

Yielding To It
A Collection of Poems

by

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[Nickole Brown]

[Tiana Clark]

Introduction

“We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”

—William Butler Yeats

“The personal lyric says to the self in its suffering: I will not abandon you. Nor will I ask you to abandon yourself and the felt truth and particulars of your experience.”

—Gregory Orr

“What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them”

—D.H. Lawrence

This manuscript was first conceived, without words, in delusion—inside ultramarathons of personal conquest and years of disorder and distraction, around internal frenzy and desperation. Before these words were born upon the page, they relentlessly collided with my ego. They were repeatedly deflected by fear and forsaken for a fabricated anthem of willpower and pride. Such stories are boring. They cannot absorb the raw nature of human complexity. They cannot process its language, nor communicate its somatic understanding to a reader. My route to poetry was not a blazed trail nor a mapped greenway. Before entering this MFA program, it was more of an aimless, lifelong bushwhack—navigating blindly through the intersection of ancestral trauma and privilege—finally emerging into faith that D. H. Lawrence was not wrong: yield yourself to the wind, allow yourself to be borrowed by it for long enough, and the *three strange angels* will find you.

In June of 2018, at Sewanee: The University of The South, I walked into my first ever poetry workshop ready to conquer the art of language in the same manner I had succeeded at other feats. It was, effectively, though certainly subconsciously, another strategy of distraction.

The true nature of reality and “the self” were buried beneath the underbrush of my action and capacity for self-righteous, sustained effort. They were covered by the curtains of performance and what my mother called a “high threshold of pain,” but was more likely an inability to process felt experience in my body. I have now come across only two things which I cannot fool for any extended amount of time—one is my children and the other is poetry. Both of these seem to absorb and reflect the truth of my inner condition regardless of the elaborate performance I may choreograph externally. Professor Nickole Brown pulled me out of the weeds right away in pointing out the necessity of “paying attention” to the surrounding world. The extent to which I was out of alignment with this practice of mindfulness became increasingly clear, but also I was unable to notice the smaller, ordinary miracles unfolding around me, but also was I unable to sit within my own questions and emotional discomfort long enough to move my pen. In *Poetry as Survival*, poet Gregory Orr explains, “When we have forgotten or repressed our own stories, or failed to value them enough to give them shape and form, we are diminished beings.” I lived in this diminished place before finding myself in a room full of poetry and people willing to wait patiently while I learned to be still, peeling back layer upon layer of societal conditioning. Learning to listen for the truth in my own experience, instead of trying to *conquer* poetry, I slowly began to hear with more clarity and empathy. With each poet we studied, I began to follow the “camera work” that can zoom in and out with language and syntax to expose the subject from different points of view. I eventually became more comfortable trusting associative leaps and experimenting with craft techniques such as anaphora to allow my own poems to say to speak from my subconscious, as opposed to unveiling my pre-constructed agendas. This began to give the unspoken its own voice, allowing the silences buried inside me to stir. In time and with much practice, they began to speak up, replacing my earlier need to tell only polished stories.

In his poem, “The Man Who Looks Lost As He Stands In the Sympathy Card Section of Hallmark,” Matthew Olzmann tells us [he]:

looks so sad with his bent umbrella
that you want to place a hand on his shoulder, say,
It’ll be okay. But you don’t.
Because you also look like a crumbling statue
narrowed by rain, because you too have been abandoned
by language and what’s there to speak of or write
among so many words. There are not enough words
to say, *Someone is gone and in their place*
is a blue sound that only fits inside
an urn which you’ll drag to the mountains
or empty in an ocean with the hope
that the tide will deliver a message
that you never could. Because even those words
would end like a shipwreck at the bottom
of clear water. Someone would eventually look down,
notice the shattered hull, the mast
snapped in half, and believe those words
meant *ruin*, when they really meant,
starfish, iceberg, or scar tissue.
And even those words would fail.

Olzmann’s ability to use common language to speak about the voice, silenced, in a way I’d never heard it before woke me up to poetry’s infinite possibilities. Language suddenly had the power to reside and be felt underneath my skin. It was something I could sit with. It may not have healed all the wounds inflicted by a long dissociation from myself, but it exerted its power in ordering places that had long held my life ransom to chaos.

