I am not my mouth: A Poetry Collection

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis.
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Q: Your manuscript reveals a true lust for metaphor. How would you characterize your work in a story-telling metaphor?

A: There is a corkboard in my childhood bedroom. This corkboard is covered in little scraps of paper; movie theater tickets, a ribbon I won at the state fair the year I worked there, the corner of an envelope that Jordan—a boy I met at the very same fair—gave me his phone number on. This is a board of memories. In Lexington, I don’t have a corkboard, I have a tin box with a decoupage lid. Inside I’ve place brochures from a wax museum, playbills from the performances of The Glass Menagerie and Cabaret I saw in NYC, gold leaf I bought in Japan, and a tea cup. I magpie the shiny things in my life. Everything on my corkboard and in my tin box has emotional weight. When I move on from college, wherever I live, I’m sure the collection in my tin box will grow. I write poems like I collect these innocuous things. It is all a part of how I collect memories, how I remind myself of what is important to me. When I hold that pink teacup in my hands, I remember the day I bought it. The thrift store I went to with my friend Darcy after a long day at the Oregon coast, the taste of salt on my lips as we laughed. The teacup brings me happiness. Just like that teacup, a poem is an externalization of a memory or feeling. This externalization can honor the memory, but it can also help the writer disown a memory that brings them pain by placing it outside the self. In my thesis, I worked through both ideas in order to find the best way to tell a story or perhaps to preserve a moment in time with all of its emotions captured inside.

Q: What drew you to this type of thesis?
A: I have spent the last six months thinking about what it means to tell a story. In my creative writing thesis, I wanted to explore poetry and its strengths and weaknesses as a mode of communication. I’ve been writing poetry since the 6th grade with some dry patches here and there. The opportunity to write forty poems in under a year seemed like just the project to culminate my creative and critical studies of English over the past four years.

Q: Why poetry?

I think poetry, more than any other artistic medium, was created to encapsulate the emotional truth of a story. The “province of a poem” according to psychologist John Guthrie, is “experience,” which is “broader than thinking” (575). This explains to the non-poet why poetry means so much to those of us who read and write in the form. In basic terms, the purpose of writing a poem is to share the experience of the poet with the reader. There is something indescribable in this exercise that escapes the bonds of basic “thinking.” In “New Love Poem,” I used a Frank O’Hara-esque reliance on obscure and personal allusion to explore the ways poetry communicates on a connotative level. The reader falls into the rhythm of sounds while punctuating personal reference (alluding to places in Japan, “daikon,” and Star Trek fanfiction) with undeniably universal images (“half chewed Big Red,” “full pots of Maxwell House” and the sensation of a “phone hot in my hand”). In the poem the speaker claims to “live in the connotations of things,” something unique to the poetic genre. A poet must manipulate the denotations and connotations of language in order to reach the emotional truth she wishes to convey to her audience.

In order to fully engage with the medium, I wrote poems stemming from my own experience and language as well as the experiences of others and in the case of one poem, I used exclusively the words of another person to tell their story. While writing this thesis I learned that
sometimes to tell a story, it is more important to convey the emotional truth of an event, specifically traumatic events, rather than the factual progression of what led to the event. This realization is especially important in poetry, a mode where the main purpose of the author is to place a feeling in the reader.

Q: What sort of other literary works did you read and how did they affect your poems?

A: The first book I read was the graphic novel *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel which made me think a lot of about how my mind was shaped by my childhood experience. Throughout the book, she focuses on her experiences with psychotherapy and a book called *The Drama of the Gifted Child* which, oddly enough, I read at the behest of my own therapist the year prior. This gave me personal context for the graphic memoir and increased Bechdel’s ethos as well as her pathos. She spends a great deal of time contemplating the defunct psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and his analysis of dreams. Reading this book lead to a series of poems about my dreams, as I thought about the way our minds create alternate realities with figurative significance. Specifically, “Asura’s Calendar” is a product of a midsummer naptime nightmare and an ill-advised foray into the deep corners of Wikipedia. I found that my dream contained symbols eerily pertinent to my personal life at the time which gave me the perfect opportunity to experiment with narrative and language. According to Bechdel and Freud, dreams have the weight we give them and if we believe that “underneath the manifest content, hidden in various ways and for various reasons, is supposed to lie a potentially more revealing latent content [which] may be composed into surreal and emotionally loaded narratives which reflect influences from structures at the latent level whose direct expression is difficult or impossible” (Pickering and Attridge 421). So the dream became the manifestation of the symbols and signs I wanted to explore.
According to the tenets of post-structuralism, narratives and literature are not the purview of the author but rather of the reader. “What we think of as an “author” is usually a textualized figure, a construction composed by readers of various texts, only some of which are the work of the author in question” (Scholes and Comely 3). So I leaned toward surreal tones and images to contribute to a construction of the author as could be seen exclusively by the reader. “Asura’s Calendar” is a surreal piece with multiple, unrelated metaphors and images, I wrote the poem that way intentionally. The use of months as characters allows the reader to bring their own connotations of that time of year to the piece. The original inspiration came from a dream so I followed incoherent, yet connected ideas to make a three-sided poem about a weak-willed character named “Kat” who acts as an avatar for both the reader and the author. The poem encourages the reader to “feel free to pursue textual lures and metaphorical trails that seem to lead away from any particular textual object in the hope that they will, if pursued creatively, result finally in a new approach to the original object” (Scholes and Comley 7). In other words, the poem is long and filled with strange images from the “Flagpole Café” to the narrator “Kat” who “becomes cat” and is plagued by personified months. These images and time periods are textual lures for the reader to play with. What does it mean for Kat to “become” a cat? Why is May a professor? I have my answers to these questions, but the reader has more exciting ones.

I mentioned earlier that I engaged with Frank O’Hara’s style, but I also identify with his quasi-satirical essay “Personism: A Manifesto” which informs how I view poetry. O’Hara states that his movement of “Personism” is about creating the poem as an object and “puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person,” the person in this case being the reader or the subject of the poem (O’Hara 248). Thus the poem becomes an object that belongs to neither party but exists independently. This resonated with the ideals of post-structuralism that I was wrestling
with as I began the collection and so “Personism” found its way into my attitude about writing poetry.

Q: Once you decided on poetry, where did you go from there?

A: In original drafts of my thesis proposal, I wanted to work with place-based interview poems. I was reading Gulf poetry about Hurricane Katrina at the time, and was particularly influenced by *When the Waters Came*. This made me want to write poetry about both Oregon and Virginia, particularly Washington and Lee, where the culture had contributed so intensely to the mental breakdown I catalog in the poem “Asylum for a Straw Man.”

The poem opens with quick, unmetered lines and repeated words to represent the harried state of the speaker’s mind. The imagery of speechlessness becomes integral as the speaker purposefully shuts his “orifices” and compares himself to a “cantaloupe.” He promises to keep his silence about the unnamed event that caused his trauma, but with no sympathy he is strapped to a hospital bed and begins writing poems in his head.

In the end, I only managed two interviews and one interview poem. What I discovered through my journey of writing was that I was interested in the idea of voice, and how we use words to create voice and through it, meaning. So instead of several interview poems, I began utilizing the building blocks of narrative like point of view, tense, frame, and dialogue to find out the best way to capture the emotional core of a story. Poems like “Scavenger’s Love Song,” “Rehab in Charlottesville,” “I climb trees,” and “A Walk in the Woods,” are all a part of the journey I took in discovering the narrative forms I prefer as a poet.

In “Scavenger’s Love Song,” I worked in the third person to tell a humorous story about three vultures who are caught in a love triangle. I used physical description as well as white space to play with speakers in the poem. Each bird has a turn to speak and share its side of the
story as they take their place on the page. The poem starts with traditional, unrhymed quatrains with eloquent imagery such as the sun as a “blood orange juiced on the Blue Ridge.” This tone is turned on its head by the introduction of the topic of the poem, adultery in the animal kingdom which is established with the phrase “a casual avian dicking.” This juxtaposition of syntax creates a humor that flows through the rest of the poem as the speaker becomes the voice of the male vulture begging for the love of the vulture he cheated on. It required a lot of revision in order to adequately and accurately switch from each character’s voice without any external narration. Since writers do so in prose, I saw no reason this conceit could not extend to poetry.

