





The Give

by

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## Abstract

This manuscript represents a progression from adolescence into adulthood with branching poetry narratives that focus on cultural and family dysphoria, the grief of loss, and coming to terms with sexuality and same-sex attraction. I began writing the poems of this manuscript four years ago in my advisor Nickole Brown's poetry workshop during my first year at the Sewanee School of Letters. The actual manuscript project began in September 2020 at the start of thesis work. I produced many new poems during this time and began organizing and placing them in an order that I hope flows like a book. I don't feel the manuscript is quite at the point of being a finished, publishable book, as there are some loose ends and empty spaces I would like to expand on in the future. I also have a difficult time ever feeling like a poem is completely finished, and I often spend years revising, especially as my writing style evolves and improves constantly.

Since that first term at Sewanee, my writing style changed entirely. I entered the program knowing that my biggest strength is my ability to write metaphors; however, this served as a double-edged sword because my biggest challenge in poetry writing is also the tendency to hide behind metaphors. Nickole was quick and gracious in pointing this out and helping me develop more honest ways of getting my intent and vulnerability onto the page and creating a balance between the metaphor and "saying it plain." I had been so concerned with the appearance of my poems, making sure everything looked and sounded pretty, that I'd failed to open up with the emotional truth of them, thus keeping readers at an arm's length. The poems in this collection are a labor of my attempt to stop hiding. They are sometimes dark, full of grief, and deal with uncomfortable subject matter. However, they are also honest, coming from a deeply emotional and personal core, and hopefully they speak to others going through similar experiences.

Another challenge I struggle with craft-wise is giving my works an effective title. There are several works in this manuscript that remained untitled for a long time. It is often difficult because creating a title generally takes lots of meditation and reading/re-reading the poem as I dig my way to the truth of the piece. I often feel like my poems must be neatly wrapped packages, and the title is the bow. Even now, I struggle to tell myself that poems don't have to be clean stories with bookended beginnings and endings and that it is ok if a poem doesn't answer all the questions or give everything away. I feel a challenge of mine is conveying a story; though I have gotten better at it, and many of the poems in this collection reflect my growth in narrative through poetry.

The biggest form of inspiration when writing poetry for me is simply reading the works of other poets. These works and poets include Richard Siken's *Crush*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Julia Koet's *Pine*, and many others. There have also been specific works that challenged me, particularly Nick Flynn's *Some Ether*, which is a book about suicide. We were assigned this collection my first semester at Sewanee, and to this day, it has been the most difficult collection of poetry for me to get through because of the emotional weight of its content. However, the deeply dark and personal concept of the book really resonates with me in my own writing style, as I write about the death of a close friend and my own struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts; I find that writing from such dark and emotional places creates a difficult balancing act of trying not to hurt myself in the process of getting out my poems. I never finished reading *Some Ether*, as just getting through a few of the poems would throw me into deep, deep bouts of depression. I hope one day I am strong enough to finish reading the collection and incorporate more of Flynn's technique into my own writing, but at the moment I must prioritize protecting

myself from such a mental state, as I already push pretty hard at times trying to get out emotional honesty in my writings, and finding my limits has frequently been a difficult process.

I would also like to give a special acknowledgement to the poets Ross Gay and Claudia Emerson and their respective collections *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* and *Late Wife*. I read these books during the thesis writing process. Ross Gay's I read for the third time, and Emerson's for the first time, and each writer significantly influenced my work. Ross Gay's ability to achieve emotional honesty and devastation in his poems while simultaneously carrying such joy, texture, and color is truly something I strive for every time I sit down to write. Claudia Emerson's beautiful embodied language and imagery, particularly of nature and animals, also struck a deep chord of longing within me and an aspiration to achieve such levels of embodiment in my own writing.

My poems have always been colored by the rural Appalachian landscape where I grew up and still live, but I haven't always known how to write about it in a way that evokes a sense of embodiment. To me, embodiment evokes a sense of deep immersion, of writing a scene or image using all five senses; it's a slow observation that takes in every detail available, then reinvents that observation in a poem to give readers a sense of authenticity. Another big struggle in writing my poetry has been just that: an oftentimes subconscious revulsion of being embodied, of sitting in my own body and letting my senses speak to me. I was diagnosed years ago with major depressive disorder and often catch myself dissociating as a defense mechanism to hide from pain, whether it be physical or mental. In the process of writing this thesis, Nickole had me do daily embodiment exercises: 50-word writings on something embodied, whether it be the snow on the ground, a housecat's playful behavior, or even the aches and pains of living with chronic illness. I found these exercises exhausting, small as they seem, but at the same time they

invigorated my poetry, kept me grounded as I wrote, and reminded me to get out of the stars and back on my own two feet. This is definitely a practice I will not abandon, even beyond this program, as it pushes me to slow down and pay attention to my senses, which is something I think all people should practice more, whether they be writers or not.

I would also like to give my thanks to Tiana Clark, who led the poetry workshop for my last two years at the School of Letters. Her encouragement and positivity has meant the world to me; she taught me not to be afraid of traditional poetry forms nor be afraid to subvert those same traditions and forms. She taught me the importance of communing with significant literary influences on the page, most notably Emily Dickinson, whose life and works haunt me in the best way and who, to this day, continues to be a great muse and joy to study.