Further study into the scaffolding of a poem was the potential influence of a single line. Professor Brown introduced me to Ellen Bryant Voigt’s collection, *Headwaters*, where Voigt leverages line breaks and caesura without punctuation or capitalization to push her reader forward into the next line, or beg a pause for a moment of absorption. Using enjambment,

inspired by the work of Voigt, I played with creating multiple meanings with line breaks in my own poems, such as in “Power Outage”:

the only time anyone got to see him
this way—

where I attempt to convey the weight in seeing the speaker’s father stripped of the image he had to portray. In reading the first line on its own, without what inevitably follows, I hope the reader is able to feel the loss and nuance that comes along with a life lived around a certain expected responsibility. Constance Hale, in *Sin and Syntax*, reminds us that “every sentence is a mini-narrative,” and I have found, mostly in the process of revision, how the poem will insist upon unfolding itself in these single-line vignettes when I give it time and allow it to happen.

With Professor Tiana Clark, I studied the work of Richard Siken, in his collection, *Crush*, which plays with the construction of the line throughout. In this work, Siken commands pacing and reveals the heart of each poem to the reader by his use of the line—caesura, variable length and deliberate line breaks. In an attempt at this, I used white space and fragments in “Why I Share Blame For the DUI” to convey the internal disarray the speaker was experiencing as a mother trying to live up to a cultural ideal. I wanted to create a sense of “pacing the floor” with the construction of the lines, down to the final two lines which culminate in two clear, cohesive questions, hopefully circling the reader back to the title and the frightened heart beating inside the poem.

In another semester of craft study, Professor Brown took me into the world of prosody and poetic form. My initial perception of form was immediately cracked wide-open by reading Diane Seuss’s *Frank: Sonnets*, and even further by Elena Kalytiak Davis’s *shattered sonnets love*

cards and other off and back handed importunities. In both of these collections I learned to follow the rules of form, but also to break out of them when the poem asked for such. I used the artistic license displayed by Seuss and Davis to practice my own writing of the sonnet, “Armadillo,” in this manuscript. A bit frightened by the restrictions within fourteen lines, rhyme and the necessity of a pointed turn, I initially resisted. In retrospect, my resistance was another aspect of my need for control and my inability to allow my poetry to speak for itself. With some time, and using the strategy I developed of getting up from the desk and taking the poem out into life with me, I was able to craft into a sonnet the idea that “everything flows” for those who allow it, which is a mantra I had been carrying with me constantly at the time. Again, the powers of poetry showed up to convince me that it will not be conquered, and that I must learn to surrender and receive it, instead. I learned many other forms in addition to the sonnet, and included in this collection are the haiku, “Neural Tube Defect,” and the cadralor, “Groundwater.”

To consider myself a southern, female poet brings politics of the female body with it, as a given. It has led me, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully, into the foray of questioning the entanglement of capitalism, religion, and the patriarchal structures that raised me—many of which still stand. I have come to identify my subconscious need to delve further into these constructs by the way a poem feels in my body when read, or within my resistance to writing it. As such, studying the craft of ekphrastic poetry with Professor Clark gave me much needed entry points into these subjects. Professor Clark provided a range of ekphrasis study from as far back as Homer to current, modern poets such as, Robin Coste Lewis, Natasha Trethewey, Diane Seuss, A. Van Jordan, and many more which all challenged and sparked my curiosity. As a beginning poet, the convergence of visual art with language took me much further than the process of initial description, and it allowed my poetic imagination to run free without being lost

in the hurricane of my own creativity. Knowing I had a door through which to enter, as well as an anchor to hold me inside the poem, granted me permission to visit, with an open and many times muddled mind, my rising subconscious connections in relation to pieces of art. In this manuscript's opening poem, "Self Portrait: My Feet," I have taken inspiration from Diane Seuss in her collection, *Still Life With Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*, and turned the gaze back upon my former self as the ekphrastic object. Self-examination in this way eventually led to the following lines, which directly address the reader in a moment of clarity that had previously been held hostage to confusion:

My feet
would confess: I was not sorry. I could feel it
and I didn't know

what else to do but run. Reader, let's be honest,
all my life I've been avoiding pain. Hiding
one kind by conquering another.

To speak of direct address, I must not neglect to give a nod to Ross Gay, whose ability to use direct address in a crucial utterance taught me another way to command my reader to stop, and to pause and take notice at an important juncture.