“‘Untitled’ in a Charlottesville Rehab Center” is based on an interview I had with a close friend who left Washington and Lee after an attempted suicide. Because the personal information was so specific in the interview, I was unable to use her language directly and still manage to maintain anonymity. This poem is my way of honoring her story while forcing myself to write in the persona of a person that I know, which turned out to be more difficult than writing in the persona of a constructed character. I found myself creating characters in the poem in order to further the sense of enclosure the speaker feels when she is surrounded by walls, people and even her skin which she cannot reconcile with what people see. Others call her “snake” but she does not agree with that. Her obsession with confinement is released when she draws a picture of a girl who is coming out of her skin. The drawing is a tangible representation of the way the speaker feels and the poems ends on the completed drawing which is deemed “peaceful” in its subject’s freedom from her skin.

Because metaphor is the purview of the subconscious and the subconscious is like an elephant charging through a rainforest, my poems took on a unified tone with recurring metaphors, images and characters that I didn’t intend. I discovered a fondness for trees, insects,
winter and fall, and an attitude that I mock in “Recasting the Bozzetto” by expressing the speaker’s contrasting desire to be funny and meaningful as she laments “my tongue will never be silver / if its always stuck in my cheek.” I found myself writing down quotes I found in the books I was reading and that I came across on the internet. A poet is a mosaic-maker and, particularly in the type of poetry I was pursuing, any words that resonated with me found a place in my collection. Poems like “Asura’s Calendar,” “New Love Poem,” and “Happiness” have quotes I found while wandering through Wikipedia—not a reliable source for critical analysis, but a fruitful destination for creative ventures. These quotes spurred many of the poems in the collection and are the basis of my reliance on the language of others as a source of inspiration.

My first idea did not fail me. Though interviews were no longer my main goal, I found myself using the language of others in the way I originally intended. These readings, quotes, and voices became an interview process all its own.

Q: Your collection is divided into sections. How did you come to that decision and why?

A: Eventually, I realized an obsession with images of mouths and teeth. I found that while I had been thinking about the role of speech in storytelling, I had subconsciously focused on the mouth throughout the collection. At the urging of Professor Lesley Wheeler, who also noticed this “preoccupation with mouths and teeth,” I named the collection after a poem that was once entitled, “I am not my mouth.” This poem’s title was also a refrain within the poem as it, starting every stanza. It went through some revision and once I realized I wanted to title the collection after the poem, I removed the title in order to illustrate the absence of speech within the poem. There are now simply brackets where a title should be representing a visual symbol of the hole that can both be mouth and wound. The title is salient for the entire collection and for the thesis of my work as I realized I was focused on storytelling as a way to disown trauma. The
mouth tells stories, but I am not just the stories my mouth tells. Because of the preoccupation with speech and mouths, I separated the thesis into three sections, each named after a part of the mouth. The first section “{tongue}” is about the speaker’s childhood and the negative experiences with her family, in particular her father. “{tongue}” was the most fitting title as the tongue is the root of the mouth, the root of speech. These poems were the root of everything that happened to the speaker afterward. The second section details the speaker’s first two years at Washington and Lee which included her first romantic relationship and a sexual assault. This dealt with the dissonance between the inside and outside of personal experience. We do not always accurately and honestly share how we feel. So the speaker’s superficiality (and the superficiality of those around her) along with her sexual experiences made “{lips}” the most pertinent title. Finally, the section “{teeth}” imbues the reader with agency and hope as the speaker of the poems goes through another failed relationship, but rises in spite of her pain and moves to a place where she is able to own her past and wield it as a tool, almost a weapon.

Q: Where did you start?

A: Well, technically I started during Professor Miranda’s advanced poetry seminar last winter term when our class was challenged to write poems about the demons in their lives. Two poems from that class were the foundation for this project: “Starlings,” and “It’s a Shame,” both of which I further revised for inclusion in this collection. They also acted as springboards for two of the topics which recur throughout my collection and are the roots of the period of emotional disturbance I experienced during my sophomore year and which I commonly refer to as my “mental breakdown.”

“Starlings” is about the speaker’s relationship with her father, an abusive alcoholic whose depravity causes trouble for her family’s finances. The eponymous starlings exist in “the garden”
of the speaker’s childhood home but her father warns her that they “are bad for the grass” so he scares them away. The story proceeds and the speaker proclaims that starlings don’t bother her anymore because she “has no grass for them to ruin.” This is both an empowered and damaged image. The lack of the fertile “grass” or “garden” implies desolation and emptiness, but as the starlings are portents of bad things to come, the lack of starlings at the end gives the speaker hope.

“It’s a Shame” takes place much later in the speaker’s life and details another abusive relationship. The male in the poem convinces her to do drugs and then berates her for not being “skinnier” and “better.” His presence is terrifying, “blocking out light,” but as the speaker sobers and returns home she is haunted by the anger she feels in the form of fire. “Volcano in her lungs” hardens into “igneous” in her “veins” representing the long-lasting and deleterious effects of abuse.

Q: Is sounds like depression and mental illness are important topics to you. Why is that?

A: I wanted to write poems about trauma because I was interested in the idea of storytelling as healing since it had been a valuable tool in coping with the events that lead to a my major depressive episode and the aftermath. With its intense emphasis on concrete images to express nebulous ideas, “poetry, it has been argued, may be a particularly appealing medium by which to cope with the unpredictable episodes of mood swings” (Pennebaker 517). I found there was something therapeutic in the ability to place the story outside of myself, to write it all down and feel it once more. For me, writing poetry became a way to take back the unwanted occurrences in my life, to gain agency over my demons. I found that describing the monster in my closet made it significantly less scary. Poetry was the mode that worked best because of its reliance on figurative language, one of the best ways to capture a personal experience and make
it relatable to others. While I can describe my monster as “red,” I can manipulate what kind of red the reader sees to cause an emotional reaction by creating a red metaphor. The monster can be “a red cherry” with connotations of consumption, succulence and sexuality. It can also be “a rotting cardinal” giving an opposite reaction. This is the magic of figurative language.

The basic humanness of poetry is what drew me to the form. In fact, the human mind is distinguished by its “capacity to bring nominal order to experience through metaphorical identification” (Attridge, Pickering 417). Poetry is the counterintuitive ordering of the world by peeling back the layers of the self in order to lay bare a truth and then obfuscating that truth again with layers of metaphor. But central to confessional writing is self-exploration, something that sounds obvious but took me a while to realize.

Q: So would you say poetry healed you?

A: Not at all, there’s no such thing as healed. Honestly, it made me realize the nature of hurt and the recurring stressors in everyday life. Poetry should be taken daily like a vitamin supplement. Not FDA approved, but Chauncey-endorsed.

Not only does writing poetry help me personally, but certain scholars have researched the psychological reasons writing can be therapeutic for the population at large. James Pennebaker links the positive results of writing therapy with the release of stress: “Just as constraining thoughts, feelings, or behaviors linked to an emotional upheaval is stressful, letting go and talking about these experiences should, in theory, reduce the stress of inhibition” (Pennebaker 164). While I agree with Pennebaker’s premise, I do not believe that only talking will result in full emotional release. Talking about one’s problems effectively releases ideas into the ether. With the words unrecorded, who is to say that anyone ever spoke? By writing about traumatic experiences, the writer is forced to create a tangible record of their emotions; something he or
she can point to and say “this is what happened” and create a concrete account of something intangible. This forces the trauma outside of the self and acknowledges ownership of the pain that may have been ignored until the moment of manifestation in the form of writing.

Alternatively, in writing about trauma and metaphorical storytelling in the lives of children, Steve Pickering and Robert Attridge note:

This richness of non-literal content has both diagnostic and possibly therapeutic potential...In sensitive interpretation of storytelling, psychodrama, and other types of expressive work the heart may come to be more aware of the speaker’s experience; in telling, the speaker too may be able to adjust to what is happening to them more fully. (422)

Writing and speaking are therapeutic as a form of actualizing trauma. By acknowledging pain and trauma, the speaker is able to come to terms with the experience. Attridge and Pickering profess the superiority of metaphorical communication as an access point to the emotional truth of the trauma. So “the heart” will become “aware” if the speaker conveys what happened in a non-literal (read: figurative) form. Then the process of healing can begin.