And finally, I would like to give my last heaping of gratitude to Nickole Brown, without whom I could not have achieved this collection. She has been an endless source of support and calling me out on my own nonsense, keeping me firmly on the wild and winding path, and helping carry me to the end of this four-year-long trek. This collection has been a deeply personal journey of self-discovery and self-improvement in the craft. It was often filled with tears and sleepless nights, feeling like a failure and feeling like I could soar. I am so excited to present these poems, these tempestuous poems that have changed and shifted as I have changed and shifted, all in an effort to achieve nothing more than a simple honesty.



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***The Give:***

*to push against the unyielding  
and push through it.*

## She May Have Been a River

1.

I had never seen a wild thing  
up close before.  
I was just a child,  
but I remember her:  
a doe, her ears two petals of lily,  
a Ward of Artemis eyeing me  
without fear like she has seen  
domestic things up close before.

I wanted her to eat bread  
from my hand. I wanted to dance  
my fingers over those velvet ears,  
wanted to curl  
under her legs, feel  
the soft underbelly brush my hair.

She didn't eat the bread  
from my hand, so I tossed  
it between us. Nose to the ground,  
her pink tongue snatched it,  
propelled into that powerful throat.  
I meant it as a peace offering.

I didn't curl under her legs like a fawn,  
young though I was. I still wonder  
at the feel of her belly, the color.  
I imagine it white like a rapid,  
and just as quick.

She may have been a river.

2.

Maybe this poem isn't about the doe,  
but stay with me, listen.

Driving to the grocery store I saw,  
on the side of the road, a doe.  
She could have been sleeping,

but the angle of her neck was  
wrong. Her eyes did not see me.

They did not see the sky.  
Her legs were like branches  
fallen from a tree struck by lightning.

Imagine that tree, great trunk split  
in a jagged wound, edges black,  
brittle, rotting, as fungi  
move in to make the decay  
home.

The doe's body was not struck  
by lightning, but I saw the rot,  
the flies, the slick tongue  
hanging from her mouth  
like a salted slug.  
I saw the emptiness.

Her head, jackknifed in violence,  
revealed to me the underside  
of her throat. White, but not a rapid.  
More like an eggshell fragment.

3.

I want to be the one who  
parks my car beside her still form  
and wipes blood from her  
river stone nose with the reverence  
of preparing a body for burial,  
swaddle her in floral print bedsheets,  
lay her to rest among  
amaranth and split tree trunks.

I want to give her back  
to the goddess who could not  
save her from that metal battering  
ram hurtling 50 miles per hour,  
leaving behind black skid marks  
and a deer that I didn't even know.

Why is it I might only feel  
the softness of her belly  
when it no longer moves?

4.

I want to be a child again,  
foundling curled under  
her legs, feeling her belly  
move against my hair.

She eats from my hand,  
and takes me with her when  
she disappears into the trees.

Maybe this poem is about the doe,  
and she is not dead.

**Sparrow***—for Emily Dickinson*

I spend a wild night with her, upstairs in  
her dusty attic bedroom where we touch

in the motes of midnight, fingertips  
singing the page of our bodies, then she

makes me breakfast for dinner, apron strings tied  
in a bow at the dip of her lower back, her arms

powdered up to the elbows in baking flour  
that she later sprinkles in the skillet to thicken.

She feeds me biscuits and gravy, lines about hearts  
and home, a breast fit for pearls. I feed her a story

about a pearl in the moon that she tongues  
when her tongue gets so tired of praying

to Death—tired of praying for penance.

We only need the salvation of sharing  
a page with one brown pencil between us—

she pulls that pencil from her dress pocket  
after brushing biscuit crumbs away and draws

the smallest crescent moon, invisible,  
on my wrist, but it burns like a brand.

And I often find myself wishing  
I could see that moon on my skin,

like I wish Emily could pen it in ink,  
sent off to press with her poems.

The moon is named Sue, of course,  
floating under a pencil with no eraser.

*Sue Sue Sue* like the chirp of a sparrow,  
and I tell Emily my favorite of her poems

is the one with a Sparrow's sweet perennial nest.  
When I ask for more of that story, she says

she and Susan built blanket forts in the attic.  
I see them clear as day, small silhouettes

surrounded by scribbled scraps of journal,  
a pencil broken in two and sharpened on the ends.

Exchanging letters as treasures the way  
Emily's father placed a string of pearls

on her mother's neck. Emily took  
those pearls, put them on Susan

in the light of a midnight candle luminating  
the blanket fort they pretended was a wedding veil,

a shroud big enough to cover them both.

## Tattoos

—after “Feet” by Ross Gay

I remember when Josh got his first,  
 the summer after high school, curving  
 letters *Faith* on his shoulder.  
 Afterwards, he said to me:  
*you should get a wrist tattoo,*  
 in that loud, southern accent thick  
 and proud as hay bales, and I wrapped  
 his words in the cup of my palm,  
 held tight, examined, and still hold on  
 to this day. I think I fell a little bit  
 in love with him at that moment,  
 pointed nose and freckles, voice  
 carried across parking lots like  
 a yowling cat, and I touched  
 my blank wrist with reverence.  
 Sometimes I drew stars there with a pen.

I was only 18 and didn't know how  
 to ask for what I wanted, what I thought  
 I wanted. I mostly had rage like  
 our first fight when I considered  
 keying his car, but he made up  
 to me weeks later when he texted  
*I miss your mean ass.*  
 But this poem isn't about  
 dumb teenagers and tattoos.  
 He's dead: a car accident, age 18.

