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# Only One Went through the Green Door

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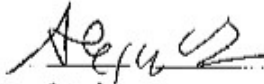
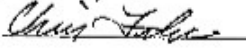
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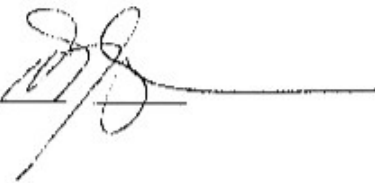
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ONLY ONE WENT THROUGH  
THE GREEN DOOR

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POEMS BY  
RACHEL SAHAIDACHNY

Only One Went Through the Green Door

Poems

By

Rachel Sahaidachny

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.

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## Drawing from the Dark

—so we said to the somewhat: *Be born—*  
& the shadow kept arriving in segments  
Brenda Hillman, “Equinox Ritual with Ravens and Pines”

Lately, at times when I read Plath (*The Collected Poems*) the poems seem overwritten. The first time I experienced this thought it really shocked me. I wondered what changed—how could I (and why would I) criticize any of her work? I realized that in some of her poems I was more aware of the effort it took to make the language lovely than of what the poem was saying, as though I was utterly distracted by the spell of it. I considered that the criticism perhaps had more to do with some thread of expectation in my own work—and a worry about my in general melodramatic, and overdramatized inclination. This drive to make things not “boring.”

Overwriting is an attempt to escape the personalized, to infiltrate the impersonal space and achieve a “larger than your life resonance,” in effort to communicate the abstract. In my drafts of poems the images sometimes seem obscured by the language: a thickening, a stuttering of the line, a sudden insertion (perhaps leading to a rejection of the poem’s intention), an overdone redundancy of the subject, rather than a declaration. Lavish language for coded work. It’s been a difficult journey to find the lines which contain weight equal to charge and beauty. This is important, because I have a narrative and not just a bunch of tricky or fascinating images. I have something to coax from within. Perhaps I should have been reading more Rich.

The quest in my writing poems is to write balanced between the personalized and the impersonal space—to protect the self but use the personal. Ellen Bryant Voight spoke on the persona of the poem, and difficulty of the subjective in the poem versus the individualized when she visited the Efroymson. “Great poems instill some essence of human experience.” She advised: write poems using personal memory and charged language to create the subjective experience, but the

private must be isolated protected. Who is the lens the poem comes through? How do you view the poem separate from the self? The concept is the poem does not disclose self, it discloses experience. Sometimes it takes a lot of writing and fancy lines before a poet can write about experiences without the explicitness of the self.

At first I found it very difficult to use *I* in poems. *I* was secret, and didn't want to be shown. Often, in a case for *I*, the imperative would assert itself on my pages, trying to give the *I* some directive, or instructions. Years ago when I met Alice Friman and she learned a bit about my narrative she recommended, "write in the third person when it's difficult to write." Then, at Conversations, when Ellen Bryant Voight spoke of the personalized poem, she mentioned the same thing, write in third person when the material is personal.

I was frustrated, so many of my poems were entirely obscured by high lyricism, and surreality—language and image that I loved, but which I was overusing. What was on the page had a shimmer to it, like a dream—but like a dream it would fade into the obscure. What seemed electric and intensely interesting before was fading into boredom and leaving me utterly dissatisfied with poems.

Over the summer at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers Poets Workshop, as Sharon Olds stood in front of us ready to read her poems she said, "Just now the little voice in me was telling me not to do this, that the poems are no good. But then I looked out and saw all of your wonderful loving faces, and I knew I could stand here and read you my poems." For me it was really incredible to hear someone whose rich and personal poems have been with me through the years admit to the same struggles—it is difficult to face the past, the world, the poems.

Over the last year I began writing in the third person, and I developed the narrative of *she* and *I*. *She* and *I* have ties to reality, but both are also fabrications (from Daisy Fried: "Consider every poem to be a persona poem. None of it is true"), and because of their intimate and haunted



relationship I found room to use the lyricism I love while giving the poems a clear emotional center and drive that tackled the themes I wanted to explore. Finally, there was a ridge to balance on.

Landscape also proved a useful tool to cross the barrier between inside world and outer. Recently in a talk given by Marianne Boruch, she said, “Place is where the writer begins to see.” The details of a place may engage in a subtle shift, and quiet materialization of the inner or outer conflict. The inner-self and the past-self become present through the images. “If it’s not inside person talking to inside person it’s not a poem,” (Donald Hall); existence is a form of art. Consider Yeats’s double gyre: history, thought, and memory entangled with the body, the soul, and senses; the crossing spiral lines—inner and outer world occupy the same space. Each spiral ascends and descends. Poetry crosses both spirals. The consciousness in my poems struggles with the boundaries between the past and the present., treading both realms in a sometimes disorienting desire to allow each to exist at the same moment. At time lines float on the page, unpunctuated, because they are spiraling between intentions and emotions.