In an essay about the use of storytelling in realizing stress and trauma in the minds of children, John Pickering and Steve Attridge argue that “metaphor and other forms of figurative language have an important role in the generative processes which underlie narrative” (415). While this argument is not based on the role of poetry in creative processing, the principles are the same: metaphor allows the storyteller to convey creative meaning through narrative. So I used poetry to tell narratives both from my own life, from the lives of others, and from my imagination. According to Pickering and Attridge, figurative language deepens communications
between the speaker and the receiver. We have to understand “metaphor as a vehicle for transfer of knowledge, as an imaginal base for language, and as a way of understanding new concepts” (419). This is why poetry is important for the communication of complex emotional truths from one person to another. The poet’s only tool is language and “language becomes the rational clothing of a metaphorical body,” meaning that “metaphor and other non-literal forms of narrative” may provide the reader with “unique insight” into his or her experience (418,420). Without creating intense metaphors, I would never have realized the complex relationship I felt with the culture of Washington and Lee. Specifically in the poem “Locusts,” the speaker compare the girls and boys of her college to the titular insect while she escapes for a break to New York City with a boy she is dating, who she also compares to a locust. The negative imagery is balanced by the way the speaker also expounds upon her own locust-like qualities. Through this metaphor I realized that while I look down on some aspects of the culture at Washington and Lee, I have become a part of it even if I am “polymorphic in the swarm” and don’t quite fit in.

Q: Clearly metaphor has done a lot of work for you and your poetry. What other tools did you use in creating your poems?

A: Even outside of metaphor, figurative language allows the writer to access the core of the story and manipulate language to create a response in the reader. There are many tools poets use, but, after studying confessional poetry during the fall term of my senior year, I was mostly concerned with the appearance of “sincerity.” Because I was focused on the post-structuralist attitude of the reader and writer as constructions, I wanted to create a specific feeling in the reader by creating the illusion of sincerity. Patricia Spacks elevates sincerity as a tool of manipulation in poetry but claims that readers
are too sophisticated now to presume to speculate about how the poet felt when he created but how we feel when we read remains a crucial matter. And the ‘sincere’ poem generates a particular sort of response, creates in us the authenticity of emotion or attitude which we then describe as existing in the poem (Spacks 591)

This was the sincerity I pursued. I did not want truth, but rather the appearance of it.

In this same article, Spacks denigrates the school of confessional poetry for exploiting pain to create the illusion of sincerity by saying that confessionalism is the “poetry of perversity and madness,” going on to say that such pathos “invites belief in the poet’s sincerity but does not necessarily create it” (Spacks 598). Therefore the confessionalist, according to Spacks, is little more than a painter spilling paint upon a canvas and calling it art. There was no artifice and tooling only emotion and to Spacks, this does not equate true sincerity. While I want to write in the confessional mode (and read poetry accordingly), I dislike the depreciation of confessionalism as a legitimate mode of writing. To avoid such negative perceptions, I attempted to pay attention to the details of what it means to be human and have an emotional experience because sincerity is a “direct product of artifice” (Spacks 592). While achieving emotional truth was tantamount, I realized that it is “through imagery, allusion, music, with poetry’s armory of indirection, the poet achieves his thrust.” In fact, I realized that I did not have to feel what I wrote, I merely had to create the illusion that the “I” in the poems—who I have collectively referred to as the speaker (there is a main speaker in my collection but she is not “me” in the full sense of the word)—feels honestly. Writing poetry can be like a theatrical performance and “there is little necessary connection between the poet’s actual integrity of feeling and his communication of integrity” (Spacks 602). While I disagreed with some of Spacks’ assertions, I appreciated her final idea; that poetry is both a “human as well as an aesthetic experience.”
When we read poetry, we want to relate, but we want to relate beautifully. Sincerity helps the reader relate, but technique must also exist for there to be beauty.

Q: What work do you want this poetry to do in the world?

A: Obviously I want people to read my work. I wrote it for myself, but, like any art, it has little value if it is not being experienced by others. I hope that I can convey how necessary it is to have empathy for other people. I want to raise awareness of mental illness and give realistic hope to people suffering from anxiety and manic depression. These things do not go away. A lot of people say that “things will get better.” Unfortunately, I do not believe that. Twenty-two years on earth have proven that those words project a false outcome: that once we are healed, we are always healed. If you break your leg, sometimes it will hurt again. If you have surgery, the scar will sometimes pain you. So mental illness never goes away. Things will get better, but they will also get bad again. Life has ups and downs, but, for people with mental illness, sometimes its more about surviving than reaching the mythical land of “OK”. I want this poetry to be a realization of the fact that very little in the world is good, but very little is wholly bad and so, in the immortal words of Disney, we have to “Keep Moving Forward” (Meet the Robinsons).

Q: What surprised you about this project?

A: Can I be really lame and say, “Everything.”? No, I can’t do that. That’s a cop out. But honestly, I was surprised at every step of the way. I was surprised when I grew tired of writing after hitting my 35th poem. I was surprised when I wrote four poems in one week. I was surprised when people thought my poetry was good. But the biggest surprises were in the words themselves. Discovering my obsession with bugs and lizards was very new. I don’t like spiders, yet they appear in numerous poems. I found out that I rely a lot more on simile than metaphor even though I am absolutely obsessed with metaphor (if this entire paper didn’t convince you). I
sometimes sat down to write a poem about a past experience and found myself writing about something entirely different. I realized poetry has a life of its own and I am so in love with it that it didn’t matter when it surprised me. I loved when I was surprised by my own poetry since “the most obvious source of the sense of authenticity is the moments of discovery one feels in a good poem” and if I could discover things in my own poetry, then I knew I was heading in the right direction (Spacks 597).

Q: Any final thoughts?

A: I’ve written poetry for a long time, but nothing compares to producing an entire collection. I discovered so much about the writing process and about what I believe poetry does in the world. I want to keep writing. While I doubt I’ll ever exhaust topics of a personal nature, I can’t wait to take on new topics, to explore new worlds, to tell exciting lies. As I realized throughout the writing process: “the sincerity of this poem has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of its statements: ‘the poet nothing affirmeth,’ as Sir Philip Sidney wrote” (qtd. Spacks 598). The speaker in these poems is me, but is not me. I created an new person in this collection; a person who shares some experiences with me, but has a life entirely her own. She is the dark me. The shadow in the mirror. The monster in my closet, exclaiming her faults with pride and wallowing in her sorrows. When people read these poems, they will assume the “I” is “Chauncey,” but they have created a “Chauncey” for themselves. And when reader’s no doubt ask me: Did poem “x” really happened? Did my father abuse me? Have I done drugs? Was I raped? Am I gay? Am I straight? Do I believe in God? I have the perfect answer for them: I am a poet. I don’t have to affirm anything.
For Briarcliff. You made me feel at home.
I am not my mouth,
tongue reaped from behind my teeth
by some angry god. The clouds dropped
sleet as I shrieked my final speech. That rotted
kiss, a ripping trick.

I am not my mouth,
all these straight teeth, permanent shine,
untextured smile to hide
the story I know. The truth is,
I wouldn’t speak even if I could.

I am not my mouth,
a piece of skin overbitten,
where I worry my sentences
into cheek cells. This oral
prison, silent since that

fine winter day, fine
fine, fine.
{tongue}
The Gate to Hell

When I was three years old the gate to hell was cut into the floor of my closet. A little hinged lid in the carpet, revealed the black black of the Under-house. I feared spiders would squeeze through the cracks and onto the carpet, crawl into my mouth while I slept. My father would take my hand, drag me, make me look into the pit. The exhumation of the crawl space smelled like the dreaded dark. There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s only another part of the house. I knew better.

