Domesticisms:  
A Hybrid Collection of Poetry and Prose

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements 
for the degree of Master of Arts in English

By

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Dedications

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ABSTRACT

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By
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This collection consists of eighteen pieces of independent, stand-alone writing, that, when joined together, form a larger, cohesive narrative. The larger link between the pieces is thematic, as they explore, among other things, domesticity and motherhood from American contemporary perspectives, looking at how these socially constructed positions contribute to our identity performance(s). I recognize that there is no essential experience to be articulated here: my work explores potentialities, rather than absolutes. I gather multiple positions and multiple aesthetics, all seeking to explore the potentiality for pluralistic female experiences as they relate to familial, societal, and internal pressures. This collection also seeks to be, as a whole, an interrogation and exploration about evolutionary potential. It seeks to expose the anxieties women face as a result of the multiplicity of choices they are offered and the paranoia and shame they must overcome as a result of the potential for making “incorrect” choices. The work presented here seeks to uncover the latent possibility of the collective experiences that can occur when limitations—social and individual—are lifted away.
Antibodies

In the beginning, there is this body—

of bone and breath and blood and whatever hangs
in the triadic balance between constellations.
Stars split ribcage to surge up and out,
travel through spinal fluid to reach a waiting cortex
where they buffer, stabilize, to prevent a collapse
beneath the weight of worry. Circumpolar, fixed, navigational; it keeps
the otherwise chance grouping bound.

There is this body, a cocoon
of flesh. Touch it awake, open it
beneath fingers.
It is eager to please,
responsive to stimuli.
An amalgamated system: nerved bridges, blooded tunnels
carrying the message. Shuddermoanquakecry—
this is not love, but it will do.

There is this body, tuned to the frequency
of everyone else’s desires. Muscle and sinew vibrate
at the calling of each pitched request.
No longer a seeker of balance, the waxing and waning
blocks all but the most urgent timbres. Yet
in the black static night, it sometimes hears its own song
and hums along at the speed of silence.

There is this body and it longs
to reproduce. Ideas flood channel, gateways open
wide; it welcomes in synthesis. It gulps down gasping desperations,
mouthful after mouthful.
Yet the environment is hostile:
everything withers in the hull.
This is the dirtiest secret the body holds;
this is the site of the unforgivable breach.

There is this body. In measured beats per minute it breathes
around the blockages. More than motor impulse, one body makes
an accessory muscle of another; together they contract and expand, exchange, exchange.
Diaphragm swells against hand, flexes between inhalations of
seed and pollen, filth and essence, trying to cultivate
something more. Dreaming of escaping
the hollowed out husk. Dreaming
of becoming.
Only the How Remains

Let me be clear:

I can take it all off.

I can. And I will. For you. There is no question of will I. Only the how remains, as of now, unclear.

I can strip down, slow and quiet, letting the clothes pool around my feet. Or I can scatter them across the room, you watching from a distance as I leave pieces of my disguise on every piece of furniture you own. Or we can leave them hanging off my body in places, the urge to tear into each other too strong to finish the task of unwrapping me.

The point is I let you choose. I let you get drunk on the idea of power. I let you believe in your own agency. You like that.

*Do it yourself,* you say.

Looking right at you, I dig my way out from inside my coverings. So, so restrained. Unhurried, I finger each button, play with the frayed edges, pause between layers in measured moments. You tense up, flex, twitch, but this only makes me yawn, stretch, pull out that gap that makes you sweat, scratch at your neck, crack your knuckles; I smile as I yank and tug and shape it into an intermission.

You still cannot see me.

Not yet. These things take time.
Each layer I peel away clears a barrier that stands between where you are and where you want to go.

You want inside. Not just my body though. It isn’t as simple as that. Your eyes meet mine, and I see a flash of fear and recognition but I ignore it and look through you into the very back of your skull where you keep your most vulnerable parts. Those are the segments of you I will devour.

I strip down till nothing is left but heat and sweat.

I strip down till my skin shines with need.

I strip down and make you see.

My nudity is an unspoken promise. And as you stare at me like I am a feast and you haven’t tasted food once in your entire life, you finally understand.

This is why you have come to me.

You look at me and you see an object to be possessed but when you get close, when all the outer trappings we insist upon layering onto our bodies, to insulate us from not just each other, but from ourselves, when all these things have fallen away and it is just you and I, toe to toe, breathing in and out in a syncopated rhythm, when you are vulnerable, your cock and your soul both out where I can see-touch-smell-taste, only then do you realize that it is not I who is the prey.
And in these moments I almost get there. Enlightenment. Transcendence. Here, with you beneath me, it is all so clear.

I come with you, of course.

I come with everyone.

My body writhes and throbs and I scream out for a god, for my father, for the end of the world because for a moment I think it is coming, the end of everything, and I cannot wait; I want it to come for me, this end, come and take me away from you, from this life, so I ride on, pulsing and screaming and holding on to you so tight because if I let go I might fall and down is not the direction I need to travel, no, I need to climb, higher and higher until I find that space between earth and heaven where I can get past all this fucking and find my salvation.

I come with you. I come with you but then I climb further. Beyond you. It is here, at this place with you inside me and me above you that I see. Here is the love-light-understanding. Here is the quiet and the peace and the noise and the chaos all bleeding together inside me and through me into you and back out again as I rock and cling and cry and sing and breathe.

But I don’t know how to care once the pulsations stop.

And they always stop.

It’s Wednesday, I think, as I pull my limbs out from beneath yours and hunt down my clothing. I have work early. I don’t remember your schedule, or maybe you didn’t
even tell me. I cannot recall what you do beyond the ubiquitous category of sales. I don’t know your mother’s name, I have no idea how many siblings you have or if you love them or resent them. I know how to fit our bodies together, how to synchronize our orgasms, but the rest of you is a puzzle to me. You don’t open your eyes as I go, but I know from your breathing that you are far from sleep still. I cannot help you with that part. Another puzzle.

I step out of your building and onto the street; the morning is clear but chill and I wish I had a coat. The leaves on the trees above my head radiate red and gold against the bright sky. Fall. But in my bones, I feel it already. Winter.
I. Ask her of the beauty of becoming 
Mother 
and she will sing to you 
a requiem.

She will show you 
her heart, now a bifurcated thing 
that lives, breathes 
outside her body.

Beyond her control.

She will tell you that once 
they leave the body everything becomes 
delicate, nerve-raw, every organ rubbed and ragged, 
the sensation 
of separateness. Of togetherness.

She will tell you what she was never told.

Before she was Mother, information was provided 
but the material was disconnected.

Incomplete. 
Fragmented.

Mother is: 
new always

self raw

sacrifice

This template.

But in the blank spaces and unspoken words meaning is made.

She stares at the model—
that fixed point; anchored 
scaffolding leads to heights 
she will never reach.

Spoken scriptures. Motherhood: 
alone interprets her.
II. They said, at last you will learn how to love.  
They did not say the lesson was pain  
sprouted in skin,  
climbing nerves, growing up spine and into brain  
to coil and wind, to choke everything else out,  
because this vine, they told her, was love  
but sometimes  
she wants to cull it all—  
the vine, the children,  
the daily death that comes  
with all this life.

They said, your world will change.  
But they did not say  
suffering hides  
in the corner of an eye,  
splintered, festering.  
Empathy a muscle  
developed during birthing.  
Once learned it will not stop,  
it just keeps coming.  
Filling her throat, streaming from her eyes.  
She is the vessel and the fountain.

They said, before they were born neither were you.  
But they did not say this self-birth came  
with the death of a self  
she had spent a lifetime cultivating.  
Requiring blood sacrifice,  
Requiring multiple amputations  
of all previously held convictions.  
Now no concept is safe inside her;  
everything is slippery,  
nothing distinct in this new self  
and afterbirth.

III. She sits in blood and fear and new and grows anger in her now empty womb.  

If you are not this Mother  
you are Monster.

She knows the monster surprisingly well.
How it sleeps, curled up in the vines inside her, always there, always waiting, always. She calms with low murmurs and nightly feedings but sometimes it’s insatiable. Sometimes the cravings come fast. Curling up through the body, expelling lines of ash and fire out her throat, mixing the dust and flame with these words that could never be hers. Still. Out of her mouth they tumble. Black, bile spewing, rising hard to fill her eyes with raging. How to reconcile this bitterness festering at the core of her tenderness?

IV. She turns her vision outward.

How else can she protect herself?
How else can she protect them?

She looks in, she locks up; she forgets,

she forgets.

Who she was before.
Who she thought she was going to be.
That this fullness is also an absence—

and that absence waits in the depths of her dark, whispering up from places she cannot bring herself to look.

Some days, when she is away from her children, she forgets to think about them, for hours. Later she thinks

Are these really mine?

V. Still she collects
the daily grime from their faces;
the things they leave behind:

loose teeth,
clippered hair,
unending need.

Things in their proper places.

Fear love resentment dedication pulp and mash inside her, everything that fearful red.

Still:

*Did you finish your homework?*
*Eat your salad.*
*Stop teasing your brother.*
*No, your father didn’t call.*

Never enough.
Always too much.

Some days she thinks:
*I would cleave this body in half to give them wholeness,*
but on others: *It might it be better to clip their wings at the bone.*

Why does it surprise anyone
that the milk carries bitterness?
that the spine curves forward
under all this weight?
At Night

The wind sings woe into the broken slats of the attic roof above them. She and the two children are tucked away in the driest corner of the room, as far away as they can get from the places where the rain enters bold and free into the structure, but there is no escaping the bite of the squall completely; it blows in through countless unseen cracks and fissures in the wood to trap their exposed skin in its icicle jaws. Each time a particularly enormous gust pulls at the loose boards above their heads, the small one whimpers and burrows deeper into her side. The young woman curls her body around the child, and reaches her hand across him to the older. Lying together, they tremble and shake as one: attic, children, woman.

She knows the children are waiting. They don’t ask. They don’t have to. She feels the expectation; it vibrates along their taut skin and makes the hairs on her own arm raise. They wait to be lifted up out of the cold, leaking house, the dilapidated town, this life full of hard edges and grim faces. They wait for a story.

Longer than they have been alive she has lived in the attic of this house, but before they were born her stories stayed inside her, warming her belly, shifting and swirling impatiently inside. Now she and her stories live together in the darkness, listening for the nimble, cautious steps on the stairs, waiting to bring the children into the light. Everyone else in the town dwells in forgetfulness, but stories are what keep the woman’s heart beating, what keep her believing in a possible future the others have long lost sight of. This is what she longs to give to these boys, this hope. But they are so young, and for now her stories serve only as a fleeting, temporary distraction. This is why the children
come to her, and no other, on nights like this. And for now this comfort she provides them is enough to sustain her.

She strokes the older boy’s hair and closes her eyes. His position is the safest of the three of them, and yet to her he is most fragile. His skin is smooth, cool glass beneath her hand; she watches his rabbit heart beating strong and fast beneath the surface. Tiny ticks and twitches of muscles speak of the countless worries he carries but will not share with her. The small one’s body is relaxed and motionless; he feels safe in her attic, her embrace. But his skin is an ice sheet draped across her; their one threadbare blanket is no match for the storm that crawls down upon them from the dilapidated roof above. She pulls him closer and breathes softly onto his tiny hands before turning and doing the same for his brother.

Every night she thinks about leaving. For thirteen years this family has kept her, and for thirteen years not a day has passed by where she did not consider fleeing. Before, when she was younger, it was fear of the hunger, and the cold, and the men that kept her inside, but for the last eight years it has been the children. They are not hers, but that did not stop her heart from freefalling down into a pit of attachment. The thought of leaving them dizzies her. Taking them, however, is a certain death sentence, for all three of them. So she stays.

“What do you want to hear about tonight?” she murmurs in the ear of the smallest.

“Something with a bird,” he whispers.

Birds are a common request. The children, both born after the Veil, have never seen birds of any kind. Everything they know of birds comes from her memory, and it has not proven itself to be the most reliable of sources. She had, for instance, told them the
beautiful, tall, white birds that used to stand on long, thin legs in the shallow waters of the local ponds were called sparrows. She later remembered their true name, but decided against correcting her error. She could call storks starlings, or crows, or sparrows, it makes no difference to the children. The birds of her imagination were the only birds they would ever know.

“Birds again? You know all my bird stories already.”

“We don’t. I know it! You always know more.”

“I do? Well, maybe I know one more. Have I ever told you the story about the birds that cannot fly?”

“No! I thought all birds flied around!” The small clambers onto her body, leaning towards her face, the cold, wind, and hunger cast aside for the intrigue of this new information. The older one shifts to fill the space the little one leaves vacant, wrapping his fingers into her dress as he too pulls in close.

“Yes. In other places, far, far away from here, there are birds so big and fat they cannot fly. They grow so large they have trouble walking, and they have to be picked up by the farmers and placed in their bird houses at night so that the cold cannot get them.”

“Then why do they come out of the houses at all?”

“Because creatures need sunlight, you know that.”

“You stay in always.”

“But I have the window.”

“Oh. Yes.” The small one glanced over at the tiny window on the far wall of her attic home, cracked and black, cloth hanging tattered from the top of the frame.

“Are the birds nice?” the oldest wants to know.
“So nice and so delicious. These birds are gigantic and plump—just one of them can feed an entire town.”

“People eat the birds?” the oldest whispers. “Why would they eat them?”

“People all over the world eat birds. We used to eat some birds here, too.”

“What do they taste like?”

“Why can’t we go where they are?”

*

When the Veil first dropped, she was a young girl. Everyone in the town was concerned, but it was an indistinct and ambiguous concern at first, the kind that grows up out of a general state of confusion. The air was just greyer in a way, and also thick, wet. It clung to bodies and made everyone’s movements heavy and tired. Skin always felt clammy, as if everyone was fresh out of the bath. Clothes were damp, like someone brought them in when they hadn’t quite been on the line long enough. Because nothing was ever dry; the town smelled of mildew and rot. But everyone adjusted, as people do.

Only the birds didn’t. First it was just one or two falling from the sky a day. The people would find them lying in the road, wings folded inward, plumage fingers clutching at tiny chests. Then the rate increased. The woman was only six or seven at the time, but in her mind she can still see the people walking with cardboard, tarps, small pieces of lumber, even scraps of lightweight metal over their heads as they went into the market or from house to house, in an attempt to avoid injury as bird after bird dropped from above.

When it came to birds, the Veil did not discriminate. Soon they were all gone, chickens and geese, crows and blackbirds, owls and jays, robins and hawks. Entire flocks
lay in feathered piles, quickly turning to sodden pulp under the people’s feet. The people were afraid; no one wanted to touch the birds, or breathe the air they cut through as they completed their final fall. The people drew straws to determine who would haul the heaps of dead out to the field, then dig the grave and bury the bodies. The smell, the daily reminder that something was terribly wrong, could not be left lying around.

After several weeks of the Veil, the body count slowed, but did not stop. Birds that came from other, distant places flew into the town and fell victim to their tainted sky. Whispers filled the death-quiet air, whispers that spoke of omens and punishment and penance. No one could determine what had been done, but surely something, someone was to blame. Upon the mist of the Veil, the people hung their shame, their guilt, their sorrow. There had to be a reason; the alternative, simple randomness, was unbearable.

* 

“It’s too far to go to where the gigantic birds are. You will get too tired. Or we might lose our way. They are far too far away for us to walk. And there are so many dangers between. We could only go if we could fly.”

“I could make it! We could, couldn’t we?” Little turns to older for confirmation.

“Our parents would stop us. We can’t leave. She can’t leave.” Older answers his brother, but his eyes watch her.

“They wouldn’t care,” younger insists.

Older ignores his brother and continues to gaze into her eyes. She cannot meet his stare.

“It is over tall mountains and deep waters and many large, large trees,” she says, gazing up into the rafters. “But all the animals are very beautiful because colors are
brighter there, grey doesn’t even exist in this place, and—” she trails off, glancing out of the corner of her eye towards the older boy. He has turned his face away from her now, to watch water drip down the wall from a large crack in one of the boards overhead. The story isn’t holding him anymore. She has noticed a shift in him, a cultivation of both mental and physical space even her words cannot breech. He talks with the father more often now. His reaction to the idea of leaving demonstrates an understanding he did not have before. This town, this place of stunted childhood; it infects everyone. Eventually.

* 

Just shy of a month into the Veil, they came. Unknown men cut through the mist into the town, poking and kicking at bird corpses with their boot-clad feet as they made their way towards the center of the town. They glanced around at the mud, decay, and disorder that had taken over the place, whispering to one another in low indecipherable tones. She was not much older than the oldest boy at the time, yet still she can close her eyes and see the men, tall, broad, black-cloaked, sweeping through her town, their eyes foxlike, hungry and watchful.

The people peeked through windows curtains and thinly cracked doors as the men sat down cross-legged in front of the schoolhouse, turned their faces skyward, and mumbled wordless strands of sound up to the heavens. For three days they sat, no food, no water, no movement beyond the occasional hand swipe at a fly or gnat. Birds continued to fall, but the men paid no attention to the carcasses that collected around them. They did not react when the falling bodies struck them on their decent. After some time, the occasional brave person would venture out, to drop a cup of water or a bit of food at their boots. But the offerings were ignored; the men only had eyes for the sky.
On the third day, the birds stopped falling. On the fourth day, the men lowered their heads and opened their eyes. Then the man at the center of the group stood up, spread his arms and spun around, shouting, *we have cleared your sky!* People came out of their homes, some still holding metal and wood over their heads, but others bareheaded and brave. They looked towards the sky and saw for themselves that the mist was dissipating. Hands lifted to their eyes and the people gazed as far off into the distance as possible. The skies were opening up and nothing, nothing was falling upon them. The men stayed in the center of town for several days, until it became clear as the skies above that their words were true.