I'm older now and trying to figure why  
 I still miss him when I'm not the same  
 person who loved him even  
 when those letters, that *Faith*, burned  
 in fire and rain on some useless  
 wet highway.

I imagine him years later, us  
 sitting in his red mustang while I hog  
 the radio, and he criticizes my taste in music.  
 I want to tell him that I love him, I still  
 love him, but I date women now, and I  
 want to ask him if that's okay, if it  
 even matters. When I open my mouth,  
 I can't speak except to say,

*It doesn't matter. You aren't here anymore,  
I've changed, and it doesn't matter.* I never wait  
to hear his reply. I'm angry at him  
for dying on me before I could know  
whether I really loved him, whether  
he loved me back. He never stopped  
talking, but we didn't talk about *that*.

He never really was silent, not silent  
*as the grave*, not even now in  
his own grave. How can he be, when I still  
hear the nasal twang of his voice,  
still smell his cologne clogging up  
the passenger seat of my car? He's been  
in the ground for years, but he never  
stopped being loud.

**Camping, October 20, 2012**

*—a year after Josh died*

we warm our hands huddle  
with stars and the campfire sip sparkling  
cider not the alcoholic kind we are  
just kids girls no older than twenty wanting  
to forget I want to forget that  
cold October

wind never lets me forget nestles  
between skin and sweater that ice blanket  
says you are not warm you will never  
be warm again we try it though  
us four girls we are just kids four  
crickets chirping follicles slide back  
and forth crack the silence if you let it  
that silence will swallow

those church folks saying he's in  
the light now heaven gained a new angel  
all part of god's plan, amen, god willing  
that sky will swallow you those lights  
outweighed by black void like a flash  
of fire then nothing we never did  
douse that fire let it simmer we  
were just kids and we weren't  
done yet

## Skipping Stones

I may have realized as I clung to the edge  
of the damp lake dock, waters beneath  
evening-cool and deep. I dipped  
in my toes, afraid, not seeing  
the bottom, not knowing  
when I might lose my grip and sink.

Or inside that TJ-Maxx where I worked  
for a year, and she blew in like a willow tree,  
long legs, long hair black as rain-soft soil—  
she stayed like a blackberry winter, though:  
here one day, gone the next.

Her dark hair swam like eelgrass  
behind my eyelids as I drifted upon  
that lake considering pebbles—small,  
dense—they can skip, or they can  
drop. I cradled myself, wishing  
to be flat and smooth.

Or three years later:  
He kissed me in a parking lot,  
first time, nicotine sweet, and I felt  
wrong—his touch like rain  
freezing my skin, painful, raw.  
I hated him. I didn't know why I hated  
him, but I hated him.

I probably knew when Honey Hair  
and Freckles smiled at me through  
that wide bathroom mirror—  
She cut me open like an overripe  
grapefruit, and I wanted her  
to sweeten my edges, dig deep  
with her spoon, scoop out my sour.

I fell in love with her ears—soft pink  
conch shells, the way she whistled  
like a shrikethrush—a songbird's  
call that I should have answered.  
I could have nested a home  
on her chest, but like a pebble  
with sharp edges, I flipped once,  
dove headfirst to the cold black.

In the wake of dropped stones,  
ripples come, epiphanies as waves,  
crashing over the shore, but  
I know now, with you,  
what it feels to be a stone,  
slick and edgeless on that dark  
lake surface—still fearing the dive  
but riding the ripples.

## Something I Can't Expose

I rarely feel grateful  
 peeling off the warm exoskeleton  
 of my sweatpants and hoodie,  
 exposing myself, the cold prickle  
 of a pre-shower, being naked  
 under air vents. My skin textures in  
 goosebumps as each hair stands  
 to beckon a warm return.

I rarely feel grateful  
 for showers, but today,  
 I press my hand against an old,  
 creek-stone shoulder ache,  
 rub clay-like skin in circles,  
 try to soothe exhaustion pains,  
 and the hot torrent reminds me  
 of my mom's fingers when  
 I allow her to press her fingertips  
 into the sorest plane of my neck.

I rarely feel grateful  
 for my mom, only let her  
 rub my back when I'm sick,  
 aching with illness, starved  
 for just a comfort touch,  
 relieved as she sweeps  
 the hateful knots in my shoulders,  
 and I think  
 nothing else matters.  
 I could live here.

Today I feel  
 the shower's hot fingers beat down  
 my back, a white static. I tip my head,  
 let heat creep up my skull to where  
 head meets neck, right in that crevice  
 where I carry twenty-seven years of stones,  
 afraid of loss, afraid of being alone,  
 of not being alone. Afraid to let my mother  
 press her fingertips too deep, afraid  
 of what she will find.

### First Crush at 23

I've never.  
     I've never touched her.  
 I've never touched her hair.  
     Her goldenrod hair  
 City of golden rods I want  
     to live inside her  
 goldenrod garden. Touch  
     her golden rods of hair.  
     Feel her want me  
 back. Her hands sting  
 the back of my neck, gentle  
     sting pink moon fingernails.  
     Gentle sting  
 being wanted  
     back. My fingers in gold  
 like Midas is a woman  
     with gold on her fingers.  
     Her fingers in hair.  
     Touch me  
 back. Lie against  
     my back.  
 Folded into sheets  
     Folded into  
     you. Hair whispers  
 on my neck. A whisper  
     of golden rods  
 I've never touched  
     a whisper  
 of moon pink gentle  
     sting I've never  
     touched  
 your hair but I have  
     touched  
     my want.