One fall, the sky spilled its entrails into the Gorge and water ran everywhere. Over asphalt, into houses, and on our cul-de-sac, rain filled the empty space in our foundation. Three days and nights of rain then I heard a whisper in my closet. I crawled along the carpet, pulled open the unholy mouth. All I saw was water, tan with Aumsville dirt, rising to the frame, I submerged my hand, shocked by the cold, delighted by the silt dancing on my palm. The rushing water seemed like music. The gate to hell was open and it sang.
I climb trees

They line the creek of my home,
big enough that their roots hang over the ravine,
a wide muddy gash in the earth of our farm.
I’ll see ferns peep between the thick limbs
and I’m afraid I’ll fall into the cold water
beneath the sprawling oak trees.
my favorite is not the one my father
deemed worthy of our rarely used tree house:
I wasted my time on you, Chauncey,
ungrateful--
nor is it the lone cherry
whose leaves often offer shelter from the storms
waiting for me inside the screen door of our double wide.
I love the tree which had fallen long before we ever moved in,
it still grows leaves as it strains at an acute angle
from the rocky ground, stretching over
the clover field. I spend my summers
climbing it. No shoes on, I get bee stings and slivers
which make my mother say I am a rambunctious child,
never listening and always getting her
hand-me-downs dirty.
On a yellow August afternoon,
I decide want climb and climb and climb
so I do. I climb
until my ungrown hands grasp at leaves.
my heart thumps overloud and I smile.
I’m only 8, competing for an award
that doesn’t yet exist, but I think I can create.
Best something. Best tree climber. Best
Chauncey. I can make space for that if I
climb high enough. Of course, I fall.
I always fall.
The pain of the rocks against my back
after a several meter fall is enough to make me wary
of setting foot to bark again. When, the next week,
my mother asks,
Why aren’t you playing outside anymore?
I try to explain and,
of course, she doesn’t believe me.
I don’t think I do either.
Starlings

My father pulled weeds in the garden, tossed a rock at a collection of small, black birds with pus-yellow beaks.

Don’t let the starlings stay around too long. They’re bad for the grass.

My father used to feed the cows, haul big, green buckets of sugar coated oats to fatten up for slaughter. A dump pair inarticulately trundle to the trough, flick their thick, pink tongues against the metal. My father would laugh as he tossed rocks against the fence, startle them off into the fields before my father went back to watering the garden.

The winter I turned sixteen there were no cows, no rocks, just shotguns, bail bonds, and over-priced liquor that ensured foreclosure.

My father stopped working in the garden.

Five years later, I have my own garden carefully planned by contractors with austere concrete where starlings peck at gravel, their too big eyes trace my movements as I rush from car to door, grocery bags in hand, tallying my bank balance in my head. The birds don’t linger. I have no grass for them to ruin, even weeds don’t grow outside my house.

Recasting the Bozzetto
(n) plural: bozzetti, a small rough clay study for a larger sculpture

I’m a little earthen with my terracotta head, just a moonkiss away from shatter. The porch lights flicker, weary; crickets hide in the wheat stalks, a hop or two from scattering hooves in the fields outside the house where I spent very few childhood hours despite people saying it was “home.”

Inside, I’ve got iron joints, a sickly clatter when I put my feet to pavement— run on highways and over hills past shedding trees and stalwart pines. I’m not running now, they simply creak as I shift on the patio furniture in front of my tired, hissing fire, think, pray: Smelt my elbows sharper, heat me til I’m wrought.

I sit with this golden boy outside among the stars; he laughs at all my fumbling with a grin behind his eyes. I like the way he runs his hands ever through his hair. I want my words to be sterling, but they all trip behind my teeth. He’ll never know my tongue is silver if it’s always stuck in my cheek.
The Fledgling Gray

Before

The sunlight teases her red hair,  
splashes the park with fire. Her eyes  
are only shaded sparks  
behind reflective lenses,  
but still ignite her freckled skin.  
If she asked I would swallow  
all these trees,  
make a grass jacket for my guts,  
swap these corneas for stones.  
I want to breathe the crimson  
smoke of her hair.  
If she asked I would  
become her muted sentinel,  
this whole park trapped behind my teeth,  
the image imprinted on my tongue.

After

Stones fall from her eyes,  
thud into the gravel where  
each one cracks, a weighted scream.  
The clouds dry heave  
their stomachs,  
splatter on the sidewalk.  
She wipes her hair back  
from her forehead,  
the smell of heaven retching  
sticks to her hands, her neck,  
subsumes her old desert skin  
into consumptive damp.  
Her heart is not a lagoon,  
but in the fledgling gray  
it fills, fills, fills.
Reptilian Climates

I’ve wanted to be a lizard for a long time, trade skin for scales to pay my way. I can lick my lizard lips and breathe heavy desert air so I can get away from the Cascades, out of the Willamette. I want to relax beneath cacti and twitch my tail, flirt with the inexorable sun until my cold blood warms, until I forget Christmas and snow storms and my mom’s egg nog made wrong. Lizard me—reptile me—likes the scratch of sand on her belly, but her favorite thing about life as a lizard is forgetting the smell of Evergreens.
Banshee Hill

No one knows when I smash my hourglass
I chase fine grains into the soft edges of my palms,
it trickles out, around, down,
sand everywhere until
I imagine I’m home where I can
smell the ocean’s exhalations,
climb down the salty cliffs,
I tunnel into dunes while sand crabs
scuttle across my knuckles, wanting to help,
doing little. I can relate.
Each grain of sand will work to scratch
the frown lines from my face.
I bare my arms to the itch,
let it rip the imperfections from my joints,
shovel and scrub until I feel my bones abrade.
Like an agate, I am nature-polished,
soft at first, though hardening.
I like the sting.
\{lips\}
Sentenced

Our smiles are brittle
parchment caught flame,
they curl up at the edges.
We share sentences like broken pens,
plastic shrapnel in suspension.
Words leak between us,
drip from our lips,
paint sick rorschachs in the air.
We watch them silhouette
my parents first,
then yours,
then that boy who broke your heart,
before they grow
limp. We sentence them
to verbal shadow.
Fears fade once we hold our
shared stories like the page
holds ink stains.
Persona
an interview

I think about nature versus nurture a lot.
Like I’m from money in Atlanta,
Buckhead if you will, or Buckhead proper.
A lot of people come to W&L and are shocked
that everyone wears the same thing,
has a ton of money.
Like none of those things shocked me,
but I was so used to it,
I’m from the South.
It wasn’t until after freshman year—
I took poetry writing class spring term freshman year.

I still have a hard time articulating this but
I think that there is a lot to be said about poetry
and the way it both promotes introspection,
but makes you open your eyes a little bit.
That was the first time in my life when I started writing poems.

I had to get knee surgery the
summer after freshman year
on both of my knees
so I spent a lot of time at home,
sitting in bed, reading and feeling very stagnant.

I never weighed much more than a hundred and five pounds until college...until this year
I thought I was someone who was careful about what they ate
and that was something
I took pride in and I thought I
was someone who was conscientious about food
but I did not think I was
sick.

Having that experience
of writing and reading poetry,
feeling connected to other minds
was the first time I could really tell myself:

I am sick. I have an eating disorder

Probably the first time in my life.

I realized that I thought that a lot of things that went on at W&L were wrong
and there was something messed up about that.
There was something messed up about my parents political views,
something messed up about the Greek System.
Something that I had felt for a very long time
but not ever thought about. So when I started
addressing my eating disorder I started realizing
there were all these other things that didn’t sit right with me.
I knew it but I never really felt it.

Sophomore year was the year I learned that
ignorance truly is bliss

That’s why so many people are happy here.
Thinking about greek life now and
all of the shit that people do it’s so—
I don’t think that all the people
who participate in that at W&L are bad people
but, at the same time, it’s hard to understand how people
don’t have problems with so much that goes on here
and how so many people are able to ignore it.
I don’t think I would have noticed if I hadn’t started
writing poetry.

I guess I’m kind of a convert to poetry.
But for other people,
it’s not always poetry, it’s
other things.
Yellow Poplar

He says he only *dabbles* in botany and yet he rattles off the names of flora I’ve never seen, my Pacific coast eyes keen for greenery here in the shade at Monticello. We have to wait a little while for the house to empty before we wander through the terrace. Sunlight greets the grass through the windows between the branches as they shift in the April breeze. I want to know the name of this flower above me, blooming yellow in waxy leaves opening its mouth to drink the sun. He says he can’t remember. I ask the class, the tour group. They evade my eyes, too busy noticing that I haven’t cut my hair in months or that my black T-shirt is heavy with sweat or something. *It must be a kind of poplar,* he continues. I feign interest but the snub melts the thin skin of my lizard brain. I want to run. Instead we herd into the cramped rooms where Jefferson once walked. The high ceilings do little to level my breathing. The tour takes too long and I slouch back to the van where tinted windows and humid silence let my tears quench eyelash thirst. A soft tap at the window gives me a precious second to compose something: myself, a lie, whatever. He’s cut a branch from the poplar tree where the lilypad-like leaves hang the tip heavy and the flower blushes rosy yellow on its perch. *I was right,* he says, *it’s a poplar.* A yellow poplar. *For you.* Classmates climb back into the muggy shadows of the van; my fingers curl-uncurl around the offering. I watch the petals shake as the car pulls from the parking lot.
It’s a Shame

He kisses me poisonous
with acid tabs and rolling papers.
I press my spiderweb teeth
with the lava of my tongue,
catch confessions before
they crawl from my cavern heart.
He Cheshire at me,
ever expanding,
blocking out light,
all dilated lips and cuspidated incisors
against my boiling skin.
I cry until I am doused
in the yolk of the sunrise
and he laughs the while:
Just say it.
You want me.
You’re such a liar,
so fake.
It’s a shame you’re not thinner

        prettier

        nicer

        like her.