People threw themselves at the feet of these men. She remembers because her father was one of them. His face in the mud, his hand outstretched towards a large, black boot still crusted with matted blood, bone, and feather. Her mother, she also remembers, stood back in their dark doorway for a moment, before pulling her inside and closing the door.

They named themselves the Council, and told the townspeople they were going to stay, to make wrongs right. They said they were there to help the people find their way. No one knew what that meant, but no one questioned their presence. These men had come and the Veil had lifted, whether by magic or divinity no one knew, but for now, the lifting was enough, and the people’s joy was so great that no time was spent worrying about how. These men took over the church, the schoolhouse. They met with no resistance.

The Council hung wooden swallows from the cross in the front of the chapel, the schoolhouse door, and the mayor’s house. All bore the words *loyalty is freedom*, scrawled
bold and red across the white bodies of the wooden birds. Years later, the girl could still recall the smell of the paint if she closed her eyes and thought about those swallows. She could also still hear the Councilman turning the children away from the schoolhouse, telling them there would be no more classes for a while. And she could still see her teacher crying, out in the schoolyard behind the building, as three of the men stood by watching her throw book after book into a flaming pile.

There were the occasional quiet talks of dissension after that, but the most vocal people disappeared soon after their words of rebellion were spoken. Where they went she did not know. There was always talk of leaving, especially among the women. But most of the men resisted such bold moves. The girl recalled the loud fighting of her own mother and father in the weeks right after the Council’s arrival. Her mother would sometimes talk about just taking her, just going. But still, they stayed. And later, as her mother’s body began to swell with life, the talk of leaving ceased.

* 

Sometimes it is hard for her to believe these two boys forgoing sleep for her tales will live out their lives in a world without books. They have never seen one, or felt its cool, firm spine in their hands. They will never be able to hold word-filled pages up to their noses and breathe in the years caught within the pulp. And she wants them to understand what this means, this terrible loss, the tremendous price they pay for the mistakes of people they do not know. But those words, the important words, those won’t come to her. Instead she tells them about bear and deer and foxes. And birds.

“What did the big birds look like?” The little one asks, filling the silence that has engulfed the three of them. Physical descriptions are always his favorite part. It is hers as
well, because she can say anything and he believes her. She can make the birds bigger, bolder, more fantastic than they were when they existed not just in her head but also in her environment. She is at liberty to deconstruct and reconstruct the creatures as she sees fit. Her birds, like her stories, come up out of her to create a newer, better version of the world, even if they can only visit it during these dark nights in the attic where both she and her stories are kept.

The wind howls and the children both nestle into her, one positioned on each side now. She wonders if motherhood would have felt much different than this. She thinks about their mother, who doesn’t speak to her children, other than to give them commands or move them from indoors to outdoors and back again. Maybe that’s what it takes to survive this altered form of motherhood, this amendment of the role courtesy of the Council. She cannot think about it. She cannot afford to become resentful of the woman who houses her.

The small one shivers; she kisses his cold forehead, and allows her to think, for just one fleeting moment, *I do this so she doesn’t have to. I do this because she cannot.* Like so many nights before this one, she considers the distance to the next town and tries to remember if the boys have shoes that would hold up in this rain. They could walk right out; the parents do not lock the door. They trust her to stay. It is true that she really has nowhere to go, and at least they feed her for now, as best they can. And they allow her to see these children, to be a part of their lives, to experience this thing that has already been taken from her future. This is more than other women in her position in the town receive. And in return she loves the mother’s children, so that the mother doesn’t have to.
“The birds,” the smallest demands, taking her from her thoughts and bringing her back to the business of the story. “Tell me what colors they have on them.”

“These birds have the shiniest, most beautiful feathers in the entire world. They are colors we don’t even have here, colors your eyes have never seen. Some of the feathers are as long as your arm, and have patterns in them, with spirals, and stars, and moons,” she says. “And they are friendly too, they will climb right into your lap and say hello.”

*  

Perhaps the people should have known all along in their hearts that all the birds couldn’t just disappear without consequence. And if they had allowed themselves to dig even further, past their hearts and down deep, deep into the recesses of their stomachs, their guts, where the undeniable truth was still stored, they would have been able to see that the role of the birds was an indispensable one. But no one wanted to look that far. No, when the birds stopped falling, when the pits were filled with all the feathered corpses and they had set fire to them all, sending their ashes sailing towards the heavens, the people thought maybe it was just as the Council said. More believing. Less thinking.

But one crisp and crackling summer morning, about a month after the Council’s arrival, the entire town awoke to a sound too insistent to ignore. It was like the rattling of one thousand pots and pans, or the clang of the entire store of scrap metal in the marketplace dropped down a hillside. The shill shrieking clawed at the people’s eardrums and sent them screaming to the cotton field where they tore their skin on thorns as they rushed to grab huge wads of the white fluff to stuff in their ears and block out the sound that surely marked their doom.
Cicada. This was the time of year when they usually hatched, but this was a
swarm the size of a decade’s worth of hatchlings, all descended upon the people’s fields
at once. And there were no birds to stop them or any other pest out looking for a meal.
Behind the cicada followed grasshoppers, aphids, flies, mites, beetles. It did not take long
for the summer wheat to fall beneath the army of whirring wings. The corn, the melons,
the beans, all their summer crops met the same end. The people ran shouting through the
fields with nets and wetted down pots, children covered cardboard with sticky mud from
the creek bed and jumped up and down in the fields, waving wildly at the flying invaders.
They were able to take down large numbers, but not enough. Soon the fields were full of
empty nubs and stripped stalks. Still the people made do. Vivid memories: Her mother
grimly removing the insects from the pots her father brought in from the fields, her
mother mashing the wet bug bodies into a paste, her mother serving the bug mash with
tears on her cheeks and heat in her eyes, these are the things she sees when she
remembers that summer.

Some of the braver people of the town went to the Council, asking why are we
suffering so greatly while giving so much? The Council leader responded by telling them
it was clear they had yet to give enough. But every person was giving more than they
could afford already, and now, with the bulk of their summer crops gone, what more
could they offer? They kneeled in the gravel and dirt where the swallow laden cross stood
baking in the sun and begged for mercy, for answers, for aid. The Council told them they
must meditate on the issue, then walked together into the chapel and closed the doors.

For several days the doors to the chapel turned house turned meeting hall
remained closed to the people. And many of the people went about their lives, fetching
water, hunting insects, clearing the fields for new crops to be planted. Her mother never stopped working. Nor did she ever travel to the chapel. Since the arrival of the Council, her mother had stayed away from the center of the town, and instead stayed instead her home, or near the river and the fields where the Council didn’t travel.

Her father, though, was one of the people who waited outside the chapel for the entire seven days. He sat in a small group beneath the swallow cross, holding hands and murmuring soft and low with the others. Her mother forbade her to go anywhere near them. And she listened, mostly. But sometimes she would lurk in the early evening shadows to try to hear what they were saying. Their wordless chant made her chest ache.

On the seventh day, a Councilmen opened the doors and told the people they needed more time. Another week passed. Most of the people went home, although her father stayed, demanding her mother bring him food and water. She paid a neighbor boy with rag blankets to take her husband cicada cakes and water and continued to stay clear of the center. By now this part of the town was churning with the angry, the frightened, the desperate. All over the town the people were turning the colors of anger. Screaming and wailing filled the air, becoming as constant as sunlight, and hunger, and fear.

While the Council continued to deliberate, the town received guests once more. And the people, so desperate for food, almost welcomed the sight of them. No one liked the idea of eating rodents, but the livestock numbers were being monitored and rationed and the rats were seen, if nothing else, as a source of some much needed nutrition. But with no owls or hawks or crows, and very few dogs or cats around anymore either, the rats learned that they too could take from the malnourished people. And although both groups were weakened with hunger, the rats outnumbered the people, and their methods
were far more aggressive. They ran openly through the streets, dragged the peoples’ linens and clothing into the crawlspace, made dens in the walls of any home they wished. Food supplies were contaminated by their droppings. People were bit in broad daylight. Then they began attacking the infant population of the town, biting at their faces, trying to extract mother’s milk from their skin. Angry women carried gnawed and assaulted children to the steps of the chapel. But they were met with barred doors.

When the Council finally came out they informed the people there was a solution, but they would not announce it until every person was present. Her mother refused, but later, with a fresh red welt that would later bruise purple and dark as fear, her mother headed to the center of the town hand in hand with her daughter, just like all the others. They joined the rest of the town. And waited.

There, in front of everyone, it was announced that each family would give up a child, just one child, of the Council’s choosing. What was to be done with the children was not revealed, nor when they would take the child. But this plan, the people were told, would ensure that everyone gave of equal part; it would be the balance the town needed to right itself, completely and soundly. To make right what had been so long wrong.

When the women protested, when they demanded to know what, and why, and how, they were told to go home and reflect on their selfishness. They were made to understand that refusal would be met by consequences far more horrific than rats in cradles. Families shuffled home, wordless, eyes on feet, on road, on anything but each other.

*  

“How do people eat the birds if the birds are their friends?” the smallest asks her.
“Their hunger is greater than their loyalty,” she replies, without thinking. Her cheeks burn. She thinks of her mother, what she herself knows, and what good it does, this knowing. Perhaps she gives stories more credit than they deserve.

“I couldn’t eat something that I petted.” The little one declares.

“I’ve done it,” older whispers. “I used to go and pet the cows sometimes, when there still were some.”

“You saw the cows? I want to hear about the cows!”

Older ignored his brother and continued. “They came right to you. They licked your hand. If you let them.” He looks at her and then down. His hand lets go of her dress and he starts to turn his body towards the wall, away from her and his brother.

“It’s alright. You don’t have a choice,” she says, as she pulls his rigid, resistant body into hers. “That’s the way it is around here. And anyway, these birds, in my story, they are meant to be eaten. You could say they were born for it.”

“Like the cows before?”

“Yes. Just like the cows. Now let me tell you a real story. Have I told you about the fish that can fly?”

*

She remembers when he came, to mark her. In that moment, at eight years old, she knew what he was taking from her. She felt the weight of all that loss. The moment itself was snowfall quiet; he took her face in his hands, glanced over her mother’s swollen belly, and paused for just one moment before he said, *this one is mine.* Her mother shrieked and pulled her hands into tiny anvils, meaning to crush him with her fury, but her father stepped between and stole the blows meant for the council leader. Her
father said it was an honor. He said not every child gets chosen. He said they should be thankful. Her mother responded by wailing and beating upon his breastbone until she broke her hand.

The next day her mother went down to the river. She never returned. Her shimmering, fish belly pale body was not seen as it floated downstream, but her note was found pinned underneath her daughter’s pillow, where no one but the girl would find it. *Now you are an only child. Now they cannot take you.* Those were the last words the girl ever read. She burned the note so that no one would ever know.

But somehow everyone knew. As penance for the mother’s transgression, it was decided that the girl would remain marked for taking, despite her only child status. It was also decided that she would be safer with a foster family while waiting for her turn. Her father was found swinging in a barn a short while later. She can still remember the smile of the council leader’s face as they took her father’s body down and away.

* 

After the boys go back down to their beds, she stands and stares out her tiny, grime-streaked window and thinks about flightless birds. The window is only about two square feet, rusted shut, and anyway, what if the boys saw? Her failure will not be the first story they learn to tell. Better to wait and see what tomorrow brings. Better to remember that some fish can fly.
Matriarchal Poetry
After Gertrude Stein

1. Warrior, severing and severe, why is it always wanton between us? Improper measures of impulse and improvisation; blackening that which was never meant to be blackened. Wax in defeat; wane as the spit sputter hiss dies down. Seared and bleary, oh my crusted salted failure, such heat, costing me.

2. Incessant whirring, mundane murderous sound meaning less in void, in significance, than body in ears’ bloodstream – I vibrate to you, inevitable as tides pull me back to swill and swirl. We dance across the synthetic wheat waves; you plugged in, I tuned out.

3. Unification on porcelain and glass, fleshed and sauced and mass: a wetted weight of consumptive past clings; you make me work for it. Thrust and grind, a gritting of teeth, repeat, repeat, repeat.

4. Stoop and bend-back, forth into the swish and sway; shoved down, held in, bubble over and under and around the way you do. I come clean, this round, but you are more metal than I; draining me much; I drain you.

5. Raw red, all elbow and knee, greased and lathered – I scrub for shine, fleeting, longing to see myself in your shimmer; purge lurks just beyond the glimmering. Filth and scum: companions; auxiliary, supplementary, top-to-bottom.
If the ancient Egyptians could rest peacefully
on pillows made of stone
I should be able to withstand these rigid laws of residency,
this bargain bin placement, this super-market life.
But the Musak won’t be muted, so I hum
to tune out black
bird singing, dead, dark
machine: off-key, broken,
while dog-headed baboons type paperbacks at the cash register.
I gather my items. I don’t pay
attention, I’m isle-wandering again, canopic
jars thump against hips, everything hermetic, everything sealed
for safety: nasal cavity passageway, bloodless
slit become portal;
they forgot to leave the heart inside
but it was never the center of my soul anyway.
In the core where the river flows
denial I am still
honey-smeared,
ready to wear suit of pestilence,
letting the flies swarm my mouth. Oh darling,
I can’t fix the hole, it all comes pouring in and
I keep building the display—
expired soup cans and iridescent dung beetles,
till this tower leads to the silence that fills the space
where babble falls away.
Further Than Sky

The first time he follows her home she doesn’t think much of it. (She’d taken in a stray cat before, and really, was a boy going to be all that different?) Still, for five blocks that evening she walks, her fingers absently worrying at a scar peeking out of her right jacket sleeve, as she wonders what might be her best course of action should she arrive home and find him still behind her. Truthfully, she is also glad for the distraction, as she had spent three full hours prior to his appearance walking laps around the hospital and thinking (about what she couldn’t quite remember now). Maybe this is why the boyish figure following her isn’t disconcerting. Though she knows it is probably silly, she spends those last several blocks thinking about the walk ending with him still matching her step for step from his comfortable distance of about one and one half yards behind. She is surprised and thrilled when she reaches the bottom of the long staircase that leads up out of her yard to the house, and there he is, looking at her from beneath a tangle of dark hair, his face expressionless, still, partially obscured by shadow. He doesn’t look scared either, she decides, just hungry.

She wants nothing more than to make him a sandwich and nice bowl of soup—lentil would be a safe choice—and then she can find him a blanket to lie on while she searches him over for signs of ownership. But her sympathy cannot allow her to be impractical. She does not know where he has been, at least not beyond the corner of First and Spring where she had first noticed him (on her third lap). Adding further complication to the matter are those bare feet. She realizes she has to leave the wayward creature at the bottom of the stairs. (She is concerned for him, of course, but the carpets
were recently steam cleaned.) She will at least go find something to wipe his feet, she figures. Then she can bring him inside and determine her next move.

She hurries inside to get a towel, an old one, faded and frayed from countless washes, but unquestionably suitable for the tidying up of a stray boy. However, when she gets to the front door, towel in hand, she thinks perhaps she ought to also bring a bowl of warm water. Then, as she stands at the sink letting the water wash over her fingers, waiting for it to heat up, she remembers the nice sandalwood scented soap in the spare bathroom. She shuts off the water and hurries down the hallway to retrieve the soap (almost but not quite forgetting to hold her breath as she passes the second door on the right). But, it turns out, the soap is not in the spare bathroom at all, but in the hallway closet. She doubles back, retrieves the soap, and comes back to the kitchen to again stand and run water, cold into warm. Then finally the water reaches the right temperature and she can fill her lovely porcelain bowl (light turquoise with tiny yellow flowers hand painted on its rim; a dead aunts, her sister had wanted it, but she managed to wear her down). Time to see if she can clean him up and bring him inside.

Halfway to the door she thinks better of taking the bowl outside; her stairs are rickety, the stray boy quite unknown and the bowl, though inexpensive, certainly has sentimental value. One more trip to the kitchen, one more time with the water, and another visit to the hallway closet and then she heads back to the door, with arms full of supplies, heart beating hard and fast. But when she opens the door and steps out onto the stairs, she finds nothing but a slight breeze and an empty yard to greet her. A burning begins in her chest and spreads outward, traveling into her limbs and torso as she stands on her toes, gazing up the block first one way and then the other. Sitting down on the top
step, she gently places her load—the bowl of water and a nailbrush, the neatly folded
towel and washcloth, an orange wide toothed comb—beside her, then leans forward and
rests her chin into her cupped hands. It is only then that she sees, down at the bottom of
the stairs—something. Some thing. Sitting in the moonlight, waiting for her.

She walks down slowly, once again on her toes, lightly, lightly, keeping her eye
on the object that sits squarely in the middle of her second to last stair. As she gets closer,
she sees that it is actually multiple items strung with something—string maybe? No,
clothesline; is it hers? She reaches the bottom of the stairs and sits down beside the thing.
It is constructed from small branches from her fruit trees, held together with strips of
clothesline and clipped in places by pins, probably also hers, and it contains, she counts,
eleven cylindrical objects. A grapefruit center surrounded by one lemon, three rocks
varying in size, a plum with a rubber gasket wrapped around its middle, an apricot, a
peach pit, a balled up piece of tinfoil, one mushroom cap, and at the farthest end of the
structure, a sycamore seed pod. At the top are two cross-braced branches, thicker than the
rest, which she uses to carefully pick the creation up from the stair. She holds it before
her face, watches the objects bob and sway. As the seedpod spins, she notices a gum
wrapper tucked in between the seeds. She plucks it out, unfolds it and finds a single word
crawled upon its surface. Here.

