



2018

Girl-Junk, Sugar-Funk

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GIRL-JUNK, SUGAR-FUNK

by

Natalie Louise Tombasco


Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
to the Department of English
at Butler University
May 2018

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Thesis Defense:

Date: May 10th 2018

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Thesis Title:

"Girl-Junk, Sugar-Funk"

Thesis Approved in final form:

Date: 5/24/18

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Introduction

“What he carried with him, all he carried with him, was a lack, something like a lack of air, of proper behavior in his lungs, a difficulty that he supposed would go on forever.”—Alice Munro

The poems in this collection are chock-full of aromas, twangs, cultural references, environments, and temperaments. They are a mouthful meant to carry a great weight, to create a dichotomy between lack and fullness, to strangle the reader with neglect. Duality is a recurring theme in poems such as “Chop Suey” and “The Transition into Backyard Mermaid,” and is also represented in the way terrains become intertwined in “Home Office Ecotone” and “Down Down from Fenneltown.” Setting is treated as a psychic space where flora and fauna drift between landscapes to embody disorientation, and it perhaps creates a new place where the speaker finds belonging.

~

Sister Sarah Joan: You clearly love Sacramento.

Lady Bird: I do?

Sister Sarah Joan: You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.

Lady Bird: I was just describing it.

Sister Sarah Joan: Well it comes across as love.

Lady Bird: Sure, I guess I pay attention.

Sister Sarah Joan: Don't you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?

—*Lady Bird*, Greta Gerwig, 2017

The backdrop of these poems ranges from Copenhagen to Deadbeat Beach, from the real to the imaginary. My hometown of Staten Island falls somewhere in between. I have a love-hate relationship to its otherworldliness. As New York City's black sheep, it is lovingly nicknamed the “Forgotten Borough”—

home to the Fresh Kills Landfill, Vinny Guadagnino and an archaic ferry which is meant to deter Islanders from mingling among Manhattan-folk. My poems find a sweet spot for home—a place where garbage, barbed wire and whitetail deer coexist in its weathered beauty.

~

On the table of a gathering, food is the focal point. It is there for nourishment when one is celebrating or grieving. It allows for true communication to occur. When one has her mouth full, she is unable to interrupt with her own opinions or stories, at least for the time it takes to chew. In this moment she is a *good* listener, given the ability to absorb someone else's perspective. Food is a vessel for love. Being Italian-American, I find it is difficult to separate the two. In my mother's kitchen is where I spent most time with her. There isn't a teaspoon in sight, which is to say she is a wonderful cook with a passed down, measurements-and-recipes-in-your-gut kind of cooking style. While the kitchen was a place of love, it was also where I discovered my mother's alcoholism. While food embodied sustenance, pleasure and comfort, it also carried neglect and perpetual hunger. I was left to ruminate on generational hurt. If it's hereditary, what kind of woman would I become? If home wasn't a healthy place, where do I belong?

Being a gluttonous American, I find it hard to have a healthy relationship to food; we tune in to The Food Network, take pictures of our meals before eating them—we calorie-count, we binge, we purge. Food's juxtaposition of comfort and grotesque-ness is one I find interesting. People ask, "What kind of poems do you write?" I respond, "Food poems." It's easier than saying poems about bad relationships, sexuality, identity, and death. When entering a poem, I look to manipulate an innocent vegetable—sometimes in an animalistic, cannibalistic, or uncomfortably humorous way—in order to approach a heady subject such as abuse, addiction, or obsession. The speaker of many of these poems turns inward, unsure if she is being consumed or is the one who is consuming. My hope is for the reader to never look at a sandwich, mango or ice cream cone the same way. My hope is to confront and present truth, no matter how difficult it is to swallow.

~

Brenda Shaughnessy on generational hurt:

“Me exploding at my mother who explodes at me / because of the explosion / of some dark star all the way back struck hard / at mother’s mother’s mother.”

“Anyone / who hurts another was hurt that same way, / so how far back behind our backs do we go / to finally find the first hurt; whose finger / points to say, ‘You! You’re the one who god / knows why started a cycle of unending pain.’”

The girl in these poems is on a mission to learn of the first hurt and what has made her mother the way she is and, therefore, who the girl is. Sometimes she approaches the subject head-on as in “Ugly Delicious,” other times from a place of understanding, as depicted in “A Teacup’s Worth of January Sundays,” or she lingers in the sedate realm of “Peonies in Utero,” where wonderment leads her to blame herself for the mother’s issues. The language attempts to balance concealing and revealing, but the girl’s purpose always is to break through and end the cycle of addiction.

~

Sharon Leiter writes of Dickinson, “Her use of the word ‘circumference’ to describe the business of poetry expresses a belief that the periphery of the circle is the poet’s proper domain. The term contains two concepts that were central to her idea of poetry. The first is slantness: the poet cannot reach the ‘center,’ that is, the Truth of human experience, head on, but must circle around it....The second meaning has to do with limitation: Circumference is the outer limit of the circle of human experience, the boundary separating what is knowable from what is unknowable. While recognizing the existence of such a boundary, the poet’s ‘business’ is to explore the far limits of what can be known.”

~

Nick Flynn on obsessive searching, circling: “In *Moby-Dick*, the eponymous whale doesn’t appear until the last fifty pages. The story of the whale appears earlier, but the actual whale only breaks the surface for a moment at the end, just long enough to wreck havoc and pull Ahab under. The whole book is about a

whale and the whale isn't there. In the end the central mystery remains unfathomable—what was it exactly that Ahab gave his life to?"

~

I like rabbit holes, sinkholes, black holes—which is to say, however small my feminine frame may appear, I can be a vessel for something big on the page. Writing sprawling, anaphoric poems, I can suck a reader dry. Morgan Parker on that: "It's like Whitman vs. Dickinson, or like manspreading. We aren't supposed to be gregarious. We aren't supposed to be large and 'contain multitudes.'" Well, the hell with that. I'll be the pothole that ruins your day.

~

"The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is both distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality."—Pierre Reverdy

I suppose Reverdy is in the back of my mind when I am writing "Orpheus fuckboy" or "Siddhartha in a negligee." Taking these mythical, heroic men and bringing them into the 21st century—sexualizing them—ultimately is commentary on the female speaker's journey to self-discovery, one which doesn't employ men.

Speaking of, there are a lot of old, white men in these poems—Frost, Jarmusch, Hopper, Magritte, Ginsberg—to name a few. The poems could certainly stand without the reference. However, the female identity has been stuccoed by the male tradition. I am inspired by these men and think there's much to learn from them. That's not to say that they cannot learn from us in return. My hope is to commune with them, find coexistence and push through into new terrain.

~

When writing a poem I trust the "subterranean mind-stream" to swerve, or whiplash, the narrative. For me, a swerve is most successful when it's been hinted at beforehand. In "Lust-Drunk," there is a leap from George Costanza to Jeffrey Dahmer. While this is a surprising leap, there are associations to make, such as they both are eating something, both fit somewhere on some psychotic spectrum and both have intimacy issues, which all creates an interesting commentary about the speaker.

Monica Youn on poetic leaps: “I often tell my poets that writing a poem is kind of like ice skating. One of the biggest thrills is taking a leap, and the larger, more difficult the leap—the more thrilling. But you only get credit for the leap, if you land the leap. Otherwise, you’re just jumping up in the air and falling. But to land the leap, to have the leg work and preparation—people think leaps are all about what you do in the air—it’s what you do before you go into the air. The establishing momentum and vector is what enables you to land the leap afterwards.”

~

A mantra of mine is Ginsberg’s line “You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!” I am inspired by the way in which Ginsberg’s poems illustrate society and nature as desolate and destroyed, but shake away the dust to reveal a golden hope.

In “A Supermarket in California” Ginsberg provides us with long lines, as Whitman once did, to illustrate poetic influence which navigates us out of a world of consumerism and back into nature and poetry. As any good disciple, Ginsberg builds to the root of the poem—its ultimate line—which conjures Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and thus Dante’s *Inferno*. Ginsberg imagines Whitman looking out at the ferry for someone to guide him, similar to Dante guided by Virgil through his journey into Hell. Ginsberg resurrects Whitman to do the same, navigating him through the Hell-ish “stacks of cans” and “blue automobiles.” There’s a Holy Trinity: The Father, the source of influence; The Son, the practicing poet creating and spreading the word of God; and The Holy Spirit, this force that floats from one body to the next, which we call Poetry.

