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No More Odes to My Mouth

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**No More Odes
To My Mouth**

Sam Ferrante

Can't Hear Praxis Until You Can Hear Poetics

On July 25, 2020, Phillip B. Williams [tweeted](#), “Scholars, when y’all say ‘poetics’ what are you talking about, because you don’t mean poetry? Asking for myself and a few friends too :*)” Luther Hughes, Ilya Kaminsky, Kamran Javadizadeh, and other contemporary poets weighed in, gently quipping at the question, wondering into the void if the term is useful at all. Kaminsky wrote that “poetics” simply refer to a particular poet’s perspective on what poetry can do or is doing.

I’d like to take Kaminsky’s idea even further, pulling in that if “poetics” are what a poet’s work *theoretically* can do off the page, “praxis” is what a poet’s work is *actually* doing off the page.

This manuscript was conceived as an academic argument for transformative justice praxis as a tangible way of holding the existence of and the harm that Patriarchy causes communities. Initially, I had collected the poems I had written over my two years in Butler’s MFA program and stuffed them into sections titled by argument bullet point. I wanted each poem to serve as anecdotal evidence for identifying abusive behaviors, for removing abusers from community, for holding them accountable, and for figuring out how to re-introduce them into community, safely. The result was a stilted, forced thing. The project would not hold the poems I had written in any sort of *useful* shape, because I did not understand my own poetics. I did not understand what my body and my subconscious were trying to communicate. Praxis *follows* poetics and I was trying to write a concrete argument that I couldn’t yet hear.

So I returned to the page, to the line, to the word, to the white space. At my thesis advisor, Hanif Abdurraqib’s, direction, I looked at the poems I was working with. I read them

aloud and tried to hear the praxis in my own poetics. I found space. I found breath. I found litany that was trying desperately to tell the story the right way and fumbling to get the phrase right, fumbling to communicate a set of beliefs. I found a lovely, rhythmic internal world that refused to communicate in images. I found a speaker that kept ducking under caesura, only half hoping a reader would be able to fill in the gaps.

I needed to define my own particular poetics before I could even begin to implement a poetic praxis. I needed to figure out what I sounded like, what I was trying to say to myself, before I could even begin to communicate with anyone else. I needed to listen to Alessandra Lynch.

It is a strange thing to admit that my entire life, not just my poetics, changed with a single line during Alessandra Lynch's *Voice & Vision* course in Spring 2019. We were several weeks into the course and Professor Lynch was taking the class through a generative prompt where we held our pen to the page and drew a line for a full three minutes. She whispered into the room, *think of an image you're obsessed with, something that haunts you*. Somewhere during the top of minute two, I realized that my pen had torn through the page and was scraping its way against the rest of my poor notebook. A few of my peers were glancing up and around. My pen, like me, was noisy: too big, taking up too much space. I hated that pen with a fervor that I'd never really experienced all at once until that moment. I hated that pen like I hated my father, my ex-partner, myself. I looked down at the ruined page and dark spots speckled my vision. I had to leave the classroom for a few minutes and sit down outside in the air.

Obviously, it was not about the pen.

No one had ever asked me to sit with myself before. When I had written a poem over the prior decade, I researched, I lineated wherever I would breathe in telling a story aloud. I made sure I wasn't crazy by backing up my emotions with statistics, with qualitative data that matched up with mine. I controlled the poem — not just the content, but the way the words sit on the page, spill out into the air.

I had never considered that the poem lived inside me, bolstered by a diligent reading and listening practice, waiting to literally tear through the page without my explicit consent. This practice, along with an analytical technique Professor Lynch had us complete during our Long Poem Workshop in Fall 2019 where we labeled sections of our poem as either “conscious” or “unconscious,” completely revolutionized how I made sense of the world. That is to say nothing of its effect on how I rewrote the world into art.

I have been writing and performing poetry since I was eighteen years old — a decade now. I was on a slam team in Buffalo, NY where we wrote group pieces railing against capitalism. My banger piece was a poem called, “Millennial Romance” which raged against, well, everyone (it's not a great poem), but at its core lamented true intimacy falling to hookup culture. The poem breaks its stanzas into thought chunks. The lines themselves are mostly end-stopped and of fairly similar length throughout.

When was the post-sweat cigarette
replaced with a nod and a handshake?
And nails nervously nicking knickers
turned to quick quakes during a smoke break?

This made sense for pre-May 2019 Sam. I must have a hundred poems that sound like slam, that sound like competition, like men. Some of this comes down to the slam format: we've got three minutes and ten seconds to do our shit. More of it comes down to how I learned in

various spoken word communities, mostly, from men: we talk like this. We start with a scene, move to a statistic, set up a pattern, a repetition. At some point, we turn, emotionally or with wordplay. This is how we art. This is how we tell our stories.

And I know how to take direction from men. I know how to imitate men, to do it the right way. I know how to tell my own story the way my father and later my rapist, told me to tell it.

There was one thing my poems did that most of my peers' poems did not do: they *wandered*. I once had a slam coach tell me, *okay, now run the poem like you're explaining it to me*. What I had in charisma, in rhythm, in sonic work, I lacked in *clarity*.

Which will happen when you're trying very hard to align your stories with the stories around you. I wrote *angry feminist poems* and *sexy sad poems* and no one ever had any idea what I was talking about.

Because I didn't want them to. I hated my own chaotic, bizarre, gasp-y internal meter and I was ashamed enough of the specifics of my internal world that I never *really* wanted to perform in my own voice. Audiences would get a feeling! They'd think my poems were pretty! But my mouth was not my own. I sounded like every man I was working with, every man I was reading. And my poetry, what I really wanted to say, couldn't fit naturally into any of those linear little anthems.

So I ruined this notebook in the Spring of 2019 and I was fucking frustrated that my pen wasn't doing what I wanted it to do. My pen *always* did what I wanted it to. And suddenly, I wasn't in control anymore. Suddenly, I was listening to myself, my own rhythms, and something was telling me that whatever was *haunting* me, was scary and my body was angry.

This is how a panic attack happens. Your brain thinks something is scary or dangerous and your body reacts accordingly. It's actually a good impulse; it's self-preservation.

The part that can be useful is the *beats* with which your body reacts.

And so I turn to Audre Lorde: "It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are - until the poem - nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt." Until I put that pen to that page, I had been feeling poems about my own rage, wonder, curiosity, even lust, but I had been birthing only dolls: poems that in most ways looked and acted like poems, but were only plastic approximations of my own narrative, my own lyric. And in looking down at this ruined notebook, I realized this was the closest I had ever come to completely controlling my narrative, to believing myself, to acknowledging that *yes, I was haunted by something that really happened. Yes, this thing, this rage, this hurt, this fear, is alive.*

Yes, I can bring it to life.

And just like that, writing poetry became really uncomfortable. I had been telling stories using other folks' rhythms for so long that I didn't really know what mine were. I didn't know what I thought was interesting, what the associations between images and scenes were. I didn't trust myself. It took a lot of time, a lot of practice, and a lot of reading — out loud, with my whole body - to start to feel a more authentic sense of "*Yes. This is what I sound like.*"

I sound like a fistfight between the tenor and the vehicle. Two years ago, I was diagnosed with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This means, among other things, that the vehicle of the metaphor, the exit from the metaphor, is often fighting for dominance with the tenor, the entrance into the metaphor. I actually asked a friend if "the heart" as "warning" was too obvious an ending to *The whore dies*. I spent ten minutes walking him through how the heart is used as a

symbol of love and love is something we all look at all the time and things we look at all the time flash bright red or deep blue and those color changes are like the body's version of a stoplight at a rural intersection and a stoplight at a rural intersection is the only light spot in miles and miles of dark, so of course the heart is a warning. This tendency to gloss over how strange my assumptions are makes me a surprising poet. But it also means that I need to work very hard to articulate which piece of a metaphor is a literal entrance and how the figurative exit can be illuminating rather than confusing.