I write from body and place and attempt to bridge the exterior with the interior. I still remember, when I was young, the first time I ever stood outside, under a sky falling into darkness because of gathering clouds, and I was at the side gate, next to the street. I had to stop and watch, and feel the fizzle of the light rain on my cheeks. There’s a parking lot across the street, so I could see a lot of the sky, and I had this feeling inside—a sudden dissolving of my skin, the outside poured into me, and I wrote a poem. A little lyric about living in that exact moment, and the world pouring in: “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender,” (T.S. Elliot), a pure moment of existence. When I write from place I often sense an unnamed tension, but a sinuous threat prevails in the sense that the place will disappear, and I must write it into existence.

Dean Young said, “Songs make sense in terms of ways that are not logical or narrative.” I still engage in surreal images, and lyrical language to draw out the unknown. I might leap away and

leave a line or scene before it is complete, I might let an image or declaration float, leave some part of the poem to exist between the phrases and the silences. Some might call a poem an interrogation. How do you interrogate a shadow?

For me surrealism is not a tool, but a part of the narrative; and I tend toward chaotic movements in the poems—which is not necessarily a strength, and in fact I have worked to negate a lot of the confusion and chaos by finding some anchor to entrench the subject. The drive to be chaotic I think comes from the disordered history of my emotional world, and in allowing myself to write anything at all. The poem unfolds its own knowledge in its own space. These are the doors it enters and leaves. Do I stay close or do I leap? Someone once told me the poem can't enter the same door it came in...but people prefer a softer exit. The first poets I read were Neruda and Sexton, and I read them completely, utterly, over and over again, when I was fifteen, sixteen, and finally began reading whole collections of poetry.

There is a chaos captured on their pages, a woundedness, and beauty, disclosures of disorientation, and disillusionment. Poems which explore sensuality by exposing the rift between life and the soul, and the will, and of belonging.

I admire the way that Brenda Hillman's work sifts through the world: the personal, the political, historical, and nature slipping into line together. Often, I don't want to be handed a poem that does all the thinking for me. I like a poem that lingers, excites a questioning in me. Life brims uncertainly. The only thing we know is the details. What Sharon Olds writes seems to make herself and her history solid, then I see some moment of life in a new previously unforeseen way. Her use of metaphor stretches the image and creates a stained glass window: all the parts filled in with just a bit of different shade—everything that already was, but I couldn't see. Her similes and metaphors bring these unknown connections to light. Their poems are written on the page, but exist partly in my mind—through the act of reading. Poetry is communal, and a living art.

Recently it seems like so many poems I like from the popular magazines are full of moon and blood and bone and stars and mouth. Of course, I love these words, and they appear often in my writing, too. For a couple of years I even took blood out of every poem—because it seemed to be in all of them. Of course, these words represent so well the interconnection of poet to life to land and universe, and act as tethers to the drifting spirit—the tiny ghost within who has the slippery mouth. The words bring concrete to the abstract, and also comfort and familiarity to the page—Roethke’s and Plath’s (among others) poems are brimming with them. Working through the common language of the unconscious we are bound in their concrete simplicity; but perhaps further investigation is required to break up these archetypal impulses. Sometimes I think the words are a stand in for a greater image that has yet to be worked out or unveiled. Perhaps an incineration of archetypal language is required to get to the root. Perhaps those words just mask—create a conglomerate expression rather than explore the individual. Or, maybe they act as some kind of shield. I look at the words on my page and some days they never seem strong enough. I wonder what is it that I want (but what does the poem want!?)—and I remember that I lived in a dome of rejection; I am trying to climb out. I used the words that have pulled me through the world until now. I admire Roethke’s wanderings through language, and he did achieve that balance—delving into green shadow, and loosening to “bang and blab.” It can be difficult to sense when you are using a word just because it is familiar and brings comfort in a shadowed and lonely scene. I imagine the thousands of poems being built with this same vocabulary...is it literary tradition? Or just what’s comfortable, what is easily within reach? Must watch for that.

My truth is wired into the fractures, but I have been trying to make more declarations. Some poems seem impossible to write. They linger in the shadows. I must find a way to coax them out. The charged language, the imagery make-up the markers. It is not enough to allow the poem to

lay undisclosed and languishing in its own dense silence. Find the form for it to exist. Know that it will hide in familiar language. Keep pressing the line forward.

ONLY ONE WENT THROUGH THE GREEN DOOR

MAKE

Mother may I make a clover chain may I  
braid my hair and sleep on it may I count

the waves may I wade your linseed oil streams  
may I breathe

~

you kept turning off the light saying the light  
was bad, there's something wrong with the light—

a little mineral spirit bored into your head  
*I'll wipe everything clean* it said *I'll wipe everything*

~

we walked next to ruins in a park:

you caught a toad, stuck it in my hand *hold it flat*  
I didn't want to touch its clammy skin

you clutched my wrist *only the wild seed grows—*  
*close your mouth to the water, close your ears, daughter*

~

Mother may I play  
upside down may I scrub your frown

may I unbutton me unbutton you  
may I swallow

your stew Mother may I whorl  
beneath your full moon gaze—

may I cut you out of my face

I.