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HERBACEOUS

ever slit the throat
of a crocus just to hide
your stink?

one

OVERWINTERING

melancholy tastes like honeysuckle?
wind is sailboat fuel?
o little bird—
i can't keep up with your whiplash of know-how
how are you perched each day near the same place—
the blue & orange house galoshes at the backdoor—
when you have wings? i can't get past the past
little bird— i don't know when i became a hermit
i don't want to *bother* people— can you understand that
with your birdbrain? i'm sorry i've been eating snow
by the spoonful i think the problem is
morphology how else do you survive
high school? *o darn!*
i am one moody motherfucker call me beatrice—
queen of equinox & stockyard— forget death
i'm power walking towards it— did you hear scientists
can reverse dna aging in mice? sign me up wait
you mean this would be forever forever ever?
the meetings appointments elections tomfoolery
having to think of what to make for dinner?
what if by accident i swerve off the road?
little bird the forsythia are coming!
little bird what is the mouthfeel of early worms?

BREAKFASTFOODS

Mood Du Jour: Sentimental
with little curds of ruthlessness.

This may be due to my learning *albumen*
is the white of an egg. I've spent all night
watching National Geographic, crying

as warblers hatch to leave the nest.
Mother fattened me up: oatmeal,
hash browns, heart-shaped pancakes—

covered me in maple syrup so I'd be sticky
& stay. Made eggs every which way,
including my favorite on Saturdays

in a background of *Eh... What's up, doc?*;
the hot pan buttered brown as she cut
a hole, filled it with the sizzle

of an egg, calling from the kitchen, "Chicken
in the Basket!" I suckled on the yellow
of those mornings. Now I separate

whites from yolks before dumping
them in the trash. I'm the bad kind
of vegetarian. I listen to birds chirp,

Momma, I'm not comin' home—glistening
in self-sufficiency. As Mother frets over where
I'm getting my most important meal

of the day—seven hundred miles away,
somewhere south and forty degrees warmer—
I coo through the cord, then imagine her

pressing a hole into her stomach,
filling it with the suck of black
coffee, so nothing will escape.

I like my ovaries over easy—which is to say,
I never thought a mother's plight
is to be left, no one to make breakfast

for. I will is to only give birth to poems—
for they'll never attempt flight—
using their little eggteeth to become

grownups & abandon me.

GRANDPA IN A JAR

i kept him on a shelf / punched air holes to free that weird
brooklyn smell / he never came out / not for birthdays
or housewarmings / he set tripwire along the rim / but
a groundswell of relatives / clambakes & fireworks made him
unsteady / the undertow of agoraphobia / some days, i thought
i would have dumb luck / tapping on the glass / inside
the decibels ringing like jet engines / him shell-shocked
in the fig trees / but if i was quiet enough / a french song
would crawl through / his muddy diaphragm / after school
i could watch his gangly body / perched upon his favorite
plastic covered couch / near the window / looking out
at the sunflower stoop / some days, i would hold the jar as a conch
against my ear & listen to him whisper : *qu'est-ce que c'est?*

OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND

My sister and I boogie-boarded, dug up hermits,
scooped jellyfish with plastic shovels and buried them
somewhere dry. In the pool, motherless girls got into
our games, hooked themselves onto my mother.
Seaweed-green-me. Where was their mother
to swim beneath? I imagine death this way: god
pulling on a string—us in the muck nibbling
on a chicken neck—up, up. I hate the ocean—
how I can't get out past broken shells,
how the blue has its way with you.

THE GIRL WITH EXCEPTIONALLY LONG EARLOBES

There once was a little girl who was very, very bad. To teach her a lesson her mother tugged hard on her earlobes.

Despite being a good sharer and eating all her snow peas, her mother scolded, “You never *listen*.”

With markings on the wall, mother measured how many centimeters the girl’s earlobes had stretched that year and in this way, measured her badness.

The girl envied her schoolmates for their unstretched, elfin ears—their attached, pearly goodness. With a wink, boys called her “Play-doh Lobes.”

“No daughter of mine,” said her mother, “will wear hooped earrings! Those are for Bad Girls.” Little did her mother know, the gold hoops kept her elbow-length-lobes from blowing in the wind.

With age came whale-tail thongs & lip liner, metal-riddled cartilage, DUI’s & Plan B pills, and worst of all, (or so mother thought) gangster rap! “I said you never *listen*.” Mother ripped the cheap gold out and the girl bled and bled and bled.

Beneath a black magnolia tree the girl, with tarnished, raw earlobes, listened. This time, hard. She heard the vowels of the yard dog, the worm fat with woe.

A MAKE-UP BAG FOUND POEM

Lolita don't stray Dr. Feelgood clueless big blue dollface
pretty please please me hug me kiss me quick milkshake eat cake
Sugardaddy Loverboy roleplay be silly underage red no tell motel
Lolita flush & quiver all about Eve sin hellbent
darkside dirtbag ex-girlfriend exorcism downtown catfight
quickie: kisskissbangbang Lolita better than sex
dimebag & roach burnout Lolita x-rated penny lapdance
deepthroat *Lo. Lee. Ta.* blackout blackmail
walk of shame stark naked sad girl mad mad world

SHITSHOW BARBIE

Mattel Bless her with resting bitch face, nipple-less breasts, ladyparts bare as those of the little girls who play with her. Bless her with an accessory kit of Xanax smoothies, anal bleach, a Limited Edition Jade Egg & booklet called

How-To Clear Bad Juju from Your Yonni. Bless her with pointed feet on yellow subway nubs. Shitshow Barbie does kegels on the 1-Train! Give her nights full of gasoline & glitter, parties at the Collapsable Rooftop.

Grant her the ability to keg stand longer than Hipster Ken, to vomit— wash it down with gin & tonic. A little voice that when closing her bar tab says, “Math is hard!” Nights that pull at her fishnets. Bless her with deep

purple mouth-mashing on fire-escapes, the strength of paralysis when Ken’s plastic fingers touch her too hard ‘til she’s swollen and bleeds all over the bathtub. Girls, remember the red is love! Mattel name her

the Patron Saint of Getting Into Bad Situations with Questionable Boys. Bless her with disheveled mysticism. Shitshow Barbie can get on bruised knees, pray away a brushfire of sin. Girls, press her battery operated voice box

and all night she’ll question, “O Cool Pope, is there still time for my sainthood? O Father of Sticking Pins, why did you manufacture me this way?”

MARGHERITA π

The big city is like this:
give in or give up. You have to be bad news
like pineapple on pizza. Mayor de Blasio's sin
of eating a slice with a fork and knife. You learn to represent
the borough, be a real New Yorkah, tawk the tawk,
the Brooklynese your ma & da carried ovah the Verrazano,
the Brooklynese you've been code-switchin since a kid,
the Brooklynese that bubbles up like cheese on a garlic knot.

At fifteen, you learn to suck the straw of a Manhattan Special
as a Phone Girl making \$6 an hour an hour at the pizzeria.
You learn to decode the "Pasta e Fagolis"
from the "pasta fa-zools," the fried calamaris"
from the "fried galamads." The words are heavy,
rolled and sawcy around the tongue like manicotti.

Learn from the other Phone Girls: the Bellas, Giannas, Sofias,
their straight black hair, hips curvier than the driveways
on Todt Hill, twirling the phone wire around their fingers,
giggle at busboys who unhook their push-up bras.

The Boss, hands calloused from half-working sanitation,
half-manning the oven, touching yours when you hand him
a guest check. He will massage your shoulders,
make you want to Houdini-out of your girl-child skin.

Learn the lingo: say nothin' to nobody.

But you ditch that pork-store-butchered language.
Learn the circumference of a margherita pie.
Truth is: put up or shut up.
Drive in circles around the neighborhood as paisanos:
small, bald, ginny-tee-wearing men yell from windows,
"Hey you! Don't park in my spot! I'm callin' the cops!
Hey you! Listen to me. You fucking cunt."

Strange word. It doesn't diminish or insult you. Just add it
to your lexicon. Start a "cunt-count," calling your girlfriends, "cunty"
in a good way. Your mother asks, "Can't you just say the 'C' word?
Or 'See you next Tuesday?'" "But Ma, he said, *cunt*."

You take a liking to it, phonetically. How the "Kuh" sounds
like a loogie hocked up in the back of the throat,
the "uhn" like a gut-punch. Particularly savory

is the final “T—” that toothsome letter, the letter
which is cooked al dente. The tongue says *tsk, tsk,*
shame on you, bitch, for complaining about work
environments, you should be in the house,
in the kitchen, stirring my coffee in the morning, tsk tsk,
to your body, for existing.

You swallow the word, at first bitter, then smooth
as limoncello. You swear on your Sicilian grandmother
you could drink anyone under the table. You drink
the word so much, you start gesticulating,
playing bocce on Atlantic Avenue, drink so much
a patch of hair grows on your breastbone, so dark
no creme bleach could lighten it.