The kindest thing a man ever said about this facet of my poetics was that, "it feels like traffic in Cairo. Impossibly dense and fast, and yet everyone gets where they're going." That was Hanif Abdurraqib at the end of my first workshop in the Butler MFA program. Greg Orr was less kind a year later, commenting that "it's pretty, but I wouldn't want to take a test on it."

My metaphors make complete sense with schema that is fairly unique to femmes, particularly to femmes who hold multiple trauma events. But connecting that tenor and vehicle escaped me until I began to fill in literal gaps between my figurative language. Torrin A. Greathouse began to help me untangle this in a [Twitter thread](#) of all places.

I sound like a title as instructions. "It starts with believing all men are dangerous if you give them enough / freedom and time," is the opening assertion of section II of *Epilogue*. I wrote that line as a literal truth without considering how much explanation is necessary to arrive at that reality. The reader, at this point of the poem, does not know the speaker was raped by her best friend, that she was sexually assaulted or emotionally and physically abused by her father, that she was gaslit and humiliated by her partner of ten years. The reader, at this point, does not have any reason to believe her. Even with Hanif Abdurraqib's generous assertion that we must always

believe the speaker in reading a poem, that we must always assume intention, I looked at that line and realized I hadn't earned it out yet. This is how *Epilogue* gets its title. You have to read the book; you have to read the layering of schema and the figurative world of the speaker in order to have any sense of trust in a speaker that could make such an assertion. And you have to respect the opening clause: it only *starts* with believing all men are dangerous given enough freedom and time. It does not end there.

I sound like a sonically-charged, gritty little image. This is not something I had to work for. In fact, I often cut this shit in revision, not trusting that it's interesting or essential. I'm talking about:

“Grace / was biceps and white twinkles leashed by Black queens in leather.” - *I, White Woman, J-Set in the Back Row*

“Look at the clumped little people pods, the human caviar dunce caps piled on top of each other all the way to the treeline.” - *All Genders Uphold Patriarchy and the Cycle Continues*

“whore heart / held in front of her untested body, a slick totem, beating” - *The whore dies*

In working with Bryce Berkowitz, I discovered that lines like these are my *Sam-poem-voice*. While they feel commonplace to me, boring even, these images that haunt me, surprise others. They're essential to my work.

I sound like sonnets with really late voltas. In Fall 2018, Hanif Abdurraqib gave our workshop a prompt: write three sonnets, all with the same title. I failed miserably, first pushing myself to hit the strict iambic pentameter line and classic ABAB rhyme scheme and then running out of room. How could I possibly say everything I needed to in fourteen lines?! And then I

remembered one of Chris Forhan's tenets of a poetic writing practice: write through it and then carve the poem out. This is how *Men Belittle Women to Make Themselves Feel Better* happened. I had written a (bad) prose poem trying to illustrate what gaslighting feels like. We were reading some of Wanda Coleman's broken sonnets in Hanif's class and it hit me: gaslighting feels like gaps, weighty empty space, and hard enjambment. It feels like being certain of an image, only to have it turned on its head in the next line. This poem isn't just about the Beloved echoing the speaker's father — the volta is in the realization that it's happening again, in the present, where the speaker breaks the poem, rather than answer the professor. The final three lines of the piece, "how am I / supposed to write that poem as it slips / out of the cup of my hands & breaks." is, even after the heightened stakes present throughout, a turn that is not only necessary, but one I feel as sharply as the more dramatic images in the lines preceding.

I sound like litany. I love Sam Sax's *bury it* with my whole body. When he came to Butler through the Visiting Writing Program, he spoke a little about his writing practice and how essential it was to read his work aloud as he wrote. This makes sense. He started on a stage where words on the air, even sounds on the air, hold a different kind of power than words on a page. He said that he repeats lines over again until they're muddled, surprising himself with the new associations that happen in the mouth. This is evident in so much of his work, but is particularly present in *Hydrophobia*.

This is how most of my own poems happen now. Sometimes the litany survives; sometimes only the best line makes it, becoming an entrance or an exit or a sharp right turn. I wrote *My Best, Loneliest Friend* in one sitting. I was thinking about the friend, trying again and again to bring depth to someone I knew I was about to out as a rapist, to get the whole picture. I

fumbled aloud, qualifying the definition, “My best friend, one of my best friends, [...] my loneliest friend, one of my loneliest friends, one of my loneliest friends whose dad died of a heart / attack [...]”.

The biggest revision happened right at the end of the poem: “I’m really good / at very quiet *nos*. See, / I’ve been good. I can be / quiet. I’ve been good.” became “How else / do you tell / someone you love / you’re not // mad? I can / be quiet. I can / be good.”

I had written too much of the litany into the final stanza of the poem. I needed to take out some of the fumbling; to make the repetition of the beginning of this poem a starker contrast to the end. Litany is not just about the transformation of meaning and sound through repetition. It is also about what doesn’t make the list, the point at which the list stops.

At the beginning of this project, I really believed that *No More Odes to My Mouth* needed to be useful in a tangible way, to teach something, to effect some change. It is not, now, an argument, because my poetics do not sound like an action plan. My internal rhythms, my voice, with all of its internalized misogyny, bias, shame, quirk, tenderness, and breath, do not coalesce as bullet points. That is not what I believe poetry does or should do anymore. There are other places for that work. *No More Odes to My Mouth* is a struggling, a fumbling, to carry a reader, a listener even, through my perspective, shifty as it is. All this manuscript needed to be was a sound, a theoretical doing, a wondering, a barbaric yawp. And, I think, no, I know, it is.

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Epilogue

I.

I tell stories backwards. I leave out pertinent information —
the interesting information. I was Bop-It once for Halloween.

Some drunk zombie broke a bookcase covered in pumpkin lights,
so I helped my best friend move all of his books into his room. He used

to think about that night a lot. I didn't know until he started telling me
about the naked dreams of us, together, boppin'. That was an easy joke.

Okay, there was a boy. Strike that, there's a man. We're both old now, bones
for him, weight for me. I can't see him anymore. He's mostly a broken

bookcase now, here, this year. I keep forgetting the weight I wear. I keep waking
up alone, landlocked, and everything is wrong. I don't care about books, only

that I'm stroking them. Don't stop; *Twist it!* I don't know what I'll do
with all of this space: the bed, the cornfields. *Fall!* through it *Roll over!* and smother

myself face down and didn't I ask for this? It's too cold to even *Smoke!* my body
to wriggling ash snake. Everything is too *too* and not enough just like Bookcase

used to say I was when I was just trying to get all the books back onto his bed.
The problem with being alive is mostly trying. Bookcase tried to tell me. So I left.

II.

It starts with believing all men are dangerous if you give them enough
freedom and time. There's a white plastic chair, Halloween again,
Big John placing his hand on my knee and squeezing so hard

that I'm nearly sober now. Bookcase walking over and lighting
my cigarette and waving John off and telling me
I'm alright so I must be alright now. My mother's fiancé

driving me home from play practice at midnight
and he's taking a different route and I'm asking him

where we're going and he's making a joke

about kidnapping me and I don't think

it's so unreasonable and then we're pulling
into my driveway and nothing is happening

except that we go inside the kitchen and my mom says hi.

My dad yelling at the dirty blonde teenage babysitter
for clipping her toenails, stale sfogliatelle flying

and flicking across the walnut tabletop: *how dare you
in my house no class white trash you're going
to wind up pregnant with a black baby.* I know this

is the worst thing he can think of. My band teacher is telling
me to read this novel while I'm pulling the reed off
my alto sax because he sees the O'Henry collection

and I'm so smart. *It starts when a wife*

gets murdered during a kinky sex game. We're bonding.
I'm so advanced. Gifted, really.

III.

It starts with a softball screaming toward
my brother. I'm confused about the rules.