## I CANNOT DRIVE TO HER HOUSE

I won't enter her sparse rooms

and see her towels placed  
on the floor for seats

see the words of the Shema  
scrawled on her walls.

She keeps no company  
except her dog, for months

she has lived in a hotel  
bi-nightly, or less—only on weekends,

before that it was she and the dog  
in the car eating cheap take-out sandwiches  
sharing the greasy meat from inside waxed paper

but she has a place now.  
I won't join them for the meal she's fixed.

~

This time it hasn't been a decade yet  
since I last saw her

she is widowed,  
her estranged Alaskan man dead.

We moved from empty room  
to empty room in the cold  
Colorado cabin where she shut the heat off

my fingers numbed as we stacked boxes  
in the box truck.

I handled hundreds of packets of rosy  
duck sauce and fermented soy sauce from the kitchen's drawers,  
awkwardly, they slid through my fingers into the last bag of trash.

The drawer for knives burst with throw-away  
plastic utensils still in cellophane, crumpled napkins,



paper packets of salt and pepper wedged into the cracks.

I would've rather closed it.

In the closet I found a blue nylon duffle bag  
too hefty to lift, contents cascading:  
water, canned food with the labels peeled,  
a hammer, poles, and tent stakes.

~

The longer we are apart  
the more I recognize  
her flash in me:

I smile amused when I am not  
a stunted laugh  
her jangled tone  
shapes my mouth.  
She bubbles behind my eyes  
makes the whole room foreign.  
I pinch my nails into my palm  
to become me again  
to think like me.

Think like her  
they will hold everything against you  
they will send you to the doctor  
they will close you in a room  
they will leave us with midnight thoughts

like a tourniquet around  
my throat—

a dark stone  
turns in me.

~

I twist and turn my stone within

I clean it with spit  
polish obsidian

someone taught me to breathe  
half-breaths to keep  
my lungs clenched

he says *You know you're grunting*  
*between each breath* yes I say yes

I suffocate in the shallows  
my airless head drifts

away from her away from me

give me your night eyes  
give me your seeds

he doesn't hear her  
in my flattened voice

none of them do

## THE ROAD

and the woman and the road  
and the road and woman in her car woman and her car  
with her dog and the road and her dog and her breath  
and the car and the lots and parks in dark  
sleeping in her car and the woman and her dog living  
in her car

and the woman who believes believes  
the woman who flees flees past  
town by town flees suburbia flees tourist nation  
and believes someone everything is fake  
who believes she flees to a good place  
woman who believes she's doing ok living  
in her car with her dog

all night i dreamed about shit and piss all night  
i dreamed about leaking from my guts  
i woke up burning in my head my veins  
it's always the same as though inside i  
hold a thought locket all night  
staring across the gap vast country  
threading my brain to her flash all night

on the road gray mirrors on pavement and sky of her  
eyes always always peering into her lord peering  
into suffering attached to peering into  
suffering attached to suffering vast expanses  
of peering at her lord like a locket attached  
to suffering peering gray  
pavement peering at stop lights suffering  
signals that say don't walk holding  
onto steering wheel her eyes mirrored  
in the rear view

ROADSIDE WITH DITCH FLOWERS

Stop the car  
in the pitch beside  
the ditch: *Daucus carota*  
finger their curdled  
blooms and needle stems  
that only the fat flies see  
feed on Wild Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*)  
avoid their caution yellow cymes  
Wrap your throat with Morning Glory  
lick drizzle from cobalt cups

*Do Not Mow*

*Native Restoration*

posted on a sign  
the fat flies insistent  
as lights too shiny at night  
little torpedoes of unsevered-wings  
besprinkle my split  
platter my bone snarl

*Sarcophagidae*

I spy your button eyes  
with my button eyes—

## RELICS NEAR GARAGE AND WATER

By the river clothes were strung  
to dry on the low branches of trees.

She found the river beside a cavernous  
parking garage, behind a hotel.

She parked her car full of everything  
that's hers: change of shoes black faux leather  
with cracked soles, mini-shampoos, small soaps  
wrapped in paper, a box of maxis despite  
her years of menopause, a stack  
of post cards she won't send, a jar of wish  
bones and feathers, a can full of paint brushes,  
one tea cup trimmed in gold leaf  
adorned with a rising rose.

She parked in the corner on the first floor  
where light  
can't penetrate the tar dark gleam.  
Her chest congested  
she prayed,  
*Lord when will I leave  
here.*  
Echo of hollow garage: her face  
pressed to the car window. *Lord.*

I've collected river mussels from the bank.  
I cleaned them in my mouth  
sucked the sand and spit the shells into my palm  
to slough the echo off.

## HOMELESS

She chose to live  
on wildflowers and clover

She chose to drink  
mud from ditches beside the road

some might question my choice to say  
chose.

She chose not to take her injections.