THE TRANSITION INTO BACKYARD MERMAID

after Diane Seuss

mom I wonder what you wanted for as a girl I don't have a hummingbird's chance
I imagine you alone in a backyard overgrown with dandelion a 1965 issue of *Mademoiselle*
spread across your body just a girl fixed on the nacreous sky

did you listen to your parents argue? did you watch your mother slip lily pads onto her tongue?
you hold a sadness I will never know or understand when did you bury your dreams?
I wonder if puberty persuaded you to swim in the softness of soil ears muffled in the song

of mollusk & maggots unlike regular girls who toe-dip the waters for warmth
you dove right in began painting your nails oyster & moonstone the color of your fungus
the poison that would claim & cover you you drank the wilderness

until your legs grew long as a tree uprooted & moving toward the sea
you were busy budding scales hair flowing tendrils outsmarting me as you did
when I was a kid back then I named you Priscilla believed you were two

people in the same body hidden yet brazen I wanted to search for what grew
from the dark of you when I was a girl you became woebegone
on the couch your lilac scent pungent as liquor when I kissed you goodnight

I was becoming a deviant growing tentacles of my own brooding beneath your erratic tree
I don't even know what the taste of tomorrow is but I want
a bloomed underskirt a necklace of pearls to anchor myself with I wander in wants:

to be a bulb at the bottom of the earth to be a secret queen

GIRL IN BATHTUB, FLICKING DRIED ROSE PETAL

Notice the door unlocked. Edward Hopper voyeur,
peer through the keyhole:
regal, a vision—O buoyant breastbone, the hillside of knees
in honeysuckle & milkweed! O foreplay, forefinger
tracing through foam & steam. So much of a girl's time
is spent
pruning, waiting for someone to come eat her. So much of a girl's time is spent being
a catalyst
for sin in silk & fringe.

Watch as she marks territory with bobby pins: backseat, night stand, sink basin.
Watch as she swells under the hot spell.

Boudoir, from the French, meaning a woman's room
for sulking in, to pout prettydaysaway.

Notice how all she wants is to get clean together, how all she wants is someone
to be hyphenated to.

Ignore that time is measured by a lighter's fluid.

Notice how she's both demure & stink eye.

Listen as she sighs at mildew & grime, waiting for
her body to materialize.

COLLECTIVE INVENTION

René Magritte, 1934

girl, what's the fishmonger to do with you?

on the shore of Nantucket forget scrimshaw,
forget Venus on her scallop stage— you're a product
of a madman: half-mackerel half-pubic hair—

hooked & hauled dredged up from God
knows where hush now think of the mermen you've teased
pray for some oilskin to take you away as commodity

my prophecy? they'll make sashimi of you
a rich man's nyotaimori along your canvas-white thighs

goody goody gum drop my tentacles are flaring up!
but I'm tired of my animal aren't you?

quit acting so washed-up & helpless
embrace your inner fish-freak

stand upright flounder into a coffee shop
let your widemouth say *a vanilla latte & quiche, please?*

whatta riot! I wonder which is more disturbing:
your fins or femininity? go give blush to the prudes
go slip on a pair of tube socks— you're more than pretty paradox

go wonder if the sea still moves
wonder why a thing like you without you there
exists

TO THE SOUND OF WAGNER'S TRISTAN UND ISOLDE, PRELUDE

(I'm living inside a terrarium: soil, pebble, moss
the world is sick wind itches like a turtleneck; sea-phlegm
sticks to the shore I'm trudging through night's tar into the slow
burn of day, seeking an upbeat nihilism made popcorn for the apocalypse
the ultraviolet bees are gone, locusts scuff-up my good shoes— *fugue* comes
from the meaning *to flee*, or *to chase* I spent all morning in the shower curley-
cuing a strand of hair into an ampersand I'm saving myself for menopause
I've gone cannibalistic, spitting out a chunk of my flesh into little fragments
on the lawn the glass-sky cracks into clouds as credits rain down like
asteroids I don't flinch at the bright light, or the black & white *Fin*—
I think about my sister how much I miss her at a time like this)

DOWN, DOWN FROM FENNELTOWN

In heaven or universe or cosmos-jelly,
I swam around with no purpose, waiting for my next life.
When becoming earth-me, I found myself at mom's table

doing homework, studying, oh I don't know—
convergent evolution—as she cleaned dirt from the white,
bulbous body of a fennel. She taught me nourishment.

But in secret, between she and the soup, she shared a glass
and a glass and a glass. While we shared a meal
I watched her eyes glaze—go white water, go drunk.

She had gone off again. But to where?
Was it a cypress-winding dream where people said *finocchio*
and the wind tasted like liquorice?

I hoped her place was that pretty,
hoped her place worth it. Isn't it funny how we choose
the body which will carry us, the body which we will carry?

As I stared into her prismatic eye, her squid eye—
realizing how we were from different planets,
the same planet—she asked, “O fennel-chested girl,

isn't it strange we've picked one another
from a whole galaxy of green fern?”

UGLY DELICIOUS

/

Do you want to hear
A story of shipwreck
Girlwreck, momwreck?
Rest a cheek upon my bark
I have birdsong, sirensong
Can you hear ocean?

 This is where I coil
Clam up dig myself
 In sand break
form my back
This is where I run
 On boardwalk cracks
toward woods
 this is where I burrow
in blankets
 Listening
to the vents
 losing myself
 in supermoon
childhood bedroom
the land of lotus-eaters
 Washed up
in slimy apathy
my muck mouth
 coughs up
your tide
 my love-hate
 the ebb-flow
of my obsession
 with your obsession
 with drowning
to disappear
the hurricane drunk
 pulls you out further
I pull you back

What does the water give you?
Who are you holding on to?
 the undercurrents:
i don't want this narrative
i'd rather have nothing to write about

in exchange for a mother
who is still around
& sober.

this space
this silent treatment

white space
seafoam

cotton bedsheets &
the cool side of the pillow

where you are beautiful

/

Mother, pull me by red wagon through

green fields, clean dirt from my fingernails.
Catch me with an old cigarette butt. It tastes like raisins!

Punish me. Unravel the snow-crusting scarf
from my face, ask if I'm hungry for a bowl

of pasta. At night, place muffs over my ears
so I won't hear house creaks, the glass-clink

of nightmares. Hope is a tire swing becoming a black hole.

/

{The tide is turning
into yellow ginkgo leaves—
steadfast on drowning.

I'm full of hot-air,
ballooning, fan-fluttering
up into the night clouds.}

lost in the simulacrum of mother
the good parts, the bad ones
like night-mommy / night-me

/

The little girl burrows into blankets.

The heat kicks on, knocks through dark vents—
a wicked sound: knuckles cracking on metal.
She gets too close and slips inside.

The lush sounds: ticks of the gas burner,
bubbles in the stewpot—a newspaper kisses
the table, then quiet. Through soot, the girl
finds a small woman speaking in tongues,
saturated in merlot smoulder.

The woman is ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly.
The girl says the word so many times
it loses meaning. She crawls into her hole,
writes letters, *Dear Mom, please stop,*
please leave the vents.

/

{the girl is me
the woman is you
now I tell the cold,
blunt truth}

can my words save you?

/

inside my secret world / dinner table / whiskey-tasting coffee / *patty cake patty cake hey the method man* / barbie thrown into a wall / mashed potatoes splattered on the cabinets / wine bottles in the washing machine / inside the t.v.: *Family Matters, Full House, Boy Meets World* / what is the glue of perfect families? / group hugs? / inside my soccer bag / bottle of whiskey / *hey! you! get off my cloud* / download sunflower sutra / *poetry's in motion rub it on your skin like lotion* / I am thirteen & burning / guilt & fault reeks of gasoline / the glue of birth / that flammable thing / which keeps parents together

inside the bottle / domed out basement / garden shed / wine in a bong / shotgun mouth with cotton-tongue / firechest / *I got myself a forty I got myself a shorty* / rooftop real talk / that good-good/ dark sky pulling at my bra strap / airbag / overdose / plan-b / pillhead / *the slums of Shaolin* / abandoned overpass / keg stands / friday night fence hops / running from cops / make out / blackout / wake up /

inside the wreckage / vomit on the pillow / irish car bombs gone sour / running stop-signs / red lights / drive drive / we were bonnie & clyde / jekyll & hyde / how did I get home alive? / I thought if I could be you / you'd change / front door 5 a.m. / my father and I pass, wordless / you wait / exhausted / you pull my pajamas on / hold the bucket / our secret / I hard-cry into the pillow / *I'm ugly, stupid, worthless* / *I want to stop eating* / you say, *I didn't know you felt so bad* / in the morning: *can I make you toast?* /

/

{Are you hungry?