Dad is barreling, raging, *You did that
on purpose* and I could have really hurt
him. It starts with white nylons, white shoes,
a white A-line dress. A pale pink skirt brocaded
by pale pink flowers, toes tapping too loud. Dad
is awake: *You look like a stuffed sausage. Is your
mother letting you wear that?* It starts with a pale
pink nightgown and stolen Little Mermaid
underwear. *Don't tell your mother.* It starts with me,
pinned to a dark green floor. Dad pops a pimple
at the crook of my thigh, foaming, *Get the bad
blood out we need to get*

IV.

I am trying to tell the story forwards. I will gift you the pertinent information —
the little information. Listen, I was Halloween once. I built some man

into a Bookcase and it hurt my worst friend, who I loved. I used to think
about that night a lot, before I started weaving clothed dreams of us, apart,

sleeping. I wake now, often, and look: there's a girl. Strike that, there's a woman.
She lives just outside my window and I do not know how to let her in. We're not

too old yet, fresh faces, weight for her, bones for me. I can almost see her, alive, caught
in the glass and tapping at the pane. She wants to go, to drive. I keep remembering —

V.

Let me try again so that I don't lose my place:
the departed are just hungry. We do not stop until Kentucky,
which is a shame, because I will die here. We need to break
the windows at a gas station; we need to fill the tank,

the trunk. I will not stay in the car. This time, I will emerge,
steak knife hanging heavy at my side. Last Thanksgiving, it took me
more than a half hour to carve the turkey. I had trouble severing
the wing bone from the carcass. I know I will not find the juncture

between a zombie spine and a zombie head. I have never had
the strength to put down a dead thing. All I can do is drive
us to the secondary location. I can get her across state lines,
give her a chance. It happens in the candy/condom aisle.

I will beg her to go as it eats me, as I feed an undead hunger.
I will beg her to run. She will hesitate. She will live.

I. O Stomach

“Where is the girl serving // buttermilk in thimbles, is the girl in the blossomhouse gone?”
- *Jump rope song*, Diane Seuss

OR

“Il faut cultiver notre jardin.”
- *Candide*, Voltaire

No More Odes to My Mouth

My mouth is a man's. Each tooth claimed
by some pen mark on an x-ray, each bump
on my tongue staked by some straight-
talking surgical confidence, signed by some John
Hancock flourish of possession. They broke
my jaw a decade ago. It was growing wrong.
My teeth would not meet and a crack
team of slick-haired interns broke
and reset me. There has always been too
much idiom in my nuance, too much certainty
in my diction, too much self-preservation
in my gut to vomit up any unpolished
stone. I warned the nurse before I went in:
my throat is barbed in stressed syllables,
studded in spondees: *supine, contract,*
consort, sidewalk. I'm sorry. My uvula
is a pugilist's practice bag, heavy and ready
to take hit after hit. My mouth is a man's,
miss. My stomach? My stomach is a sea
of glass. Shattered bits roil and crunch,
heaving femme and desperate for soft feet.

O stomach of dangerous waters, corrosive
and brilliant, slick with oil and shredding
fibers. O Molotov, you useless broken bottle,
you turbulent, wine-dark sea, you corked
and tamed thing. You see it, right, miss? I need
to know that you can see what I've swallowed.
Here, put all your fingers in my mouth. Pull
at the corners; I won't squirm.

I, White Woman, J-Set in the Back Row

I have taped so many tits together that even today, I can find a nipple through two sweaters, blindfolded. I've been toting size 14 pumps, pinning wigs, angling Beyonce fans, and demurely j-setting in the back row since I came

into myself at seventeen. I didn't play Black Horse Rugby or brunch with lesbians until many years later. I learned to be a woman from Black men in fishnets and pudding balloon-weighted bras and to be honest, I did it wrong

for a long time. There is a confidence that men are gifted that makes them uniquely suited for long ponies and death drops. Novice drag kings have a steeper learning curve, waddling around their tube-sock bulges and thumbing at their noses,

eyeliner chest hairs peeking out of bound breasts. *Tragic, really.* And they were. Grace was biceps and white twinkles leashed by Black queens in leather. There is no seductive salvation for a slim-thick white girl with a goatee. You miss all the shots

you don't take and I was usually the DD, willingly. Now, when I walk down Mass Ave and see Pride flags on top of Dog Bakery signs, flying high over nitro ice cream shops, and etched into delicate macaron tops, I cackle contralto enough to alarm

the straight folks visiting for the afternoon. This street is trying so hard to see me and I can't help but feel a little like I'm backstage again, poised to dash after dollars my queens never had time to collect themselves. That is, I did, until that broad-

shouldered blonde stepped onto the sidewalk and offered me a smoke and a wink. Everybody hates their mother a little bit, but who would I have become without that first man pulling me onstage, whispering, *Get it, girl. Go get yours.*

My mother believes the world

is haunted, but doesn't notice
ghosts unless she's drinking

spicy ginger beer. Every other year
or so she'll spy a cardinal, if it swoops

into eyesight, and tilt her head,
saying hello to her father, now

feathered and as red in the face
as he always was, exuberantly

whistling and perched just steadily
enough to claim all the attention

in a room. At six years old,
I would stand on our back porch,

surrounded by chickadees pecking
at sunflower seeds. I would round

my small mouth, pushing air
out toward the holly tree, breathy

tones catching on its waxy spurs,
and wait for my own father to appear.

I see his robin redbreast everywhere
now, erratic and vibrato call startling,

puffed up and sucking all the salt air
from between the telephone lines.

All Genders Uphold Patriarchy and the Cycle Continues

I want to swallow that girl. I want to swallow her and put her under my tongue and babybird her back out into the middle of this baseball field, the outfield, my childhood outfield, no, Central Park. Look at the clumped little people pods, the human caviar dunce caps piled on top of each other all the way to the treeline. I want to scoop her up with my tongue tip; I want to scoop you up; I wish someone had scooped me up and puffed out their cheeks until the skin was hard as bluebird eggshells, all humidity on the inside and soundproof and *safe*. I want her to be safe. I want you to be safe. I want me to be safe.

I wish someone had seen my dad screaming on the sidelines, too blue sky, too green ballfield, too dry dirt, and realized something was wrong. Standing on his tiptoes on the bleachers, Skoal and spittle catching in his goatee, dusty red comic book explosions floating out over the T-ball diamond. *Get your ass out of the dirt, Sam. The ball's coming right to you. What's the matter with you?* I wish one of the mothers or one of the fathers or one of the coaches had come out from behind their palms, their mortified clamshell huddles, and swept down to third base. Surely someone knew. Surely some grownup knew. Where was my bluebird eggshell? I can be a bluebird eggshell. I can open my mouth real wide now; I can hold you, young one. I can stop you from going home by yourself. I can sit between you and that older man. I can sit between you and that Skoal-studded spittle. I can be a chainlink fence; step out of the clamshell. I can sit with you until your mom comes to pick you up. I can sit with you. I will sit with you; in front of you. You don't have to be alone. I wish I hadn't been alone.

You don't even know me, but sit here, on the flat of my tongue, little one. Grow your father's - feathers - awhile, here, inside the hard shell of my pursed lips, my puffed out cheeks. Get fat. Get squat. Read alone and eat cheese and watch too much TV and when you feel big enough, knock on the backs of my two front teeth and I'll crack open and you can brush yourself off on a hearth somewhere plush. Wait for something plush enough. Don't waste your french braid youth; all that tightly-knotted time. Protect your body and on days you can't, I will. Not that you asked. Not that I ever asked. I can be your hard bluebird eggshell. I wish someone had been mine. I wish someone had asked.

I Should Not Make You a Plant, But I Don't Know How Else to Eat You

I expect an eating disorder, sex trauma, a trip
to the psych ward — suicidal ideation. I expect what I expect: someone close

to you hurt you: frayed roots, bowed stem, a slight wobble near your top leaves.
I never worry about my body on a sidewalk anymore.