In her eyes so blue  
everything she sees and doesn't  
drowns—

~

It's possible I will never see her  
she always moves farther away

while she wanders I wait  
for news of her death

hope she might dissolve  
unnoticed except for the bit of her

I can't spit out  
biting the thick of my tongue

red split in the white coating  
I choke every morning

my head says quit—

## SELF-REFLECTION

lately she only notices the shadow  
floating beside her—in a mirror or puddle or automatic  
door of the grocery the bulletproof window at a gas station  
as she turns to get into the car—  
shroud imitates.

one afternoon while driving she notices  
a dusky mark on her forearm.  
she squints closely at it.  
does this arm belong to her?  
she licks her skin. she feels uneasy  
and smells turned yogurt or rancid noodles.  
she keeps measuring its edge with her eyes.

she avoids all reflective surfaces  
focuses on the blacktop stretching before her.  
beside her a silver suburban blares its horn  
as she sits too long lost gazing at the accumulating  
shadow in the clouds above the green light.  
*It will make everything shiny. It will make everything stare back.*

she must not touch the spot on her arm though the pulse in the bruise has become a gong. it's a  
blurred moment. it reminds her of a door she once bumped into when she was saying goodbye—

when she thinks goodbye she looks at her eyes reflecting in the rearview  
her own eyes telling her where to drive telling her to drive to the next where.

RECEIVING A LETTER FROM MY MOTHER, I REMEMBER

her eggs—  
burgundy beet-stained and drained  
of albumen, the yolk pricked.

*What have I done now?* she said.

She carefully drove the needle  
into each end of the shell.

It took a lot of force  
to blow the membrane out.

I breathe I breathe I breathe in

I admit I don't know her well.

Blue iris            is my mother's favorite flower  
my mother's eye has.

*I am sick and of poor health,* she said.

To make the egg blue she used vinegar and cabbage.  
Soaked her onion peels for orange,

melted wax to trace the shapes onto the shell.  
She could make them bold or delicate.

*I have tried to love you, to let you know how much I love you.*

If I wanted to burn my hand I'd burn my hand

form a blister on my skin and then press the pin in  
and watch it seep. This is how we heal, she told me.

You don't have to drain  
the egg            just let it sit  
eventually what's inside

will dry out.

Eras later with a gentle shake  
the soft weight of emaciated yolk  
will cause a dust rattle.



WHEN SHE COMES TO MY HOUSE I FEEL LIKE WEeping

She sits at my kitchen table.  
I make her bone broth  
soup with beets in it  
as she stares through my back.

Outside coral skies: it's winter.  
In the garden leaves hang  
limp as peeled skins.

She doesn't speak to me  
just sits at the place with the placemat  
as her dog licks and licks the floor.

I'm faced with the bloodless mess of red  
beet flesh on my knife  
and cutting board.  
It digs at my chest:

these are things we passed down,  
an old recipe.  
It disintegrates in me.

*I heard the door bang and bang  
I heard the door as you left and left and left*

I could tell the woman that—but she doesn't  
look at me. She whispers to her dog

she wouldn't be here  
except it's winter and the flowers  
have gone underground.

If she had something to say to me  
I would write it down. Write it  
over and over.

LINDA

Linda of the vacant blue      Linda chewing her lips      Linda of the talking mirror  
Linda of slashed canvases      Linda in her bare apartment      Linda of empty cans  
Linda of the blue iris      Linda counting ragged flags      Linda drinking lethal water  
Linda of the quiet execution      Linda of the wild grass

destitute and living in a car

a race to erase everything that is Linda

all manner of mother crumbled inside

II.

*I've had enough of death  
she says, and fools you  
dragging  
in the wagon behind her  
two corpses  
identical to her  
except  
for their empty goblet eyes*

## TRANSATLANTIC: A FAMILY STORY

She says:

They hold a gun to my father's face  
because he wants to pass the line

they say women and children only

I lose my grip on my sister's hand  
as we cross the river

water surrounds me: I hear my mother  
and her sister crying I hear my father crying

seated in the long grass alone among the bodies  
of the other young men.

"They let me go," he says, "they let me go."

We hide in the woods so long  
we're so hungry we dig a grave

the men must walk ahead  
I can't feel my legs to disappear  
outside so long no one would recognize us.

We cross the river again  
black crest bobbing my neck  
my father holds my hand

I drag my sister  
behind me like a doll.  
I feel bones through my father's palm—

He says:

Inside the concrete block building  
everything stone-washed dim  
beneath flickering fluorescents  
we are pinned against a chain link fence,  
our shoulders bruise as we crush.

They face us from the other side  
in their uniforms holding buckets.

Her dark hair falls into her face  
over her dark sweater  
her hand reaches to catch  
crumbs they toss from their buckets  
for our breakfast after our sleepless  
night on the floor of this shelter  
built for refugees. Detained, our skin  
thickened from dehydration  
pinch us, watch our flesh spike—

She says:

The rain tastes charred.  
My mother calls it ruin rain  
it leaves streaks of ash on our skin.

Somewhere a home is burning,  
once it was ours.

Mother says she has been hungrier  
she has eaten charred lumps of clay,  
this is what to feed the children.

They say on the other side of the water  
we won't have to dig graves.