Sometimes he goes days without making an appearance. Sometimes as long as a
week. She knows because she is keeping track. She is keeping a calendar. It is tacked to
the inside of the pantry door in the kitchen, where no one that stops in for a visit will see
and ask her what it is that she is checking off, what her system of marks and symbols
means. She knows that others might not understand the importance of keeping such
detailed records of his comings and goings, but how else is she supposed to decode the
patterns? How else is she ever going to figure out what makes him come to her some
days and stay away others? She would like for him to stay, that is her goal and if there is
one thing she knows for certain it is that goal achievement is all about dedication and
focus. And so she makes her calculations, she tracks his movements, his behaviors, she
studies the calendar daily, using it to revise her own behaviors to better suit his needs.
This work takes up much of her free time, and sometimes it creeps into her time that isn’t
really free, time often designated for other things, but she doesn’t mind. She knows her
commitment is going to pay off in the end.

Because her focus is the boy, she is beginning to lose track of other people. How
long since she has seen her sister, her boss, her friends, her neighbors? Weeks, months,
maybe longer. She recognizes the evidence—the casseroles are all gone, the flowers are
long dead, the cards are covered in a film of dust; it is clear a fair amount of time has
passed. But she cannot quite remember; this she does not mark on her calendar, in her
charts. Frankly, she doesn’t miss anyone. She especially doesn’t miss her sister, who only
comes to pester her with questions she has no interest in answering. I’m just looking out
for you, her sister had said. For her sister, looking out for her usually involved a stay of a
week, sometimes longer, the days spent reorganizing her drawers, her cabinets, her
closets (as if she needed all that, her system was perfect), evenings spent sipping some
tasteless, weak tea on the staircase, all those pointed questions—Are you seeing
someone? Why haven’t you called Dr. Murphy back? Are you back to work? Don’t you
think it’s time you cleaned that room out? —those kinds of things. No, she doesn’t really miss her sister much at all.

She leaves him things on the stairs, things he might need. Homemade food. Warm, clean clothes. Rope, because he really seems to love rope. Blankets and towels. Once she left him a small popup tent (For where could he possibly be sleeping?) and he took it, although she has not seen it since. She tries not to think about where else it might be (she looked in a few yards, what was the harm in that, didn’t see it though, thankfully). She sticks to things she believes to be practical, gifts that are a translation of her caring into physical form. She bakes and boils and washes and weaves in her attempt to show him that she could make him comfortable; that she could love him if he would let her. She sees the stairs, this dance between him and her, as a kind of negotiation and she needs him to know that she is the right applicant, that she is willing to go the extra mile to please him. Her boy. For isn’t he hers? Hasn’t she been waiting for him all this time? Hadn’t he been looking for her, that day, on First and Spring?

He never expresses his pleasure to her in words, never gives her a smile or a murmur or even a sigh of contentment, yet he has his ways of communicating his gratification. For one, when he accepts a gift, he always leaves her something in exchange. Various assortments of pinecones, acorns, dried flowers, lemon seeds, collected in various cans and bottles. A ball of twine painted to look like Earth from afar. An old mayonnaise jar of polished bits of broken glass. A three dimensional model of her house made from items she was sure he had found in her own trashcan. This last one was by far her favorite, and once it had aired out on her porch for a week and been thoroughly
sprayed down with her homemade disinfecting, deodorizing spray, she brought it into the house, and placed it on the table beneath the window in her bedroom where she was now keeping all his gifts. Above the table, the first thing he had ever given her, the cylinder-filled mobile, spins and dances when there is a breeze, and if there is moonlight, it casts shadows off the tinfoil planet onto her wall that ease her into sleep.

Her sister found her calendar today. She got home from work, already feeling anxious because she hadn’t seen the boy or been able to leave him anything or mark the charts because her sister had been at the house for days, constantly hovering over her every minute. She dropped her purse and entered the kitchen to get herself a glass of warm milk, maybe a banana or just one spoonful of peanut butter, these things always relaxed her, and that is when she saw it. The pantry door was wide open, (quite accusatory really, if you asked her) and all her things were taken down and spread out all over the kitchen table. And there—in the middle of all her private things, perched on a chair, knees up to her chin, face all scrunched up like she smelled something just awful, something rotting and dead—was her sister.

*What is the meaning of all this? Is this some kind of joke? I was going to call mom, I swear I was, I don’t know what else to do. But I don’t want her to panic. I don’t want her to worry. Just let me help you. Why won’t you just let me help you?* It was a long, one-sided conversation. What was she going to say? (Her sister wouldn’t have listened anyway.)

She doesn’t like to think about what happened after that. She will remember that day with several marks, a cluster on her right side, between the collarbone and the
shoulder. That is enough. Better to hold onto that feeling. Better to remember this was something that her sister could not understand.

The details of that conversation have since escaped her. The scars, which she worries over like prayer beads, speak up feelings, not words. But she does know she hasn’t seen much of her sister since then. (Or maybe she hasn’t seen her at all. She cannot quite remember.) It’s better this way, she thinks; her sister’s absence is a minor consequence and she has to think about what really matters. He did not come once while her sister was there. She must be diligent. She must cultivate an inviting environment for him if she is ever to convince him to stay. To come up higher on the stairs, even, that would be nice.

He did come back, though, that is the important thing. And after a week of breaking every gift she left for him (even the Santa shaped cookie plate) he settled down.

Every fifth or ninth or twelfth visit (it varies, according to her notes), he stays and crouches on the step, allowing her to get near enough to talk to him. She doesn’t know why, but she tells him things, she talks for hours although she can never recall later what it was she said, she only knows her chest feels lighter, her head less heavy afterwards. He never says anything back and he won’t come inside, although she has extended the invitation multiple times and she has tried to draw him upward by placing her gifts for him higher up the steps. It never works; the second to last step of her stairs is as close as he comes. And when she gets too close, when the space between them becomes too much for her and she, against her better judgment, acts on the impulse to close it, he never fails to back away from her slowly, eyes on her feet, before disappearing into the trees and
shadows at the end of her yard. She tried to follow once (maybe more than once), but he was too quick for her. By the time she reached the end of the trees there was no sign of him.

Out of these exchanges grows an unspoken rule of distance. She counts to ten before going out the door so that she will not rush the stairs and spook him. (If she is really eager, she will go to twenty, even.) She never tries to touch him anymore, although she would very much like to do so, to wrap him up, in a sweater, a blanket, her arms, to take him in and show him what a loving home she could give him if he would just let her. She would even clear out the room at the end of the hall for him, even though she still has to hold her breath to walk by it, as if the absence on the other side will enter her through the lungs and spread into every part of her if she isn’t careful. Still, she would, she knows she would. But patience and discipline, these things eventually pay off, they will take her where she needs to go. Her control must always remain stronger than her desire, she knows. And when she forgets, she knows how to remind herself. After she is finished with her pins and her needles, when her box is put back up in the bedroom closet, she tells herself that these moments are lessons important enough to be fixed in her body. Her mind so often leads her astray, but her body holds these mementos, these maps that remind her to stay in control. It doesn’t take much; just enough to leave the smallest star shaped mark. Permanent memories that remind her to behave.

He doesn’t come for three days again after the neighbors across the way come over to “check in.” (Check up, more likely. This feels like her sister’s work.) She had been preparing a meal to set out for him—a simple offering of assorted cheeses from the
farmer’s market with some olives, green and black, and toasted sourdough triangles. But
the neighbors just sat down and started eating her offering as though they thought she had
prepared it for them. She smiled it off, but she was certain they could sense her irritation,
as she paced the living room and answered their every question with yes or no, whether
those answers were appropriate or not. Still they stayed for three hours, and when the
wife was in the bathroom, she was sure she heard her talking on the phone. After they left
she waited on the stairs until the sun rose. But he never came. She ended up walking
around the hospital that day for the first time in a long time; she even sat on a bench by
the emergency entrance and watched the paramedics bring people in. She thought she
would recognize faces; but they were all just a blur. She circled three more times and
went home after that. The boy didn’t come back for four days.

The first time he speaks to her she hears *your blue farther than sky*. He is looking
at her as he says it, so solemn and still. He then takes a final bite of the grapefruit he is
eating, rind and all, before circling twice, lying down, and nodding off to sleep in the
garden, curled up beneath the snap pea trellis. She looks over at him from the stair,
shocked, not by the speech itself, (although it was his first words spoken to her) but the
string of words themselves. She wonders, did he mean you’re or your blue farther than
sky? And had he really said farther, or had he said further? Or was it father? She agonizes
over the difference as his snores drift over from the lettuce bed he had rolled into.

Later, when she is alone, she turns his words around in her mouth, feeling the
syllables one by one; trying to pull the meaning out; she counts the words first: five, then
the syllables: six, before writing the whole thing off as an issue of interpretation.
Although even as she thinks it she cannot understand why — did she expect him to speak differently than he did? She just cannot escape the feeling of buoyancy to his speech, a certain roundness that is wholly unfamiliar to her. So strange, in fact, that she forgets to think about the actual words altogether after awhile.

Later still, as she lies in her bed and tries to picture his face, all she can see is one tiny white bird drifting across a sky so dark and flat it looks like a chalkboard. Why, she thinks as she sinks deeper into the darkness where sleep lies waiting, that sky isn’t blue at all.

She is trying to track the pattern of his more destructive moments. Part of her wants to believe they are random acts, simple outbursts of a wild and uncivilized child. But the quilt just seemed spiteful. It was an entire painstaking month of stitching and sewing that had kept her up into the early hours of the morning, until she again called out sick from work so that she would not have to explain her bloody thumbs and purpled, bruised under eyes (she knew what they would think, and with her grievance leave just over, she couldn’t bear the looks she would receive). She’d left it on the stair for a week, waiting for him to take it, telling herself he just hadn’t seen it yet, but when she saw him sitting under the sycamore, plucking up stems of grass and blowing to make them whistle, she could not ignore his snub. She stumbled down the stairs, the blanket in a messy lump in her arms. As she reached the bottom and stepped into the yard, the quilt got caught up beneath her feet and she nearly fell. She released a barrage of sharp language that startled the boy, causing him to retreat into the nearby lilac bush where he watched with blank dark eyes as she flung the blanket on top of the boy and the bush,
after which she turned then kicked the willow tree no less than three times (it took weeks for that foot to stop hurting), before turning and heading back to the stairs, stomping her way back to her door and slamming it behind her. He kept his distance for a full week after that. There was rustling in the lilacs, or sifting rattles near the trashcans, but he wouldn’t get closer. And he shredded the quilt into strips; she kept finding them blowing around the yard; hanging from the trees, fluttering around in the flowerbeds. She marked the days he was gone on her calendar as well as her right arm, just below her elbow. Seven marks, seven tiny stars. Remember.

After weeks of no contact, she thinks of potatoes. She remembers how much he enjoyed potatoes the last time she made some, how he had sat on the grass just beyond the stairs, curving his body around the bowl as he ate the off-white mound into a spiral shape before plucking a handful of dandelions and decorating the remaining potatoes with them. She had left that bowl of leftovers out on the counter until the smell had become too strong to ignore. Thinking about all this, she is overcome with a feeling so strong and so foreign that she has to lean against the counter for a minute. She is actually happy. As she gathers herself and gets to work, first slicing off the tops of garlic, slathering in olive oil then placing them in a pie pan (still crusted with apricot pie remnants—slightly embarrassing), to roast, she realizes she cannot remember the last time she felt such joy while cooking. (Determination, obligation, satisfaction, certainly, but not this joy.) She whistles during potato prep—wash, peel, rewash, boil, mash, and while she is squeezing the roasted garlic into the potatoes, she almost burst out into song. She consults her notes—did he prefer certain cheese to others? She decides to take a risk and go with her own favorite (Brie). Out comes the flowered turquoise bowl; she has no
time to worry about delicate tableware at a time like this. While she is reaching for a spoon, she sees her pastry bag and piping tips. Once the bowl is filled, she stares down into the dish. She cocks her head first to the left and then to the right as she twirls the bowl in her hand, frowning in concentration. Something isn’t right. They look so bland, so monochromatic. Chives. She needs chives.

Kitchen scissors in one hand, bowl in the other, she heads for the door. The phone rings—her sister. She ignores the call and keeps walking. Hearing her sister’s voice —you haven’t been to work all week they’re going to—only makes her want to move faster. She reminds herself not to run; she makes herself stop to count at the door to make sure. Slowly she heads down the stairs, holding the bowl with one hand and the rail with the other, making sure to place both feet on each stair before stepping down to the next. Reaching the bottom at last, she bends over to place the bowl down on their shared stair, so that she can harvest her chives, but before she can let go something catches her eye in the yard and she stops, still hunched over and clinging to the potato-filled bowl, to look.

Stretched between the sycamore and the plum trees, just to the right of the path leading to her garden, is an object that looks a lot like her quilt, but looks even more like a hammock. Bowl forgotten in her hands, she approaches the spot where her work is dangling, repurposed, but still recognizably hers. The boy (of course who else could it be?) has ripped and torn, yes, but also reattached and reassembled, to create a cradle-like structure, cinched with rope and attached to the trees flanking the spot. She reaches her hand out towards it, notices the hand is full of bowl and potato, and unburdens herself by placing the bowl at the base of the plum tree before returning her attention to the hammock. She fingers a bit of the stitching (strong, clean work, her Aunt would be
proud) before giving the rope attaching it to the tree a firm tug. Slip knots, mostly, and although her knot knowledge is limited to a few techniques her father had passed down on summer trips to the lake when she was a girl, the whole thing seems sturdy enough. She climbs in and looks up at the sky full of stars, then runs her fingers over her own stars, saving the newest cluster, the ones below her right elbow, for last. Although the light is too dim to see them clearly, they are raised little pinpoints, pink and fresh, tender to the touch.

When she feels him climb in with her, she holds her breath and squeezes her eyelids together while he settles at her feet. The swinging slows and she relaxes one eyelid, peering out to see him sitting cross-legged with the bowl of potatoes in his hands. She had forgotten a spoon, she notices, and it took all her concentration not to cry. But as she watches, he places one index finger into the bowl and swirls it around the center, gathering a mass of potato before lifting it out of the bowl and placing it into his mouth. Then he smiles.

Several evenings later she is alone in her still, quiet yard picking apricots and then suddenly he is behind her. *Forgetting is not a forgiveness*, he breathes into the air behind her, and though she keeps her back to him, she can see the air he expels curl around her, long, climbing tendrils that swirl into the tree in front of her, before dissipating into the sky. She watches as his hand takes an apricot from the basket, she listens as he moves away from her, then climbs into the hammock; she smells apricot as he bites through its skin with a crunch. She knows he is looking at her; her skin crawls with knowing, but she cannot turn to face him; she must keep turning the words he said to her over and over in
her mind. They are like a puzzle, but she cannot solve it; something is missing. She keeps picking fruit; even though she has taken all the ripe ones, she cannot stop. Next she picks the almost-ripe, then the still-green, and when there is no fruit left within her grasp, she begins plucking leaves, tearing down small branches, all the while thinking she needs to run inside, she needs to get her box down from the closet, because marking helps her remember and she needs to remember. She has to turn to get by him, she must turn, she must go inside now, her hands are numb and her arms are scratched and she can feel her scars rising up on her arms, awake and demanding, and so she takes a deep breath and spins on her heels to face him. But the hammock’s only occupant is an apricot pit, picked clean.

It is then that she realizes she hasn’t left him a gift in quite some time.

She would come outside sometimes, when she couldn’t find sleep, to sit on the bottom stair, sip tea with a little whiskey, and stare at the sky. This routine was a common one, but this time she has also brought the journal his sister bought for her after—she can’t quite recall, a birthday? No. (Something that makes her stomach ache; she sips more whiskey-tea.) Her box has been put away, but the markings are fresh; she wears a tank top to let them breathe. It is late, and dark, and no one is likely to come by and see her. So she sits with a pen in hand, to, as her sister likes to say, write it out, (although what that means she can never figure out). Soon her hand takes to doodling; she fills page after page with mindless circles, swirls and spirals.

Because he had been with her earlier in the day, she is surprised when he comes zigzagging across the grass towards her. He bounds, brisk, energetic, up to her feet,
where he stops, circles, sits. There is clustering of weeds in his hand: dandelions, mustard, long clumps of crabgrass. The boy plucks out a piece of grass and pokes at her foot with it, before thrusting the entire tangle up into her lap. She pulls her newly marked arm out from under the dirt-clumped roots in one quick motion, and the boy startles. As he watches her shake off the dirt, her marks catch his attention; he grabs her wrist and turns her arm one way then the other as he frowns and clicks his tongue. She reddens with embarrassment, but also something else that feels a bit like anger (these marks are hers, alone, after all). He plucks the pen out of her journal, still sitting on the stair beside her, and then begins to draw around the markings. At first she is afraid (the area is tender and he is so intense), but his touch is light; she cannot feel a thing. He is hunched close over her arm, so she quits trying to watch him and instead returns to studying the sky. When he is through he throws down the pen and barks out a laugh. She looks down at her arm in wonder. It now contains a constellation.