I don't live in concrete cracks. I have re-potted myself indoors. I swallow
every femme in the city, the country. Certainly I cannot stop

that car from pulling in front of you. I cannot stop the man getting out; I cannot
stop what happens next, I cannot stop

what has already happened and I cannot stop what happens next. He is in maximum
security now, has been for nearly a year. I'm sure,

in a few weeks, I will think about how much violence he will be made to eat
in prison, how many more people he will be made to hurt inside,

how hurt, inside, he was, he will be. But for now I cannot bear to touch
you. And even if I could, when has contact ever been good

to us? We can do nothing but witness each other's leaves — the curves
of our stems, the reaching. I can do nothing, again, but bury

myself next to you, a few inches, unbending, and hope
that you'll continue to grow up.

I, Ciswoman, Reject Softness

The kitchen smells like clove, cinnamon, and weed. Fruit flies circle the garbage disposal — something hopeful. Lydia brings the dough together on the countertop; gentle fingers do not melt the butter, the lard. *I really love apple pie. I have the sweetest tooth,* she grins, her chin five inches above the crown of my head. I add the nutmeg and begin to put the spices away. *I don't. Baking is safe, because I will not eat anything I make.* She's got this habit of hunching forward, pointing her big toes at each other. *I have worked hard to be small.* She touches my hip. *The best part is how soft we can get, how tender.* She presses the shell into the pan. Pricks the bottom with fork tines. I hate her as she bends to put the crust into the oven. Tonight, Lydia will bloom, bubble into a live thing onstage while I crumple into a barstool. She will croon and the room will soften. It will be too many more years until I understand how to raise a dough; how sugar brings yeast back to life.

First Shift at Tequila's

I have never held a gun. But I remember his cowboy boots, belly over the belt, cargo-colored shirt, ten gallon hat. I remember trying and failing to separate the ones from the fives and losing my place over and over again. He pulled it from its holster, placed it on the bartop. My hands shot up like I was back in middle school, small and smart and quick and trembling like a rabbit. He laughed, but you know this. I imagined pushing a finger into the hole in my gut. Of course it would have been my gut. I imagined crumpling, calling my partner or would it be my mother? I imagined the rag soaked in seconds, half a second. I imagined not being able to hold my blood in my own hands. I tried to think of the right words. *Oh honey. I'm just letting you know it's here. Just polite.* But I knew what he wanted.

To anyone on the overpass,

we look like lovers, sometimes. I can
see us how they might see us: from across
the interstate. We look alone together.
He looks for me across eight quiet lanes.

He looks for me from westward-bound,
I'm atop the hill: a cross, neon-lit, a mark
in the distance: *this way home*. I look
like I'm looking at him, like searching,

like beckoning. I am two nails in my chest,
palms outstretched and spine straight. I am
buried ten feet deep and swaddled by concrete.
I flicker. I blink. I am brightest in my dying.

I worry myself out. He looks for home. I am just
a thing to pass — a landmark, not a shelter.

My Best, Loneliest Friend

My best friend, one of my best friends, six foot four inches
of Western New York skin and a huge mouth that gets bigger
when he's drinking, my loneliest friend, one of my loneliest friends,

one of my loneliest friends whose dad died of a heart
attack when he was sixteen, raped me. My best friend, who drove too
fast, loves beef-on-weck, had never kissed me before he turned

over, locked his huge hole of a mouth over mine, needed me
like I needed him. My best friend, who never did take my dress
off, didn't, couldn't, last more than a few minutes, needed me. My best

friend, who loved the Sabres, loves his mother, cared for his two
younger brothers, was very drunk, raped me. I should have been
sad. He needed to borrow my body. And I mostly let him. I didn't

quite shove him off, didn't bite, just breathed *no* quietly enough
that we could both pretend he may never have heard it. He went
to sleep before I did under his dark blue sheets and the crack

in his ceiling. I kissed him
on the forehead
the next morning. How else

do you tell
someone you love
you're not

mad? I can
be quiet. I can
be good.

Men Do Monstrous Things But Are Not Monsters

There's a clean-shaven stone man holding his mother
or maybe he's grabbing his wife or maybe
he's embracing his daughter. Something

about the lighting or the shadows
or the skill of the sculptor makes it
a little difficult to tell.

There's a curdled honey colored
fungus or maybe the very beginnings
of a beehive growing over both of his eyes.

It doesn't really matter. He's looking past
her anyway. You know what they say about gazes,
about women inside pupils:

They're stuck; they're silent. Another balding bystander,
a bearded stone man is sitting on a granite till not two steps
from the tussle/cuddle/rumble and this one is reaching

out toward the bee-eyed assailant. The observer's feet
are planted. He's tilling himself. He's stilling
himself. Is he outstretched in protest? Is he holding

a hand toward the woman? To comfort? To stop? There
are no bees yet. Now that I intrude upon it, that woman
might be reaching out to touch the honey that is not

there or to hold the bare-faced man. She might be welcoming
him. He might be coming back, coming home, seizing
home. It doesn't really matter. She's sculpted stone.

Men Talk to Other Men to Make Themselves Feel Better

Matt pretended to be asleep when I grabbed my boots, pulled my leggings back on, floated across the parking lot to my car. I don't remember getting to my house in Buffalo. I only remember slumping into the white plastic chair next to Bookcase, my roommate,

on the porch, lighting a cigarette, telling him, *Matt fucked me last night. I think maybe we'll date now.* I only remember Bookcase being transparent as he always was when he was thinking very hard about how to explain the world to me. *I mean, it's Matt. You two are friends. That would be weird.*

I stared. I mumbled, *I think I need to buy Plan B. Will you take me?* In the parking lot of CVS, he bounced his thumbs on the wheel, *I'll talk to him about it, just don't get your hopes up, okay?* That weekend, they went for drinks together. This is where the ghosts hang out, huddling around

my shame over a sticky private bartop. They were two spirits clinking pints while I laid out on the futon, bleeding like a human, like I was still alive.

He Tells Me He Had Me

Text messages received from my boss 1/23/20 12:17pm

I had ~~the feeling you~~ wanted to say

~~something to me about the class. (...) You~~ were fine.
~~you were being yourself. (...) are we~~ **okay?** (...)

Just **checking** that **you don't** have any beefs with me
you **want** to **air**.

Because **i'm** always up for airing
of beefs. (...) no worries about **missing**
class. So i'm your prime example
of retrograde masculinity? Jesus (...) **love**
someday you're going to get honest
with me when you realize I'll **love**

you either way. (...) define "mulling through it."
Define "write me off" define "**doing**
the work." "doing the **work.**" "just that one

(...) **yes, it's good.** I think

the class is going well. **I'll take SOME**
credit for that, but not **too much.** I'll give
you a lot of credit for that. (...)

II. O Fingers

“I am struck with the thought that if Devotion was a crime, I had inadvertently produced evidence, annotating as I went along.”

- *Devotion*, Patti Smith

OR

“Your tongue is a rudder; It steers the whole ship.”

- *Play Crack the Sky*, Jesse Lacey

I Ignore the PunkGirl so EmoBois Won't Drop Me

Joan Jett winked at me, I'm pretty sure, & the crowd didn't drop me like I was so certain they would so maybe I was light enough this week & I am so good (in love) with every adrenaline-fueled white boy with tiny nipples & ribcages on the outside who can pick me up & did I miss it?

Did she wink right at me? Eyes open. Catch & hold flashes of gray sky, chipped black nails, & emoboi spittle-splashed eyelashes. I can hear *Story of the Year* as a sea of boys press their fingertips into my black jeans. *My hands are at your throat / And I think I hate you.* I am an entire generation of girls

choked, pinned to *But still we'll say, "remember when" / Just like we always do.* I am not looking at Joan Jett. Instead, I blink certainty through sloppy kohl eyeliner: My hands. Their throats. I hate just like a frontman, just like it's love, just like it's my fault. All of my friends are boys &/or in my head. *Until the day I die; I spill*

my heart for you. To do it right you hold your body rigid. I think she winked at me, but my head is turned. She cannot hold me like it hurts like I need it to.