## Josh's Red Mustang

See her:

Cherry red blushed deep,  
deep to the rust brown of blood.

He left at night. Left her alone  
in that damp parking lot; fleeting  
headlights dancing against  
her own dark lamps.  
Such lingering absence,

absence you could suck the fuel clean  
out of, absence like fading indentations on  
a leather seat, absence that does not  
announce itself.

Call this what it is: Abandonment, a click  
followed by silence; the lock sunk  
down, a sealed breach,  
a closed casket.

Hunched under rain, she can't even fire  
her cigarette lighter. No brass-licked sparks  
survive this October wind.

She still holds his backpack, his  
Hollister cologne breeze, his  
half-empty sweet tea, sugar gone  
brown, congealed. But her warmth  
slipped out when he left,

pulled back and hurled,  
arched,  
crushed  
on that asphalt. Call her  
hollow, but

intact. She wasn't the white truck, the death  
trap. No somersaults or head-on  
collisions crumpled her. Yet  
she weeps that sweet antifreeze,

weeps with the hiss of passing  
vehicles and wet gravel, red metal

coma, his thigh prints smoothed,  
invisible now.

## The Punchline

is me, admitting that I still  
can't look directly at your car  
crash. That I remember hearing  
*decapitated* as in spooning  
the leaved cap off a strawberry. As in

the broken glass was only confetti.  
An explosion: fireworks.  
Viscera: silly string. Just magic  
tricks. A clown routine with a joke  
of a finale: that disappearing act where  
you stepped into the metal box, and the lid  
locked airtight. When it opened, you were  
gone. No trap door no wires or pulleys just  
gone up in a puff of neon purple smoke.

As in, I didn't laugh when I heard the news,  
but it felt like a joke anyway because  
your funeral was closed casket, a  
magician's box of doves.

As in, I can only see your death in metaphors  
of temporary glamor because it's easier  
than admitting the violence that took you.

**grandmother**

she lived in that dirt and baking-  
soda soil, her drywood fingers  
cradling book pages gentle  
as if she were holding a bird,  
turning those well-worn wings,  
their songs rustle the living room  
curtains. her feet shuffled through  
breakfast with black coffee, and  
she napped late in the afternoon.

i think of her curled form on that  
white couch and how onions never  
see the sun until they ripen,  
huddled and waiting for harvest,  
of her saying *sometimes i think  
god forgot me* as she sighed,  
rocked back in her green recliner.

she was a pallid moon, nearly  
a century of folded skin and  
folded hand towels, quiet sighs  
in the kitchen over tepid dishwater,  
over luzianne tea bags and lemon  
slices, earthy, tart. she sighed like  
the breath of a breeze on fanned  
leaves gone yellow, a pale bulb,  
ready for the plucking.

## Lemonade Recipe for Coming Out to Your Parents

1.

So here's how you begin: the real secret is to crush them first. Cradle each one in two palms and squeeze, or: crush one on the countertop with all the weight of your arms, or: ask a friend to do the crushing for you because you aren't as strong as you'd like to be, but the crushing is what's important: it gets the juices flowing. Halve the fruit for better access—you might worry about slicing a finger, but what's life without risk?

Here's how you can say it:

*I'm a lesbian.*

Never mind, that's too direct.

What you may want to do is cut one lemon at a time.

2.

Juice with the mixer attachment, then lick inside the peels before throwing them in a Food City bag. Have you ever noticed the inside of a lemon is a different color than the skin? Picture that girl with hair the color of a lemon's insides. How you wish you could marry her. Your mom wants you to have a husband, but the last guy you dated smelled of cigarettes and weed and called you boring.

Try saying it like this:

*Mom. I don't want a husband.*

3.

Formality calls for measuring exact amounts of sugar, but you can also just dump it straight from the bag until it's about as tall as two fingernails. Dad might question you, but honestly, you've practiced for so long that you know how much sugar you need to get maximum sweetness. When you run out of sugar, try honey. He may say the lemonade is weak, but honey is a perfectly acceptable substitute. Remember that girl with lemon hair. Remember how her neck smells of honey, how she tastes better, richer, more like a life you can savor.

Say it this way:

*Dad, I fell in love with a woman.*

4.

They will comment on your water-to-juice ratio,  
but that's the best part: when you can nestle your pitcher  
under the faucet, fill her near brimming. Then you can slip  
the wooden spoon into her depths and whirlpool  
that summer treasure. Serve the lemonade  
with a side of:

*Why should anyone tell me how to love?*

Besides, you make this all the time,  
and they always say it's the best they've ever had.

## Prayer to My Mother

You fold me small, origami star  
 placed between Bible pages  
 bookmarked, cramped, edges  
 smooth, no dust, no wrinkles.

I am stuck there, pressed  
 flower snatched from the dirt,  
 ironed flat and brittle. Closing  
 the cover on those dry petals  
     hides me from view.

*I love you*, you say, and  
 it's true. You love me with the sharp  
 stem of a blackberry bush, then  
 say, *I would do anything for you*,  
 but what if *anything* means eating  
 the berries unripe and red,  
     swallowing that sour  
         of my never wanting to marry  
             a man?

Take the dry flower from  
 between those Bible pages.  
 Pull her petals off  
 one by  
 one.