Have you eaten?

Did you eat?

Food is love.

Go and eat.

What did you eat?

Dinner is on the stove.

I made something good.

Daddy ate already.

You sure you ate?

Sure you're not hungry?

You must be starving.}

/

it's six o'clock on a monday
in both places. i'm a subterranean swamp thing.
she calls like a season, wine-bottle throat.
i don't have time for this.
even blackbirds on wires fly away. liquid pangs
wax & wane in her cup. she is lonely,
but fills the house with nutmeg & cloves.
i promised i'd never leave.

/

{i sniff a flower hard as if
to get high; i hide behind nature}

i want to make you comfort-soup : bay-leaf, leek, thyme.
remember you taught me : *you can always add, but can't
take away?* is that why i love in small doses? maybe
i've made you this way? you in the laundry room, chugging
from the bottle. maybe i'm a hypocrite for drinking
bad days away? you're a high-functioning housewife.
i should be happy you are no longer brazen, more inward
drunk. the only-when-no-one-is-home type. of course
i don't believe you're in denial. surely, i don't have addictions.
let's go back to morning. let me make you breakfast.

let us end this famine.

/

I've followed your trail of half-bitten figs,
tasting for what your life could have been.
It leads me down mossy crags, over white pebbles & broken
quahog shells to this foam shoreline.

You're tasting each fruit for succulence—nothing but brine—
& tossing it to be devoured by the waves.

You become that tree near the sea.
I count your rings, your whorl of branches.
Please, let me see what you see.
Warn me of the storm. I've been waiting below in a blanket
of deciduous needles, growing in the understory.
Tell me of generational hurt. What sweet rain you have!—

water me in it. I want to grow from this dense-dark
floor as opaline tree & shade your limbs.
Let's hope for a strong wind. Blow away those weevils
& bleed sap-balm down to your roots.

THE GIRL WITH THE APPETITE OF AN OGRE

Oh fern-green girly girl, you've chewed mother up
real good—her cartilage & sinew—gorged on
her freckles, your own blood. What a predicament.

What is your alibi? You've engulfed something
beautiful, tortured, remorseless—something like
the Atlantic. Swallow air to hold down a spit & acid

drenched ear so it's not coughed up as if to say,
"I heard that." It's a shame you're being hollowed-out,
femurs & arteries gone. She sits in your gut, sucking

the last of the intestines through a paper straw.
Bigbad girl, you've tried to embarrass her
into change, but you needed animal tracks

leading to fuschia chrysalis, to love.

GNAW AT THE ORCHIDS

Seethe green—no dessert unless you drink up your kerosene.
Remember being fourteen, the queen of mean? Stun-gunning

with speech? I know about misled anger: boil cauliflower
within an inch of its life. Tell a friend to drop dead, buzzcut the carpet,

bust down the door of a dream. Waking up is foul milk. Yuck!
Curbstomp a lotus, implode with childhood's muck. Childproof

your insides. Gnaw them raw—they're tougher than they look.
Ball gag the moon; snarl it to smithereens. Cry like a hammer—

nails puddle the room, pelt down a staircase and flood the house.
Fizzle-out, grow smaller, sorrier, rabbit-hued. Those days

of stayawaystayaway—*stay, won't you play with my hair?*
There, there. Gather from dirt a bolus of hurt, swallow it.

SAYING GRACE

I'm a heathen I dream in dirt eat with a pitchfork breathe in praise
O Owl it comes a-la-carte as I fasten Io moths onto the pantry door
When I sit atop the counter I am a child again—starved for cloudscapes
the burst of a grape When I wander through the cupboards I become soft-
bellied for all the organisms When I open a jar I swell like a fig—
smidge purple with doubt—how could both wave & field fit beneath the lid?
I spread the earth with a pin press a ouija into the sea garnish the calendar
with thyme As a bee I gather musk scatter it across paper spit dusk on a desk
I am forever bound to your bigbang your worms & holes & mud
to the man who gave me gloves of flower seed the woman who taught me to ladle
a lake suckle the sweet The bugs & dumps & bananas settle into oneness a cube
Dear Owl bless this—quick before I burrow into a mound of brown rice

two

AMUSE-BOUCHE

fret away those hunger pangs / hesitant to devil,
gaspacho, or pickle her / *voilà!* / bite-sized,
planted by tweezer / microherbs & a few granules
of come-ons / she's sex kitten tartare: beetroot,
butter-poached — lips like thistle & fig, punctuated
with squid ink / hidden behind white
ostrich fan soufflé, barely-there wisps of pastry /
a spoonful of dita von teese / mouth-water,
cold-shower / please peek behind the curtain.

STATEN ISLAND NATURE POEM

I live inside a husk

between smokestacks
& bridges

a whitewashed sky
an acre of beer cans

the wetlands lie within

a greenhouse of fumes
clotted with abandoned
red wagons

homestead of stripmalls, wild
turkeys on the boulevard

sepia-toned bears in a riverbed
of traffic, a bobbing stream
of backward baseball caps

I am camouflaged by sheer curtains,
watching a ten-point buck, velvet antlers
appear through sedge & mist

hooves wandered the landfill,
pavement, past barbed wire fences
to this field, graffitied with lavender

I shoot rounds
of crisp green fruit

white tail disappears
through reeds
& crashes

into a store window
bloodies mannequins,
leaving a trail
through the dressing room

its carcass on a display
of Doc Martens

A WALNUT FALLS FROM NIGHT

*“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”
-Robert Frost*

I've got a bone to pick with you Bub—
all afternoon, I've ground down
this cortical argument
to a spear, but what does little ol' me
know about hammer & strike?
I've admired your wander-about
into the yellow wood of alternate futures—
choosing the grassy untouched path—
& it's not just you, but the Romantics, too
stupid-drunk on Daffodils & solitude

I've tried to stray from the trail—
yellow-lit kitchens & shut-eye garages—
found a stick for walking as old, wise men do,
except I was a girl
so it most likely was to beat someone with

these props we carry
in the dark alleyway—car keys
in fist, pepper spray a guise of lipstick

one time in Asbury Park after the restaurant shift
I scared away a crackhead with a wine key—
what glee! what privilege!

I hide behind being my father's daughter
I hide behind *sorry, I have a boyfriend*
I hide behind a wedding ring
I'm home before sundown, unsure
whether to rest
or play dead

what privilege to be immune
to the body's intruders, to walk
out of the house bare-handed
with the exception of Daffodils

if I do go into the wood

I would very much like not to jump
when a walnut falls from night
not find someone to suck the marrow from me
not write from a wound—you see,
my heroes have bite—they slice
open each tree with an em dash

if I go into the wood I want to find
a creature who scratches hard
but kisses soft

FIELD SKETCH OF A BAD HABIT

I've journeyed all damn day on horseback
to reach this place. All western-movie like.
Snowblind & hungry, got so many hang-ups
there ain't room on the coat rack.

I'm in the midst of the blizzarding.
I know about strong winds—how they pull
you into lodges like this. I ain't
gonna get caught up in no scheme, cased
the place good. The surrounding firs
& birches, a barn out back, trapdoors.

Snow falls harder, heavier on the roof.
I'll admit, I'm mildly depressed. Each winter
I've tied & untied myself to railroad tracks.

"City girl, whatchu know 'bout Wyoming?"
asks a sideways looking man with a sneer.
"It's wild out here." "How about you mind
your beeswax," I grit through yellow teeth
right back. "How about you tell that Buffalo Bill
looking motherfucker to pour me a drink?
A porter."

So tired, I'd turn myself in to the bounty hunter.

Round these parts, people call him Habit.
From somewhere far, he pursues me
with a molasses swagger, carrying only a lantern.
Maybe we've met before in a planked-up town,
yes, told him I shot a man once, no,
it was a drink n' drive, a flee the scene.

I swear I've tasted Habit before, played footsies
under the table. He pulled a bottle from my throat.
Soon he'll kick open the door as snow la-di-das
around the lodge. Hat brim cocked over one
green eye, & he looks good, *real* good with all
that scruff. The kinda Habit your daddy
warned about.

I can't help myself. I'll want to lick
along his cheek, let him feel the soft remorse
of a woman's mouth, a lawless hint of dark

chocolate, honeyed orange peel—supple,
smooth—a chicory finish. Arm in arm,
handcuffed to each other. “Dead
or alive,” he says as we walk away
& into the white.