That night she lies in her bed and closes her eyes, picturing the stars on her shoulder, her arm, her wrist, seeing them sprawling and lit across the shades of her eyelids. She sees a boy, not this boy, another, smaller and fairer than the stray boy, and he is running, first in circles, then away, she watches him until he fades into the blue. She opens her eyes and sits up. And without understanding why, she calls her sister. When there is no answer, she leaves a message, saying to the machine on the other end, I think I’m ready. Then she gets up and wanders down the hallway, stopping at the second door on the right. Pressing a hand against it, then an ear. Nothing. Just quiet and cold. She curls up in a ball in front of the door, and falls asleep.
The next morning when her sister returns her call and asks her about the message, she cannot recall what she had meant.

She wakes up nervous; it is an important day, a day marked with a big red box on her calendar. But there are no other clues, other than the ringing phone (her sister, her mother who never calls, even friends she hasn’t heard from in so long she has forgotten all about them), and the tingling in her arm. She strips down in the bathroom and stares at herself in the mirror. (When did she get so thin, so pale?) She runs her finger across the marks that now cover her entire right arm, the blue ink dark against her white skin. In the shower she rubs at the arm gently – some of her handiwork is still scabbed and tender and she needs to clean it. But the ink remains. After twenty minutes in the shower it still looks fresh. Perpetual.

Today, she thinks, is a good day for a walk. But then she remembers that she had picked the last of the plums, intending to make the boy some tarts. She decides she will do that first, and then take the walk. Maybe she can even get him to take the walk with her.

But then her sister’s voice is on the machine and her sister is saying she is on her way, on her way with their mother, it cannot be avoided she says, their mother thinks they should all go together. (Go where? She doesn’t want to go anywhere with them today.) In her frenzy she forgets the tarts until the kitchen begins to fill with smoke. Rushing to take the charred black lumps out of the oven causes a burn and worse still, she realizes she doesn’t have enough filling to make another dozen and she doesn’t have time
to start over. She frantically searches her pantry and fridge for something to feed the boy and settles on an assortment of sandwiches.

When she finally gets outside she is worried that she won’t be able to find him, but there he is, sitting in the plum tree, staring up into its branches. She wants him to come down, to leave with her. Not only her sister but also her mother are coming and nothing good will come out of this (and she doesn’t have enough sandwiches anyway).

She holds out a turkey on rye with avocado and sprouts, and he comes down out of the tree and plucks it from her hands. He stands in front of her, sniffing the sandwich, pulling the bread apart and peering into the contents. When he looks up at her she takes a few backwards steps, then motions for him to follow her. And though she half doesn’t expect this plan to work, he actually does. Together they walk slowly, he munching sandwiches, she watching, and in this way they slowly makes head out of her neighborhood and onto the main street beyond. But when they reach the corner of First and Spring, (their corner) he stops. She again motions for him to follow, holding out a mozzarella and tomato, but he only shakes his head in refusal.

Her anxiety is building; she begins to tug at her sleeve, to push it up so that she can get at the arm beneath. She realizes she needs to get to the hospital, to walk its parameter, to count the ambulances as they drive in and out, to look for faces she recognizes but cannot say why. After several more anxious moments of silent staring, he opens his mouth. He says, today is to let go. Then he turns and bounds away.

The entire walk to the hospital she is stunned and silent. She walks her three laps in a daze. Then, walk finished, she goes to sit at her usual bench a safe but watchable distance from the emergency entrance. But the bench is gone. This confuses her and she
thinks about going back home but she knows she needs to stay. Even if only for a few minutes. So she settles on a bench closer, and it’s nice because she can really see the faces of the drivers and the paramedics, the doctors and nurses, but it’s also not so nice because they can see her. Luckily no one is looking. They are all doing their jobs, hustle in, hustle out, repeat, repeat, and after a while it is easy for her to imagine those aren’t human beings they are transporting into the building, but something else. Piles of fluffy towels. Oriental rugs. Old baby clothes. She doesn’t like thinking of baby clothes. She gasps, she claws at her head, her throat, she thinks this isn’t real, she thinks, you are fine, just breathe, but it feels real and because it feels real there is no air. She tries to stand but she staggers and this draws the attention of a young man leaning on the back of an ambulance in a crouch, (he was hiding, smoking a cigarette; she’d noticed), and now he is running towards her; he throws his cigarette and he is calling hey lady, hey lady, you alright?

Later on, at home, she thinks about that nice paramedic. About how he had helped her talk the attending doctor out of calling her family. How he had given her a ride home, and how the entire way he had driven in silence (much welcomed after the barrage of questions at the hospital—so many of them remembered her, so many more just knew of her), how he had simply patted her hand at the bottom of her driveway and said I got my own, I can’t imagine. And then, be good to yourself, mam, by god, you gotta. Then he was gone.

It is only then, walking up the driveway, that she had remembered the words of the boy and it had occurred to her that the person who needed to let go wasn’t him.
She thought to herself, *of course, of course.*

She needs to go inside. She needs to walk down that hallway, she needs to cross through that doorway. But she can’t. She won’t. Instead she will make herself some tea and go lie in the hammock for a while.

The air outside is cool and damp but the sky is clear enough. She sits on the bottom stair and turns her face to the sky. Fixing her gaze on the stars one at a time, she imagines she is pulling their light down into herself, letting it burn all the terrible things out of her, leaving only pure light. She starts at her toes, and just keeps going, filling herself with heat and dust, pulling and filling until she feels herself swelling, she is so full with it, so large, she is so big, bigger than anything, bigger than this fear and this loneliness and this sadness she cannot put a name to.

She stares until her eyes grow weary and the lights in the sky wink and blur. Then she stumbles her way over to the hammock and climbs into it. Her head throbs so she lets her eyes close. The stars reignite beneath her eyelids and she watches them until she falls asleep.

Movement at the foot of the hammock wakes her. First she feels only the heat of anger, but it is fleeting and dissipates quickly. She cannot stay angry with him. And it is him. She doesn’t have to open her eyes to know that. It is him, he has returned, and he is climbing into the hammock with her. Somehow he manages to get inside the thing without tipping them both out onto the grass below and then he curls his body up near hers around, positioning himself lower in the hammock so that his head is in her lap. She wills herself not to move. Not to breathe.
But soon the proximity becomes too much for her to bear. How long, how long has she waited for this? Months, years, maybe her entire life and now here he is, and he is nuzzling into her side, his hand wrapped around her sweater, and she tries to remember how long it has been since someone touched her or showed her any kind of tenderness, let her know through the simple action of pressing skin to skin that they care, and she feels like no one ever has (not since—she cannot remember), and then she has to do it. She is reaching down her hand, she is reaching down to stroke his hair, his cheek. She is reaching down to him.

And he reaches back.

He traces the stars on her arm, then looks up into the sky. They look up together. And he says to her, *They sing all names. Listen. The endless song.*

In the morning she wakes in the hammock alone, to the sound of her sister.

*Why are you sleeping out here? And why did I get a call from Dr. Murphy saying you were in the hospital? This is my fault, I never should have left you alone, yesterday of all days*—

She sits up, pulling leaves from her hair and wiping the clump of drool and grass from her cheek. She is still trying to reorient herself, so that she can explain, but her sister isn’t finished.

*I was thinking we should do the room today, I was going to come over today anyway It’s been a year, I’m sorry but it’s time. But first, yesterday? I was worried sick the whole drive over, my god, I almost called mom, but she’s still mad about you not showing yesterday. The site looks good, by the way—*
She allows her sister to take her into the house. She gets into the bath when she is told, she drinks the weak tea. She promises to go see someone. It’s easier.

    Old routines, comfortable routines.

    But she tells her sister she isn’t up to going through his room tonight. Tomorrow, she promises. Tomorrow.

    Later that night, once her sister is snoring loudly from the spare bedroom, she slips outside, intent on sitting down on their stair, the second from the bottom. But then she sees something. Some things. The light is dim; she has to walk all the way down to see what has been left.

    Folded up on the stair neatly is her grey sweater (she draped it on him last night in the cold), the Santa plate (glued back together), her pop up tent (there is a tear in the casing, but someone had crudely sewn it up with bright red thread), and something else, something she doesn’t recognize. It is a large piece of thick paper, folded over several times. She opens it up and out like a popup book springs a model—her arm, her constellation. Her stars. Made of newspaper and seeds and bits of glass, eggshell and grass and even leftover bits of the quilt. She holds out her arm, although she doesn’t have to. She knows that it is perfect. And right in the center is a tiny note attached to one of the largest stars. She pulls it out, and unfolds its corners to reveal its message.

    Here.
Our Lady of Perpetual Deferral

At night I dream a replacement mourner—

almost a wet nurse,
but leaking from her breast:

    a state of perpetual grief.

Within her, my own currents could course
    unobstructed. Chemical cocktails long ago purged
from this vessel;
    this suit every day less recognizable, less understandable, could be
reproduced
    in temporary flesh,

this other,
this stronger woman.

I could tell her:

    I am encased within my own myopias,
    I hoard breath in mason jars beneath the house, I feed

a mandrake (in my heart) that threatens to outgrow my resolve.

Still, I hold. I hold.

You see, I have grown to fear the rushing fluid, the let-down, the flooding, surging tide

and now this blockage festers in my chest, it breeds
shade, it harbors infection. Too late, recognition—
    this swollen, puckered, mastitis withers me

but nothing will release
from these tender ducts, this obstructed system.

So I conjure a woman, unapologetic
in her yielding flesh
because I cannot drown in the softness;

what is done is redone
    in that mirror,    in this life,    my daily affirmation.
This is abandoned sanctuary, I tell myself every morning, stripping away the first stratum of my soil, mirror reflected surface crumbling beneath touch as fingers sink in, lost in the grit, years accumulating in layers upon teeth, under nails, in pores.

I have become un-easy. I have become un-bearable.

I have unlearned transparency.

I know that once we made life on islands, now barren because we turned to the art of bottling emotions; now they are defused, milky, expired, spoiled beyond use, still preserved in shelters of primary hued prisms.

This becomes elbows and forearms steepled, weary from the heavy burdens I refuse to lay down.

This becomes compromise.

Better to fix suffering in muscle, in sinew, better to feel weight than want or worry or woe.

I never really paid attention to church doorways before I met you, I would tell her,

but now I see that what mattered was never the cathedral; all we can hope for is threshold. A way in. And she would understand—

This breath is confession:

Touch, my road to absolution.

Come here, she would tell me. Tuck in, warm your blood in mine.
Playing Telephone

If memory is just a story we tell ourselves,
each repetition harboring alterations of strategy,

If we are only reformers, building false-bottomed bridges
while tone falls away like pitches in the darkness,

If self is nothing more than web and gossamer
spun recollection, allowing us to sleep, clung together in the night,

If shatters can be made whole,
emotional supplementation grafted to wounds,

If the brain is machine, body corruptible animal,
caught in the space between malleability and manipulation

If everything un-held is fabrication
weaving and unweaving mistakes to stave off entropy, clasp wasted time,

If science can generate formulas
to implant delight in matter, extract sorrow from soul,

If happiness can be manufactured,
can you reach inside, take hold, show me how to make a heart-beat?
There Behind the Garden Shed

He was strong.

He was big and strong, all of him.

Before.

Now his hands seem too large; mismatched parts on a broke down mannequin. He made his living with those hands, massive, hardened and rough, and even now you can still see the shadow of his past potency when you look at them.

My grandmother tells stories of before, what he was like before. My father leaves the room, but my uncle and cousins stay and I stay with them, stay and listen to the stories she has to tell. It’s the same dozen that she tells, with only the slightest of variations, and I know them all so well I could tell them too, maybe tell them better, even, because she has to stop sometimes. Sometimes she loses her place, her eyes shifting left and up, away from us. I know exactly what should be said next, but I hold back.

I am always holding back.

But mostly I sit. I sit quiet and watch the cancer eat him. It chews away the muscle and fat with equal enthusiasm. He is a skeleton picked almost clean now, a sculpture of ash waiting for an open window and a breeze to set him free.

He was so big. So big before.

A tower, he loomed over everyone, a massive and unmoving pillar. Or a tree. He smelled like the fruit trees in the yard, at the height of bloom, that’s what my cousin Lisa said to me once, as we spoke in hushed whispers beneath a canopy of abandoned grape and vine, our secret spot on the eastern edge of the property. I was trying to understand why he ignored me. She was trying to explain why I should be grateful.
This I could not understand.

Before.

This morning I am alone, alone with him, but also just alone. I haven’t been alone with him in ten years. So strange to be so close. I feel bigger, and I am, but maybe he is also just that much smaller now. Reduced. Husk and silk.

My grandmother is still sleeping, and I have been left to watch. Watch what, I wondered. The breathing, I suppose. Breathing is all he does anymore, and even that he does not do well. At each gasp I lean forward, clicking my tongue against my teeth, keeping time. I watch as his chest collapses down into the folds of the worn, white sheet. I count the seconds – one, two, three. Then with a rattle he inhales and it rises again. I know eventually the rise won’t happen. I know this.

I wait for it.

He was a mason and a boxer and a card shark, but I don’t remember any of that. Everyone who has come to this room has talked about how clever he was, how talented, he could fix anything, build anything, grow things in impossible places, but I do not share in these recollections. The garden of my childhood memories is forever overgrown, I only remember him sick, the reek of decay around even then, even ten years ago.

My stories of him are untold. While the stories of others sing out from the corners, mine are hidden, tucked in with dog-eared decks of cards in the shed, dusted with time and delay. My stories are nested with the birds in the grape leaves, they are embedded in the mosaic pathway to the garden, they are buried in the compost heap, planted in the soil, and they watch and they wait—

and they wait.
Ten years; I am counting.

I continue to watch the rise, fall, rise. But then the rise doesn’t come. I count four.

I count five, then six. His mouth is open but the gasp is absent, and no whistle, just
gaping mouth in a vacant face. Skin settles over bones like frost over soil. I exhale,
letting the air leak out from my own body. Seven, eight.

He ignored me for most of my life.

Most of it.

When I was eight, I found him sneaking cigarettes in the small space between the
garden shed and the back wall, at that property that I have always called my
grandmothers, as if I always felt that he was temporary. As if I sensed that he would go
first.

It was there, at last, that I knew what my cousin had meant, there behind the
garden shed, but it was the smell of too many trees, the smell overpowered, making my
head sick with the scent. He was salt and spit and flowers left too long in the vase.

Hands too large and me so, so small.

Tatters of yellow and purple torn away, left behind, it was my favorite, and
sometimes I wonder if I might still find them there, those strips of sun and violet, faded
and forgotten on the thorns that clung to me as I ran back towards the house, leaving a
trail of battered bicycle brand playing cards scatted across the pathway.

Don’t you rat me out, Lisa, he called in my direction. The smell of the forbidden cigarette
curled after me, like voice, like touch, it would never leave me, and I was not Lisa—
but I would never tell.
Hands. Such immense hands. I take one into mine; I fill both my hands with one of his. I feel the weight of it. I feel the emptiness. It is as if the blood and sinews and marrow have already left; what I am holding is nothing more than hollowed out bone. There is a window to my left, dirt-caked with neglect. Weak light leaks in through bent blinds leaving crooked yellow streaks across his sheet-shrouded legs. Mummies, I have read, kept their hearts while all the other organs were turned to soup and washed away. His heart, I remember my dad saying, was keeping him going, stubbornly, despite all the other organs being ready to let go. His heart, my grandmother would say, was not through with us. I think his heart never knew us at all.

His lungs rattle themselves awake, startling me. We breathe in together once more. I watch the white sheet rise. I breathe in his smell, rubbing alcohol and sickness and shit. I stroke his skin, white skin, thin like paper, written upon with want and wait and wrath.

I lean down close to his face. I take back the stench, the ten years of the unspoken. *I am not Lisa.*

I drop the hand to pick up a pillow.

Also white.
Some Assembly Required

Remember
one swallowed up man, gravity,
head dropped and held; two
hearts burnt, down; slowness of sand
doled out, fastened firm, to three,
bundle of unbound
untethered cells, wetted
eyes and mouth and sound and I
so weighted beneath;
we wait together.

To use
smooth ivory wash murmurs
like your mother,
nothing
like your mother, yelping and winded—
how you bright this house,
how you black that moon;
cradled
in what is done and undone.

As directed
we tight the device.
To simulate motion, still
beating around curled questions
held in three neck breath whispers,
two bodies out of orbit,
one firm round period; we
and all and this.
Attachment Parenting

This, the hour, nestled in the space between one day and the next, a vacant plot of potential dream; here, always here, you find me. It must be an evolutionary trick, some undiscovered permutation; when I start to slip away, slide into the crack, the crevice, when I’m nestling in, breath slowed, eyes closed, you sound your siren call, detect the faintest light, the softest movement, know the precise moment when I reach the threshold between wake and slumber, and you cannot stand to see me go.

No, I, alone never again. You make sure of that, you: wailing wanton, your wish is warrant; voracious feeder, did you stop to think that I thirst too? I reach for you and you grow louder, kicking with excitement when I pull you in, when you smell the fear and exhaustion on my skin. My soft, squirming succubus laid bare, skin on skin, mouth on flesh, cocked and ready to thrive as I wither, do I live simply to feed you; were you brought here to suck me dry? I, host animal, you hold on tight, prepare to feed, always, always, it is your turn, but I am just as hungry as you are.