You love God, you love me  
     not, you love God, you  
 love me not.  
     You love God  
 You love  
     me  
     You love God  
 more.

**Why I don't let you read my poems**

because you will call them  
sad because you will call me  
sad because I am  
a lesbian because I write  
about being a lesbian  
and you don't know because you  
ask what my poems are about  
and I never have an answer  
because the answer I have  
is not one you want because  
I cannot admit to you  
that the last time I felt happy  
was planting pine trees as a child  
because I detach myself from you  
and I say we are nothing alike  
because we fight like a cluster  
of firecrackers but you can  
never admit your temper and see  
my anger as a flaw I don't want you  
to change me because you are a fixer  
and I am afraid because I write about  
a girl I've been in love with for years  
but you still talk about me having  
a husband you put me in ill-fitting  
boxes that you think fit perfectly  
and I know you love me because  
you show it all the time because  
I love your cooking and  
when I am sick I need  
you the most because you rub  
my back when I am in pain  
you say funny things when  
we watch movies because  
you love me but I also know  
you don't always love me  
like I need you to.

## A Rose Gold Bath

—*After Bluets by Maggie Nelson*

1. I wouldn't say I fell in love with rose gold. I wouldn't even call our relationship obsessive. My fascination with the color felt a natural progression. And isn't there something about how rose gold is two colors combined? You see it right there in that compound name: rose gold. The relationship between the two words does warrant a little bit of my obsession. They soften each other. I think of a bright red rose and of flashy gold rings, but somehow, the combined colors create softness, create quiet.

2. The color is a child of metal crafted by Carl Faberge in 19th century Russia. Rose gold hatched from an egg. From many eggs, all elegant, graceful designs. I looked at photos for hours, days.

3. Imagine that soft shade of pink and gold formed into the iconic oval. Then crisscrossed in silver like my grandmother's quilts. Hanging from a chain or perched like royalty on golden clawed feet. A daughter's hair bow of diamonds. Or the middle opening on hinges to reveal a bright red heart like a cherry. Despite all these designs, I keep staring at the one that is smooth, unblemished and shiny. I want to put it in my mouth. Hold it there like a communion wafer. Absorb it into my bloodstream.

4. The metal itself is an alloy: copper, gold, silver. The exact ratios differ depending on how much "rose" one desires. Think "75% gold," "22.25% copper," and "2.75% silver." Rose gold is none of these colors though. The combined palette of metals creates something new. Think about reproduction, human reproduction. Of putting two people together and creating someone wholly new.

5. Rose gold: the dreamed child, tumbling and melting like that softened silver, that softened gold, that softened copper, a molten threesome creating something delicate, like memory on waking.

6. I spend a lot of time meditating on the copper. Copper gives the rose tint. The more copper in the alloy, the more the rose blooms. Like the way blush spread up her neck when we touched hands.

7. I still cannot decide how this color should look on the page. And I mean literally the name. Is it "rose-gold" with a hyphen like an unsevered umbilical cord between the two halves? Is it "rosegold" in the most romantic sense of two becoming one? Most sources put it on the page as "rose gold." Two words for one color. Two parents for one child.

8. We must also consider the sound of the name. Two syllables like a cry turned whisper: ROSEgold ROSE gold ROSE-gold. Say it enough times and it becomes a heartbeat's rhythm. Say it once and it becomes a dog's bark and his answering echo. Say it very quickly and it becomes a bird's chirp, a bi-syllabic call for one's mate.

9. Think, for a moment, of the roseate spoonbill. Florida native and hunted to near extinction for her plumage, she manages to survive and flourish regardless. I read that these birds are serially monogamous and take one mate per breeding season. Something about taking a new lover each season seems to defy traditional pink. It's not a forever love, but a bountiful one.

10. Well, really, it's like Aimee Bender writes in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, "he loved her the way a bird-watcher's heart leaps when he hears the call of the roseate spoonbill, a fluffy pink wader, calling its lilting coo-coo from the mangroves." That spoonbill's call, that "lilting coo-coo," like a siren that won't kill you but instead will take you under her breast for a season and then release you afterwards.

11. The color feels biographical at times, and other times it feels like I am trying to catch myself in the rearview mirror of someone else's car.

12. I think I have imposter syndrome about rose gold, as in I don't know if it is a real color. Everything I find about the metal is manufactured. I could fill a vat with my rose gold inventory of phone cases and sneakers, headphones, wallet, my glasses. I even own a romper I probably can't fit into anymore. It has little rose gold flowers sharing space with navy blue. For a while I wanted everything I wore to be rose and navy.

13. I haven't painted my nails in nine years, but if I had a pot of rose gold polish maybe I would pull that brush across my ten half-moons. Maybe I would do my toes as well. Or maybe I would drink it like Van Gogh did his yellow.

14. My imposter syndrome wants to be a bright pink bubblegum stain, so while writing about this metal turned pigment I have to wonder, *Am I just writing about pink?* Are they the same? Is rose gold just pink?

15. Think of it this way: I haven't dated a guy in four years. I also haven't dated a girl in four years. Is rose gold not just pink? I've

dated more guys than girls. I joke with my friends that rose gold is the lesbian color. I don't have a logical reason for this other than the fact that looking at the color makes me feel at home. But is it just pink? How can I call this a lesbian color when I have dated more guys than girls?