The whore dies

first. She's young; she's half-naked; she's decapitated while on top of the athlete. Chin raised, mouth open,

eyes closed, a thin red line precedes a neck wobble, a thunk of skull, hair extensions rolling out of frame,

deeper into the woods. Her body, in pieces, becomes his horror, his vigilante talisman. The first time he fires

a bullet, he sees her candy-red fingernails on the trigger. The garotte tight against a jugular: her left thigh in the grip

of his hand. Her body, a memory, creates a killer. Her body, in pieces, becomes the virgin's warning: *give of yourself*

and we will take your head. The virgin did not see it happen, can't feel the whore pressing ten fingers into her chest

the way the athlete can, still. But when she finds the torso, she screams. *A head is just a head, post-machete.* The virgin

can not stop herself. She looks down into the whore's cavity, taps an index finger against the severed spine. Fascinated,

she digs until she finds the heart, hardening already. The virgin plucks it from behind the whore's breast and runs; she keeps

running. The whore's body, in pieces, in no way resembles the whore. It has to be this way. In her truncated name,

monsters will be slain. The virgin will flee, whore heart held in front of her untested body, a slick totem, beating

as the athlete draws near. Her body is most useful this way, in pieces. The memory: a motive. The heart: a warning.

He Teaches His Fans to Make Pain Absolute

Jesse Lacey's public apology 11/11/17

In an effort to address recent events and the public conversation currently happening, **I** feel it is important to **make** a clear and personal statement. The actions of **my** past have caused **pain** and harm to a number of people, and I want to say that I am **absolute**ly sorry. I do not stand in defense of myself nor do I forgive myself. I was selfish, narcissistic, and insensitive

in my past, and **there** are a number of people who have had to shoulder the **burden** of my failures. I apologize for the hurt I have caused, and hope to be able to take the correct actions to earn forgiveness and trust. Early on in my life, I developed a dependent and addictive relationship with sex. I was scared **of** it, **ashamed**, and unwilling or unable to admit it, and so it **grew** into a consistent and **terrible** problem. Years ago, **after** admitting my habits and cheating to my then soon to be wife, **I** began to approach my problem in a serious way. I **entered** professional treatment, both in group **therapy** and individual counseling, and revealed the **realities of** what a terrible place I had gotten to in my life, and what a terrible impact **my** actions had on people. **Lust**, sex, love, and arousal were coping tools for me,

and **I** returned to them repeatedly. I **detached** my own feelings and emotions from most of **my** sexual interactions. I hid, or lied about my **behavior** to escape reproach. I was a habitual cheater. I have been unfaithful in many, if **not** most of my relationships, including the relationship with my wife, who has with all of her might, patience, and grace, tried **to hold** our marriage together, despite having to endure the pain of the revelations of my past. It is heart wrenching that the most important changes in my life have come at the expense of **others**. I am sorry for how I have hurt people, mistreated them, lied, and cheated. I am sorry for ignoring the way in which my position, status, and power as a member of a band affected the way people viewed me or their approach to their interactions with me. And I am sorry for how often I have not afforded women the respect, support, or honesty that they deserved, and which is their right. I believe in the equality and autonomy of all, **but** in my life I have been more of a detriment **to** these ideals than an **advocate**. I am working to shed all my narcissism and my self obsession, and to be better. In sobriety I have changed my life and my mind in real and important ways. I have also revealed the truth of my behaviors to myself and to others. I do not have words to express the patience and help my wife has offered me. I love my family with an intensity and realness that I have never felt **before**, and as a husband and a father I have been granted the opportunity to wake up each day with the intent to serve my family and the people around **me**, and to feel, for the first time

that **I** have purpose. The fact **remains** that none of us get to put **a** wall up between who we are and who we were. I need to earn forgiveness. Concepts like repentance, **compassion**, and love, are made real through actions, and it's **through** my actions that I need to prove change. I hope I can show humility, and that the pain I have caused people can heal. I am not above **reproach**, and no one should be.

~Jesse Lacey

I Ask *Scream*'s Matthew Lillard to Teach Me

O Boy; O Sticker; O Knife. You are sharpest in the kitchen when you stoop and place your chin on Billy's shoulder. Show me how to crowd Sid into the corner counter as the corn syrup drips down a white t-shirt, as bodies litter the first floor like hastily discarded boxers. I do not want to be Sid. I do not want to be Rose McGowan, safely severed in a cat flap, hanging from the garage door. O Good Boy. You'll let Billy get you in the arm, in the gut. *Get up, Billy! Get it up!* O hands behind your head, elbows skyward and chest wide. Even as I watch pint after pint of you fall onto the kitchen tiles, I can't do it. I can't pray for Sid. Teach me to intone, *Stop it, Billy! I can't take it anymore. I'm feeling a little woozy here.* I need to be you, bent forward and leaning toward him. I see you keening, a performance. There's no strict femininity, no sliver of pink lace. Last masks standing, you and Billy: the last mascs standing. *My turn*, you huff, cradling your hemorrhaging stomach. Don't look at Sid, trembling, knifeless. Stay with the moment of tension, the withholding.

Will Billy give you your well-earned knife, the chance to *get up*, to be inside him? O moment before Billy relents or betrays. O Beat between *will he* and *won't he*. You and I, Matt, we can live at this altar. Take me with you. We'll all go woozy.

The Last Aubade Before I Leave

It begins with the two click-clack
night prowlers. They inch past the folds
in the door with the first trills of bird-joy calling

out to welcome sunbeams. They tumble between
rows of shoes, claws unable to find purchase on hardwood floors,
and hide in dress hems, chasing each other's tails around

the still-twilight of the room. The half inch of curtain
that can't quite cover the pollen-coated panes
beckons the Bronx-filtered sun to my side of the inherited twin

bed. A guest's alarm softly pings from beyond
the headboard. Each time he sleeps through it, the wakening
gets more insistent. Apparently, he can

not be persuaded. The cellist creaks the bathroom door
in harmony with the first round of early morning/late night
sirens. Sometimes it's the fire department; more often it's last

call for the police. I or some other occupant sleep-moans
with that first dry percolation of coffee beginning
to bubble in the kitchen. I will not go to it for several hours, blocking

the temptation with a comforter stitched
up near my eyebrows. Knees knock together
like tectonic plates as we promise to be the last greeters

of the Sunshine. We're happy she came,
but she makes the Moonbeam uncomfortable
and that company is so much softer.

Henry Was Never Mine

There were too many bodies in New York, under
and Frederick Douglass, on top of a yippy pitbull
into the courtyard to anyone
Bernstein blew his back out in the 80s. I do
waiting for me at midnight. New York knew
on when my card was out. Of course,
York passed me a brown
over. My leased ceiling did not warrant
my cockroach, boasted two three-inch long
twitched every time Tom or Michael
onto the foot of my twin
my body from 145th to 110th everyday for months,
artificial lake, while Black nannies pushed

New York. I lived on top of them, Sugar Hill, 148th
puppy, for a time. I do remember John. He would shout
smoking a blunt on the stoop that Leonard
remember Arafat. He had a bottle of Hennessy
my name within weeks, swiped me
my New York was never mine. Someone's New
paper bag with three newports to hold me
an answer on 311. Henry,
antenna and was a pervert. Henry
fucked me while rainwater dripped
bed. My stolen New York carried
to run circles around Jackie O's
blonde toddlers in strollers. My New

York was so many bodies that when I left,
and imagine Henry twitching from between
ghosts fucked me with my burgled fingers.