~

When I go to school I don't speak  
your language

when I go to school I don't wear underwear  
you show me how to swing  
how my skirt billows

my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth  
you send me for speech therapy

we changed our names  
we sound familiar  
we are Mary and Nancy and John

now our tongues move foreign in our mouths.

We have a box of photos and names  
of the ones we will never see again.

How we are burned by hot steel in the factory  
and return to work.

How you say the women from my country  
are crazy how the men sing and sing  
and I dance  
and I dance my arms streamers through the air—

He says:

What about my mouth is different  
than your mouth  
what about my words makes them less than

when I yell out  
my tongue falls,  
I bite it so hard I feel it in my spine

imagining my ribs splintered  
as if I keep breathing deeper

you will open the gate—

## AN APPARITION BRINGS VACANCY

A woman with blood on her lips  
is stealing my groceries.

She places my baby in a brown paper bag.  
She walks out the supermarket front door

Into the squint white sunlight.  
The bag bursts to fire. She holds it

Above her shoulders as it crumbles to ash.  
My baby blisters, tumbles to dust.

All I see of the woman is her shadow.  
All I remember of the baby is hunger.



## SURVEYING THE PALM

I am always settling my palm  
against any solid surface.

It doesn't come naturally to me  
to wave my hand half open  
moonflower at dawn.

I sleep with my hands clenched—  
in the morning my swollen  
knuckles make a twist around a dog  
leash, a door knob, a steering wheel  
excruciating.

One night I woke to find  
both hands balled beneath my chest.  
Now I hold a rabbit foot,  
fur eroded, by its chain  
bracing myself for the dull  
blade

I press into the heart  
line's blue mountain shadow  
on the edge of my palm.  
I know there is birth there.

## FALLING FROM HER BODY

Hear the brain bang on a rock knock knock

The womb is a picnic shelter

I unhinge both elbows

Tinnitus is a warship

My cochlear canal in spasms a slug plugs cartilage

Air shoves into me

I am wresting breath out

The rush of blood vessels: a million moth wings

All the insects tucked into tunnels

White breath of loneliness

Gas rising across stars

## RENEWAL

The vulture lifts off the dead  
thing in the road and hulks  
gargoyle large on the gutter of a house.

She flicks her wine dark wings at me—  
not at me, at the spring breeze,  
her eyes scanning for what we kill  
when we drive: sunbaked  
remains, dried gristle.

There's blood streaked on her beak  
almost dark enough for me to see.  
She'll clean the bones, clear the road.

I pass her slow.  
She hisses, *Daughter, daughter.*

## SKIN BRANCHES

You asked: if we existed in a world without men  
would you miss me?

We slept with the air between us  
you cursed and threw punches as you dreamed.

I woke to a dark room  
and the skin of your back  
etched with branches

I hushed the worry  
whirlpooling in me

you sleeping so still almost dead.  
I kept blinking as the branches

fanned out, deepening  
across your back into a tree.

I my dream the walls were made of silver bark  
and peeled away by children:

whatever limb I had  
I handed over.

I walked naked in the bare light  
and wept in the window.

I was afraid my neighbor saw my breasts  
all his dogs died of exposure.

I wrote on the wall to remember:

I like to watch the hawk streak in the evening—  
none of my poems are about nature.

## THE SCATTERING BLOOMS

Our flooded garden ripples  
as though you're walking through.

I hold out my palm  
to the vanishing rain.

Whose idea was it to keep a garden anyway?  
I smell roses or tobacco.

Moths cluster beneath drenched crowns.

Star anise you planted delivers succulent spires of musk.

We spent the afternoons watching the Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
thrust its small shape into blue sage blooms.

Rose haze tenderizes the atmosphere.

Low moan of wasp near my shoulder—is it you?

## RAPTORS FIGHT ABOVE THE ROAD

Tree limbs shudder above the road,  
an object explodes from the branches. It's living.  
Two vultures grip each other  
in claw, in talon embrace, they fall and twist  
then bound onto another bough.

"What is that?" you ask me. "Looks  
like buzzards," I say, thinking  
the birds of prey are the same species.  
You google buzzard on your phone,  
and what's pictured is too small.  
"Not right," you say.

We sit here every night, on the porch  
at sunset, like leeches soaking in  
the last rays of daylight.

It's difficult to explain how brutal  
the birds look, a murky mass of feathers  
pitch dark forms in the hackberry, wings spread,  
then cocked crookedly in their ritual fight.  
Or is it romance?

Through the rustle the road  
is silent. Not a neighbor drives by.

Sometimes I hear them  
shouting next door, from the kitchen,  
the bedroom. And I wonder  
if the neighbors hear us too.

The vultures bustle in the tree I wrecked  
after an argument. I grabbed it and ripped.  
It splintered, but didn't break off.  
I looked back  
at the house and wondered  
if you would come after me.

What did I want with a broken tree?  
Perhaps to hang from it. No one saw.  
The street was quiet. And I slipped away  
back to our house, leaving the wreckage.