Magma coils low inside my stomach,
the air steams my words
back into my mouth.

The world spins sideways as
I crawl on eight legs past bridges
with cars
and people
with smiles.
My arachnoid eyes flood,
eight-fold closed
against the bright morning light.
I web my way home,
losing my extra limbs.
I step into the shower
where the water won’t
soak the smoke from my skin,
bank the volcano in my lungs,
the igneous in my veins.
origami

you’ve lost weight, i can
tell. your fingers slip across my hip bones,
i bite my tongue; my smile crumples.
that’s what happens when my stomach
eats only itself.
origami insides:
if they are constantly folding,
i will never be a swan.

—

my knees rip against the carpet,
he holds me down, presses in.
he put on music and i close
my eyes, my paper-self flutters, folds.
the bass shakes not this.
not this. stop crushes against
my teeth.
i feel paper thin—other him,
the old him, only creased me,
this one tears me in half.

—

the bathroom light blinds me
when this new him gets out of bed
to clean himself up.
dog-eared, i lie in the overwarm sheets,
press my palm against the glass
of his window, the winter frost crawls
across the pane. my fingers, damp, seem translucent,
a sheet torn from my notebook, tesselating slowly.
i will not cry, not think about that first him
who collapsed me between his palms,
dropped me in the waste basket.

do you want to go to sleep?

sure.

his breath evens and i rustle out of bed.
i forget my coat but with a locked door behind me,
the cold pushes me home, paper
knocking against the curb,
riding sewer updrafts.
Suicide on a Rainy Weeknight

the pills are miniature pink mirrors,
53 unflattering self-portraits.
horrible mess that you
are, lay them in your
hand. they stain your
life-line pepto-pink.

the white pills don’t leak like that,
instead they crumble in your nail beds
as you scrape them from the container,
the empty rx bottle, a dead hermit shell.
you hear the ocean breathe through lucid orange.
count these, too.
you hold them, hold them, hold them,
realize you can’t lift them into yourself.
this is not the way to keep your demons,
they can keep themselves.

—

pulled into the rain by terrified
voices cracked across the phone.

you regret those almost-final
text messages.

mud climbs your jeans,
desperate for a little skin

as you take yourself
to find the help

they tell you about.

raindrops scuttle
down your scalp.
campus is magnified by night,

illuminated by a thousand shards of falling
water.

rebirth isn’t real.
right as rain? a lie.

*i had a plan, a pen, and paper,*

but hands empty easily
in the terrarium dark.
Asylum for a Straw Man

I’m going to lose
        lose
        lose
while I wait in the space between
the shout and the echo of the shout.
All of those reverberations stunted in my chest
pressing
        pressing
        pressing
inside my wicker skull,
the itchy hemp shell.
They called me basket case
and bullied me into bed.
I have no eyeballs,
no nostrils,
more cantaloupe than human.
My orifices are shut.
        I swear I will not speak.
My stuffed limbs are ringing
with the screams of other men.
The straps dig into my ankles,
the smell of a stable burning.
My hennaed hair rustles about my collar bone,
I itch to swoop it back,
nail screech on scalp.
I’m losing shape here,
        losing my straw here.
An effigy, leaking its insides.
*Please scoop me back into my woven head*
*and carry me to hospital,*
I’ve scribbled my poems here.
3 AM Requiem

I slump
in the remnants of your moving.
My back presses barely against
the bones
of the wall. There’s trash
next to my right knee,
the smell of lemon Clorox
in the air.
The not-white of the carpet
too bright,
too like your eyes when you ask
me to stay.
This is the 3 AM requiem
for our tangled bodies,
our untangling hearts.

I fall into the bloodless dawn,
my feet like empty boxes
scrape across old brick
I try not to think of the way
you looked
among your leaking suitcases,
collapsed cardboard,
unsocked feet gripping
the taupe linoleum as I left...

I’m only the story you’ll tell in the morning.
“Untitled” in a Charlottesville Rehab Center

People called me snake,
bleached hair, green eyes,
I don’t feel reptilian.
But they know better, don’t they?
I pretend their words are chalk,
dust on my tawny skin.
See, no scales here.

Sometimes I don’t choose what I’m going to draw. It simply grows behind my eyes. Blooms from my pencils.

I keep shaking white clouds from my hair,
I’m choking on them by the time I decide:
life is too much for me.
I don’t remember the hospital.
I do remember the look on my friend’s face,
the curl of her fingers around my wrist,
pulling me into the car.
I think I was crying.

I’m drawing a girl, it seems. She’s climbing out of her skin. Or maybe her skin is climbing off of her.

They put me in a clinic in Charlottesville
and I feel like Plath or Kaysen.
Anorexia aside, suicide is a big deal
when you’ve got a full ride to college.
Apparently, I’m a “risky investment,”
I’ve got to prove I’m worth tuition and fees.

I gave her blond hair and red lips, sketched her bones with a felt tip pen, my nail beds black with excess ink.

I get weighed every week,
my calories are counted by someone else.
Sometimes it’s nice not to think.
The clinic feels small
like the white soufflé cups they count our pills in.
Once a day Claude, the veteran with OCD,
invites me into the courtyard
for a Marlboro. He lets me light my own.

Her face becomes skeletal without plan and her ligaments stand out against the page.
I’m sketching in my cell
when Georgie peeks in,
her thinning hair evidence of some
disorder I don’t care to name,
she asks me what I’m drawing.
I don’t think it has a title:
Snake Girl, Shedding, Untitled...

My sketchbook closes over her peaceful skull, her scaled skin. I move into the common room.
An Atheist’s Dry Spell

Fucking stone.
I’m always dragging my ass up the mountain, which coincidentally is also stone.
Carrying a rock up a larger rock seems a pretty heavy burden—pun fucking intended.
I made God mad. So-fucking-what.
Does nobody else make God mad? That’s hard to fucking believe.
I have to bust my balls day-in, day-out pushing carrying this boulder up this goddamn hill.
That’s right. You heard me. GOD damn hill.
Take your name in vain.
   Fucking right,
I’ll take your name however I want to fucking take it. From behind. From the front.
   Bent over this fucking stone.
   I’ll fuck it good.

Fuck this.
Sad Baths

My skin is raw pink in the mirror. Flushed in the steam rising from the water
I take a deep breath, scowl at my reflection, mascara clumped, running.

In the steam rising from the water,
I can feel my blood thumping, dirtier than the clumped mascara running
in the bathwater, my tears a wash

I can feel. My blood thumps. Dirty,
I scrub at my knees, my hands ache
in the bathwater, my tears awash.
In my chest, the grime slides, loose.

I scrub at my hands and knees. Ache
with the anxiety collapsing my lungs
in my chest. The grime slides loose.
If I breathe steam, I will be clean.

With the anxiety collapsed in my lungs,
I take a deep breath, scowl at my reflection.
If I breathe steam, I am clean.
I am raw pink in the mirror. Flushed.
nights out

we stalk the streets in high heels and combat boots respectively. collectively we don’t give a fuck so we dance with all our might, having beers in our right hands and cells in our left and there’s not a cobblestone left in this town untouched by our toes as we tap tap tap for a little more time on the dancefloor. we’ve bartered, and flirted, and stolen for our liquor because sometimes destruction is a mutual glory best shared over wine glasses and mixed metaphors.
I Hate Radios

No blinding light or tunnels to gates of white
Just our hands clasped so tight
Waiting for the hint of a spark
Death Cab for Cutie

A song that makes the skin crawl off my bones,
slough into the ditch. I’m a snake
I curl in, cannibalize to avoid the conflict.
I won’t touch the dial, let the radio
dictate the mood. My car smells like coconuts and
my grandma’s updo. The air touched by coffee
as I spill my Starbucks latte all over Laura’s jeans,
my wheels are circumspinning,
going off road. While this sickly song plays,
dead grass flies in through windows,
slams against my eyelashes, my cheeks,
my collarbone.