I'd lay down in my San Diego shower
the aqua tiles as New York

Contrapuntal In Which I Learn How to Eat Horror Again

He is teaching me to swallow

no. A full stop. Jump scares are palatable:

for obvious reasons. Most terror is safe
if I don't go home

when the dead girl shows up;

sleep while being

possessed is fine. I am used to not owning
my own body. There is a normalcy

in a black cloak, a top hat, a clawed man propped up
behind my door. He wants to be inside
of me, but my body is not a soft
home. I am terrified that I might throttle

horror. I am learning to sleep
with the lights on. Zombies are a hard

twinge in my pelvic bone that passes. Stalking is out

alone. He puts out all the lights for two
hours and lets me talk through the movie. I giggle

quip at decapitations before 2010. The orange
hue of blood, exposed brain, exposition
disguised as monologue. He is teaching me to

prey. My stomach is lead-lined. A body

in tension, in soundless prolonged
shots. The Babadook only stuck
around for two days. A hipster

something with my calloused hands,
my short-clipped fingernails. But I am

the only thing that can live in my walls.

The only horror that will
survive the lamplit night.

I cannot talk about humans without talking

about the debris in the space between *human*
& *value*
or the debris between *value*
& *capital*

[molar, blood, clumps of hair, cuticle, flesh]
[brick dust, shards of glass, tear gas canisters, glistening oil spots, a cracked cellphone]
[trampled cardboard, empty epipens]
[half a clipboard, the corner of a five dollar bill, a shattered Starbucks window]

What *evidence*
claims what land?

[broken condoms, cigarette butts, cotton fibers, chicken wing bones]

Can dignity be roped off,
measured, *worth*
any weighted thing?

[red medic band, wedding ring]

Can *men*
with tape-covered names cut
open & point to *resources*
as objects of incivility?

[uniform, sunglasses, riot shields, second position, & pli ]

[rage, fear, love]

Is there an *etiquette*
for owning oneself?

[petition, follow, like, share]

Does war not *scatter*?

[neatly slit water bottle husks, a left shoe]

Is a *civilian*
somehow less or more *human*
than an armed *force*?

[washing in the fountain, coddling a child, putting a bead back in her hair]
[molar, blood, clumps of hair, cuticle, flesh]

He Needs Me to Understand Him

Email received from my boss 3/3/20 2:17pm

Hey Sam, Thank you for **understanding my** strange (**strained**, I almost wrote) request that you skip class today. I needed a reset and I had **hope**d that AWP was going to provide **that**. The class went well, as our classes have generally been going, but I felt a little closer to the students this time. **YOU HAVE NOT DONE ANYTHING WRONG.** It was just a dynamic

that was developing which I **recognized** because of some other things that are happening in **my** life. There was just some tweaking that **needed** to be done, and

now that we've done it we **can** go back to our regularly scheduled **programming**. **YOU ARE AN AWESOME AND PASSIONATE AND KIND TEACHER AND I AM NOT SAYING ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR TEACHING.** We can talk more about this anytime you want. Give me a call. We can have coffee. I'm **sorry** if it was difficult.

Here's our new schedule: we're going to read **NORMAL PEOPLE** by the Tuesday after **break**. That day we will also talk about portfolios (which is a requirement I don't really understand myself). **And** then on Thursday we have Ken Honeywell. I was thinking that next workshop **submission** would be due on Thursday. Sound good? Really, let's talk sometime. **I will be sad if that left a bad taste in your mouth.**
Fondly,

Men Belittle Women to Make Themselves Feel Better

I write a love poem about watching a bright
red pyrex bowl slip so slowly out of the cup
of my hands & hit the kitchen tiles & break

my beloved walked barefoot over the threshold
& clucked & did not call out just clicked
his tongue like *daddy*

*issues why are you crying I would never
scream why are you crying I love
you but I do not trust you with my beloved
things & my professor*

clucked *well* why is she with this
jerk anyway & how am I

supposed to write that poem as it slips
out of the cup of my hands & breaks.

She Teaches Me to Leave to Get Out

Excerpt from Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's Opening Statement 9/26/2018

I drank one beer that evening. **Brett** and Mark were visibly drunk. Early in the evening, I **went** up a narrow set of stairs leading **from** the living **room** to a second floor **to** use the **bathroom**. When I got **to the top** of the stairs, I was pushed from behind into a bedroom. I couldn't see who **pushed** me. Brett and Mark came into the bedroom and locked the door behind them. There was music already **playing** in the bedroom. It was **turned** up louder by either Brett or Mark once we were in **the** room. I was pushed onto the bed and Brett got on **top** of me. He began running his hands **over** my body and grinding his hips into me. I yelled, **hoping** someone downstairs might hear me, and tried to get away from him, but his weight was heavy. Brett groped me and tried to take off my clothes. **He** had a hard time because he **was** so drunk, and because I was wearing a one-piece bathing suit under my clothes. I believed he was **going** to rape me. I tried **to** yell for help. When I did, Brett put his hand over my mouth to **stop** me from screaming. **This was what terrified me** the most, and has had the most lasting impact on my life. **It** was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett **was** accidentally going to kill me. Both Brett and Mark were drunkenly laughing during the attack. They both seemed to be **having** a good time. Mark was urging Brett on, although at times he told Brett to stop. A couple of times I made eye contact with Mark and thought he might try **to** help me, but he did not. During this assault, Mark came over and jumped on the bed twice while Brett was on top of me. The last time he did this, we **toppled** over and Brett was no longer on **top** of me. I was able to **get** up and run **out** of the room. Directly across from the bedroom was a small bathroom. I ran inside the bathroom and locked the door. I heard Brett and Mark leave the bedroom laughing and loudly walk down the narrow stairs, pin-balling off the walls on the way down. I **waited** and when I did not hear them come back up the stairs, I **left** the bathroom, ran down the stairs, through **the** living room, and left the **house**. I remember being

On the street and feeling an enormous sense of relief that I had **escaped** from the house and that Brett and Mark were not coming after me. Brett's assault on me drastically **altered** my life. For a very long time, I was too afraid and **ashamed** to tell anyone the details. I did not want to **tell** my parents that I, at age 15, was in a house **without** any parents present, drinking beer with boys. I tried to convince myself that because Brett did not rape me, I should be able to move on and just pretend that it had never happened. Over the years, I told very few friends that I had this traumatic experience. I told my husband before we were married that I had experienced a sexual assault. I had never told the details to **anyone** until May 2012, during a couples counseling session. The reason this came up in **counseling** is that my husband and I had completed an extensive remodel of our home, and I insisted on a second front **door**, an idea that he and others disagreed with and could not **understand**. In explaining why I wanted to have a second front door, I described **the** assault in detail. I recall saying that the **boy** who assaulted me could someday be on the U.S. Supreme Court and spoke a **bit** about his **background**.

Listen, I Get to Dream About Revenge, Because in Real Life I'm the Takeaway Tub

I pick my chopsticks off the bar before
the edamame arrives. My beloved
abuser meets my eyes and begins
to tell me how lovely

all ribcage, dry throat, politess. I'm imagining
a ramen tattoo on his neck,
hyper-real, sheen of fat across his jugular and

fresh noodles puffing steam over his blonde
stubble. I am salivating now;
the scent of ginger, scallion, and sesame

into my flaring nostrils. I begin to drool
and the corners of his mouth twitch. He believes
he's made me

that he might own
my loveliness. I bend toward him, knees parted and fist
clenched around the chopsticks.

toward me, expectant, blue
eyes shining and certain
he has me. This time,

the sticks into his neck and tonkotsu
spurts out, hot and thick. I latch my mouth
just to the right of his perverse adam's apple and suck
the milk broth from under his upward-tilted
chin. He whimpers; he crumples
off the stool. I follow him, harpy now, wings

from the crescents etched
into my back, ten perfect matches for his fingertips.
His pinprick pupils roll back and I do not see it happen.
I'm moaning, looping each slick noodle around

inhaling static air through my nose so I don't

I look,

delicate

unfurling

wet,

He leans

I jab

sprouting

my tongue,

have to stop draining him. I feed myself, nearly
choke.

until he's just a plastic takeaway tub, useless
and hollow. I kick the husk with a talon
as I launch myself into the air,

and smirking as I join the ravenous

fanned out above me.