You will swell and fatten, my glutton, grow as I fade away, dwindle and wane, while my life pulses through you. Sputter and throb, cough up the excess, relatch, reload, relive this endless cycle, you taking, I giving, you looming large and I crushed beneath the tremendous weight. Such a small thing; I hold you but I cannot contain you.

You burrow into me. Can I relax; let the tension leak out of bones, muscles, blood; the pain peeling away and we fall into a rhythm, you and I, no longer struggling against each other—

   you making me as I make you?
All Of Me

You said follow me, said let’s go somewhere quiet, and I did, mostly because although I was afraid of you, I was more afraid of you leaving me alone if I said no. We were the only kids brought to the party this time. There was constantly a different mix, but I was always there; my parents weren’t keen on leaving me alone, not with my only child status still so fresh and red and raw in their minds. So there I was, an unseen kid in the midst of wild adult chaos. I didn’t like it, exactly, but I didn’t want to be alone at home anyway. It was better to be in this place, smoke and whiskey-scented, too loud and hot to think. Thinking led to a stomach made queasy with this new life I couldn’t yet process. I needed a break from the ache as much as my parents did.

But you were something different in the routine, something never seen before. This normally scares me, such newness, yet I was drawn to you; something about your bright red hair and your Dead Kennedys t-shirt, and the way you were picking at that frayed hole in your jeans, a hole that revealed one smooth, tan knee. Maybe it was the knee itself – it was a sand dune, a mound of salted caramel ice cream, it looked like what the word perfect really means. My fingers twitched and I shoved them deep into my pockets so that I wouldn’t reach out to touch it before I even knew your name.

The adults were in the den, where the scent of my new childhood weekend scene wafted out and towards me and I knew what they were doing but I didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to picture my parents with shining glass eyes and wet sticky mouths laughing into the air with smiles too wide and bodies too loose. I knew what they were doing and I didn’t want to know what they were doing and so I wandered, trying to get
some distance, and that is when I found you, outside on the patio smoking a cigarette.

Picking at that hole in your jeans.

So I followed you. I followed you back inside, riding the trail of your Bonnie Bell Lip Smacker—Dr. Pepper?—and your White Shoulders perfume; it reminded me of my sister, and maybe that is why I was drawn to you, captivated, despite the fact that you were older and rougher than I was accustomed to. I had a book in my hand; I had been happy about that fact just moments before, looking forward to finding a place to read it, a place where I could see but not be seen. But then I saw you and suddenly my book made me feel like a baby, because you had a beer, Miller Lite, probably my father’s but maybe not, it didn’t matter; you had it and I thought that you were probably going to want me to drink some of it too, and I didn’t want to, not because I was afraid to drink, but because I was afraid it would be obvious to you that I didn’t like it. And I wouldn’t, I knew this without putting it in my mouth; the smell reminded me of my father yelling and my mother crying for hours afterward, so just getting a whiff of it made me make sick in my stomach all over again. I would make a face when the neck got close to my nose and then you wouldn’t want me nearby anymore. And I needed that, for you to just want me around.

We stopped at the threshold between the bathroom and the hallway. This was our apparent destination; you crossed and entered, leaving the light off, but I remained motionless. My hand thumped against the doorframe and I realized I was shaking, shivering, my teeth knocking against each other in my mouth. All this despite the fact that my entire body felt sweaty and damp, because all I could think was: why dark? It occurred to me that I had no idea why you wanted to go into the bathroom, and in fact,
anything we could do in a bathroom seemed like something I did not want to do. I thought of the time in first grade when I didn’t want to go pee in front of another person. I was going to some hippy school that didn’t believe in separate bathrooms for girls and boys, which okay, fine, but they also didn’t believe in stalls either, so I spent most of the year trying to go to the bathroom when no one else was in there and that day I couldn’t make it. I held it as long as I could, but people just wouldn’t stop going in there, and then I waited too long. My friend Rosanna made me laugh real hard and it happened. I pissed my pants. I had to wait in the nurse’s office for four hours. I just sat there wrapped in a sheet with my wet clothes in a big Ziploc bag in my lap, eating raisins the nurse had fished from her purse because she felt sorry for me, or wanted me to stop sniffing into my pigtails. My mom never came; her friend finally showed up and took me home.

My mom wasn’t going to come to get me this time either.

You spun around and placed your back against the sink counter and then with a hop you were sitting up there and I was faced with your knee again. So smooth. It reminded me of the small, animal shaped soaps my grandmother kept in her spare bathroom, soft and cool and just as untouched. One time I stole one—a tiny starfish the color of butter. I carried it around until the time I forgot to take it out of my pants and my mom washed it. My finger twitched again, so I shoved my hands back in my pockets and tried not to notice you watching me. You were focusing on one part of my face at a time: first one eye, then the other, before you dragged yourself down the lines of my nose, then slowly inched over to my right cheekbone. I needed to sit down. I needed to stand up. My entire face felt alive and crawling with tiny, fiery insects and my only hope was that the
bathroom was too dim to see my fear, our only light a sailboat nightlight plugged into an outlet, partially obstructed by your body.

*Your sister is dead, right?* you asked me, and it was so simple, so unapologetic, that I didn’t know what I was supposed to say. No one ever talked like that, at least not to my face; sister was a word I wasn’t even supposed to hear anymore, like when our neighbor had been talking about her cats with me, just a few weeks or a month ago, and she had said *the two white and black ones, the sisters,* and as soon as the words were out she gasped, clasping both hands firm and fast across her mouth, as if she could shove the offending word back in and away from me. But you just said it, like it was benign, like “yellow” or “sandal” or “Monday,” so I just said *yes, but it’s okay,* which was weird, but I was tired of the banished words, not just “sister,” but also “accident” and “car” and “crosswalk.” You were saying the thing everyone thought but wouldn’t speak, right to my face. And I was grateful. It reminded me that I was still real and here.

I had to look up at you though, I needed to know if you were giving me that look, those sad, stupid cow eyes everyone threw my way when the topic of my sister came up in my presence. But first I looked at myself in the mirror over your shoulder. I stayed there, frozen, staring at myself because it was safe to look into my own eyes. I could feel you though, waiting. Watching. Was I supposed to be saying something? I shifted my eyes, just a bit, and saw that you were just watching my mouth now, nothing else, and that felt weird, like seeing something I wasn’t supposed to; it made the words dry up and the bottom drop out of my insides. My lip got hot and itchy, and I was about to have to scratch. I didn’t want to but I couldn’t take it, I was going to do it, only just then there was a burst of laughter from the den and it saved me because you sighed and looked
away from me, tucked a stray tuft of red behind your ear. Then you said, *they make me sick, and I said me too* although I didn’t know what that meant, exactly, at least I didn’t know how you meant it, but I knew I meant it too.

You kicked the door slightly with your dangling foot; the room darkened and the noise from the party dimmed. *What’s it like?* you asked, *having a dead sister?* I didn’t want to answer you, I didn’t have an answer, but I also didn’t want to lose your interest. It was so white and warm and I had spent the last year alternating between being invisible and being a leper. *It isn’t really like anything. Everything’s just emptier now.* That sounded so wrong and stupid and I could feel my face getting hot again, and I could feel my bladder starting to ache a little, like I had to pee, and I thought not again, because I couldn’t ask you to leave, I knew that would be a mistake but I also couldn’t do it in front of you. I pressed my thighs together tight and I locked my knees and then because I didn’t know what else to do I asked for some of your lip gloss.

You looked at me. But this time not just an eye or my right nostril or my now quivering chin. All of me. Everything got cold and still inside as I stood there, trying not to fidget in your gaze. But it wasn’t working; the insects were swarming under my skin again and I could feel myself bouncing. You noticed too. The right side of your upper lip curled upward and you let out a snort. Then you reached a hand into a pocket and pulled out a tube. Cherry cola; I was close. You rolled it back and forth in your open palm, before twirling it between your thumb and fingertip. *Come and get it,* you said.

I wasn’t expecting that, wasn’t expecting to have to release my clamped thighs or my locked knees and now the urge to pee was overwhelming and there was just no way I could take that step without releasing all over the floor and I would have rather died then
let that happen. I squirmed. *What’s wrong?* you asked. You held the lip gloss out in front of you, all I had to do was reach for it. And so I did, but my knees were still locked and when you yanked it away suddenly, I fell forward and into you and the only place for my hands to go was onto your knees. That knee, I didn’t plan it but suddenly there it was, cupped neatly, perfectly, in my open palm. Your cherry cola lip gloss clattered onto the ground and rolled underneath the toilet.

*Oh no.* I said. *Oh no?* But what else could I say? I didn’t know what to do, should I crawl under there for you? I felt like I should because this was sort of my fault, but it was also yours. And I was afraid to move around too much; my bladder was still protesting under the pressure. But the heat of your knees filling my hands was almost too much. I just stood there clinching my muscles trying to be calm, still, but my fingers on your naked knee had a mind of their own, up the hillside of your kneecap and back again they traveled. Petting you. I thought of the neighbor’s cats again, black and white sisters, and a small, tight ball crept up the back of my throat. I swallowed.

*It’s okay,* you said, *I’ve got some right here* you said, and I looked up at you, at your shining mouth, slightly parted, with just a few strands of that bright red hair stuck within the gloss, but I didn’t know what you were getting at until you extended a hand toward me, toward my face, and then I understood. I hadn’t ever done this before but I had watched enough TV to know what it looked like. I wanted to say *wait,* or *stop,* or *no thank you* but even more than all that, I wanted to say *please.*

I took in a deep breath, flaring my nostrils out wide and full and you smelled so good. But you also smelled like her. And then it happened. I couldn’t stop it. As you leaned towards me, I released a loud moaning sob right into your waiting mouth.
What the hell? you exclaimed and then pushed me off and I fell on the floor and stayed there, crumpled. Weirdo, you muttered as you left the bathroom, kicking me a little with one Conversed foot, not a hard kick, it was just a push really, but I rolled over as you nudged me, and turned my face toward the wall. I could just make out the daisy flower pattern on the wallpaper; it looked raised, like braille, as if I could reach out a thumb and forefinger and pluck a petal right from the nearest flower. She loves me, she loves me not—you slammed the door behind you; I was left in the dark.

The rug was shaggy and soft, but it smelled like pee and wet dog and Lysol and after a while I thought some of that smell might be me and that thought just made me cry even more. I didn’t want you to hear me and I was convinced you were just outside the door, so I reached up and grabbed a wad of toilet paper from the roll and folded it into a fat cylinder before shoving it in my mouth and biting down hard.

I don’t know how long I stayed in there, in the dark, on the floor. When my mother came stumbling in, her voice hoarse and her mascara slightly smudged and smeared in the corners, the toilet paper was still in my mouth, by then it was a wet, soggy mush. As she dragged me up off the floor, shaking me, asking what are you doing, didn’t you hear me? I grabbed the cherry cola lip gloss from beneath the toilet and shoved it into my dress pocket.

I brought that lip gloss with me every Saturday night for four months after that, but I never got a chance to give it back to you. I never saw you again. I did end up throwing it away, but only after years had gone by, after it had become a shrunken, shriveled version of its former self, forever entombed in its sparkly plastic casing.
Nesting

From the top of the tree house you built
in another life,
I can see farther than I can feel.
In here I smell your cigarettes,
see you crouched in the corner,
biting your nails, blowing smoke rings.

In here I pretend I’m not making you up
as I go along.

Even though I am.
And I want you
to like what you’ve become.

Remember when we used to touch
scars, to see if we could feel what nestled beneath skin,
our bodies, such miraculous healers,

until yours couldn’t.
Not this time, dad whispered, not this time.
Because nothing ends with dignity;
because these lives are never self-leveling.

Should I have said goodbye when they told me they were letting you go
instead of tucking your last exhalation
inside my own lungs?
Should I have slipped you into my pocket
instead of giving my thimbleful to the dirt beneath this tree?

I am wearing your shoes
inside of mine,
each doubled step a heartbeat.

I’m still making you
up even though I cannot hold you together off the page
and this poem is not a life at all, your breath gone
stale inside my throat. Still

I keep climbing up this ladder, into these branches that were smaller
when they knew you,
to burn letters, to turn questions into leaves
to know what I will never know—

would you have been better at all of this?
The house has been trying to speak for years. In a cacophony of creaks and groans and shudders, in a code of shifting foundations and peeling paint, it speaks the condition of the family that dwells within its walls. But no one is listening. No one hears. The house is ignored.

It cannot do its work under these conditions.

Houses are meant to foster and shelter life—that is their purpose. What they are not meant to do is store the dead. This is, in fact, the transformation houses fear the most. This is because when a house ceases to cradle life and instead becomes a repository for stagnancy and rot, it cannot be a home anymore. Despite the appropriate elements everyone expects of a house—roof and walls, floor and family—this house is harbinger. This house is decay.

If anyone would look at the house, really look, they would see that it is labyrinth overgrown. It is unmappable, an ever expanding and contracting pathway of bramble and burr; it is a spiral tunneling inward, inward towards collapsing center. Towards its occupants. Because the house, despite its not-home state, still contains living things within its walls. Nestled deep within, protected from the elements and the outside world are a mother, a father, a daughter. Within the house they are warm, they are dry; there are beds to sleep within and chairs to sit upon. These occupants breathe and speak; they eat and dream. But they do not truly live. Instead they exist in a space between living and death, in a space where breath is shallowed and slowed, because to take in too much air is to take in the truth: they are not alone in the house. The house is not alone.
The house also contains a second daughter, a daughter who is not. She contains neither breath nor voice; she is weight without form. This daughter is lost, she was lost so very long ago, but she is not gone, because the family will not let her go. And when people are gone but cannot go, they become bound.

They become bind.

~

In the house there is a mother. She is the mother of two children, but only one of them is living. Being a mother of one child who lives and another child who does not isn’t something the mother knows how to do. She spends her time grieving this tragedy-birthed inability to believe in her own potency. Her mind does not know how to process this change. How can I, she wonders, be mother, bringer of life, when half of my work has failed?

Of course the mother has the other child. That child lives in the house, that child grows older each and every day, that child is a testament to her ability to parent. The mother knows these things. But her mind transmits failure and her mind whispers bad mother and her mind won’t let her do that kind of work anymore.

She looks at her hands, so empty. She cannot stand to look at them. She decides she must fill these hands, fill them up every hour of every day so that she never has to think of what fell from them.

So the mother sits on a sofa in the center of the house and knits afghans. The mother knits afghans over and over, hook loop pull repeat, repeat, repeat. Her hands, quick and nervous sparrows, fly over the yarn. The clinking of wood on wood is her birdsong. This nest, this nest is too cold, she thinks. She means to insulate the family with
her work. The mother hook loop pulls until the house is completely blanketed in her woolen therapy. She hook loop pulls until her hands are only good for that one deft motion, until her hands grow into the needles, until all she needs to do is plunge them deep into the brightly colored skeins and the needle-fingers pull the patterns out, over and over, again and again, until she is lost in a bundle of soft, quiet, forgetfulness.

But her afghans are not functional in the way blankets are expected to be. The mother has dropped too much sadness into them, the tears have been woven in with the wool, hooked and pulled, they are now a permanent part of the structure. To sit under one of these afghans is to fill your blood with frost. They crackle and snap like branches overburdened with snow as the mother arranges and rearranges them, nimble fingers trying to find the design that will make them purposeful.

Blankets aren’t supposed to have sharp edges, but these, the mother’s blankets, are bladed. Tiny, invisible needles lodge deep in the material long after the mother’s labor is done. The daughter loathes this sharpness. She watches the wood splinter away and fall into the fabric as she hides in the corners, counting the clicks, watching her mother plait shame into tangible forms. When the mother falls asleep, when the clicking slows then stops, the daughter creeps up to file away the rough and splintered wood on her mother’s hands. She strokes those hands. She whispers in her mother’s ear, I miss you. She whispers, come home.

The house settles around them, adding its creaks to the mother’s clicks and the daughter’s croons. Together they build a chorus. Together they sing an elegy.

Despite its perfect pitch, no one hears the house. Everyone is folded inward, backs hunched, eyes crossed from years of looking always inside. The house decides to try
another way; it begins a new process. A giant windowless room opens up to the right of
the sitting room where the mother likes to do her knitting, curled cross-legged and back-
bowed in the center of the old, brown sofa, hollowed in the middle from so many
identical days of service. The daughter notices the room, but she does not stop to wonder
where the room came from; she is too concerned with the overabundance of scratching,
scraping afghans. They are piled everywhere now; how often she is tripped and cut by
their presence, as they are draped or stacked on every motionless surface of the house.
When the daughter sees the room, she only thinks, thank goodness. She only wonders,
why haven’t I been using this room all along? She stacks the room full from floor to
ceiling with her mother’s work.

This only increases the knitting. The mother looks around, sees bare chair backs
and naked couch cushions and empty laps. She sees void. The needles fly faster. When
the house become too full of afghans again, when this new room is so crowded the doors
no longer close, the house opens another room. But the mother is dedicated, her work
continues until the second room is piled to the ceiling in itchy rectangles measuring the
exactitude of her forgetting. The daughter enters the sitting room, arms rubbed and
bloody, to see her mother’s hands worrying the air. The yarn basket is empty.

The daughter begins unraveling the blankets, re-spooling the wool and the acrylic,
sneaking it back to the baskets to be made again. Is this what love becomes? the daughter
wonders.