POEM AFTER A HURRICANE

tonight we will not listen to the weatherman
& hunker down tonight we will eat chinese
take-out fortune is to catch the last ferry ride
home we will light candles while the outside
world goes dead someone will name her
Sandy she'll laugh at our cinder blocks
& sandbags mouth-first she will heave
boardwalks surge into subways
forget the man singing for change
new york: tonight you will plunge
into seablack-dark Sandy keeps on swallowing
the atlantic knotting phone wires & trees
new york: in your loving filth I will mother you
do you need a glass of water? what is a home
without high-water marks?

DEADBEAT BEACH

what have you given me?
besides the rotten bottom of the pot,
this salty, deathbed pawnshop
of carapace, fishguts, red solo cups,
syringes and tampon-shells
and I'm feeling like the Audubon
of feral cats and a thousand paper gulls
as the sea swells swallowing the marsh;

I am collecting Wonder
Bread bags, thinking about carnal love
while standing in the muck
of a horseshoe crab orgy;

your love is hypodermic, full of wreckage,
nothing besides this washed-up sink,
a busted existential hero—
half-splinter, half-plaster—

its sad little sink mouth agape
at all this disenchantment,
unknowing how in the world it wound
up in this god awful place, of all places,
but somehow feeling it belongs here,
feeling that by some process, this bounty
of wet will gather and flow
through its faucet as a colloquy
between sink and sea—

and I'm rummaging for loveliness
like a mother lode of saltspray roses
or beach plums or an egret
who walks like a minute hand.

FRIDAY NIGHTS + BLACK BEAN SOUP

I think I'll take you as a lover. When I use the word *elderflower*, does it make you hard? Let me pour you a little. It tastes old, floral. Old man, I'm the worst pen pal. However, I'm sick of writing. Where did all my fake IDs go? Joanne, 5/4/1983. Where did my velvet sophistication go? I drank the sunset from a Colt 45. This will be called "Ode to Ferry Beers." I poured it into the flood-tide for my dead homie, Walt Whitman. I asked a crew member if it would ruin his night if I jumped in and swam to the Verrazano. He said, it sure would. Old man, where did my friends go. My high-heeled, curb-stumbling army? Are they living big-girl lives? In a new car by a coastline on a short road to tubes-tied. Do I need to water down my feelings? Aren't you too old to be strung out on a skateboard? I want to help, I do, but we're blowing smoke into each other's mouths. I think about trying bulimia as I cry into a barrel of cheese balls. The eucalyptus hates seeing me this way. Has the soup boiled over? I'm poached. Give me your morning-breath, your oatmeal kisses.

DYKER HEIGHTS, 2017

The quiet
is what gets you
thinking. Winter sneaks up,
slips through your skin.
Out the window
an abrupt crump
of its black boot on white.
It's a grumpy neighbor
chewing on life.
In the yard, you leave warm
milk for the stray thing
pussyfooting around. In the bowl,
it abandons one small hair
as if to say, thanks.
The hush-hum heat rattles on.
You want to go out, stay in.
Knock-knock. All the parties are going:
string lights and schnapps,
the kindle of talktalktalk
and fussbustle and tinselkiss
and giftglow and
someone making snow angels
on the hardwood floor as you ghost
out, because icicles
are more your speed.
You're stuck in a clear spike,
a slow drip
off the roof. Time blooms
daggers from a fountain.
You drift off the porch, onto the road
where the first snow in its sleep,
suffocates potholes. On rubber tires,
winter lurks so quiet
you never look over your shoulder.

CHOP SUEY

Edward Hopper, 1929

Even Hopper couldn't stop her.
I hate how her chopsticks puncture
water chestnut—a misophonic crystal
rises like jagged bottom teeth. I hate
her dumb fork scratching white plate.
It's her cosmic lust I distrust.
Face to face, rook to rook—a chasm,

a table between us—puff puff pass—
I laugh at my faux fur doppelgänger
as she sizes me up, thinks she can replace
a queen. I'm no fool. I know those ringlet
thoughts that drip from dark places: hideous
stalactites, amethyst & slug. A thug who
pulls the rug out from nurture & harm.

STILL LIFE WITH NAVEL ORANGE

The fruit bowl cradles washed-out grapes,
figs & an orange—glam-glowing navel with
an intrusive malformation: *linea nigra*,

a vertical line rising on its swollen peel.
Darling orange, I shall call you Belladonna
for the pretty poison thoughts you given me.

I touch the tablecloth, a lump of sugar, the flank
of me: animalistic, delicate. In morningwood,
twisted bedsheets, I am nectar, mood-swings

& big-bang creation, imploding with ideas
like a roadside bounty. I could be more
than this half-person if I wanted,

if I didn't backtrack for miles upon miles
to girlhood: when things were perfectly
dumb, before I could think of bad things

like barefoot & pregnant. I was mother's
little helper, little thumbsucker,
everything tasted like nail polish & cigarette butt.

I had an oral fixation—felt my tongue as it learned
that *clinical* rhymes with *cynical*. Before I knew
what my body could do, what men could do:

unteach the bunny ears on your shoe. I wondered
what germinated in the black of the laundry room,
thrived off half-truths. If vulnerability is what you crave,

I know pressure points. I know a man
never wants a woman after he's watched her
give birth, after the dark-twin of herself comes

out shitting & screaming. I know how to sing
myself to sleep, sound out the bickering.
Orange, you are so purposeful—an alchemist

of any mistake. How do you choose between
lunchbox love-notes & morning papers?
I whisper storybook monsters, moonlit

forests into your belly, but never physics
or theorems or spheres. I say: *Dearest Seedling,*
you'd never be the glue that holds daddy

and me together, like momma spoon-fed me.
For I am an uninhabitable ravine—the dank-smut
from supernova debris, cluttered by free beer,

fruitful fuck-ups. A thing covered in nerve-
endings, wanting something apart from me,
a part of me. If I flesh this out: I am uncertain

if I would destroy you, if I'd collect your fingernails
& teeth, if I'd mark your height on the wall,
say stuff like *you're so cute I could eat you*.

So vague; the disease inside me,
the bogged-up brains of bad-moms. O orange,
in your splendor, sweet umbilicus of sin—

I want to dissect you, breach your skin, carry
your zest beneath my nails. I feel your weight
in my palm—the thickets & spider ferns,

your lovesome marmalade of curls, then the eventual
bitter: *I fucking hate you* as you slam the front door.
Stupid orange, I cannot undress & swallow you

like a drug—for you are someone else's masterpiece,
the magnum opus ripened from a painterly grove.
I peel away your sticker birthmark. Mine is from

the puncture of pine needles—to pine: the hunger
to suck the life out of someone, devour her daydreams
to the last drop. Should I pierce a crescent into your skin,

unravel your atmosphere, be your rotten universe?
Can I split you in two, press you into paint? Can I keep
your sex & wilderness? I break you right at the soft spot

in your skull, bear your vitamins & minerals
& afterglow—only to unearth after all, your watered-
down orange taste, your membrane between my teeth.

his words give her a pickled hatred
he's a classic loser good-for-nothing
Orpheus fuckboy

& she doesn't know how she gets into
these situations
this massacre of discarded vegetation

imagines herself on the mend
hits the road up & split
seasalt & driftwood
she is thinking of someone

Elsewhere:

in true-blue in Pensacola
he will be weathered soft as sea glass
& instead of eyes blue thistle

LOVE-SLAUGHTER

I remember your cunning, your magic
carpet rides that smelled like bong-water,

the stench of your stories that went something
like: *I'm sorry sorry sorry sorry* & dripped red

with roses & hangover. I hated roses. I hated
your beg. How I wished to be the blue

on the eyelid of a squid, the black inky etch
of your first tattoo. The homemade needle

which dug into your arm an angel. I sketched
the real story of you: no longer the skinny,

freckled, blue-eyed boy wonder. You becoming
the type of man my mother warned about

with morning glory arms vining around some Becky's
waist in a photo. I confess—it felt good to throw

the claddagh ring in a hedge & I'm sorry I had hand-
trouble & I'm sorry we outgrew each other & I'm sorry

you lost your mother & I couldn't fill that space.
I couldn't fetch the wind, hand-stitch it to your skin

so you could feel something real. Sometimes
when I'm back home I see your ghost in coffee shops

& I think of us pre-ink, how easily I could tug on the line—
reel in this fish story of love-slaughter, throw a wrench

in your day, carve a dash on the white page,
let it linger there like a "hello."

HOME OFFICE ECOTONE

I am feeling sluggish
on a sea of carpet, coiled inside
a shell of blanket.

An invertebrate seeking
a neck crack,
I am a ladylike abalone,
broken-in like the spine
of a book.