16. Think of it this way: I didn't realize I was a lesbian until age 23. I actually found out when my friend said, "maybe you're gay." I never considered the possibility before. It's not like I hadn't dated guys, like I hadn't exclusively dated guys my entire life. It also didn't feel like she was prescribing an identity when she told me. It felt more like sliding into the heat of a bath and feeling my aches evaporate.

17. I've been talking to a girl on a dating app who handmakes pigments from a cotton/silk fiber mix combined with water and applied to walls. She said the pigment is concentrated natural material, a plant-based formula. I need to know what makes rose gold pigment. I was afraid to ask her if she knew. I think a part of me is ashamed of this color.

18. My own research shows that the pigment is red dye 40, also known as "Allura Red AC." I'm disappointed. Red dye 40 comes from coal tar. I wanted so badly for this color to have a life to it. Most colors can be pulled from plants, like a transference of vitality to make that roseate spoonbill's coveted plumage. Allura Red AC feels like a chemistry project. It looks like a chemistry project.

19. The molecular formula of Allura Red AC is as follows:



I couldn't tell you what any of that means. I nearly failed chemistry in college, but these failures turned me into a writer because I went from studying pre-vet to studying English. I don't know what any of this chemistry means, but I can write about it, or I can write about the spirit of what it means, what it makes. I can transform this chemistry project into a biography project, take a bath in it.

20. So is rose gold just pink? Some call it "millennial pink," which is exactly like them to associate it with my generation. Articles on this phenomena have names like "Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away" and "The Tyranny of Rose Gold and Millennial Pink." Rose gold is seen as a materialistic color just like millennials are seen as a materialistic generation.

21. There is another side, though. One article describes rose gold as “androgynous” and “a genderless mascot,” which feels pretty close to a mirror of myself. My relationship with gender was fucked as I figured things out. I was raised believing men could only love women and women could only love men. So if I loved women, I had to be a man or, more accurately, I was not allowed to be a woman.

22. The idea that rose gold defies gender norms is both ridiculous and profound. Maybe it is the lesbian color.

23. So why does any of this matter? It could be like Maggie Nelson’s “We don’t get to choose what or whom we love,” but it’s not that. Not really. I could take those spoonbill feathers and even the chemistry project that is red dye 40. I could take my entire rose gold wonderbox full of materialistic shit I’ve collected over the years. The phones, wallets, shoes, clothes, makeup pallets. Even the smooth Faberge egg balanced on my tongue.

24. I could take all of this and dump it into a bathtub, melt it down to the consistency of syrup. Strip myself nude, take a dip. Feet first, then legs, then the rest. Submerge until nobody could see me for all the rose gold shining at the edges. A gilded object is described as “gilt.” I could be “gilt” in this bathtub, emerge embodied as rose gold.

25. It’s not that I am in love with this color so much as I feel like I should be gilt in it. *Gilt*, as in I am tired of carrying *guilt* for wanting to be the roseate spoonbill with her “coo-coo” siren’s call. Tired of feeling guilt at the touch of another woman in my bed.

**Perspective: Black Rat Snake**

As a child I believed  
you were deaf.

That your earless,  
spoon-shaped head  
tasted the world only  
on the twin points of  
your tongue.

I know now that you  
hear through the bones  
of your jaw, hear violent  
vibrations near the earth.

Did you feel the living room  
mossy green carpet under  
your belly, see the gold-brown  
stripes on our old couch? Feel  
my mom, frantic, sit me  
down, demand, *stay here,*  
*don't move,*  
did you recognize danger  
when you felt her voice?

I was young, legs barely  
filling my OshKosh jeans,  
and I didn't know what  
it meant to hear the bellow  
of my dad's scream slinging  
out from the other room.

I only found out later that  
emptying his pant pockets  
onto the rosewood dresser  
was where he met the slits  
of your eyes, your oily rope  
body, dark as a bruise,  
curled in pitch spirals.  
I don't think you meant  
to intrude—you just slipped in,  
a silent wanderer seeking  
the warmth of that old wood.

To my dad, you were a thing  
of horror, a devil's minion  
in wait for your opportunity

to strike with needle teeth, draw  
blood, and wrap your slick coils  
into a cold black noose.

I want to say he was just  
doing his fatherly duty,  
protecting his family from  
a gaping, jagged maw,

but what I remember is this:  
he took you outside in a metal  
bucket and shot you dead.

Did you hear the crack of  
the gunshot against your pale  
eggnog-colored jaw?

In my head it was early fall.  
The leaves crunched under  
my father's heavy boots when  
he transformed from *dad*  
to *killer* for no damn reason  
besides an old biblical hatred

against a creature who meant  
no harm, who used her violence  
only for survival.

If my dad never found you,  
he would have never known  
you were there at all.

You weren't going  
to hurt us. You would have  
taken your fill of warmth,  
then blended back into  
the night like a whisper.

He didn't have to kill you.

## Rocky

The miracle of today is you got  
out of bed, front feet first, shifting  
backward to lift upright your frail  
spine with a heaving effort.  
Your back legs, tumored, wasted,  
can barely hold your weight and  
shake with the strain of standing.

We stroll around the yard,  
six bare feet toeing the summer  
grass, your labored breaths  
beating a tired rhythm. I give  
you a scratch on the ears,  
grateful to see that bullwhip  
of a tail still swing its response.

