end, when Madame Orange and Madame White roll around on the floor, bleeding together, you'll hope Sandra Bullock (who else) won't shoot Jennifer Lawrence, in the end, but she will. It'll hurt; critics will say *Roberts should have spared them*, like Orange and White should have ridden off into the sunset, a lesbian Bonnie & Clyde, Sandra Bullock at the wheel of a yellow Cadillac, titless Jennifer Lawrence, sprawled out in the backseat.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

“Soap” appears in *Caustic Frolic* Spring 2018

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