~

In the house there is a father. There is a father and he lost one child and kept the
other, just like the mother. But the father has also lost a wife. She has been replaced by a
woman crafted of sharpness and angles and sting, her heartbeat nothing but a murmur, her wooden form forever bent away from him. In her presence he comes to know the true scope of absence; body and blanket melding together to form a shadow cast on the walls of the house, revealing every inch of his failure. This wife is reminder. He looks at her and sees a hollowed out center where his family used to be. And so he stops looking.

He also cannot allow himself to think about the daughter he lost, because the loss is unfixable. The loss is unfixed. The absence cannot be pinned down; it cannot be mended. He cannot consult a manual or find the right tool to repair the tragedy, to make his family whole. And so the father decides he must fill the space with new focus, new purpose. He takes a look at this one remaining daughter and this father says, no. He says, this one stays. He decides to pin all of his love, his hope, his attention upon her living frame. His love will be her armor. But he must be diligent; he knows all too well what happens when daughters wander too far from their father’s hands.

He has always worked with his hands, and so they are formidable. When the daughter is young and small, these hands are enough to contain her. But daughters grow and the hands of fathers, even very determined fathers, do not. Soon the daughter is large enough, quick enough, to dash between his fingers and fly away, into the world. The same world that took that other child from him. The world that took his wife. He looks at his hands, too insignificant, too empty. This won’t do, the father says. I can do better.

He decides he must build a larger set of hands, a set of hands strong enough and large enough to hold his daughter forever and always. Locking himself away in the basement with his tools and his materials, he plans the construction of these hands, these physical manifestations of his want to keep her close and safe and contained. He
experiments with various materials: wood and acrylic, rubber and clay, but in the end metal seems best suited for the task of daughter keeping. He designs a complicated system of wires and screws, straps and springs. Pulleys maintain mobility of delicate finger bends. Lightweight tin and aluminum prove most flexible and less likely to overheat too much in summer and cool too much in winter, but steel is less likely to break beneath the weight of the responsibility that the hands are tasked with carrying.

Mechanical hand building is a lesson in compromise.

Each prototype is tested on the daughter. Wires snap. Straps tear. Springs break loose and leap across the room. The daughter tries to tell her father this is unnecessary. She tells him she isn’t going anywhere. *I’m right here with you*, she whispers in his ear while he is doubled over at his workbench. The father only wonders aloud if bronze guitar string might be a suitable replacement for the copper wire that keeps unraveling. When the hands break, as these hands are apt to do, the daughter waits until it is time again. Waits until the elastic is restrapped and the bolts are retightened, until the father calls out that it’s time. *Come to me, daughter. Let me cradle you safe*. She tries not to wince as the fingers close around her, pinching her flesh and filling her sinuses with the acidic marriage of skin and metal.

The house senses the daughter’s discomfort. It tries to slow the father down. Hallways grow up and out of its groaning floorboards, creating pathways that twist and turn their way towards dead ends or doors that lead to more hallways. The father blunders down them in search of the stairway that leads to his basement, dropping parts and losing tools. The daughter collects these like crumbs and stashes them away in heaps of afghan. But there are always more parts. The father gets tired and collapses in a corner, resting
his head on colorful bundles of wool the daughter has stored for the mother. The daughter, not wanting her father to sleep huddled on piles of inhospitable blankets, always comes for him, always leads his sleepy form back out of the labyrinth to a more suitable place to rest. The house rattles and shakes, it calls to her, it begs her to notice the pathways it is creating. But she is focused on her father, she is tucking him into his bed, beside her far away mother, she is singing them both to sleep, she is holding them in her arms until she hears their breathing deepen, until she feels them let go.

The daughter is weary. But she loves her father, so when he calls, she complies. And when the father is so exhausted that he cannot lift the mechanical hands to place them upon his own, the daughter helps the father into them. She fastens each strap; she secures each hook. Then, because the father cannot lift the hands to pick her up, the daughter uses a chair to climb into the hands on her own. They are finished this time, the father says as he bends his face near hers. You are safe now. She kisses his cheek and stays still and small in his artificial palms for as long as the bindings will hold.

On one such holding, the daughter sits, curled up against the crook in the thumb of the left palm. She is cramped up, knees bending into her chest, head and neck folding forward and over the knees, just so she can fit. I’m too big, even for this new set, she realizes. The house hums and whines into her ear, but she pays it no mind. Why, she tries to remember, why are we here? Why am I here? She cannot remember. Behind her the clicking and the hook loop pulling slows, slows, and then stops. She turns. She looks at her mother, now asleep, needle hands still dug into the burnt umber bundle of wool bunched up in her lap. She looks at her father; he too has dozed off, and the strap on the left hand is already straining under her now full-grown weight. When did they grow so
old? Their creaks and groans have fallen into rhythm with the house’s; she holds her
breath while the rhythm washes over her, biting her cheek until the skin puckers and
swells between her teeth.

As she straightens her legs across the palms of the hands, something catches the
skin on her calf. She reaches down and pulls a fragment of wire out of her calf. One
bright strand of wool dangles from its edge. The sight of it fills her with a something she
cannot put words to, she looks up and left, searching for the words, and it is then that she
sees something. Above her, there is a space she has never seen before. It is as though
someone had made a passageway through the ceiling right above her. She stares up,
absently folding the fragmented wire and wool into a ball within her palm. She squeezes
it until she feels it bite into the fleshy ball of her thumb. Squeezes it until she has
forgotten the hands of her parents. Until, at last, she can focus on the sensation within her
own.

And there, in the locus of physical sensation, she lets herself remember. Why did
you leave me alone? she asks into the hallway. I don’t know how to be the one that
remains.

The house shifts hard and fast, rattling a window and knocking something that
hangs from the wall. The daughter gets up and walks down the new hallway, to the fallen
object. She picks it up, a now-broken frame. In it lives the image of a family, whole,
complete, wearing smiling faces she doesn’t recognize. But she knows—this mother, this
father, these two girls contained and frozen in the image, this is her family. Or was. She
walks back to her parents, carrying the photo. So small they look, so tired. She unhooks
the hands, and places the photograph within one. She grabs an armful of blankets. Then
she drags the hands down the new hallway and into a corner, where she stashes them under the afghans.

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In the house there is just one living daughter. This daughter holds time and hides memory. She does these things because she thinks they keep the mother and the father breathing. Because she is trying to turn their collapse into a kind of unfolding. The daughter is the household’s keeper. And in the house the daughter is forever kept. But the daughter is tired of all the hands and all the holding. And she is tired of the house.

The daughter stands in a room that is now just hers but is also forever someone else’s. She stands and she takes inventory of the things that fill its recesses. Green dresser with yellow drawers, paint faded and chipped, worn smooth from decades of fingertip strokes. Old, pine four-poster bed, etched with the stories of years upon its shine. It has one broken and cracked arm—they’d been swinging from it into a pile of pillows, she remembered, and it had broken off right in her hands—how she had cried. How her sister laughed until she cried too. And over there, the braided rug of blues and purples, from a time when the mother crafted more than afghans. The curtains, red and black patterned and heavy, to keep what light existed beyond her windows out. Everything, everywhere, a clashing clatter. Nothing is ever thrown out, everything just accumulates, what is hers piled on top of what had once been theirs. And at the center of it, only this girl. Still.

A girls’ room, everything in the room was once soft or bright or shiny, but now everywhere she looks things are cobwebbed and broken and dull. Things are aged and brittle; they seem anachronistic to her. Is this really my room? She picks up a bottle of perfume from the dresser, aged and cloudy, its contents separated into bubbles of various
shades of brown and yellow. The glass is clouded too, chalked with dust and time. She turns her attention to the hand holding the bottle and in her shock she drops the bottle, shattering it on the old hardwood floor beneath her feet. It fills the room with the scent of decaying flowers, but she hardly notices, she is too busy turning her hand this way and that in the dim light from a nearby lamp, examining the unfamiliar ridges and contours.

*How long, she wonders, have I been living under ghosts, in this room?*

The daughter looks around, and she decides that the room is a trap. They have made the entire house into a trap. The daughter decides what they all need is out. All of them. Parents and girl and lost daughter and house.

She decides today is as good a day as any for an awakening. On light feet she tip toes out the door of the bedroom and turns. But what she is greeted with is not the hallway she remembers. This is a new pathway the house has presented her. And although she is impatient to reach her parents, to help them to wake up too, she realizes she hasn’t much choice in the matter. The house is speaking. And she is going to listen.

*Our life is that of an empty pair of shoes left by the entryway of a world of feet laid bare,* she thinks as she walks with the house. She likes the feel of these words as they bounce around her head, and so she speaks them aloud to the hallway. She likes that even more, so she then lifts her left index finger, and traces them onto the wall. The house rumbles and quakes, she hears cracking in the walls, feels bits of plaster and paint rain upon her head and drops down to cover herself. It’s only when she has crouched down that she sees it. There, at knee level a small door— almost a window really— has appeared. The house settles down. The daughter plants her hands on the frame, then pushes.
She is already on her back on the other side before she realizes that she has crossed over the threshold. She stands up and shakes the dust off herself. She is in a space that looks a lot like her father’s workshop basement. But there are no metal hands, no spools of wire, no piles of aluminum scrap. The walls are covered with neatly organized woodworking tools: saws and chisels, clamps and vices. And on the center of the workbench sits a house. Her house, only the size of a child. A doll’s house. Its paint is fresh, its lines crisp and straight. It smells of linseed oil and sawdust. She gets up close to it and peers inside its depths. Much like her own house, she cannot see the ends of the hallways. She notices various strings coming from the walls, the floor, the ceiling and kneels down for a closer look. She finds the back of the house contains hinges, allowing her to open it up. Reaching her hand in, she pulls on the nearest cord, which is attached to what appears to be a little trap door in the floor of the sitting room. She reaches inside, but the trap door leads to nothing. She frowns, then sits back to take in the entire house once more.

She needs to get back to her parents, to check on them. She wants to take the house with her, but it won’t fit through the little door she has fallen through in order to find it. She fingers the thumbnail sized roof shingles and promises she will return. She takes a tiny chair from the living room, exactly like the one her father sits in, and slips it into her dress pocket. Then she shimmies back through the door and dashes down the hallway in search of her parents.

She finds the father first, in a darkened hallway deep within the house, holding the corner of the bruise colored afghan she had hidden the hands within the night before. He throws aside the blanket and pulls out a pair of snips. As the father works the broken
strap, the daughter holds out the tiny chair. But he doesn’t see; he is bent over the hand, strap pulled tight between his teeth. She places the tiny chair in the center of the left hand’s palm, so that he will have to see it, so that she can show him what she has discovered. But as he is fiddling with the hands, the fingers of the hand contract and the chair is crushed. The proof, her proof, lost within the blasted contraption. The daughter scrambles to gather the splintered remains as the father blows the dust away, murmuring about particles in the joints.

She is enraged, she wants to break these giant hands into scrap and hurl them into the street, outside the house, away from her. Away from her father. Still she takes his hand, aged and tired, but still living and real and him. She places the broken pieces against his skin, trying to get him to feel what he refuses to see. He pays her no mind. Go check on your mother while I mend this strap, he says.

The daughter doesn’t want to go to her mother, at least not right away. She runs down three hallways and up two staircases before realizing that she is getting nowhere. The house isn’t letting her get back to the door. The house is taking her back to the same hallway over and over, the hallway that leads to her mother. She tiptoes down to the threshold, careful not to step on any of the creaking boards. When she gets to the doorway, she stops just short and leans forward, peering in. She wants to see her mother before her mother sees her. I will check on her, she thinks. I will check and she will be fine and then I can go back to the room. But when she looks in, she doesn’t see her mother, although her mother is there; the clicking of the needles confirms this. She does not see her mother because her eyes have settled on the chair. Her father’s chair. In pieces all over the floor.
Every floorboard seems to sigh beneath her as she steps into the room. She feels heavy, solid; she cannot seem to remember how to exhale. The sounds of the hook loop pull fills the room, but she cannot hear anything but the squeaks of the house beneath her feet and the drumming of her heart within her chest. Eyes on the chair, or what remains of the chair, she steps around piles of blankets, heading straight for the wreckage. She is so focused she almost doesn’t see the hole.

Yet there it is. As if it had always been there, as if it were a perpetual feature of the floor, naturally occurring, right there in front of the fireplace. A perfectly square hole in the middle of their living room floor. She drops to her knees, then crawls over to it. This feels safer somehow. When she gets close, she begins to lean forward over the edge of it, but thinks better of this. Instead, laying flat on the floor, holding to the wood as tight as she can, she slowly edges her body forward, pulling herself along inch by inch until her fingertips cross over and enter the space where the floor stops and its lack begins. Warm air blows across her fingertips in rhythmic pulses. She feels moisture trapped within it. *Breathing.* She thinks. *I can feel you breathing.*

She pulls herself forward a bit more, until the top of her forehead and her eyes are parallel with the opening. She can see nothing but blackness. She can hear nothing but the faintest hint of a whoosh, or a shhh, like air passing through a tube. She pulls herself back and away and sits up. The daughter looks over at the mother. Her mother. She almost cannot see the mother’s tiny frame, masked as it is by the growing pile of afghan she has created; they are piled beside her on the couch and scattered all over the floor in front of her in rainbow colored heaps. The daughter realizes how much she hates those
stupid afghans. She lets out a yell, grabs the nearest afghan, and shoves it straight into the hole.

That first blanket is all it takes. Soon she is tossing armful after armful into the hole—great, mounding wads of them. She keeps expecting that she will fill the space completely, but no matter how many afghans she tosses down, the hole appears open, vast, hungry for more. Soon there is nothing left to throw away; she has thrown everything down, all the blankets, all the bundles of yarn, she has left her mother hook loop pulling away at nothing; the needle-hands are once again clicking air. *Mother*, she sighs. She approaches her and tries to lay a hand on the needles. *Mother, stop. Mother, look at me.* But her mother does not stop and her mother will not look; the needles keep clicking, and as the daughter tries to restrict their movement, one of the needles slices her hand. Again, she feels the redness, the heat fills her body. She wants to purge, but how to separate her mother from this sharpness she has taken on; the needles are as much a part of her now as the blood pumping in her heart, the chemicals coursing through her cells. The needles have become her.

And so the daughter walks to the room in the hallway and pulls out an armful of afghans. She travels back to her mother, sits at her feet, and chews the end of one of the blankets until the knot loosens in her teeth. Then she begins to unweave the wool, and feed it to her mother. The hook loop pull begins again; the clicks becoming more muffled as the needles piece yarn once more.

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In the house there is another daughter. A daughter nobody sees, nobody speaks of, everyone feels. For too long only the house has acknowledged her, so long that she has
become a part of the house. She cannot be separated from it, her absence is an ache in its walls, a keen in its foundation. To breathe air in the house is to take in the guilt, the pain, the loneliness, the helplessness that her loss gave birth to. Her family now as lost from the world as she is.

The house knows what has to be done.

The daughter wakes up on the floor of the sitting room, her cheek resting upon a floorboard that is pulsing rhythmically against her jaw like a pounding, sped up heartbeat. Startled, she sits up, and hears the whooshing from the floorboard hole, faster now than before, in rhythm with the heart-like beating. She hadn’t meant to sleep; she has wasted time and she is anxious to get back to the room. But when she gets out into the hallway, she finds it has changed once more. It isn’t really a hallway at all anymore. There appears to be arms, or branches, or veins, which lead away from a central room. She can see, through the open doorway across from her, her parent’s bedroom. To the left of it, her own, and further around the circle, she sees the kitchen, two bathrooms, the father’s workroom, their unused office. Every room of the house is now an auxiliary offshoot of this wide open, centralized space. And there at the center, the small house.

The daughter walks over to it slowly. Breath held, hands clasped. Across the way, she can see her father asleep in his bed. Her mother snores behind her on the couch. She is alone, with the house. She reaches it, springs the latch, opens it up. There is the hole in the sitting room floor. And all around it, hundreds of tiny afghans. They cover the floor in blood reds and sky blues and forest greens, miniature versions of her mother’s work. She picks one up, and rubs it between her fingers. Then she pitches it into the dollhouse’s
hole. She glances behind her, backing into the sitting room, just in time to see the afghan fluttering down onto the floor beside the hole.

She runs back to the hole in her own house and scoops up the blanket. It is definitely the same colors, the same pattern, the same blanket. Yet something has changed. She pinches it between her fingertips, then lifts it to her cheek and rubs, first cautiously, but then with more force. No catch, no pull on skin. No scraping pain. The blanket is soft and warm against her face.

The daughter shakes the mother awake. The needles fly up, startled birds, and the daughter has to duck. But then she quickly grabs them tight, wrapping all her fingers around them, forcing the mother to see and hear her. *Let me show you what I have found*, she begs. She drags her out into the center, to show her the house. She grabs a handful of the tiny afghans, and holds them in a cupped hand in front of the mother’s face. *Yes, time to work*, her mother smiles, and turns back to the sitting room.

She follows the mother as she walks into the sitting room, begging, pleading, but the mother is unresponsive. When they get near the sofa, the daughter can hear the floor, or rather what is in the floor, it is gasping, gulping; it seems to be begging too. And that’s when she does it. She whispers, *I have to*, and shoves her mother into the hole.