Incapacitated and numb. the policeman says
pretty girls in car accidents, shakes his bobble head.
I vibrate. She rotates. This is the dark.

This is what it’s like to be fevered in the windchill
and feel the rubber loose from your soles
while you cough into a scarf and rise
from the dark. Welcome to the new vacation.
No more wheels, we walk everywhere.
Host Mother

She makes breakfast for me every morning, more often than my real mom ever did. But mothers aren’t for mothering, I’d been taught that by the scrape of a wedding ring across my cheekbone.

Promptly at 7 am her voice, melodic Japanese, calls from the stairwell: Gohanyo! she sings. My feet stick to the floor with my nightsweat as I clamber down the stairs, the cat winding round my ankles the way cats do. I sit in the seat now reserved for me, the one usually occupied by the father who gets drunk most nights.

I think of my father as this other man guzzles beer, I wonder about the price of whiskey in Japan.

She sets a bowl in front of me with a genuine smile. Something I’d never seen between family.

She asks if I want coffee or just the cold green tea we drink with every meal. I always just say Hai. She decides for me. It’s a holiday; a Sunday. The TV murmurs in the corner, news I can’t understand, I look down at the food and not for the first time my stomach feels wrong, too full.

I feel wrong when I eat.

The girls at school are so thin. The girls in Japan so thin and I’m not. Thoughtstream seizes staring at a bowl of cold rice noodles, the soft clink of the coffee mug onto the glass table top shakes me.
and she cracks a small smooth egg on the corner of my bowl.
Raw oozes onto white,
my coffee steams,
I mix the food in silence, and I

thank God the noodles slip down my throat,
like salty room temperature jello.
I lie and say it’s delicious,
I’m good at this fake smile.

This mother, my host mother
believes me and feeds me,
makes sure I clean my plate
before I start my day.
Asura’s Calendar

Asura—the lowest rank of deity in Buddhism. Often depicted with three heads or faces and four to six arms.

“Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith — this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asuras.” —Zhiyi, the fourth patriarch of Buddhism

1.
Girlish footsteps clatter on the tile of the mall’s mezzanine, she’s got to be at the Flagpole Cafe by 12:15 and its 12:10. Embarrassing.
The Professor doesn’t like it when she’s late.
The line outside the Bead Shop keeps growing and she tracks the height differences between the murmuration of customers as she passes, they squawk at the delay:
What shops open at noon?
Bad shops!
Bead shops!
A new man is standing near the back, his January face distracts her into a quick trip, a toe-scrape stumble as she descends the stairs.
That’s what she gets for wearing heels.

2.
The first floor cafe is populated with flagpoles topped with floating dinette sets, their table cloths jig to the jazzy mood music. She knows she won’t be able to climb them—there are no high seats for Kat—but she came anyway to stare up at the happy couple-not-Couple, February and March, whose snowshoe laces tangle obscenely, dangling in the air.
This was supposed to be academic not romantic, despite their kissy faces.
Professor May accepts defeat—there will be no studying today—he slides down, more graceful than 70 year old bones should be:
Have my seat, Kat. But please return
my silverware.
She imagines she’s a willow tree,
each strand of hair a barking whip to hide
her weeping.
Still in line, January man leans over the stair rail,
a cackling mister,
she wants to give him the finger and shout
shove your beads up your ass!
But she sways.

3.
Kat becomes cat, whiskering away beside the staircase,
afraid to ask the waiter for a ladder.
These are the inconveniences of flagpole dining.
Is it special for couple-not-Couple?
Sifted laughter says yes.
Then again, they’re always
laughing.
Kat laps the wine that dribbles down the flagpole.
Red rivulets,
a cabernet.
Drunk on leavings, she stumbles
—is stumbling—
at the foot of the stairs.
Suddenly November trots out of the double doors, accompanied
by June and her lightning-bug smile.
Kat thinks of October’s hair on her shoulder
last night while he slept, before
she left.
November’s hair is different;
she hasn’t run her fingers through it yet.
{teeth}
Sheepskin

The poem rattles in her mouth,
a shotgun shell waiting to be spit.

“I am a poet,” she announces
at the podium, her hands are cherry blossoms,

shaking themselves into tatters
as she grips at the stonework

like a gate between her body
and the lambs before her.

She sees a field, a verdant hill,
she breathes dandelions.

The taupe walls slam down.
“I am a poet,
a doctor, an actor, a philosopher,
I am everything I want to be.

I am the last of the sour cream
waiting to be scooped

onto your taco later tonight.
I am the smell of german chocolate cake,

the taste of snowflakes.
I am the sound of your father’s

belt whistling through the air,
the sting of buckle on skin.

I am the dried roses on your dresser,
a dead birthday gift

from two years ago.
I am the white crayon,

the red lipstick,
the black fingernail polish,

chipped at the edges.
I am the pen, I am the paper.
I am these words.
I am.”

Her knuckles are white,
the sheep bleat,

their grins are woolly,
wolfish.
*The Shining* Sestina

Everything pulses an ultraviolet red—
slow at first like a merry go round’s
clunking start up. Easing faster,
objects blur and swirl out of reach.
Behind a shower curtain Death breathes;
she rises in the mirror, eyeballs shining.

People arrive, the ballroom shines,
bathes these masks in brilliant red,
a racing heart beats beneath. The past breathes
frenetic life into this fishbowl-round
room. Furry fingers reach
for stretched lips, scratch the carpet faster.

The TV screen flashes faster:
Each scene worse as *The Shining*
reminds me of the panics, when I reached
for the Ativan, lorazepam, in bright orange red
bottles. How they melted on my tongue, little round
pills, pressed dust, helping me breathe
easy—easier. Now a little boy breathes
*redrum*, Daddy swings the axe faster
and Mommy screams a bloody round,
sees herself reflected in the knife’s shining
blade. Wood planks newly painted Torrance red
won’t keep Jack from reaching...

He kisses a beautiful woman’s lips, reaches
into a mirror. I forget how to breathe
when the hallway washes red
and the couples waltz faster
with glasses of bourbon shining
in the low light, dizzy spinning ‘round.

Jack, you call to the barkeep, *Another round!*
He turns away your money when you reach
for your wallet. He’s taken a shining
to you and your over-toothed grin. Breathe
a sigh of relief. Free booze? Drink faster.
This is who you are now, forever swathed in red.

Eternity at the Overlook? Not so bad. I’ve got a party dress in red
and another round on the way. Not me. Jack. Who? *Just shake your hips faster*
and shine. I feel unreachable. I feel like I can’t breathe.
Yellow Cake Baked Two Ways

1.
The bowl in the kitchen overflows with cake batter. Runny gold clings to the spoon. The oven warms, heated ripples licking at the air. Bubbles form and burst, slow like lemon lukewarm lava. The tin pan pops, excited exhalations, a gooey kiss.

2.
A kitchen misstep and she hears you, turns with an accusatory absence of face, her empty skin like melting wax. She tips the bowl, pours the prenatal mass, utensil desperate against the plastic sides. You retreat, but you can’t escape the sounds of her scraping.
Cicadas

Summer in the Shenandoah Valley is particularly sticky.
I walk home,
sweat dripping in the shell of my clothes.
Lack of central air means
Window Units: useless, loud.
I click mine on,
watch the display light green,
let the fan rattle.
I like the white noise,
if nothing else,
extcept today--
the last Thursday of August--
the unit shrieks and whistles.
I jam my finger against its buttons,
all the buttons,
any fucking button,
to stop that awful sound.
Pop the console open.
A creature as big as my thumb falls from the filter,
iridescent glitters.

I’ve never seen an insect so big,
jeweled colors in contrast with my inherent entomophobia.
My breath sharpens as I edge around the creature,
I realize this cicada had crawled into the cooling machinery,
burrowed from the outside in.

I open the door for him,
and envy his apathetic trek from kitchen floor to humid twilight.