I eat

screeching

murder

Three Dollar Tip

Call me <3: 317-362-3098

I crumple the number in one fist
& let each digit fall away
like blueberry scone bits
to the bottom of the trash bin
like the last flakes of my sex
appeal like my early twenties
like every hot boy mistaking
my body for fuckable like
mismatched morning lingerie
like lingering fingertips like old
catcalls in new cities like invasion
like invitation like didn't I want this
like didn't I demand to be taken
seriously I crumple like if someone
isn't trying to touch my backbone
do I have one at all like is it worth it
to be heard and unseen I crumple like
coming down like falling like feeling
the weight of my body for the first
time no arms behind my knees no palm
on my head no slipknots no moisture
no friction no ease no red marks no
bruising no teeth no mystery hairs just
apron strings & a three dollar tip.

III. O Gullet

“Pour the unhappiness out / from your too bitter heart, / which grieving will not sweeten.”
- *Another Weeping Woman*, Wallace Stevens

OR

“So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive.”
- *A Litany for Survival*, Audre Lorde

I Need You to Know that I Still Taste Salt When There Isn't Any

The anchorman said it might rain, but Dad wanted to go camping, so we went camping. He beamed bright yellow all the way across the bay. He was so happy with one hand on the wheel, bow lurching far above my head. I cut my tiny pruny foot on a razor clam, not bad, just a little salty before the storm — a little sting, a little stick. I knew not to cry. I knew to keep digging my heels backward, to keep clamming, to keep wriggling until the sun went down.

We set up the tent later than we should have and of course it started. Jamie had learned to be quiet already. Brie wailed and I shushed her, held her. Mom kept the tent up for as long as she could against the wind, the rain. As metal poles crashed around us, Dad stood in the center of the falling thing, eyes wide and red and glassy. We begged to go back to the boat as the olive tarp sagged, as the blue crabs escaped the bucket, scuttling out to the shoreline. It must have taken hours until he finally relented, huffed and puffed and stormed out, kicking heavy sand behind him. We were supposed to follow.

I remember holding my sister's screaming body over my head, breathing through my nose and trying not to think about what happens to lightning when it strikes the water. My mother grabbed her under the armpits, hoisted her over the side and threw her into the cabin. Jamie must have been with Dad, already stuffed into the bow of the boat. I assume my mother grabbed me, but I only remember putting a lock of my sister's hair into my mouth, sucking the salt out and waiting for the nor'easter to rock us into morning.

Triple Sonnet Bushel

After After Apple-Picking by Robert Frost

It's been a very long time
since I've held
a freshly picked apple
in my hand. So long,
in fact, there's a good
argument that I've never
held an apple in my grown-
up hands. I do not know
what it would feel
like now, to reach up
and pluck a growing
thing from its limb. I do
not know the ease of holding a red
and yellow orb in my adult grip.

I only think I remember the scrabbling.
I only think I remember the reverence
with which I would spot and pick
the largest apple in my vicinity,
the one closest to falling, most keen
to fly. I only think I remember
the coolness of the film that water
creates on a velvet peel (is it a peel
if it hasn't been slit?) I only think
of the audacity of still-growing
feet to run from mothers, white
paper bag swinging near knees, eyes bright
and searching for the tamest prey. I only think
I remember the certainty of field-trip youth,

the confidence of girl
versus tree, the surety
of the first time I take
something away
to feed myself. I ate
four apples in the back
of the station wagon

before we left the orchard.
Cores littering the grey
upholstery, I only think
I remember the apple-
sauce nausea bubbling up
as I watched rows and rows
of trees shrink before I turned away.

My grandmother is a WASP. She lies

about her year of birth, which is to say, she smiles
a little when she announces that it is improper
to ask a woman's age as we stick candles into cake.

She has done this since forever, so much shorter
than her two olives, bone dry forever.
My mother says Grandma finds herself now, circling

the story of the mother cow who wouldn't leave
the farmer alone until he followed the mother
cow over a mile away to a ditch. Her calf

had gotten itself stuck. My WASP grandmother
is so impressed with that mother cow.
I can hear it over the phone, in the question at the end

of every decree. She gets like that, impressed, more easily
now. She was reading that book, the one with the cow,
on New Year's Eve, before she went to sleep, before

she woke up, one sock just a little akimbo, and slipped
on her way to the bathroom. I was not there. My mother
circles her now, the way I used to, hand on her elbow.

I can hear her six states away, unable to do anything
but low outside my window, an urgency
I recognize in a language I no longer speak.

I Can Hold It; I Just Have to Find the Right Pocket

I am going to have to tell you
eventually, but, yes, Mom, please
fill this space with the olive oil spattered

between the burners and how far away
your son is. Today, coat the phone in
crochet stitches. Give me low stakes

and the beach falling away. I can hold it; I can do

the little pee dance; I've been holding it, but now
I know I'm holding it; I can hold it;
I can

[mother and father and (ex) lovers in a brainbox brainspace
jello mold jellyfish box of lines: long rectangular bars quick spurt
bust breath wind too big to catch in a mouth
long alveoli squirrel's nest wind does not
aerate: it erodes
wind is a temperature: not a nourisher box of playing cards (a shoebox:
take the lid off
at 2:01pm
close it again
at 2:55pm
shove it under
the bed)

wind slipping whistling out the slit sides

what box breath
fox depth hole
burrow warmth breath
what exhale wind moves
away again and brushes
her toes along after a kite
string spiked with punnets thing,

breeze cool wind bitter carries

as easy as breathing

breezing not sated

unsatiated

wind down one pipe

drink down

another

{They We I} Survive Their Father if {I} Do the Talking

{They We I} tiptoed toward the back door. {We I} reached ten pudgy
fingers to the knob. {We I} chased down my brother. {We I}
wrangled my sister. {They We} huddled under the walnut table. {We I}
pulled their tiny bodies into {my our} crisscrossapplesauce. {He I}
stroked {my our} sister's raven hair. {She I} kissed
{my our} brother's forehead, his hard-cut fringe. {I} pulled
{them us} into {their our} blue carpet basement. {I}
sat {my our} brother in front of the building blocks; {my our}
sister on
the bunkbed. {I} started the video. {I} held {them}.
{We I} wish {my our} mother was home. {She} smells
like popcorn. {We I} smell like perfume. {We I} smell like grandma.
{We I} have the same eyes. {She} is not here
& the floorboards are cold & the banister is white & the couch is gold & the steps are
so cold & {they} need to be quiet & I'll be back down in a while

My Retinas are Less Pigmented than Normal

Where the heck are you from? he asks. *You've got the blondest fundus I've seen all month!* He points

to the scan, the pinprick cluster of pigment right in the center of my eyeball. I blink and ask

him to ask again. *What did your father put in your eyeball?* He wants to hear Northern Italy.

I'm supposed to tell him I carry Bari and Naples and the particular violence my father carries

in his eyeballs, the particular violence his mother carried in hers. Instead, I ask him if it is dangerous,

this blonde fundus. I ask him if the sun could hurt me; if it could do permanent damage. *Those are two different*

questions. He laughs behind his mask, his cheeks dimpling near the straps. *If they made sunscreen for our peepers,*

I would prescribe it. The sun has hurt my eyes for my entire life. When he hands me the prescription slip, I squint. *L: -4.50 R: -5.0.*

My eyesight has improved. I am less nearsighted this year than I was when I still had health insurance. My glasses are too

safe, now. Dr. Godfrey wants me to buy thinner glass for my frames. He wants me to buy a year's worth of contact

lenses. This will not make me safe. This will help me see. It will hurt as it always has, but now I know why.