The miracle of today is you,  
eating, licking the plastic spoon  
in my hand, folding back mashed  
chicken, peas, carrots into your  
mouth, wet food softened  
against the brown of your teeth.  
Your tongue seeks food less  
and less, and like the dripping  
of water from a hole in a cup,  
you slow as you empty.

I try to be grateful. For the fur  
on your ears, a velvet baby  
blanket's corner that I thumb  
for comfort. They are warm closer  
to the ancient dome of your skull,  
but cool on the tips like a fresh  
orange peel. The wreath of fur  
around your neck is like running  
my fingers over a soft-bristle brush,  
the kind you groom an infant with.

I am grateful when I palm over  
the front of that wreath, right on  
your chest, feel movement as you  
pull air through tired lungs, rapid  
inhale-exhale graveled by the  
congestion of time.

Or when I feel that gravel  
direct in the cup of my ear,  
head against your side, careful  
not to press my whole weight  
against your ribs but stretching  
an arm across your body.  
Or how your clouded eyes  
look directly into mine, how  
you rest your heavy head  
in the fold of my lap and sigh.  
You still know me, you still  
know me, you still know me.

## Downtown Intersections

Imagine this:

we meet on a bridge.

It's evening. It's July.

I ask you out for ice cream.

Or you ask me? Either way,

we both say yes.

We walk for so long that my right sandal  
rubs a blister into the ball of my foot.

I joke that I don't get out much.

It's a miracle.

No, not the getting out part.

The walking downtown with you part,  
wanting to braid my fingers through yours.

We are in a bar.

We are on a date in a bar. I want to impress you  
with the ice cream place, but it's closed. I want  
to impress you with downtown, with the lights  
and the art. I want to impress you.

You aren't from around here, and  
whatever this is,  
it's a sacred pilgrimage.

We are on a date in a bar. A man swoops  
too close to our table in passing.

He swoops

too close.

The smirk on his face feels like  
a burglary.

On his return trip, he leans against our table,  
offers us drinks, asks what the deal is.

Too close.

He keeps putting his hands together,  
interlocking fingers as if he wants to ask  
those age old questions:

*Do you scissor?* or

*Can I join?*

I can't stop staring at his hands,  
fingers weaved like padlocks.

My response is stuck somewhere  
between lung and tongue.

You say, *We are on a date.*

Also known as,  
*fuck off you weren't invited.*

A man inserts himself into my first  
date with another woman. He is like  
that blister aching when I walk.  
It's not a fucking miracle anymore.

We leave the bar. Instead of braiding  
our fingers together, we braid our  
keys between them in jagged knuckles.

## The Give

This new experience, strawberry  
syrup tea reverse-waterfalling  
my tongue through a broad straw,  
cheeks pulling inward at the sweet  
sugar sting. A new experience,  
drinking boba, then another one,

taking a woman into my bed,  
the one framed in rose gold velvet  
like moss reflecting the sunrise.  
My bare legs fold around her  
apricot hips. I am fighting to touch  
her with joy, grip the tanned expanse  
of her shoulders and feel her warm  
against the bones in my chest,  
run fingers through the ropy  
shine of her hair, and  
not feel  
guilt.  
No, guilt isn't quite right.

I wanted to touch her  
and not be repulsed  
with myself,  
wanted to not feel like  
an imposter in this bed.

This bed is not the one with  
celeste blue covers and framed  
by my grandmother's rosewood  
headboard. I used to press  
my cheek against that wood  
and seek solace, like this girl  
pressing her cheek to my thigh  
as if searching for home, but  
all I can feel is homesick.

I wanted her to be my rosewood,  
wanted to press my face in  
the softness of her center  
like the first time I drank  
bubble tea, slick pearls  
displaced upwards,  
squeezed into the straw.

I wanted to roll her around  
the inside of my jaw, press  
my tongue against  
the unyielding,  
feel the give.

### **Reuniting with my body is mostly pain**

greeting me as I come out of my head  
and feel stabbing knitting needle pains  
in my right breast, a kind of stab like  
wolfing down spicy food, so I keep  
expecting it to fade with a quick swig of water.  
I walk frustrated fingertips around my  
salmon-skin areola, afraid of finding  
that parasite, that round lump of a devastation.  
Sometimes the pain tastes like biting  
into a hot lump of coal, repeatedly.  
But when it fades to a dull simmer,  
I miss it. Another reminder from my body.

The pain often migrates to my right shoulder  
like an anvil sitting on the joint. It climbs  
sharp edges up my neck, digs a nail into  
the soft temple of my skull. It sounds like  
a bass boost, thumping down the ear canal,  
vibrating the edges. Climbs into the back  
of my neck, a vulture waiting for her feast.

Reuniting with my body is startling  
when I forget what it's like to live  
inside a body instead of ignoring it.  
My head of wild hair, jutting hilltop,  
that thrumming ache near the base  
that never speaks unless touched.

## October

always smells like crisp burning  
leaves, glowing edges  
on the logs, spitting  
up smoke the color of storms  
as they writhe and shrivel  
before collapsing into ashes,

like me, nine Octobers ago,  
the first time I removed my body.  
I was on that side road next to the mall,  
the phone, pressed against my ear,  
a hot coal branding me:  
*it killed him it killed him.*  
I don't remember the rest,  
but I could have fragmented  
my windshield with the nails  
spinning up my throat, throwing  
themselves out between teeth  
and into space that answered me  
with silence.