I want to shed my nymph skin,
become imago for the autumn,
let the leaves announce
my time of dying,
find a tymbal in my exoskeleton,
forget my heart,
and sing.
The Devil You Know

the devil you know—

You’re suddenly reminded that this isn’t a race, it’s a fight, and watching two shapes circle each other makes you think more yin and yang and less blood spilled on pavement and broken ribs—do they even bleed? —because there’s energy in their movements, subtle sway, constant vibration, and it seems impossible to think in anything but black and white yet here you are, fingers clenching the fabric of your jeans, smoother now than when you bought them a year ago, worn at exactly the place you’re clutching, because that’s where you always clutch and you’ve got a VIP seat to a fight you didn’t ask for except He thinks you did and there’s pride in His eyes when He glances your way with a smile and your heart is an afterimage in your chest and you think He should keep His eyes fixed on the shadow-man across from Him and you don’t know if you’ve ever been more afraid of a faceless thing than this hulking blackness in the sepia twilight, but the stranger makes the first move—a sudden lurch with grasping hands—and He reacts, grabs the stranger by the jaw and smashes face to pavement, once, twice—there’s a lot of red—and you no longer have to wonder what teeth shattering sounds like and you’ve never kissed concrete but you can taste the rubble at the top of your throat and you feel like it’s you choking as His hands wrap around the shadow’s windpipe and you think you see a face, ruined with gravel and blood and the bloom of bruises beginning, but it’s not a face you’ve ever seen before and you want to scream STOP as loud as you can but you can feel the stones mosaic your lungs—better than those flesh made ones—and His grip loosens in silence, the body drops, and there’s just a short step between you and being crushed against His scorching skin and you realize you were never on anyone’s side but as the coals kindle—were those always there beneath your feet? —you nevertheless think you chose less-than-wisely.

—beats the devil you don’t
Scavenger’s Romance

“There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow: there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate.”—Isaiah 34:15

Three vultures in the sky
repeat lethargic circles
as the sun leaks,
an overripe blood orange juiced on the Blue Ridge.

Vulture One eyes the coyote in the foothills,
who gazes at an unsuspecting rabbit in the brush.
The rabbit consumes the dying grass,
little bristles on his face and sees nothing.

Vulture Two ate a big lunch does not feel
the need to spy out prey,
rather torpidly wheels about in the red currents
of the settling dusk.

Vulture Three watches the others, mostly
Vulture One. See, they had a love affair once,
but Vulture One fucked Vulture Two who didn’t
mind a casual avian dicking.

Vulture Three took personal offense, even though
it really meant nothing to Vulture One.

“Come on, I don’t love her.
It just happened—”

“Don’t make excuses. You’re the only bird
who has ever vomited
in my mouth.
This is such a cliché.
I hope you two are happy together.”

“Together? Are you serious? He clearly doesn’t
understand the mechanics of
vulture sex and left me completely
unsatisfied.”
Nothing Beats a Clean Set of Sheets

Sheetless, the bed looks so naked,
beige, stark mattress in my lamplit room.
I hold the striped fabric in my hands,
I can feel my nails against my palm
through the fibers. I dig. The dams unshore.
It takes five steps and three pauses
to put them in the wash. Unfurling,
they look obscene against the pocked
white of the barrel. I will not press my nose
into the print and breathe deeply.
I will not think of time spent curled together,
parentheses on linen paper, the beginning
of an unfinished poem whispered into their
threads, now to be washed. I will pour
the detergent with an air of ceremony,
each heavy grain, a heart. I will leave
the lid open, watch the water crash. I will sink
against the cold metal as the cycle begins.
All this means nothing. The machine pulses
through my ribs, steady steel rhythm before the whir.
The Ex Files

There’s an error in my bank statement. Did you do this?
Did you commune with the little blue moon men who live on the satellites, give them my name and say "Fuck her. I'm done with her,"
and laugh with them, their eight eyes twinkling as they tinker with the numbers and choose exactly the amount they can take each month that makes me the least likely to notice?
I'm lucky that I like to Scrooge McDuck my money every month or otherwise I'd be out 49.95, little blue cunts.
While I’ve successfully cancelled my card, I can only think of that time in the mellow orange light of Scully's BBQ as your ex cried in the wake of your separation, her phone alight with news of a fraudulent bank statement and all she wanted was the comfort of your abduction, anything to keep her from falling to pieces.
She looked to my human hands for solace.
I had yet to identify my feelings for you, flying silent across the skyline.
The Sleepwalker’s Manifesto

“You let everyone see your pain and that can be hard for some people because it reminds them of their own.” —my brother

I howl at night. When everyone’s asleep dreaming of turkeys and chinamen and apple flavored feet, howling keeps my lungs aloft so I can float into the dark, eyes closed, mouth gaping. I walk, each step a stone, each breath, a pomegranate. I am.

In the dark, I am dark. In the morning, I’ll be thankful for socks, pink and yellow, my feet bruised but no gravel stuck in the skin. No stones in my arches. Not today, but I can feel them tingling.

I cannot stand the dark so I’ve turned on all the lamps, my house is a terrarium, no rocks to hide beneath, only a bare bed. I am a lizard lounging, a tarantula sleeping still. Tap against the glass, I hiss.

When people turn their backs, I think I’m the rock, you’re the hard place. I press against them till I’m absolutely juiced--no longer breathing seeds--they say I stink of sweetness.

When I wake, I wash the dirt from my hair.
The Mystery of Disappearing Leaves

There are no trees in my neighborhood except for the two in my front lawn. One is choked by ivy and the other stands opposite so they can condescendingly shed their leaves onto my peeling white Oldsmobile whose windshield wipers are not nearly strong enough to swipe them from the glass.

Buckets of leaves fall once they’ve turned brown, they tumble onto gravel, onto grass, onto asphalt, confusing the squirrels who have hidden their acorns throughout my unkempt yard. Our jack-o-lanterns fatten them up the little monsters in lieu of lost acorns. They eat those pumpkin faces, steal their eyes and teeth, get fat on orange gourd flesh.

I like this old house on Hanna lane in spite of these few flaws, I like its lack of lighting and its laminated hardwood floors, I like my tiny room filled with an empty desk and all my dresses, I like the old shower head and the shower’s sliding doors. This house is the first place that I’ve ever felt at home and the summer warmed and the summer chilled until my thoughts were drained of color. Like chlorophyll, I’m fading. Is this depression or am I fine? Who knows except I cannot write. I have no words. So I carve pumpkins, drink pale ale and wine. I laugh seated on the living room rug. The leaves fall. Nothing changes and they pile up, no one else will do the yardwork, take care. I take my lack of energy to the driveway and rake. I rake & rake & rake & rake until my arms are sore, until there are three piles or more.

Scoop the fallen into clear bags and feel them crunch between the callousing pads of my fingers. I took my rings off so they won’t get lost. I keep stuffing bags until all the leaves are accounted for. Bag them. Curb them. Wait for Wednesday, trash day. Instead, I go to bed Sunday and all those bags disappear.
Wings

I tell my ex-boyfriend a story about a spider in a web. It feels connected since he grew those eight limbs, started watching for flies. Orange glow of the streetlight casts the filaments in gold. A flesh-toned monster waits. A freckled moth considers the lamp, inquires after the light. Arachnid snatch—quick consumption.

He says, *it's an interesting metaphor.* I respond: *How so? You're the spider.* But if I’m a spider, who’s the moth?

As prey, Nick’s not worth eating. As a predator, he’s more tapestry than trap.

I feel moth-like. I always seek the light, I crave reprieve from the cold. Tired of flying, I swallowed my own wings.
happiness

_By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul_—Epicurus

the first flakes of snow fall on your birthday,
your steady grip of the steering wheel with both hands.
hear the track of your tires in the slush.

Operating on half instinct, half theory,
I’m wrapping presents beneath the tree,
gold paper, red paper, silvering ribbons,
fog is curling round the house, closing in,
the windows white with it.
I put the kettle on, the whistle comes quickly.
Steam rises into my eyes as I pour
the water, make my cup of Constant Comment.
Black tea, citrus scent. Christmas in a cup.
I usually take my tea with sugar.
This I drink plain.
She is my list of Pros and Cons

and one giant yes.
An affirmation like autumn
igniting the trees.

A lot of little negatives

There’s something like acorns about her,
the percussion as they dance to the ground.

There is no sense to be made in the firing of the trees,
they do not need to harden.

I hate acorns.

I can’t even make a cohesive a metaphor.
Can that be a giant con?