She stumbles back towards the dollhouse, feet barely under her control, flinging herself the last few feet towards the thing. She wants to apologize to her mother. Explain why. Get her to come back through. But her mother isn’t there, not really. Instead, resting there, on top of the mountain of miniature blankets, is a doll, with tiny knitting needle hands.
This is unexpected. But the daughter is undeterred. It makes sense that she would be a doll while in the dollhouse. All she needs to do is feed her mother back through the hole and she will come back to this house, changed for the better. Like her afghans. But before she can reach in and grab the mother-doll, her father yells from behind her, from the sitting room. *Daughter*, he cries. *Where is the mother? And what is this hole?*

She enters into the room again, out of breath, and sees her father, arm full of tools and metal and wire, overloaded, top heavy, leaning over the hole. She wants to reach him, to pull him away from the hole, but he has left the hands in the doorway, she trips and falls right into them. She shouts at him to back away, but when he spins around towards her, the weight in his arms shifts too quickly. Both he and his armful of junk fall right in.

The daughter breathes disappointment. She takes it in deep, forgetting the rules of shallow breathing, forgetting that she must never let the house in too far. She takes it in, all the dust and mites, the microscopic bits of yarn, the taste of metal and the smell of decay. She realizes that she miscalculated the power of habit and routine. She forgot that sometimes, being trapped is a choice. Disassembly is a process, she must remember that.

The daughter climbs out of the hands. She shoves aside afghans as she staggers out of the room. As she walks, the house opens up a hallway in front of her; she cannot get to the dollhouse; she cannot go anywhere but back to the sitting room and the hole, or forward, down this new pathway. She doesn’t want to go backward, cannot bring herself to return to that dark, hungry mouth, and anyway, what would be the point unless she was going to go through it too. So she follows the pathway provided to her until she reaches a spiral staircase. The hallway dead ends behind it; she can only travel upward now. Up, up, she climbs, away from the wool and the wire, away from the needles and the blankets
and the hands and the dollhouse and the parents-become-dolls. She scrambles up until there is nothing left above her but rafter and roof. At the top, she finds a tiny window, nestled in where the two sides of the house met in seam, and she opens it.

They release a sigh together, house and girl.

She sits with her body folded up, curled in, resting her chin upon the windowsill. Outside she sees a giant elm tree and beside it a smaller willow. She inhales deeply, smelling the night blooming jasmine growing beneath the window, the blossoms of the peach tree she cannot see but remembers is just to the left of the house. She hears familiar birdsong—warbler? Oriel? When was the last time she left this house? Has she ever? I’m not the shoes, she whispers. The house is. She sits and she traces these words upon her palms over and over until she feels raw with them. She presses down in the center of her hand’s reddened skin, and watches as ink forms in a pool at the center of it. She dips a fingertip of the other hand in, turns to the wall, and traces the words upon the wall. Then she paints the unspeakable name. Then she paints one last word.

And the house whispers it back.

When she climbs down, the dollhouse is sitting at the bottom of the stairs. She stoops over to latch it closed, and finds it is already fastened shut from the inside. This, like everything else, seems unquestionable. She scoops it up into her arms. It is heavy, but it is a weight she is willing to carry. She turns towards the doorway, and finds it wide open, waiting for her.
Over Easy

I gauge the failure of our relationship by my inability
to cook the perfect egg.
You never wanted any more of me,
making my culinary collapse all the more difficult
for you to swallow.

In the claustrophobic kitchen, the frontline
of our marriage, I readied my weaponry:
nonstick skillet, stainless steel spatula, shining, perfect,
useless
in my hands. I was overcome. Still
I held my ground, tried to caress them into cooperation.
I whispered into their mystery.
Watched impatiently
for molecules of protein to stretch and unfurl,
create bonds, form networks;
I waited
for this process to bind
separateness together.

But the eggs resisted my charm.
I miscarried your breakfast. Red-rimmed plate after plate,
offerings I placed upon white Formica table
where you sat, sharp;
utilil-ready to pierce the yolk
of my efforts.

Eggs are supposed to be simple.
Self-contained. But I couldn’t hold
you, cast in iron, inflexible
in your desire.
You wanted over
medium: malleable center with a firmness
you could hold.
You couldn’t forgive
my lapses: yellow streaks
across plates, transgressions
against toast.

An unforgivable sin, a defiant streak:
fluidity—a kind of crime scene.
The Stone and the Sea

She sits on her barge swirling a piece of sea grass with her toe. Beside her, four bottles are lined up in a row. She picks them up one at a time, prying up their corks and putting her nose to their open mouths, inhaling deeply. Then she adds a fifth bottle—deep, cobalt blue, polished to a shimmer. This one: empty. She spins it in the palm of her hand, watching blue tinted streaks of light flash across her arm as the bottle rotates. It slows to a stop, and she tucks it into her belt. *Almost time now.*

~

She was a girl of salt and sea, who spoke in a language of water. She grew into words within the swaying cadence of her mother. Before her body learned to take in its own breath, before voice found itself in the nestle of her throat, the stories of her people were sketched on her skin and outlined behind her eyes. Her mother passed into her the dance of years of tradition; maternal blood and salt and sigh spoke her into being. There, in the brine and glow, words were her companions. Every murmur seeped into her streaming blood, until her blood became a stream of its own, drunk with rhythm, with beat, with inflection. When she was birthed from that swill and swirl into the gentle hands of the deep water, she simply traded one soaked lullaby for a multitude. She arrived into the open air mid song. She arrived humming.

~

Her people cluster in an alcove off the largest island on the side where the wind blows to the sea instead of to the shore, preparing for both their annual festivities and the migration that will follow. This is when the girl first feels it: a subtle but distinct vibration—a rippling, a shifting, a displacement of atmosphere. Ship strike. She stills
herself to listen for the call. But what she receives is not the usual groaning clamor of a
ship set to sink. What she receives is a distinctly different kind of call.

And now she is here, on her barge, watching the chaos of unknowing all around
her. It has crashed down upon her people like a rogue wave. She knows scouts will be
sent at dawn. And she knows what they will find. The transmission of a mysterious
darkling had entered her thoughts like ink pooling in resting water and spread across the
depths of her, blacking out everything in its path. Something, someone, is alive and
pulsing on the deck of a nearby sinking ship. The rest of the tribe feels it too, but their
connection is weak, fuzzy, unclear. There is no decipherable language in the pulse they
are picking up. None, not even her mother, can decipher the message. *So strange,* she
thinks, *that the images he is transmitting seem meant for me alone.*

~

She had been born to a people that withered or thrived at the whims of the sea.
They built their lives upon open waters, all drift and current and harmony with the wind.
On small barges constructed of thatch and palm, cane and wood, the tribe traveled,
practicing the channeling of stars and the harvesting of jet stream. There wasn’t an
expanse of water or a span of sky that did not know them. Every member of the tribe had
a role, and for the girl, story was currency. Words schooled in her brain, plunged down
her spine, and dove through her bloodstream out to the very tips of her fingers where they
floated on the currents of her thoughts, waiting for her to send them out into the world. It
was the same for her mother, and her mother’s mother before that. History was kept in
blood, language guarded in bones, their flesh turned tide to tales that could carry the song
of histories. The other clan members brought raw and dripping language to the women of
her family and from it they crafted spiraling stories that built a collective existence, that told new stories to the world in a spreading map of the future’s spray and mist. The ocean provided fluency and the girl never learned what it meant to worry about translation.

~

The storm is dissipating, but the girl is roll and churn. Never before has a story come to her first. When her mother comes to her the girl expects questioning. She expects orders. Instead her mother kneels down, cups the girl’s chin and tilts her face so that she cannot look away. Daughter, she says, you are preparing to plunge headlong into an unstoppable current. And I do not know this story. As her mother walks away, the words hang as heavy between them as the pregnant storm clouds above their heads.

~

Every year for one day, the entire band would leave their floating world for a ceremony that took place on the southernmost island. Because she was only twenty, the youngest girl in her family, her job was that of a recorder. Her job was to listen, to learn. So though the stories were bubbling and sloshing within her, she could only sit with her sister, whispering the words quietly to herself while her mother spoke the tale. Because we once were nothing but saltwater, her mother always began, your blood and your bones and your marrow pulse with the song of the sea. A sea that must flow free. We must flow to create, the way gulls must fly and fish must school and sea wolves must howl. We can transfer the decay, the debris, the detritus, but only if we keep moving. Let the torrents rise within. Welcome in the wilderness.

The people did not have names for any of the five islands that rise up from the tropical waters where they spend much of their time. Instead the islands are known by the
stories the people sieve from their soils, their creeks, their inhabitants. The first island was where the ceremony took place. It was their place of remembrance, where cracking foundations, tumbledown buildings, and abandoned, overgrown gardens told the people that theirs was not a world of permanence. The second island was known for a certain type of tree that grew so fast you could hear the skin crackling in its urgency to grow towards the sky. This was a place where the people gathered lumber for their barges, a place where the trees whispered thanks at every harvest that trimmed down their weight and bulk and burden. On the third island, the largest in the chain, the soil was dark and rich, a loam that smelled of rainwater and moss. Growth on this island happened year round; there was no cycle of dormancy, so the people came to the island to restock the barges with fruit and vegetables. On the fourth island it rained every day, though the sky above it was always the purest blue without a trace of grey or white. There, the people traveled to harvest the fish that rained down from above, catching them in woven baskets and bowls.

But because the girl was a story-maker, island work was not hers. She had never harvested a plant, she had never caught a fish mid flight, she had never felt the reverberating thud of metal on wood running through her hands. But she who had the hum of the people’s history stored in her sinews did not feel contented by words alone. She needed to know what the sky tasted like on the fourth island right before a glut of fish and frogs tumbled down from the cloudless sky. She needed to travel to the second island and run her hands across a tree growing so fast its momentum could be felt beneath fingertips. She needed to taste and touch and be. *How,* she wondered, *can my sisters and*
my mother be content to only know the world through others’ eyes? Story, she thought, is nothing without experience.

~

Drenched in the dark of the new moon, the girl paces on the edge of her floating home searching her mind until she can read the narrative of the next day. She watches the five scouts flow into the sea. First she loses sight of legs, then torsos. Finally, the scouts cease to be anything more than dark streaks cutting across water into sunlight. She watches until their forms become the water. Moments later, they enter the sinking ship. Glint of metal, flash of bone, a flood of bright, stinking red. She knows this is tomorrow’s story, told to the scouts by her mother before their bodies break water.

But I can change it. And so she follows the pulsing urge into the sea.

He does not speak when she pulls her body up onto the creaking wreckage and approaches him, hands outstretched and welcoming. He does not speak when she spills out words, raining them from her body to lie dripping and pearlescent all around him. He does not speak when she drags his dead weight from the vessel and into the sea. And he does not speak as she maneuvers their bodies skillfully through the coral that surrounds the island of trees. He only stares up at her with flat, grey eyes, unblinking, sharp, hollow.

Soon, she learns, he does not speak at all.

~

Her first secret trip had been to the largest island. The smell of the soil penetrated her nostrils long before her feet touched ground. As she ran across the sandbar, she spotted a glinting shimmer of green tangled in the weeds on the edge of the water. A
bottle. Several of these already lay scattered across her barge; she liked to spin them on the deck and send their prisms of color across her sails, to blow her breath across their necks and seduce out their songs. As she walked along in the dimming sunlight, she collected the island in her bottle. Strange plants, nuts and seeds, a tangle of sea grass, and a handful of the sweet, dark soil. Each piece murmured a tale into her fingertips as she pinched and plucked and gathered. She found a tiny stream, clogged with pebbles. The water could not flow around the obstruction. She pulled the pebbles loose and set the water free, then dropped a tiny handful into her bottle.

Later that night, as she held the bottle up to her nose and inhaled the island’s essence, she pulled a new story down from the sky and whispered it into her treasure. A story about stones and water, and the relationship between them. Parts of it she borrows from her mother, parts from what she had learned on her own on her exploration. *In stone is a kind of forgetting.* she told her bottle. *Remember.*

She continued to sneak away once a years after that, always during ceremony, until four bottles were filled and only one island remained unseen, untouched, unknown. She tried to be content with these annual adventures, tried to find happiness within her bottles of memory. But each time she would return, she would find that the rocking of her barge deck only made her long for the soft, stable caress of shore.

~

Having spent her life steeped in the idea that language was the origin of connection, the girl is unsure and awkward in her search to find the right words to speak to the man who seems to be without any of his own. He reminds her of basalt: hard and coarse, with angular inflexible features nothing like her own. As she swims on her back,
holding his head over one arm and up against her chest, she stares down at his face. His skin is lined and grey and as cold as his eyes. Also, she notices, there is a complete lack of buoyancy to his form, making his body feel drawn to the depths below them. It takes all her strength to keep their heads above water as she kicks and thrusts her chest and neck up and out of the waves to try and keep his head from pushing them both under.

It is at this moment, between islands, between worlds, that the girl thinks of her mother’s story about the boulder and the stream. *There once was a stream that fell in love with the boulder. All the stream had wanted was to whisper across his surface, run her life across his solid mass and understand stability. But her caresses pulled more and more of him into her until she became sluggish and sick with him, until she had become so full of silt and pebble and sand that she could not free herself. The boulder split the stream in half, divided her power, while she broke the boulder down into fragmented grit. This is the outcome of the meeting of rock and water.*

She does not want to remember her mother right now. She grits her teeth and swims on.

~

After the end of the festival, the people would begin to prepare for the travel season. For harvesting. The season brought other ships to the people, ships captured unprepared for the temperamental waters, captains unaware of the cruel nature of the massive expanse of reef that jutted out from the islands for miles upon miles. The barge tribe members would navigate the storms, and wait. To catch wind of ships bleeding out onto the ocean’s skin. To strip the stories the ships carried down to their bones.
the language, wrenching the words from the trembling throats of the dying, before they were carried to the depths of the sea to mix with the rust and the rot of yesterday’s lost.

Although it was true that the barge people could pull language from any living thing, even from the tiniest of organisms carried in ocean currents and sea breezes, there was no greater feat than saving a story from a creature caught between life and death. This was the moment when it would be determined whether the stories they carried became part of the people’s history, or if they would instead fall into the darkness of the forever unknown. To snatch these tales from the snarling jaws of the sea at the cusp of death was a great victory. But victory had a price.

~

The girl knows there is no way to hide. And she is afraid of what will happen to this creature, this man, when her people catch up to them. It was fear that guided her to the fifth island in the chain, the only place where the people were unlikely to follow. Some of the oldest stories the people carried held warnings about its shores, and the waters just beyond them. These tales are sewn into her heart. She knows the island is tainted; she knows to go there is a risk. But she cannot take him home. And she cannot leave him behind.

She drags his body out to the windward side, scraping them both on coral and rock, before tangling them up in weed and mangrove root. Every muscle in her body screams as she struggles the two of them towards the shore.

As she unwinds a broken mangrove branch from her ankle, her body jumps and hums with a sudden intensity that knocks her back with a splash. The scouts. They must be entering the water. She leaves the man in the tangled murk of the mangroves and
swims through the cover to watch for signs that a search has begun. She closes her eyes and focuses her mind on his wreckage, to see if she feels anything in the vibration. But all she feels is the electric hum that had swum into her bloodstream as she crossed over the coral. She cannot sense anything but the coral-covered ships murmuring indecipherably just beyond the shore.

When the barges arrive at the outer edge of island five’s coral reef, looking for her, the man is still tangled up in the mangrove roots snoring softly, his face resting on a patch of dried up seaweed. They won’t break the barrier; they won’t come any closer to the island. No one is that important, not even her. The girl listens as her people send calls from the boats towards the island, as her name leaps out into the wind and drifts to her. Her own words creep up out of her pores, tiny beads of condensation that strain towards her people, towards her sea. She inhales deeply, ready to answer the call, mouth open. And then she sees her. Her mother.

Her mother stands on her barge deck, one hand shading her eyes from the sun as she scans the groves. They lock eyes and the pull is so strong her body seems to lift up out of the mud and grass and roots. But then her mother breaks contact. She looks up to the sky, shakes her hair loose and dives straight into the sea. She does not surface for more heartbeats than the girl has lived. The girl grows nervous, and begins to think she should swim out after her mother. *Why aren’t the others doing anything?*

But then her mother does surface, on the side of another tribe member’s barge, where the people on deck help her up. In just moments, before she realizes what is happening, they are gone. The girl watches her family sail into a speck of shine and shimmer. She is left behind.
Only the boat remains; a cord her mother could not sever.

~

Time passes. The girl waits, but they don’t come back. She waits a little longer. From time to time she glances back, and he is always there where she left him, in the mud. No one is coming; they are alone.

She walks over and kneels down in the muck and sand beside her new companion. Because she was taught that skin spoke the universal language of body and she needed a place to begin, she runs her hands across him, first tentative, then with more pressure. He is rough and firm and edge, so different from her soft and yield and center. Minor scrapes and scratches are scattered across his skin, but he seems mostly untouched by the wreck. He also seems unmoved by her touch. As she sits beside him, feeling her way across his body to assess damage, she tries speaking, singing, humming. She lets inflectional nuances build up and cascade out of her throat to crash at his feet. But she is met with silence, stillness. She begins grasping for signs, thinking that each blink, each twitch, each lock of his eyes on hers is a symbol. She only needs to decode, to become fluent, and then they will transcend their difference.

_I will make a new language out of sand and stream and salt and in it I will find 1,000 ways to sing your name._ She speaks these words up from her heart onto his chest as he drifts in and out of sleep. She speaks these words in wet gasps then watches as they seep into the cracks of his skin and disappear.