THE SKY TURNS ORANGE ON THE EASTERN SIDE AT TWILIGHT

Scepters of fir descend the mountain  
until their edges fade.  
I smell of metal—my tin  
fingers, silica shoulder.

What are you mountain  
what are you chest what are you  
breath I can't see yet fills me.  
What is this I hold onto  
I don't mean to hold onto. Needles

cling to pines.  
They plunge in silence  
and make a patch on the ground  
of silence. As I walk

eyelashes shed on my cheeks.  
Follower of leaf prints in a land  
without fallen leaves—  
I turn my hand over for a whisper  
of thunder: a faint thud  
in my breast when I undress and don't  
want to be seen.

MEDUSA PEERS INTO THE WELL

Everything sharp surrounds my heart

I needle my heel into earth

I eat green moth

I stare into well

I put every memory I'm sick of looking at

I put mud

Hello lost stones

I slither in rain

Belly prunes

Skin carcass yellow

I see loveliness in snakes

But my crown of hiss slid

White-lips with starfish bruise cheek

Gray nails, purple-skin fingertips

My womb pit of plum

My heart snail twists in its shell

Barnacle eyes have no reflection

Moss grows that needs no sunlight



## DEFINING THE SKY

On the phone  
you ask me about the stars.  
I say, "The sky's still light."  
*See cirrocumulus, see cirrus, see cirrostratus.*

Beneath the clouds  
the mountain is creased  
like mud hardened and scraped  
from the bottom of someone's shoe.

In Indiana it's the season of the glow worm  
flicker flies fire at dusk  
you pretend somehow it's for us.

If I were there  
you would point to the largest clouds:  
*see cumulonimbus, see nimbostratus, see stratocumulus.*

I am impressed with an unpunctuated blue  
or the gray line of an impending front.

At night you'd show me  
the brightest blinks of light—  
a world with 67 moons.

I say, "These pinecones are extraterrestrial."  
I wanted to touch them, but I refrained.  
I'm used to a softer structure  
of trees.

## WHAT I REALLY WANTED WAS A GARDEN OF LILACS

In the stony soil of our yard  
even forsythia won't grow.  
I planted a jasmine  
though I knew it would only last  
one season. It never bloomed.

The hummingbirds won't visit  
our feeder. I took it apart  
and found the fake red  
posies filled with ant corpses—

Lately, the garden stinks like carcass.  
The bees on the coneflowers  
replaced by black flies  
with juicy blue-metal eyes.

You couldn't find the source  
of the smell nor did you sense it.  
You sprayed bleach  
on the moss-slickened border bricks.  
I showed you where to avoid  
the spider's nest.

We sat quiet as lichen  
together in the lawn  
beneath navy sky laced with clouds.  
Toads hiccupped and leapt  
in the crabbed grass around us.

On your phone you find  
a house for sale.  
You show me pictures:  
a bungalow, arts and crafts,  
back patio surrounded by raised beds,  
a koi pond glistens oily green  
full of slippery orange bodies.  
I shake my head, say,  
"You'll have to do way better."

## MATRYOSHKA

There was not a spring  
just a doll locked in a box

Hating just one person can make  
you hate everyone

Over and over pull the doll apart  
inside  
is the same doll  
and she too splits open

## THROUGH THE LILAC'S DRAPING BLOOMS

I part the blossoms with my finger  
and peer between the petals

I take a twig in my teeth  
and gently push where branches split.

In the center of the tree I find  
some her that isn't me—

pale, wearing clover in a crown.  
Some her that looks fuzzy in the dusk.

Incapable of stampede.  
Her veins lavender pulse.

She plucks dust motes from a glade,  
collects a palm full of pollen.

After a while she smothers it all over  
her body.

## KEEN DISSOLVE

The Sweet Gum tree had star-shaped  
leaves and radiant star-ball seeds  
limbs curved like women  
swirling abundance of arms and legs  
swirling abundance of arms and legs

I cut it down. It's freedom  
to move one body away from another.

I felt something yesterday,  
my liver was tender—  
thrum red haze thrum spent magenta beating.

Dreaming of death is dreaming about saving  
people and falling.  
I know a story about the sky:

Her split lungs filled with blood.  
I didn't invite her in. She wanted me to.

She won't open the envelope I sent  
or open my back and see its blank dark slick.

CLOUD SEE SUN

Come up the rutted road      come up the mountain  
lava cliffs      look-out      horse pasture   plateau  
juniper-laced stones   big as gods   weathered pale.  
Iron streaks the slickrock.  
Beneath gold-leafed aspens   grazing cattle  
eyes shining black      match slits  
in bark's unfurling white.  
This thin air alters my face      until gray veils my eyes.  
Should I pray?      It's difficult to build a fire,  
fire just goes out.