I can’t even make a cohesive metaphor.
Can that be a giant con?

I tried to write a poem

but the words mangled in my hands
like a pot broken before the firing,

I crush leaves beneath my feet and think:
these leaves should be her.

Eventually, the wind will pummel them into submission,
de-frock their righteous plumes.

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but the words mangled in my hands
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de-frock their righteous plumes.

Pro: not everything is pottery.

Con: I still want to shatter her.
A Walk in the Woods

“I’m not little, I’m not red, and although I wear hoods they are not my preferred type of sweater.”—LLRH

for Annie

I think I took a wrong turn a while back. Several hours ago an unmarked fork led into the woods and the Romantic in me screeched THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED so I walked into the evergreens, and somewhere the path dropped off. Now it’s been only stones and roots for miles.

I thought my coat would help keep back the wintery weather. It’s my favorite. Red, double breasted. The dye runs when it rains, makes me look like i’m bleeding at the seams. But it’s not raining now. The trees watch me walk, angry, gray fingers interwoven. Dead leaves compost beneath my feet in their churlish damp.

Shouldn’t I have reached a road by now?

A slight whistle unnerves me, a man rounds the nearest pine tree, smiles, surprised yet friendly. “Little miss, little miss, you look gorgeous with the crimson high on your cheeks and your hair pulled back like this.” I’m flattered. Am I? He’s handsome. He is. He holds out his hand. “You seem lost. We should go together.”

I think of wolves dressed as woodsman, admire his flannel, his conspicuous rifle. I think of teeth, better to eat with, buttered bread, and jars full of clotted old lady’s blood.

I think of Grandma’s words of wisdom:
Never have sex in the woods.

I imagine his hands clutching at the folds of my coat, the red dripping down his wrists.
Mirror/Mine

His face is more like a mirror than mine
though I’ve walked the bridge between
its brown bogs, illuminated in the dim
of a Tuesday setting sun. It was the middle
of spring, twilight lasted long, lasted cold.
The mosquitoes had barely stirred.

I wanted to remember the tread of that bridge,
breathe in the unworked pine, hear the cattails
whisper at the edges of those stretched ponds.
My mind is too weighted for that weak wood now.

I’ve worshipped at his temples with my fingers, lips:
an even smile. I’ve sat beneath the solemn arches,
lived in the light filtered between stones.
I heard music, the steady drum. Even in
ecstatic revelation, I felt it reverberating,
sussurating, echoing through bone.

I cannot hear it now.
For the first time since I saw him, I can feel
my face, delight in its asymmetry.
I dance with my crooked brows,
drink with my leaking mouth.
These are my imperfections.
I watch them slip; rise with them.
New Love Poem

“Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings.” — WH Auden

New Year Letter

I close my umber overcoat,
tuck my paisley scarf into the collar.
I dig my fingerless gloves into the oversized pockets,
watch my breath bloom.
Nice to see there’s no one on the streets
at 8 am on New Year’s Day.
The remains of 2014 season the concrete:
half chewed Big Red, a crumpled can of PBR,
something that might be spilled soup
but is probably vomit. Dead cat
or wig? Curly. So...wig.

My head is a champagne bubble,
it waits to burst. My phone is hot in my hand.

Walking to a Tully’s in Seattle, I imagine
walking exclusively in the mulch beside the sidewalk.
My boots could eat.

It doesn’t matter what city as long as the buildings are tall
Seattle, New York, Tokyo, Portland.
I’m glad to know I’ve been places,
even if they all feel the same.
The sun rises behind clouds everywhere,
at least here they drop their secrets every other day.
Secrets are hell on the scalp.

In Seattle the taste of coffee is not just full-bodied,
it’s the taste of the mornings I wake up in Lexington
with a poem itching in my palm,
those mornings I make full pots of Maxwell House
instead of breakfast.

I live in the connotations of things:

Every winter is all of my winters.
And when it inevitably snows come February
I think I’ll be stuck with the feel of a certain pair of hands on my hips.

I go to Seattle Chinatown and read the kanji on the sake bottles,
I buy daikon and ramune and all
I can picture are the souvenir socks I bought from Ginza. My ex still wears them. When I buy bubble tea here, I’m back in Akihabara, sipping boba and eating udon.

I’m not writing this poem for an old love, the one that held my hand in Portland, walking down dirty streets and eating truffle oil fries and *signature* ketchup from a food truck before browsing Powell’s in the New Year’s crush, definitely not for the one that held my heart in America while I stood on the train from Kanazawa to Komatsu reading Star Trek fanfiction, wishing I didn’t feel so alone, so diluted by the rain. I’m writing for a new year, a new love with no connotations yet.

I never change the time zone on my computer because I know where I am.
Locusts

Day 1
The drive to New York takes eight hours.
It feels like less with New Boy #7 in the front seat.
Though I’ve left the hive
I can still see them,
girls armored in army green barbours
skittering across bricks,
expelled from dancefloors.
I want the world outside the horde,
I keep driving. The engine whines,
an exoskeleton grinding.

Day 2
I haven’t slept this late since high school.
#7 likes to stay up until four, we have a long
talk about the potential for famine.
He cries so I hold him, pet him between
his wings, wait for serotonin
and for sleep. Already he is afraid to return home.
I have long been inured to the idea:
the hive is home.

Day 3
I forget what Virginia smells like so I press
my face into the folds of my wool coat
which smells like cigarettes and sweat,
I haven’t smoked in six months.
I feel phantom bricks beneath my feet,
see flashes of green coats even in the city,
I feel followed, I cannot sleep, I keep vigil
at the attic window, overlook
the fields of identical houses.
Their curtains blink at me.
#7 climbs the stairs, startles me,
asks if I want breakfast. I eat
a bagel. In this house, they keep kosher.
I smear cream cheese counter clockwise.

Day 4
The host wakes me early asks if I want
to warm my legs fireside. I decline, prefer the cold.
My flightpath is broken. This is a short migration,
I must return for I fear that
all my crops in the valley are falling
into ruin. I am not like the others, 
I must grow what I devour.

Day 5
#7 clicks and buzzes in the front seat, 
mind tightened for the drive. I want silence, 
he plays music. The cacophony soothes 
his return journey nerves. I am in phase.

Day 6
At a party beneath a shining white tent, 
a feverish jazz band plays. The students 
swing together, their segmented arms holding 
cups inundated with harvest. Their wings 
shutter, iridescent in the strobe light. 
They look beautiful. They look at me. 
#7 dances with one of them. 
I am reminded that I am undesirable, 
polymorphic in the swarm.

Day 7
The havoc rises. My wings are closed. 
The fields buzz with feasting. Green 
shells shine, discarded in the streets. 
My feet click against the sidewalk. This is my 
recrudesce.
Works Cited


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Works Consulted: Annotated Edition


As I stated in my paper, this book affected some use of topics including dreams as metaphors and the emphasis on childhood trauma.


This book informed my knowledge of post-structuralism and was the basis for the way I approached creating a speaker throughout the poems.


This was a counterpoint to my readings of Plath. I thought it would be an interesting study in POV as some poems are about the same thing as what Plath writes on. I was particularly struck by the poetry about the terracotta bust of Plath which both of them wrote about. I used the image in “Recasting the Bozzeto.” A sort of Plath easter egg if you will.


While I did not read this during the production of my thesis, it has been formative in my thought patterns and approach to traumatic experiences.

I read this in high school and then again over the summer as I began writing poetry. I was interested in the fictional memoir as an idea.


This collection definitely informed the tone and style of poetry I wrote during that period. It also produced an imitation poem for an assignment in class which, in its final draft, appears in the thesis as “Mirror/Mine.”


Simply a fantastic collection that we read parts from in the same Wheeler class. I cannot say if it directly influenced any of poetry, but I can only hope.


This book provided context for the ways creative pathways and mental illness share parts of the brain. The book was inconclusive and basically useless for real analysis, but I found it interesting all the same.


I find myself citing the entirety of Wikipedia because I cannot tell how many pages influenced poems. I used it as a source of biological information about locusts, cicadas, tarantulas, and
willow trees. It very much influenced “Asura’s Calendar” since the epigraph of that poem is a quote from the Asura page. I read about Epicureanism, poetry and generally wandered for inspiration. Consider this citation a general thanks to the hard workers of Wikipedia, you’ve meant a lot to me.