~

It takes most of the moon cycle before she is brave enough to leave the beach and explore the island. He is still not very mobile, but it seems to be a matter of choice rather
than injury. She decides to wander deeper into the island’s interior on her own, to both quell her boredom and perhaps find something to eat beside tide pool animals and seaweed. She is struck right away by how much life springs from the island’s soil. The strange bulbous bottle shaped trees with wild dancing plumes of bright red flowers streaming like fire from their tops. The rows of trees that look like clusters of hands shooting verdant green clouds of leaves from their tips. These trees are so alive. Why then, do the stories she knows of this place swim in death and decay? She wanders on, gathering strange leaves and buds and fruits and holding them bunched in her tunic. Everywhere on the island there is strange and wondrous life—it bursts from every rock crag, every stretch of soil, the air itself is filled with the chirping, twittering sounds of animals unseen. Her feet feel heavy with this knowledge, yet something has loosened within her as well. She thinks of her people again, but this time her eyes do not fill with salted water, her throat does not clog up with longing. For the first time in her life, she is angry at her mother.

*Everything is made up*, she murmurs. *Everything has been a lie to keep things in line. To keep me in line.* The doubt dissipates. Surely she has done the right thing by coming here.

If only the man would open himself up. If only he would speak. His call had been so strong before. Why now was he now so closed off and silent?

*I’ll build a bridge with my words. I will fight with my tongue’s sword, I will fight with my laughter, with my cries and screams and roars. My blood will churn with metaphor and blossom its way into every branch and leaf and blossom on this island.*

~
He seems rooted in the sand beneath one of the fingerling trees. She hears her mother’s voice again as she looks at him, something about soothing, something about forgetting and splitting, but she finds she can’t remember it right so she shakes the droplets of story from her mind and focuses on him. So unlike anything she has ever known, his newness is like the inside of a shell before time wore away the shine. As she crouches down beside him, she notices hollowed streaks crossing his chest where before he had been as smooth as dolphin skin. She runs a finger down the length of one and feels something crumble away beneath her touch. **What**, she wonders, **might I find hidden beneath? Can I dig in?** She absently traces the groove over and over, back and forth, thinking of the first story her sister ever told, about the clanswoman who gave birth to a mangrove. But she couldn’t remember how to begin. **Once there was a woman who lived in the space between stream and sea.** No, that wasn’t right. Beginnings are important. Why couldn’t she get it right?

Now, she notices, her fingertip was no longer visible. Her fingertip had disappeared into him. She pulls it out, then holds the finger above him, letting water drip down onto his abdomen. At first the liquid disappears into his skin. But then she sees that the skin itself is changing, dipping inward. As though she is carving in sand. She pulls away and looks at his face, **is he in pain?** But no, he is placid, still. Unmoved. She thinks, **I don’t know how to tell this story.**

She wants to speak to him, to ask him questions, to maybe try drawing her stories for him into the sand. **We are a people of waves,** she begins, but then she stops. She turns her face to the moon, just making its appearance in the sky, then she tries to tune herself in to the tide. In slow, lapping, tendrils she reaches out to find the story of home. But she
can’t find the words. They are getting mixed up; her head is a tangled net of aching throb.  
*I am wave*, she begins. But she can’t remember what comes next.

~

There was a time when the stories of the people stilled. Of course she had not been there, it was so long ago, but the story was inside her. The people had left their ocean, climbed up onto the rock and soil and sand, rooted down and forgot the importance of movement. They build homes and cultivated crops, demanding that the island bend to their will. Their lives stopped being about cycle, stopped being full and round and ripe. They became fixated on enforcing order, forgetting that their lives and their stories relied on remaining free.

The band grew sick with stillness. Their numbers receded. Although babies were born, they refused to feed and failed to thrive; life upon the island could not be sustained. Mewing cries mixed with the frothing waves at the island’s edge. Then came the day they stopped. Everything went soft and static. Fifteen babies were born upon the island. All were returned to the sea.

It was the girl’s great-great grandmother who finally spoke the words that woke the people from their despair, that taught them to howl like sea wolves and call the waters back into their minds, their bodies, their hearts. *Clear your heads, fill your minds with flood, be in tune with the seasons, the cycles, the moon, each other,* she said. *Remember that riding the current is not escape, but return.* These were the words that returned the people to the sea, the words that rode them home.

~
The girl looks into the sea to clear her thoughts and that is when she finally sees it. The barge, her mother’s barge, is bobbing gently in the waves above the reef just beyond the island’s lagoon. Home. I just need to make him understand. She will pour a story of home into him. She will carve him out with it and then nothing is lost. But she needs to remember things. She needs the barge.

She dives into the sea, but despite her coaxing pleas, it fights her every stroke. The wind shoves against her. Root and rock, coral and tide, everything unites to push her back and back and back toward the island. And all around her, the call of the ghost ships-turned coral reefs sing in her ears. Never home, they seem to croon. She ignores them and shoves on, until she reaches the barge and flings herself across its creaking wood. Her headache fades, the fog in her head begins to clear, but all she can do is think of her family. She collapses in a puddle of exhaustion and frustration, curled up on her mother’s bed mat, and falls asleep trying to taste her mother’s breath off the pillow.

In a voice that sounds like family, her dream tells her a story.

Once there was an island, lush and green, but the lushness hid a secret rot.

Nothing tasted right, even the buds of new beginnings smelled of death. Lush fruit planted burs in their throats, and then fermented there until those that ate of it could no longer sing. Until their voices were buried like shells picked clean in a sandbank.

She wakes to a jolt that tosses her off of the bed mat. She sits up and sees that the barge has drifted to the shore. The water, the wind, the currents had all conspired to drag her back to the island. Back to him. And he, she finds, is hard at work on her mother’s barge. She has woke up to its death knell.
She scrambles off the boat, but her legs, still half in dream, stumble and she falls at his feet. The man does not notice her distress. He is occupied with his conversion, the barge already a form unrecognizable. He looks down at her and moves his mouth into a configuration that might be a smile. Then he points to his chest, to the indentations in his body. What had been abstract to her before now clearly spells out one word. Home.

She sits and cries under a bottle tree, watching him turn her mother’s floating home into a stationary enclosure. The hull, meant to facilitate action, becomes a solid immobile foundation. The bow and sails, open harvesters of wind, become walls to keep the weather out. What had before set her free to skim on the surface of the sea would now keep her enclosed. She cries until she has no moisture left, until her face is salt crusted and tight. This is her fault. This is more than error in translation.

She rises up from beneath the tree, trying not to look at the bones of the barge, the bones of her history, still scattered at his feet. She watches him tying two sails together; he is forming the fourth wall of the structure. She places her hand over his, looking for a pulse of life beneath the skin. She whispers, *you silent rock and my pounding sea, can we be? Can we change this ending?* But he only moves his hand out from underneath hers to finish his sailor knot. She turns her hand over and sees that the entire surface is covered in a fine dust. She lifts it to her lips and tastes iron and salt.

She is disappearing. Moisture is leaving her in puffs and wisps; her skin crusting with mineral deposits, her very form shrinking down and in and away. She walks towards the shore and watches as the waves recede from her feet. She opens her mouth to call the sea back to her, but what erupts from her throat is a cloud of granulated white. She puts
her hands out in front of her and sees solid white and grey mass, up to her wrists. She is not just carving him out; she is also pulling him in.

He is not going to learn to speak. She is going to become the unspoken.

Yet she can still feel them. All that fullness, all those stories, they remain inside, trapped. Raised pulsing networks flowing just beneath her surface, she needs to release them, she needs to purge, but the island is taking her language as rapidly as they are taking each other. She needs to get the stories out, to release the flood; they are accumulating too rapidly inside her, rising like spires, hard and insistent everywhere inside her skin and against her skull and she thinks any moment she might crack open and spill her contents onto the sand, to be lost forever. And she is afraid. Afraid of the permanence of that loss.

~

There had been a time when the people attempted to rescue more than just the language of the dying. When urgency and compassion won out over practicality and restraint. When the people thought they could envelop these travelers into their fold, replenishing their numbers with new blood that they might teach the ways of the sea. But the seas had turned on them; the people were lost with those they tried to rescue, taken by the sea froth and foam, their screams echoing for days after the bodies stilled. They had thrown their last desperate words into the sky, the words collected in the clouds, and for weeks the narrative of tragedy rained down on the people. But the stories could not be harvested. This was punishment; this was the cost of interference. The living could do nothing but stuff their ears with wax and grass until the sound stopped and the air stilled. *We must never again impede the fate of the outsiders,* her grandmother had directed. And
because the pain of those days still crouched in the corner of every heart of every barge clan member, no one questioned the decree.

The girl had not lived through those days, but the experience spurted through her like spilling blood. She understood that stories lost in punishment could never be retrieved, that the sea restores the balance set adrift in interference. She understood that some stories become sacrifices; the sea would swallow some tales whole in its hunger. Sometimes the sea needed to feed. Mother, she sighed as she watched the sea pull back and back away from her, *what have I done?*

~

All around them, the landscape is tumbling to stagnancy. The thick and heavy silence between them stills the running water, silences the screams from the gull’s throat, turns the creatures in the streams and river, the lagoon and the tide pools, all the same pale white of suffocation. Everywhere she looks, life is in a rapid state of collapse. She tries to show him, bringing fistfuls of fish scales and blanched coral, bird skeletons and shriveled desert roses. She brings him empty clamshells and dried out husks of anemone and urchin. She hurls it all at his feet. *Exchange*, she stammers, her speech mangled and dry. *To learn or loss is we*. He stares at her with his docile, unblinking face. *Exchange*, she repeats, and traces the word across his cheek. *Please*.

He reaches up and traces the word she has left imprinted upon him. Then he walks off, into the swiftly expiring vegetation of the island. She loses track of how long he stays away, spending most of her time sprawled across the sand, attempting to coax the sea to her toes, or standing in the shallows, trying to decipher the messages the ghost-reefs are
still whispering into the sky. And she calls to her mother, desperate to call her back from the deep. She no longer believes he will return. She doesn’t care.

But then he appears, arms full of bone and coral, empty shells that drip greying, stagnant river water, fallen feathers and scales, flowers and fur; all of the island’s evidence of its own accelerated death and decay, he has all of it, and he is piling it outside the compound. He points to his cheek, then leads her by the hand to the pile, not noticing that his fingers are losing mass as she clutches at them.

*Exchange.*

She tries again to speak them together. But each of her tales is misconstrued in air, mistranslated as it strikes his body. She desperately swipes and strokes at him, but he is only brushed away as her fingers skate across his surface. By now his body was covered in grooves and ridges. She has marked him with etchings that looked like letters, but in disarray. And now she is becoming a stagnant body of debris; inside the stories swim but outside she cannot make sense of her own tales.

~

This island, it was told, was once seen as a fertile place; its streams and rivers so sweet the people would gather it in old bottles and jars so they could carry it on their barges year round.

But the island itself was too sweet. It drew a fleet of ghost ships with its siren call and intoxicating scent. These unmanned, death-quiet vessels drifted into the reefs surrounding the island where they struck, fell, remained. Over time they gave their iron and steel to the reef that surrounded the island, mixing with it, becoming a part of it. The deaths of these ships brought growth to the ridge; the coral and sponges and sea grass and
algae and mollusks all took to the ship, and soon its strength became theirs. In this way the ghost ships became a part of the structure of the reef’s ecosystem.

At first the people were elated over the new arrivals. The ships had been adrift upon the open waters of the ocean for years, carrying stories deep in their rusting, bloated bellies. The people had chased them for years, anxious to harvest, eager to coax the ships to rest. But when the ships arrived at the islands, when they stopped fighting and laid their tired bodies down, the people found that they could not extract the bitterness from the ships’ rusting, hardened hearts. The stories were changed; they were dried up and hollowed out from years of neglect, and the people had to watch in silence as one by one the stories of the ships, their crews, their passengers, blinked out like dying stars. And the island itself changed too. *It soured in our mouths,* her grandmother used to say.

*How could I have forgotten?*

~

Misunderstanding is a word previously unfamiliar to her; the taste is sour as squid ink on her tongue. She struggles to quiet the urge to scream, holding it down in her belly, letting it slosh around deep inside, waiting for it to stop kicking for it to drown in the depths of her. But there is no peace for her in this complete stillness.

She wades into the water with the mangroves, the only seemingly healthy things remaining on the island. She strokes a leaf, still green and sturdy, and notices the leaf’s skin is covered in a thin layer of salt, like her own. This was how they survived here. But she is not a mangrove. She lets her body sink down into the muck and the roots and tries to cry into the murky waves. A final plea mixed with the swells, carried out to the deep. But she is too dry; she cannot confess. The sea cannot offer absolution.
She turns her head towards the left, away from mangroves and man and that is when she sees it. A blue and shimmering bottle, wedged in the sand. And she knew without a doubt that it was hers. She crawled, splashing, tripping, through the water and roots, across the sand and shells, to the bottle.

First she spreads out on her back in the sand, then holds the bottle up in the sunlight. It is hers, the one from her first island trip; she can see the tiny pebbles dancing around at the bottom. She pulls up the cork and pours the contents into her open palm. And along with pebble and plant, she releases something long forgotten. In a voice clear and strong, a familiar phantom story swirls out and up into her ears. A story she knows. It too is hers.

*In stone is a kind of forgetting, a quiet that sinks in and hardens shadow and denies the necessity of memory. A silence that seduces with its soothing skin. This is alluring to those who spend all their time remembering and speaking and feeling. But rock slows, rock clogs; rock holds what should not be held.*

*Remember.*

~

That night as the man sleeps she sneaks away, in search of something she feels but does not know. The decay and the quiet are widespread now. As she travels, she finds nothing but skeletal remains and lifeless plants that cling to her and whisper their deaths upon her skin. Caked and congealing apologies rise from her pores as she untangles herself from the clutches of all the death and dying. Eulogies fill her throat with salted water, but they are caked and thick, all she can do is cough them out onto the sand and watch them evaporate.
She sits to rest beneath the carcass of a once blooming bottle tree, its branches twisted skeletons now, and places her hands, all grain and grit and powder, upon its skin. Her eyes close as she searches for the voice she knows can guide her out of the hushed, white vacancy. And she does feel something. Soft, subtle, she strains to sense it, but it’s there: a steady pulsing vibration, first from within the tree, but growing, throwing itself out through the shriveled roots, into the soil and up into the soles of her cracked, bare feet. She rises and walks, then runs, towards the shoreline on the opposite side of the island, where the winds blow away, toward the sea.

There at least she finds what she is looking for, what came looking for her. Bottles of shimmering cobalt, emerald and saffron, weary travelers gathered together on the sand, wedged in amongst the mangrove roots, floating in the brine and bubbles of the waves lapping up onto the island. They have come for her.

She plucks one from the nearest pile and works the cork up from its neck. It is aged and rotted by sky and sea and her fingers tear and flake. She smears it with blood and salt, making the bottle slick, but it soon builds up a sticky crust of grit. She loses her grip over and over. But finally the bottle yields.

And her ears fill with the sound of her mother:

Once, girl of waves, you spoke with the power of water. Brine and blooming words are companions and they are in you, in your blood, they live and die with you. Find the song.

She tears into bottle after bottle, and finds each one contains story, told to her by the people she had abandoned. When her fingers grow too slick and refuse to grip, she begins to smash the bottles upon the rocky shore. The sound of the shatter mingles with
the voices of her family and rise up into the air, into her ears. The vibrations grow until she shakes with them. Bottles crawl out of the sea to kiss her toes and whisper their secrets into her open palms. In the bellies of these bottles she finds her sanctuary.

She speaks words over and again until she becomes transparent with them. Now she can leave behind her own blanched bones, white and silent. She can leave behind her skin stretched taut over scapula, skin now too tight, too thin to cover the vibrant blood that still pulses madly against her surface. She lets the blood burst out into the air, lets it crystalize with the salt and the sand and the words. In that fifth blue bottle she places herself; she becomes her own story. The meaning soaks in the tones, in the sentiments, in the very sediments they sweep along as they move through and up and out of her. In the surge, the pulsing moment when moons swell to pull current, pools rise up into flood, she pours herself out into existence. She is going home.
When We Sleep Too Long in Darkness

We gather the materials with belief
askew, to rewrite the templates—

That this ruined temple,
soft, worn shale,
skin crumbling beneath touch
can be made new again.

That we can draw the circle,
call the quarters,
and still remain haunted when we sleep too long in darkness.

That leaving the house—that house—will mean something.

That a nest of clipped hair, loose
teeth, lost love can be built into the corners
of a heart.

That this is shelter.

That this is again a time when war is easier than daughters.

That the dense ache of silence
breaks more than any stick or stone.

That cracking bones are a whispered language
between
bodies. A declaration;
mutual, reconcilable fragility.

That we can peel away these rinds and taste what nestles beneath.

That these carbon oxygen calcium containers are stars:
we glimmer in the darkening skies for as long as we are fed; for as long as we feed.

That you cannot see distance
from a distance.

That a desert understands condensation.
That people are rock or ocean.
tided together,
    over, over,
      again, again.

That when oceans send rock up from their depths, they must remember what was given willingly—

  and what was taken.

That romance between seas and stones alters.

That it dooms.

That every one is stone; that every one is water.

That hope springs conditional
and this is enough; this is abundance.

That breaking the heart of the world to mend it: that is our destiny.