## TIAMAT

no longer will I fight  
the wind  
when he blows into my mouth  
my teeth  
fall like stones  
& litter the darkness

every nerve dazzles  
down into my fallopian  
my ova melt like berries  
slink away from me

let me be viper let me be asp  
to engulf him  
until I splutter small gusts  
into the nothing above us

## AMERICAN DOMESTIC

you on your brother's  
old cat scratch couch  
I in my mother's  
kitchen rocker

and then you leave  
and I bake nothing  
but burned crusts  
falling through the traps



## APPLE

I kneel on motel carpet  
gripping datura slivered with light

there's a bible to put one hand on  
reflected in the tv my face dims the screen

the headboard like open wings behind me  
as if I were shadow imprinted in a lithograph stone

oil darkens the road outside my door  
the engine of a truck sounds like a hurt animal—

in this room, glare through the curtain:  
3 am ghost sun across his cheek

the apple on the table next to me

his palm held out, he says,  
    I know what it is to forgive  
but not how to.

## LIVING WITH THE ALIEN

It has two purple mouths for eyes.  
Two translucent tongues  
loll beside my chin—it's tentacle  
shoots through my ventricle,  
wraps around my spine  
like a newborn's grip.

Yellow fluid trickles  
from its fanged mouth  
panting beside my ear  
where I hold my cellphone  
and pretend to listen  
to him  
between the crackles  
and pops of gnawed cartilage.

I tell him I just want  
to go home and read  
but instead I sleep or drink wine.  
My dog waddles next to me,  
buries its head in covers.

Every night at 3 a.m. I wake up  
my fist balls around the alien.  
Blood stiffens on my neck.

I am getting sick  
of the dampness  
in the middle of my chest.

I am full of words  
like: clean, bills, eat, workout.

I want to feel electric as a star—  
I listen to it speak between the nibbles:  
fever, galaxy, darkness

attrition, pestilence, ice melt.  
I wonder if I might be losing

my grip as I pour cabernet into my cup.  
Probably I'm too old to be a mother now,

and it has siphoned most of my organs.  
A womb is just extra space inside.

## IN A POOL UNDER NO MOON

when he presses  
me when he holds my head holds my hair down  
with his fingers wrists chest

my voice slivers to ribbon  
no air no breath a trail of snot leaks from  
my face when I cough and cough the water  
out, my whole body burns

with suffocation there is no exit  
from the pool, and no end where my feet  
can touch the bottom feel the coarse

concrete scrape small pruned toes  
where sun dances and shimmers aqua  
streamers on the bed and I  
can see the vacuum and where the danger

is I wouldn't mind mucus slicking my face  
because I'm the one trying to hold  
my breath longer and longer  
and he never told me to

III.

*I am no mother —  
when I think of living  
I think of bones.*

*We all try  
to undo ourselves*

*like a daughter  
with a mother*

*like a daughter  
without one.*

## THE ROSARY OF CLIPPED WINGS

In the sanctuary of no-constellation  
she meditates on plains of nettle  
piped through with shadow  
her prayer darkened with no-words—

who doesn't trust the sound of her  
voice who hears it and doesn't like it because  
it doesn't sound like what it sounds like inside  
her head—

can never be too  
careful keeping the unsaid  
unsaid

even the candle glass might be listening  
even the mercury

## CAVE CRICKET

Somewhere there must be  
a mother on the street  
who loves me, a mother

on the street. My mother—  
nails peeling off. Old blood  
stains yellow the seat of her jeans.  
She won't take money only food.

She wants to be a red-  
winged black bird perched  
upon pussy willow  
watching horse tails swat flies.

Black bird has no daughters.  
The sky opens up: red wings bear  
down plotting to fill my mouth  
with mud, shovel it down my throat.

In the marshes she shit seeds  
into me. She resurrects herself  
in the damp grass, then prays.

She passes judgment: on a field mouse,  
percussed toad, black beetle.  
Even mud.  
What are we doing?  
Were we formed wombless  
or born with only half  
our hearts?

They will know us by the bones we leave.  
White daisies rising, star flower resilient.

Her softness comes in a web  
invisible, and stuck to my lips.  
I stroke my face  
but can't find the threads.

## SHE AND I

Sometimes the I finds a way  
to bleed into the she  
but only one went  
through the green door  
and only one eats a regular breakfast.  
Neither one of them sleeps  
but they each have different reasons:

she prays a lot all night through the night  
she believes God speaks  
or someone does, she has conversations  
with the room, or with her old brown dog  
which eats whatever she eats.  
She's married to it and the empty room.  
She's made her first solid commitment  
and I do not belong.



## CHILDHOOD

i.

I was the child with bright red paws  
Among tree roots I slumbered  
Waited decades for mother to come  
Mother made me black lace  
Taught me love is a bruise  
What kind of home is it where children daydream  
About being pets  
My sister wanted to be a cat  
I jumped around the house gnawing on cabbage  
My nickname was bunny  
She got skinny I got fat

ii.

In the closed space of the upstairs hallway  
At night she crossed the threshold  
She came into our room  
And lay in bed with my sister  
Said she wanted to be the girl again  
Pretended she was one of us

iii.