I'm outside now, naked feet  
pressed into the wooden deck  
so hard my toenails go white.  
The top of my head connects  
to brick as I bend back,  
look upwards at the black  
paper sky, punched  
with shining holes.  
Every year in October I remove  
my body.

It is a flaying,  
as in, I numb myself from the pain  
your death left when it slit me  
from head to toe, but now  
I cannot climb back in, and  
it is so much worse this way  
when all I want is to put my body  
back on and breathe.

## I put my body back on

feet first because they carry me bare  
 across gravel and hot concrete, heel  
 hard as iguana skin, big toe white  
 on the side with self-made armor.  
 These toes are not pretty, bent,  
 crone-knuckled, formed long ago  
 nestling in a pointe shoe's rock-tip  
 striking wooden floors.

But I never had much talent for pointe.  
 My hip a rusted hinge, legs too  
 restless for holding fifth position,  
 for balancing flamingo style, leg  
 cocked up sideways. Now, these legs  
 spend too long motionless, bent-pretzel,  
 feet in the fold of thigh and calf.

These legs, wide and soft after years  
 of exhausted sitting, pressed into  
 chairs, mattresses, floors, couches.  
 These legs attached to a real *potato*,  
 grown up awkward from a young  
 twig, grown into a shape that is  
 too round, too soft, covered in  
 pale feathery stretch marks  
 raised like scars: a body  
 I often feel I failed. I would like  
 to wear this body tighter,  
 squeezed in like the spandex  
 leotards of childhood ballet.

Putting my body back on now means  
 cupping desire in the hinge of my legs, in  
 my wild cherry-stone center,  
 the repressed desire that wanted  
 a girl with rose-blonde hair frizzed  
 to the moon, bottle cap glasses, a girl  
 with a bird's whistle, who did not  
 want me back.

## Breathing

*Left her husband*

*for a woman,*  
is all I hear my mom say.

Before, I was spooning my soup beans  
in a haze, half listening, but those words  
pierced the droning  
fog of dinner gossip

about you, a girl from  
my childhood church.

I remember you: boyish,  
square-jawed, swimming

in men's plaid shirts, cargo pants.

You carried yourself like  
a hyperion tree, towering,  
unmatched. The sway of  
your strut, dirty hair peeking  
under a backwards cap.

I don't remember your voice,  
but I hear it deep, like the center  
of a midnight lake. You came from  
a nest of sisters, but  
wore men's clothing without

shame, the way in middle school  
I wore my brother's t-shirts and  
basketball shorts before the first

stroke of eyeliner in eighth grade  
that I didn't mean. Heavy  
kohl under each lid, smeared  
like two bruises, exactly how  
my best friend wore hers when  
a boy first looked at her with desire,

the first time I felt as thin as air.  
I didn't want him, not really. I just  
wanted to be wanted.

I saw you years later at a funeral.

On the arm of your husband and  
trailed by two daughters, you were

awkward in makeup.  
I felt sorry for you.

No, sorry isn't right. You looked  
like a fake flower, plastic  
stem stuck in a florist's foam block.  
You were rootless, not  
alive, just there to look  
pretty. I felt your  
suffocation.

When my mom says what she says  
at dinner, she tuts, disgusted, but  
I feel my lungs expand  
in relief for you, a woman  
who married a man, had  
children with him, and one day, let go  
of the lie.

I want to say, *I never really knew you,*  
*but I know you. I know*  
*you, and I am still*  
*struggling to breathe.*

Give me some of your air,  
because I know  
what that Baptist thumb  
can do to a gay woman, how  
it convinces a hyperion  
she is a fake flower, how it chokes  
me on the backwashed venom  
in my mom's voice when she speaks  
of you and doesn't realize she  
is also talking about me.

## Ode to my Pride

The most beautiful part  
of my body is my tree  
trunk spine which  
often bends  
but does not break  
like the eastern white  
pines in my backyard  
that I planted with my  
mom as a child, bending,  
pulling those saplings  
from their plastic bags to  
nestle with the earth.  
That homemade forest  
has weathered two  
decades of wind  
and still holds  
a million green fingers to  
the sky as if saying,  
*I am here I am still here.*  
I am brittle, sometimes,  
when I want to be pine  
instead of rubbed raw  
by decades of silence,  
burying my pride in damp,  
crushing earth. I grip it tight,  
wounded, but bright  
when it emerges.

**Sparrow's Elegy**

—for Sue Gilbert

After Emily dies, Susan washes her body,

torso bent, casting long shadows over  
her lover, the pair bathed in candle

and moonlight as Sue uncinches  
Emily's white dress, the one with pockets,

peels it from her still form as carefully  
as when they were girls under the sheets.

The dress is no longer warm, but Emily's scent  
lingers: baking flour, tree sap, pencil wood.

I hear the silent noise of the washing,  
the wrinkled tips of Sue's fingers clinging

to a white cloth as she dips it in warm water,  
strokes a path across that pale forehead.

She lifts each cold wrist, brushes her cloth  
along the inner skin between Emily's fingers.

They are worn and calloused from gripping  
those small pencils, from turning pages in books.

Sue washes Emily's collarbone and breasts,  
her hand moving in gentle circles over

those delicate bones and giving curves,  
then presses her face against that empty chest,

back bowed as if in prayer, imagines breathing,  
breathing for both of them,

the sound a whisper like sparrow wings  
clinging to the wind for one last flight.