My homecoming to poetry happened later in life—in my forties—and as a result, the self-critic of cultural and generational conditioning repeatedly attempts to drown the voice of the true self. For this reason, I believe in exalting and invoking our own poetic muses as ritual. The work and instruction of poets Nickole Brown and Tiana Clark has inspired and shaped my work more than any other. Nickole Brown's quiet, but sharp strength inside each dense line of her poetry changed me and my idea of what could be done with language from the very beginning of this study. Her work gave me permission to take poetry off the pedestal I had it sitting on and to

invoke my own true voice, unapologetically. One of the greatest revelations I've had in my study of poetry has been a shift from dualistic thinking—from everything needing to be either wrong or right, bad or good, white or black. Poetry was one of my first true practices in allowing space for complexity in the human experience. Living inside the questions, without the need to assign a villain and a victim to every situation, was pivotal for my growth as a person and poet. Nickole Brown taught me, through her instruction and her work, to write, and consequentially to live, from a place of empathy while also standing in my truth. The last lines of her poem, "Barren Lake," hauntingly exhibit how to show, and not just tell, this type of complexity:

I thought of my girlhood, how I was the catch-
of-the-day, how I was once a lean nymphet
swimming in the cradle of his fist, and even then I waited
arched on a plaque for someone to come
and spray the gold back onto my dead body
to make it perfect again.

The work and mentorship of Tiana Clark has been no less impactful in this respect. Tiana Clark's willingness to push the boundaries and be vulnerable within her own lines of poetry unlocked new doors of courage for me. She challenges sensitive subject matter and claims joy in her own pleasure, always unafraid to implicate the speaker simultaneously in contemplation. In her collection, *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*, she boldly experiments with enjambment, white space and stanza variation to push her poetry beyond language. In her ekphrastic poem "BBHMM," a response to Rihanna's music video, she explores the song's theme of a woman demanding her own retribution and begins the poem with:

I, too, want to be naked, zebra-striped
in the almost dried accountant's blood, sticky

and sucking
suitcase brimming

a fat blunt inside a Louis Vuitton
with the newest money.

and stealthily leaps to more overt exposure of patriarchal and capitalistic ideals a few stanzas
down with:

I wanted you to pay

for every meal, and yes, the movies taught me that love
was someone reaching for the check first.
But there is no such thing as a free lunch. Someone

has to pay with the fruit from their body. Yeah, I'm spreading

my legs for someone else, because I'm hungry and always
at the end of some kind of altar.

This poem is entered through the door of Rihanna's music video, but soon makes its way into the
speaker's own personal politics of the body and capitalism, weaving its way into religion.

Through their writing, teaching and mentoring, these two Southern female poets open
themselves into their work and exhibit the spirits of courage and compassion that I wish to
embody in my own poetry. Joy Harjo, in her third term as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United
States, addressed an audience in which she spoke of all poems as having "ancestors." My work
can be considered descendants of, not only Nickole Brown and Tiana Clark, but also of Adrienne
Rich, Sharon Oldes, Maggie Nelson, Ellen Bass, Robin Coste Lewis, Joe Wilkins, Molly
Twomey, and Vievee Francis. I continue to study the lives and work of each one and many
others, as I believe the courage and energy that lives inside their art must carry on.

Most of the work in this manuscript has been an attempt at ordering internal chaos and
untangling grief by granting it a voice it once felt had been denied. It required an internal
transformation that I did not foresee. Yet, with time and persistence in showing up to poetry and
the blank page without my own agenda, I began *yielding to it*— the present moment, and in turn,
to the powers of poetry as they emerged. I found that Gregory Orr was correct—the personal

lyric *will not abandon you*. This collection had to be written first, but I now see my work beginning to unfold in conversation with nature and place, juxtaposed with culture and conformity, questioning the role of religion and contemplating ideas that we tend to accept without critique. I want my work to be accessible and stirring especially to the southern female, but also to all who dare to question conventional ideas.

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I.

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?*

—T.S. Eliot

Self-Portrait: My Feet

after Diane Seuss

If these feet could talk, they'd tell
you about Mt. Elbrus. How I greened
at high altitude and vomited
into a plastic bag, pissed
my mountaineering pants but re-cinched
the frayed laces on double-plastic boots and willed
them toward the frozen summit anyway. I've run
these feet through deep cuts, they've carried
me across crevasses while I shook. They're calloused feet,
proud feet. They prop themselves up while I toast
to the girls who won't let them quit, other girls who pretend
they don't smell the piss nor see the twitching
eye of fatigue but push me down
the dew-cloaked trail and talk
about the mating rituals of bears.

If these feet could talk. They know 4:30 a.m. runs
on three hours sleep, they know grit and gravel,
the dopamine dump under fluorescent beams, the scuff
and weight that tracks a woman's ache, how I steered
them off city streets into the mud
of a married man's self-hate, my body a side
street for his parade. My feet
would confess: I was not sorry. I could feel it
and I didn't know

what else to do but run. Reader, let's be honest,
all my life I've been avoiding pain. Hiding
one kind by conquering another. Keeping
the lack under cover. Lack braids
itself down through the backs of my family
and we work ourselves into worth, stuff paychecks
in our mouths, hoard brand names
in our homes, but goddamnit, I run.
It took me twenty-seven years to stop running—

to listen to what lingers in my feet. Like in high school,
in a dead sprint on the basketball court, a collision that tore
all the tendons in my foot—

it may always hurt, the doctor said.