At the end of the world the sun

Looming orange

I stand with my mother

Her eyes glazed black

Pools looking past me

“They’re all dead” I tell her

Our shadows erased in a flash

Of radioactive brilliance

*We’ll be together* she says

She digs her nails like pincers into my wrist

She hands me the blue cup with the poison in it

*SYRINGA VULGARIS*

—I was growing horns  
but they turned to twigs

they grew magnificent green in the center  
they grew from my shoulders

how they must have scratched  
my mother  
as I traveled from her inside  
out.

There is no such thing as a delicate scream.  
I would like to press her mouth

until the air is out and press her and press her  
like blooms in our book:

between the pages she kept  
violets and clover. I tried  
to press the lilacs  
but their woody stems wouldn't flatten  
only bend—

## BROWN SKY

the sky turns brown  
in the evening

unfamiliar ashen haze  
new depth to the spills of winter

I had to shovel and shovel to find her  
beneath the long driveway's ice pelt

whose skin is that tapered  
tawny light in the atmosphere

snow falls one-sided on the tree  
the storm settles the freezing comes

I see the tracks – shadows in the snow  
leading towards the house

beneath the reddish haze of street lamp  
the light slips off the edge of the road

I have hated every word  
my mother has given me

## THE ROSARY OF CLIPPED WINGS

i.

*Your father is lying, and his father before him lied,  
your grandmother is lying, your other grandmother is lying,  
your aunts and your uncles are lying, the doctors are lying,  
your friends and my friends are lying, the government and  
the President are lying, the police are lying, your teachers  
are lying. Trust no one. Believe no one  
but me.*

ii.

*what an evil ugly girl you are  
what a hateful evil girl you're full of hate  
you're so miserable you're embarrassing you know nothing  
nothing nothing listen to me you are so stupid you  
know nothing at all are you listening  
all you do is embarrass me how could you write this  
you don't care about anything you don't love me  
you're stealing from me you're the reason I can't paint you're stealing my ideas  
you look hideous don't eat that you're too fat why aren't you eating this  
I made this for you you have no idea what I've done for you you don't care for me at all  
you're just full of lies you're just like your father you're just like them a liar  
you're full of shit*

iii.

*if you don't leave with me  
you're going to Hell  
He's going to destroy everything  
everyone will be dead  
just wait it's happening  
none of this world will exist you won't exist you don't exist  
unless you come with me to the woods come with me  
we have to wait in the woods He's coming for me  
and he'll come for you too, if you come with me  
I wish I could make you see why don't you see  
we have to wait in the woods with the bible*

*I love you so much  
I just want you to be saved.*

iv.

*Don't come near me Raven  
I knew it was too late for you*

*Take this bible maybe it's not too late*

*Everybody is going to be dead this world won't be anymore  
it will be His  
as He provides for the birds of the field  
He provides for me.*

v.

*You have no idea what I've been through  
but you'll see don't forget  
it's hereditary.*

## MIRROR MOON

Her last visit she seemed sexless  
dressed in layers  
of shabby black  
her thin head a floating skull  
detached from any mother.

She gave me a book  
for a baby—  
on its cover the moon had a face  
in a dazzling sapphire sky,

she told me how I'd been  
loved  
by the Father –  
– no

I was a thief curled in her mind  
swiping out her dreams at night.

She threw the dishes at me  
she punched her hand through the storm  
door, through the bathroom mirror.

I know her divisions  
her black hair parted long  
the small bouquet of moles on her belly.

In the world behind the mirror:  
I see a halo moon above  
a metal rail—

every memory silver plated  
every dinner perfectly ended  
without any personal disclosures.

FOR MY MOTHER IN THE DRAIN

Occasionally you rise  
from the drain like a beetle.

I turn on the water,  
drown you again.

Tiny fungus fibers line the pipe.  
Your shed skin is pungent.

I pour bleach down the hole  
to mask the smell.

Sometimes your blue eye  
peeps at me

to blink a message: *Love*  
*bearth all things, belieth*  
*all things, endureth all things.*

I jab at it with my pinky nail, force it back.  
Don't tell me about love.



## VIVISECTION

Through the doors the light disappears.  
Turning the corner, I find myself  
in shadows—

I see her body pressed between the glass,  
her abdomen sliced, divided  
see her dead and damp

on the walls she's hung  
it's grotesque to see her spread like that

her outline, her skin's tenuous stretch, poke my arm  
with my fingertip, pinch my belly.

The color of her dulled by formaldehyde  
her organs and tissues brown and beige  
swirls—a trail of veins, like rocks, like agate.

What are we doing in this room  
with this corpse woman—  
is she mother or is she me?

She left me, she took the dog—

## I BRUSH MY HAIR TO SHED THE DEAD

strands and think how old hair isn't lovely  
not like leaves falling

in these winter nights of freezing fog  
only half the trees have lost their leaves

discarded strands wrap around the brush handle  
find their way under the covers of the bed

impossible to untangle  
every feeling in a day

I keep brushing but never shampoo  
I think tomorrow

I will dunk my head in the stream  
where the ice melts and leaves clump

I will let my knees sink deep into the umber  
then barefoot in the ripples wade

trying to hear you coming  
in the rattling leaves.