He Knows Me

Text message received 5/14/19 6:39am

Samantha **I know you** came home for Mother's Day to honor and show your Mother the respect she well deserves. And I'm proud to see how loyal

you are to her. **I** would never begrudge Jane that. She is a great mother and a better person. But I am deeply **hurt** by the lack of respect I know you have shown me ever since the day **you** saw your mother hurt after

I told her that I had to leave. **I was** a 32 year old man who had a **physically, emotionally, and cruel** mother that beat her children **and was** rejected by the woman who was **supposed to** love honor and respect me for years. I am a very physical and emotionally needy man that needed the **comfort** and attention of his partner. I was constantly touching and trying to reinforce the bond between us and she rejected me for years. And when other women would come on to me and desired me I rejected their advances because I loved **you** -r mother and wouldn't disrespect her. Finally

with the help of a therapist and the men in AA that mentored me, **I made** the decision that had to be made so that I didn't do **something** that a couldn't live with. And that hurt your mother and the woman I loved and all of her children. The day **that** I did that I was **crushed** just as much as you're mother and cried for months because I wasn't going to wake up in the same home as **my children**.

I wasn't and never **will** be perfect. I have made my apologies and **corrected** the **those things never to do them again**. I have done my penance and respected **your** feelings and for the most part kept my **big mouth** shut because I felt that I deserved **your wrath**. Now I know in my heart of hearts that I have been a good father and and a good man who **deserves** the respect, **love** and admiration of the people who are in my life. Please for your sake and peace of mind.

Seek forgiveness for my **humaneness**.

I will not continue to communicate with you until you can **find it** in your heart to do so. Our relationship being strained this way leaves a huge hole in my heart that can't be filled with small talk over a cup of coffee on the week of my birthday. Please search your heart **for** forgiveness for I will never be whole without you love in heart. I love **you** I used my words to try and reach you and

I know you are a super writer of words. So please don't **refute my feelings with your power of debate**. Our deeds and actions are the only thing

that can **heal** both of us.

In Which I Tell My Dad About Tornado Sirens

I've never had a father, Dad. I know that now,
but that night, I watched you bellow, and I knew:

this is safety. You taught me to flick out my tongue,
test the salinity of the air before bracing. All rain

tastes like bottled water here in the midwest.
It's unsettling. I watched my best friend roll

her eyes when her father called about the tornado
sirens going off. Where was her salt-mouth, her search

for the quick crack of lightning, the thunderclap?
How could I have known? She does not jump

in front of her father, Dad, does not fear for anything
he might grab, anything he might pull toward him, might

caress or crush before he passes. I didn't know that some girls
get a warning instead. I thought we all cowered, placated. I thought

we all ran to the windows, stuck Duct tape crosses on the panes
and curled below the sill, hands to our ears as the house shakes.

My Body is a Map

My body is a map, gray and soft. Not soft like the Poets talk about prepubescent girls. Not soft like supple, like Beatrice, like Caroline Kennedy. Not soft like pure, not like silk drawn through large hands. Not soft like delicate: buckled fawn legs. Not soft like fur. Soft like age. Soft like sedentary. Soft like hearty. Soft like a preference for terrycloth, heavy comforters. Soft like the Midwest. Soft like wings instead of triceps. Soft like a public school secretary, like sapphic. Soft like a reckless youth: left behind, across state lines. Soft like pinprick hand-bones and too much skin. My body is a map that has not been read in awhile. My body is a map covered in coffee stains and very old pinholes. My body is a map I try not to open. I, map, only fall open after midnight. My body is a map I borrowed once. I am a map to nowhere. My body is a map, but I don't drive anymore. My body is a map I keep just in case.

Epithalamium for My Brother's Fiancée

I could drive to Georgia & put on the aquamarine dress, but I am not going to your wedding. I could

make the day about you & my brother; I could stand in the line of southern belles & I could hold

a bouquet. I could dab my eyes & I could pull my elbow out of my father's reach. Of course

I would cry & of course there would be a compass tattoo on a bridesmaid's elbow & the toasts would be

done & the buttercream would be melting. But I am not going to see it, that ivory paste curdling on rented china. You,

of course, will & I need you to know you can drive. You chose this room & I am grateful & I am not there

& if you ever need to drive, you can. Would you take my brother with you, please? Could you hold him, now that I can't?

I look down at her hand,

then up at her mouth, and I'm unsure
that I remember how to write a poem.
I know I once knew. Does it break?

Do you trust it won't bite? Will it pull
away as I tap its teeth with an index
finger? What if they're hollow? Will it

crack open, react fluorescent? Is there
any joy left here? I'm unsure that I
remember how to love someone. I feel

like she's everywhere. If I could just
knock my fingernail against her canine,
I could catch her. I could hold it.

Midwest Sirens

I feel about cicadas the way I imagine people who move to New York City feel about sirens. They keep me awake. I wonder about their insides. I lie in bed and listen to millions of critters screaming. I wonder how other humans can bear to drift off into their night, leaving the cicadas behind in the still-awake Midwest. I am fascinated, which is to say, their bodies disgust me and I must hold them. I have only ever seen their husks in daylight. The trees outside my closed windows cast jagged shadows and I imagine the weight of millions of hollow bugs bending the bows to taunt me, to haunt me. It is not fair. No one ever taught me how to be empty, how to chitter like an instinct, how to stay in one city, how to continue a conversation from the day before. I am expected somewhere tomorrow and I have to show up. I have to bring a casserole.

Every night on the porch, we speak

of the discomfort of handcuffs, the preference for leather shackles, the timely need for nipple piercings before I turn

thirty, a knowledge of knots: I know slips; he knows rigging. I giggle at his suggestion of a BDSM tacklebox, a midwestern

attaché case, hardware he won't order. His red; my yellow. We argue about chastity belts, the cruelty in withholding during an act of charity.

We debate the efficacy of erotica versus tumblr gifsets, sexy mobile RPGs against deviantart accounts. I pretend to agree

on the importance of boundaries, of tease. We discuss until I'm not wet anymore. My lips slow, breath returns to vanilla, to wine, then sours,

dusty until I brush my teeth. Minty and clean. I turn left at the top of the stairs and he turns right. He stands in his doorway and I knock

an elbow against his before I close my own door. We are nearly asleep. He is terrified of touch. So am I. We'll start again in different states, we promise. We'll use our bodies next year, maybe, safely, apart.

In Which a Warlord Tries on a Wedding Dress

She brought her wedding dress over to my place today, pulled the hem over her head and walked downstairs into the living room. This has happened to me before. I have crossed a leg on a sofa while some comrade, some beloved warrior, has descended, eyes bright, fingers fidgeting on the railing. They never trust their own eyes in this. *Do I look like a bride?* I have never felt qualified to answer, but it's hard to fuck this up. Look at the cut, the color. The royal blue against her scarlet hair. Imagine her head at his shoulder, chin raised and toes peeking out of nude heels. Ask her to spin, slowly. Smile softly; whisper *he won't know what's hit him*. Don't flinch. You've practiced this. Watch her grow surer with each rotation. I used to think this was cruel, granting permission to dream. I used to think it was permission, this decree: *you're ready. This is it*. I am growing into a naive adult. She stands on the bottom stair and I believe in mithril now. She wears it underneath the dress: a love that is light, brilliant, and safe, not the weapon. She is only asking about the dress. That fits, too.

Prologue

When the zombie apocalypse comes, my roommate
will balance the molotov cocktails between her knees.
This means that I have to drive, at least until we clear
the city. I know I will be able to do this. I know
the entrance ramp will not phase me. I curl my toes
against the gas pedal. I carry us past cornfields, perfect
pairs of moonlight reflecting back at us every few miles
from between the stalks. I roll down the window half an inch
as soon as we reach a curve of the world that is un-speckled
with buildings, telephone poles. I light a cigarette and she sputters,
Are you crazy?! The cocktails! I will sigh and let it fall out
of the firm grip of my fingers, into the wind, landing like
a first compromise, smoldering behind us until it is just
ash. No zombie will mind. They are not chasing us;