Press an ear to the sheets,
hear the ocean inside me—
how wishy-washy!

I drift through a lexicon
I thought I was too stupid for:

the fluorescence of sea anemone,
toxic pricks from urchin,
the melancholy
that moves like a jellyfish.

Mother told me
there's a pearl inside me,
I am waiting to feel it.

Sometimes I think

of things I am not
like "outspoken" & "forthright—"
words defecated into the cesspool
of my psyche—

someday I will hug the daylights
from "outspoken" & "forthright,"
wrap nacre around those parasites.

Oh, what a host I would be!
Coffee? Tea? You see,

I'm a luster—
sinful for wordplay,
wanting to sloppy kiss a cuttlefish.

But merely flesh & womb
 & begging for worth,
I wash up on the papery surf,
 slapping in sea-lettuce & scum,
a watermark left on the walls.

A girl's mind is so sultry.

But there—that mocking chair!
Executive & erect, skin-shedding
& brown like leather stirrups
 for Ulysses.

Frankly, is it coincidence that
snakes, swords & pens are phallic?
That manhood is structured & syntax
 is without frills?

How could I be heroic when I am
 cold-blooded?
That's what what's-his-face
 called me. But how could that be
when I'm hot & bothered?

Can you neuter my mindset,
 be my Hemingway beard? Get me off
the floor, up from this corner of the room—
this poor excuse for a reading nook.

Teach me how to think
 without the comfort of a heating pad,
how ergonomics brings duende.

If I could scrape off these barnacles—

I would like to be reborn
as opalescent sequoia,
holding siren-birdsong.
I would speak direct
as an anchor, stop you
dead in your tracks
to wonder what else
sneaky curves conjure.

AFTERNOON TEA AFTERTHOUGHT

A man once said,
very Britishly and dapper
and deadly, "I could eat you
all up with a pudding spoon."
(stiff upper lip) I slip
into what if
I were a sinkhole?
On the surface I am
railroad, bridge, street,
but below I am woman-
spreading, containing.
(stiff upper lip) I drink
The Man's shit.
I think of the ocean's floor.
I sink from the Bayou swamp,
I sink into my eye sockets
all the way to China,
to the trembling core
of the matter. This is a wake
up call—man oh man,
don't flatter yourself—
I've consumed ponds
five times your size.
Small hand man, quicksand
is a dear friend of mine.
You want silence
while you drill and spill?
I'll be so quiet you won't hear
my detonator—
a weight
I've buried beneath
your house
as you fiddle around worrying
about the stock market,
or whatever.

THE WHIMSICAL LIFE OF MADAME CROQUE

after Monica Youn

not much different from mister she carries an egg she is French in her stench
with thin brioche-legs gold strolling smears of Grey Poupon and well-to-do
at night an accordion follows her into a roux “but, I’m more than a sandwich!”
objects mademoiselle still her lovers insist on her dolled up in béchamel

sure, she’s got frills wears tulle filthy as swine not a perfume in the world
to guise the reek of brine dirty little miss with a soul glued together with fromage
her boss sniffs out her stink pays her an unwanted massage “you were asking for it”
his grounds for a grope she spends Sunday in bed buried in bars of soap

“daddy issues are delicious” dead-eyed on the parquet on empty park benches
cracking up like crème brûlée thought tales end lighthearted? a godmother’s toast?
she darkens into a midnight snack all wants had been poached her body, her form regarded
as foodporn—poor madame croque swallowed piece by piece when it was she who was hungry

ARS POETICA: BREAD + BUTTER

and it comes in clutter rattled and strange
full of ink stains like mornings of reading
the classifieds searching misguided
as sacagawea but leads to sound
a scratching that eats away at you
like a lover your underwear on its head
first fig-sized then triggered
stare into its unripe eye and say
i wish i'd catfished you which is a fern's way
of saying *i'm patchworked* it comes
counterfeit / behemoth / sinewy / true
it comes as a soft-bellied beast of bedsores
and black lung this thing is ruthless
stitches together a cherry pie to placenta
and it comes
like a knife thrower
imageless but godsent
dilly-dallying down the snail-trail
of purpose it scavenges meaning
liquefying distilling
breaching

three

PEONIES IN UTERO

/this morning I woke to swollen-bellied
lymph nodes & purple swallows

I showered
my greening body
slipped on a kimono
shellacked the larynx with honey & hum
I felt strange
as if the flagellum of a dream
were swimming back

there was a flower that reeked of motherhood
like the milky top of a newborn's head

I needed bed to meet it again
I was growing
shapeless scentless senseless
didn't know who or what I came from

something was inside my stomach
it tapped three
times on the windpipe
the songpipe truth was blossoming

//a strange bloom with its slender leaf-limbs
taps three times on a black lacquered box
a peony reeking of pink & plush
creaks the box wide open
slips inside I follow her

a sweet smell
of confession of spring & morning moon
a white budding tree near the lake
stepping out of the silk robe
I have a sudden urge to wash my feet

peony hands me a cool washrag
& an elixir it tastes of indigo
at first timid
she tells me about the hard cracked dirt
the ho-hum life among swans
& the reason why birds fly in v's

somehow her femaleness offends me

in a kate moss small-breasted dark-rooted
sort of way I think she feels

my uneasiness, or guilt—
by the obsessive nature in which I drank milk
between each sentence

peony taps three times
on my leg & the sky blots stormclouds

///sixteen year old me blots lipstick on a love note
I'm on a pleasure-hunt x marks the spot
I take a blowtorch to rolling papers

peony fingers the caesura
scar on my formless body
tells me I can't keep an orchid alive
tells me I'm used-up, scraped-out
tells me I threw my baby dolls in the dumpster
a chorus of *mommy, i'm thirsty*
i want my sippy cup!

I could feel myself growing
colder cumbersome thunderstruck with grunge
about to crack into a whole
garden of bolt-roots I demand *bring me*
the closed heads of peonies on a platter

///in the rainshade
lovelorn & shivering peony weeps
petals shrinking down into ground she tells me
her hiding places

in my mother's underwear drawer
the secret of marriage written on cocktail napkins
those were mom-snooping days

mother said
don't go looking for something
you can't handle
it will swallow you like a fishmouth

still,
I would listen to her
phone calls my shirt over the receiver's mouth
he hasn't touched me in months I heard
once *I don't know who or what I am at all* she cried
& cried

a downpour I would carry around

////the girl-flower whispers:

wee-tah-kah-wee-loo
unfolds

like a parasol & collapses
to a sprout back into wet dirt
leaves behind a photo of me
as a girl tousle-haired in a plastic house
& I do not know who or what I am made from
which pollen-breeder left me
in the cold wind for bees?
if I will always live in this fake kitchenette
with a bowl of fruit I cannot eat?
if my body can
ever be a home to anything
a wheatfield? sickle? poem?
thoughts
were beginning to resemble a clothesline
I knew I would never be good enough
that we were the same
clipped from the same deep pink root
that being one woman is never good
enough
I press flora behind my ears smudge rouge on cheeks
I could feel it rogue peony
blooming from my mouth.

A TEACUP'S WORTH OF JANUARY SUNDAYS

upon a hum, I housecat around
in the pink and red of my mother's bed.
beneath the honeyed lamplight of a book,
I hold the scold of hot mint tea between
my thighs. I descend in the seam of comfort
and danger; hurrah! warmth! I am plump
with bliss as Bowie's "Modern Love" plays in
a black and white movie and the smell of some
Moroccan cooking experiment—cinnamon,
coriander—rises from the kitchen. tonight,
mother and I will use bread instead of utensils.
we've been tilted in solstice; daylight glimmers
like couscous and is swallowed behind chimneys.

how quick the stinking pink goes
off leaving behind a rose-strewn path,
a lukewarm calm along my lady parts.
beyond the window, unto hedges of white,
a shovel scrapes against the sidewalk in sad
rhythms before the dark intrudes. whenever
it's this cold, I think of a past boyfriend,
a pap smear: the cold clamp which wrenches one
wide-eyed. I still flinch at the unspecial sex.
I think of mother's miscarriages before me,
after me & why we've invited in ache.
under dried-out azaleas, through her smoke,
I wonder, as another snow comes to heal us,
if mother ever lies down like this.

COPENHAGEN

I am an old port— scalloped
with rowboats,
sea buckthorn & bellflower
colored townhomes.
Lutefisk & salted
herring on rye
sold at cobblestone.

I am a bronze mermaid voice
lost in the carousel's
song of coil.

I forage for urchin, scurvy-grass,
cloudberries;
pickle rosehips,
ferment blackcurrant.

I pull radishes from a hazelnut
& malt soil—
a deep plunge crudités
of sheep-milk & tarragon.

I am symbiotic
with the naturalist, the botanist,
the chef, the farmer,
a sprig of pine.

I am harbored in Earth,
scouring for cep-dusted lichen
on a bed of moss.

I plate venison
with snails
& fiddlehead ferns—
a marinade
of where the animal slept.

But I am only a fiber
on the coastal tufts,
a module of salt
in an eddy.

Nothing without
the rickety pier,
planted buoys

& fishing pole seedlings.

 Only a speck
in the wharf's catch,
the calm hurricane, the tired
 ferris wheel.
Just a cluster of wild angelica,
falling madly
 for a black hole.

LUST-DRUNK

A fool for thinking I could eat mango
over the sink without feeling a thing.
Costanza said of the sunlit stimulant,
“I feel like I got a B12 shot!” but picture it: in summer’s
late light, belligerent, the dark kitchen, I’m probing the ripe
skin with a dirty butter knife. I felt for tenderness,
never asked consent for its nakedness. Felt for
a brief moment as if I were Jeffrey Dahmer, in the serial
I-want-to-keep-this-inside-of-me-forever
kind of way. This isn’t supposed to excite, or get panties
in a bunch, like a first-date gut-punch, when you both
realize: *I’m a nerd for you* and *this is someone*
I can watch Seinfeld with and you’re both hungry
for flesh, so you mash those cottonmouths together
in the awkward quiet of a parent’s basement.
You both accept that this person is likely to take-off,
perhaps due to a mid-life crisis, or the afterlife,
while you are left listening to the sweet nothings
of the garbage disposal. I’ve wondered why violence=
masculine and nymphomania=feminine, and done
the math on how many orgasms are being faked
this very second, all while at the grocery store,
carrying a single basket containing a single mango,
because that’s just the type of person I am.
Pitiful, really, to go at a mango, ravenously
hickeying its sweet meat down to the stringy bits
as juice runs along my elbow and into the dishwater
like an inkblot test, resembling the silhouette
of Costanza’s stout body on a velvet couch, and my skin
gets sun-warm for his black dress socks and bald spot.
I’m liquored up, pent up, gluttonous—when some brilliant
killjoy comes along: God’s way of saying, “that’s enough,”
as the slippery pit lies limp in the sink. I fingerlick and beg
for an easy fix, waiting for a yellow jolt, something
to go aflutter like a small kiss behind the ear.

A GLITCH IN NATURE

your hour is almost up

I'm in the waiting room
with earbuds of nature sounds:

you've got mail!

says the snail *do-re-mi*, chirps the chickadee
wind chime goes,

alas! alas! to the crescendo
of white noise

to the day I wanted to kill the wind
a day when everything
/ hummingbird mid-suckle, dandelion mid-wish /
glitched

when everything got real
the mixture of your chiari & ocd & summer & panic
when it was just us in the car
as I tickled your arm waiting
for the ambulance to arrive you thought
you were having a stroke, dying soon and I was mad
banged my face into a tree
like a woodpecker
why couldn't I be the headcase for once?

still I'm a junkie for your weird thoughts
love the way you say ...& then there was & then there was...
and I never know what happens next
the way you tap three times on your head
to be sure it's still there

don't fret poor cracked boy I'm still in the waiting room
got kites in my blue-sky brain for you
got cubby-holes of terrain and miles of song
let us make a deal:
I see your equinox and raise you a solstice

MAILBOX

You've received a letter from me
I'm sure—heart-shaped & stamped.
Maybe it traveled in the back of a post truck
or across flora, carried by silkworms.

It comes to you from the future
me, love-sick in the back of my throat
& wishing we were back in Indiana
on the mattress on the floor writing poems.

Remember that time the professor
called us "The Bean Eaters," even though
we had fleetwood, tusk & omelettes.
Those vintage postcards scattered around

the apartment of all the places we wanted
to go like Yosemite & Mars. The day
in the park when I taught you the difference
between pine needles & we cried. Remember

that time you bought me a house
plant, because every good poet should care
for a plant —oh dear,
my memory has grown elephant ears.

BLUE HYDRANGEA IN TERRACOTTA

summertime, grandpa's house.
for breakfast: blueberry flapjacks,

pulpy orange juice & strawberry
ice cream in a minnie mouseug.

a painting of fox hunters & hounds,
nose to ground, in the stained glass nook.

around the table, he begins his séance:,
glacially cutting through the equator

of a grapefruit, flesh from rind,
parting papery membranes—

this was before I knew what numbers
were divisible by three; yet I was the medium,

as the morning sun was our candlelight—
carve the edges, then section, he instructs

while swallowing the pink. a bitter mist
of melancholy sprays into a smile as he squeezes

the last juice into a spoon. the only sound here
is the hoarse voice of a harmonica

moving between us, leading us to the black
& white tiled bathroom, where I watch

his stubble-ritual: a dulce de leche delicacy,
shaving brush & sinatra-smooth singing,

kid, when you got it, you got it—
in this old-school brooklyn fervor—*hey!*

you musta gotten all your good looks
from me. me mid shaving cream beard,

mid noticing the vase of dusty eucalyptus,
a perfume bottle with spray bulb & fringe,

the handrail in the shower. my inherent sad eyes
in the mirror. I kiss his musk-battered forehead

and the voice carries us into the garage,
where everything is moth-bitten, exhausted—

except the red oldsmobile, golf clubs & me
all pinch-cheeked & driveway technicolor chalk,

fisher-price-chatterbox-rotary-phone. quiet
surrounds him—golden, & I know though

he sits there: cross-legged, barefoot,
a slow-sweet cigar filtering through his pores—

he is gone for a moment, watching love's blue dress
on the wonder wheel in coney island: a time

spared from sawdust & rust. into the front yard
he carries coffee grounds & eggshells white as ghosts—

begins pruning the hydrangea bushes, loveless & worn out,
into youthful strangers in terracotta pots.

for they are sad-eyed companions, blue corollas,
cold eggs, toast bits—I wonder if this is how love is,

how living is, surrounded by ashes & artifacts,
citrus, holy burst of blueberry—I am tumbling,

mumbling, finding comfort in things
that come from dirt, from beginnings. a life passes

through like a cyclone, leaves a mess
in the mind, only to begin the next day

with clay underfoot & grapefruit.

UNDERGROUND FANTASY

Mark Rothko, 1940

If only I could kill someone
with kindness, I think, waiting for the subway to arrive.
If only I could remember the feeling of felt.
If only you would notice, behind your newspaper
& houndstooth tweed—me: blue-grey, bone white,
drifting through walls, station to street. Aimless in
a rice-paper dress. Yes, I want to jump off your cleft
into bed, moonflower & spooning. If only I could count lambs
without thinking of iambs. In this weird-eyed tunnel,
a gap-toothed man asks, *darling, why are you so boring?*
Keep in mind the housecat who mews in a dusty ventricle,
watching thoughts swim like koi fish. If only there were a trapdoor,
a turnstile—a thimble of hope. If only our eyes weren't cross-stitched.
I would write with chopsticks, kiss with acoustics.
I should be more polite; glide like a knife through papaya—
be Siddhartha in a negligee. Among commuter puppets,
I wonder if I am this faceless centerfold, canvas-flat,
uneventful hair. If I could leave this subway sanatorium,
a place where rats squeak on fallopian tracks—I would be mouthy
as a speakeasy. I would be watercolor & wilted,
a disheveled violet roaming Washington Square Park.

THE MAN WHO PICKED FLOWERS FROM THE LANDFILL

Two hundred years ago on island of Staten
was home to a garbage dump seen from space.
Two hundred years ago a man operated upon
a gull-gray mountain—an engineer of the crane—
pecking away, nine to five, in a sulfur skyline.

Two hundred years ago, when the dump closed,
the mayor ordered a restoration project,
“we shall call it: Fresh Kills Park—”
& *poof! shazam!* a manmade stratum!
which went as follows: shale & siltstone,
garbagegarbagegarbage,
a 9/11 briefcase graveyard,
gas vents, pliant liners,
sand & clay, a smooth layer of topsoil,
a sprinkle of seed, wild cattails & reeds.

The man’s wife needed help, her own
restoration project. Who else was responsible
to pick her up, dust her off? All he does is throw
her half-empty bottles into the trash, fill her
with a neglect seen from outer space.

The park became littered with great
blue herons. On summer days, it smelled
like Chinese take-out. The man enjoyed wandering
the park’s new trails, picking flowers by the handful.
He stuck his nose deep in the bud,
the yellow still smelled like shit.

COFFEE & CIGARETTES

Jarmusch, 2003

Jim Jarmusch, you've got me like a lit match.
There's something succulent about black & white.
What kind of dichromatic hocus-pocus have you got me under?
I have an urge to peel back the latch of your 5 o'clock shadow,
enter your darkroom, dream faster. Lately I can't tell
the difference between film & news—I walk through people
projected onto a screen. The television shows Charlottesville—
a tiki torch of passed-down, glowing white, fermented hate.
I flip back to RZA & GZA drinking herbal tea
while Bill Murray chainsmokes.
When you think of Staten Island, which is rare,
do you think of Wu-Tang, or do you think of the blue
ribbons choking out trees? Or how Eric Garner died on Bay Street
for selling loosies, or white flight, or how this place
is an incestual cesspool? Let us meet at Talk of the Town,
let me set the table: checkerboard, ashtray, moodymoodymoody.
I'll play Dive Bar Chick: eyeliner smudge & jitter.
I'm drinking straight from the pot, down to the nitty-gritty.
I'll pull the trigger. *Hey you*. Land of black, white, blue,
what would it take for Garner's cuffs to be undone?

AMERICA

America I am spent & Ginsberg mad
America two-hundred dollars of my parents' money November 9th 2016
There is nothing for me but this poem
My head is 5 a.m. fog on a Monday
America you are Beavis & Butt-head with a tinge of Gershwin
Let us toast the first orange-skinned, pussy-grabber in the White House
Slap yourself on the back for this "movement" of the bowels
The pendulum swings north-south, east-west, but America where is your heart?
I will never understand a woman saying, "Make America great again"
America go make me a sandwich
America you are not hidden in the Boondocks
A pitchforked town of bad apples & family values; you are Main Street

I don't care for your super PAC or snack pack, go away
America I don't owe your donors a thing
Fuck Donna Brazile Tim Kaine's eyebrows & Hillary's hot sauce
Fuck Tomi Lahren, Alex Jones, blue ribbons on trees
Fuck baby boomers, fuck Generation XYZ
America fuck your pickup trucks, your small hands, your dick measuring contests
My father says I have a filthy mouth
Pretty please America, don't tread on my uterus
Is there a morning after pill for this?

America why did you waterboard me in hate?
A hate manufactured along with our differences, hope-campaigns
& presidents you can drink a beer with
America who is "the other" now? Still China still Russia
Them syrians them syrians them syrians
Why didn't you listen when I said "I can't breathe?"
America stop stop-and-frisk, stop building walls, stop your fracking & coal mines
Your dear leader, your love of the almighty businessman
America stop giving Wall Street fellatio
Gentrification doesn't fool me—where did everyone in Bushwick go?

America why do I need to explain to my father what locker room talk is?
Ms. Steinem why are you suggesting that I'm voting for Bernie because
"That's where the boys are?" Ms. Albright remind me again why am I going to hell?
America what kind of feminist are you?
My mind is made up of fire & havoc
America I am numb from your dixie cup of measured pills
I take it & take it like a nasty, nasty woman
America keep your boyparts away from me

I walked in Hyannis Port last summer
The Kennedy compound behind me & Nantucket somewhere
There were piping plovers & I don't know why I'm telling you all this America
But I watched the flag in the blue sky & for the first time I felt
Proud as though once upon a time, before my time, there was hope & it wasn't perfect
But it was something & then I felt sad & *lilacs lilacs lilacs*
Could my generation feel that someday, something legendary
Something mystical like a cosmic birdcall?—then out in the deep blue Atlantic
A humpback whale brushed the surface, spewing ocean & I don't know
What the point of this story is America but I'm bankrupt on avocado toast

Pardon my jingoism, but on the highway, I see your riverbeds & water towers
Beautiful & bleak & busted—truth is, your lungs are coal-black
America I am solar-powered, a windmill sprouts from my head
I am not here to berate you
O country of haul & sweat, O country of immigrants
Country of puritans & everything in-between
Would you shut up & listen to my humblebrag
My thoughtful critique?
Land of the gluttons, well-fed, starving
Home of Buy-a-Bunch-of-Crap-I-Don't-Need
America I'm in an empty parking lot of a Target
America I'm coming inside to unleash my bitchfest & flask

CONTEMPLATIONS OF GIRL INTO VOID OF POTATO CHIP BAG

Why is it so comfortable at the bottom of the hamper? Vibes: lost & found bin

Bag is 1/2 air 1/2 chips—
am I a pessimist? There are 15 minutes until tomorrow Mood: plastic-wrapped
American cheese

I measure distance
in terms of subway stops;
you are 4,832 stops away There are 6 calories
in a stalk of celery “Being entirely honest
with oneself is good
exercise.” -Freud

LOL: that time I put
a tennis ball Mood: Dali’s
in my underwear Venus De Milo with Drawers”

“How many one-night-stands would’ve been avoided
had the L-Train been running?”

Possible new habit: smoke cloves

Bank account: \$9.11;
buy: \$60 eye cream I interact w/ ppl only
through memes

Note: alcohol makes sleeping
around easier Why is everything about
an absent
“he?”

Search: how to know
if someone has I want to disappear so much
a second family I’d need a paperweight

Is Dad in the laundry room
cool ranch Doritos
staring blankly into
the black hole of the dryer? Do I keep filling myself with images
to feel whole?

THE CURIOUS SADNESS OF SUGAR CONE

enough gibbous vanilla & rainbow sprinkle—space-junk, sugar-funk. enough in the trunk, the plump, jiggle & chafe. goodbye, love-handle. goodbye, honey-high. imagine how difficult it must be to soucycle when you're cone-shaped. hello, recipe card box—may i feed you something pretty? hello, laxative, can i stomach you? i've engulfed a heap of self-loathing—cherry on top. hey there, ketosis & halitosis. oh, osteoporosis—hollow me out. my sickness beats your sickness. hello, infertility—i want this line to wither, to rot. welcome bareboned, concave conquest. bring on, skeleton me. bring on, mood-moon phases. enough sadness that spills from me—dropped, forgotten cone on a sidewalk. i will sulk on a scale, blow-up a b.m.i. chart. this isn't about nicole-richie-skinny, or heroine-chic. farewell fructose-binge, farewell fullness! form, i will purge you of hurt. goodnight fifty-calorie being. goodnight little voice that goes: *fatfatfat*. sleep tight, bosomhood. enough being atlas. i want to be cosmic-dust. i'm just tired of holding onto so much.

BUBBLY + CAKE

A package sits on the doorstep. Yesterday was my birthday. Let's celebrate me
getting out of bed. A package is sealed, stamped, delivered with my mother's pretty handwriting.
Before ravaging it, calling her, I think of her bad day, her home alone, her voice
getting into the liquor cabinet.

I leave the package untouched, heavy,
on the table ticking with the thing that kills me. How much love was squeezed into the box,
how I always feel hurt/happy/hurt. How going home for summer break, I'm happy,
but duct taped with dread. Here, a concoction that goes straight to the head.

What becomes of unmothered girls?

This is my package to you little girl, little sister— you are learning the person who loved you
first is absent-but-there and will never notice your resentment. You can't run away
yet. You can't return
to that quiet dark liquid place. Baby girl, I will hold your feet
to the fire, then kiss them. Happy Birthday—
you are your mother's daughter.

LIKE ICICLES

mountain fangs
she hangs between melt & spring
 swingdance & felt

flintflutter neon yellow
 maroon blooming

in this room
hello windowsill

hello desk
chattycathy
doesn't
know
how
the
world
works
epi-
phyte
of
dyker
heights
born
small
in a
cellar
dank
dark
brain
fold
& mold
the shut-
up
sink-
hole
you
neglected
her

didn't you? orchid your kid pinkspawn
thrives off you never meant any harm
feed her an ice cube don't overwater
now keep company with a cacti friend
think happy thoughts think manic
greengarled roots loot the ground-
swell budding river pearls
sound puddle up
beneath a plant pot

PANNA COTTA PASTORAL

Overstayed my welcome,
what a bad dinner guest!
Been here since embryo,
not another espresso—I beg
you, it will keep me up all
day. Tired from decades
of drinking thorns. This isn't
a candyland good time—
the gumdrop geraniums,
scrumdiddlyumptious bees.
I've grown a little since then,
Gene Wilder is dead. Been
lying low, a vanilla bean bathing
in vodka. Extract my sweet tooth,
bury it beneath a willow.
Heartache, toothache—
thanks nightcap, I'll go drive
into a wall now. I want the real
stuff: urchin & moss & joy.
Outgrown the sweet hold,
the child mold, I'll drive all night
in the afterglow of letting go.