It does.

Giving Ourselves Over

for J.T.

I know all about commitment, marriages locked
into godliness, fire-proofed and forged
in brittle scraps of self-esteem. The contract. The 401k.
The kids. But *we* were kids, black-crowned
night herons, formative and still freckled
on the wings. I was two years from ordering
my own drink, and you were bleeding
from a childhood crack
along your nose-bridge—wounds for which you still
won't speak.

I know this now.

I know Jim Beam when I smell it—sweat like stale
sourdough on the sheets. The tar-finger residue
from a Marlboro Light. I know pub grease faint on flannel,
the intoxicated cock. The way a man will wake
early to iron his blue-collar work
shirt when a girl on night shift wrinkles
his mind. The way a woman scared strikes
back at the knees.

I see two birds flying back from Nashville, back
from their overnight honeymoon, trying
to sing *I Saw the Light*, trying
to be husband and wife, as if
they were free. As if they were ever.

Teenage Mom

“To free us from the expectations of others, to give us back to ourselves—there lies the great, singular power of self-respect.” —Joan Didion

Those mornings the sun rose scared, scalded
us with hope, WIC vouchers served
breakfast and we breathed and hummed
to hope, rocking—no, gliding—
the glider was crammed in the corner
of the two-bedroom duplex

we got for 350 a month barely scraped-up
from scanning items, making sure
the customer was always right. That was when

once-plush carpet was walked
slick-flat and the neighbors *living in sin* kept locking
each other out on their side, got-damnin’
and *Jesus Christ*, and last night’s Jim Beam slept
sound in the water bed so I just kept gliding
with you, Desitin-stained floor, diaper pail packed
to the rim. Saturdays were for cleaning,

smelled like Pine-Sol and Clorox,
not fermented diapers and Enfamil, when pale
green formica sparkled and was not left speckled
with Sun-Drop, but the *click-clock-click-clock*
of your borrowed baby swing sang as I swiped

the sliding-glass door (that didn’t slide). Biology was ambition

it drove you to Mrs. Jan’s basement full
of toddlers, and me up Highway 55 singing
Seven Mary Three into the sparse parking lot
of community college, which wasn’t hustling
or bustling but flooded
in fluorescent light to keep awake
other mother-glidiers, or maybe UPS drivers
off nights. That was when shame

bounced checks, pride locked
itself up in the bathroom to cry
then crawled back to Momma for help
to pay the overdraft charges and kept
wearing the same underwire that rubbed raw, rubbed

its pink paint plumb off the clasp,
and picked up a new case of diapers to come home
and find another fifth of Beam chilling
in the freezer, a dart board hung in the kitchen,
and my anger slammed all the doors. The lawn sprinkler then
was a waterpark, gnarled tree-roots a playground,
returned wedding gifts to Wal-Mart covered
next week's groceries
and maybe a CD.

At night

I shouldered you, unfolded
the plastic bath into the sink and swallowed
your sticky breath
whole. Testing the running
water on the inside
of my arm, I eased
you down into warm
bubbles, your eyes locked
into mine,

nerves like suns rising
in my spine,
my trembling finger

in your grip. It was then I ignored the need

to pee for hours, my bladder outranked
by bottles boiling
in the stockpot after midnight,
I folded laundry until 1 a.m.
and every night you woke
again at 2 a.m., and we went back
to gliding. I lightly rubbed
the space between
your brows, singing us into
a so-called more respected
light—a mortgage near a cul-de-sac,
a college degree.

You don't remember this
kind of life, but son, come
and listen here to me,

I have no better advice
than to glide, find your songs
in the space between.

Hard Marriage, or Collapse No. 13

Once you were born, I started smoking again. Back to work
your ninth week and sucked the thick protest

of a cigarette into my lungs, took it in like it was your dad
when we were teenagers—warning labels always gave me cravings.

Still, I'd choke on smoldering tar and tobacco each morning, first light
after I dropped you off at the sitter to watch the sun spy

on me through the trees, mock it for having no voice to scold
without that co-dependent apron of hard marriage at my waist, without

the dull knife of a Bible in my back for the two-hour drive through
mostly tenable land. I thanked God for the job, thanked

the government for the degree I whittled out of a Pell Grant
and the dangling fear of being a disappointment to my parents. I'd spritz

my sweaters with cucumber-melon and mask my breath with thin sheets
of Listerine tingling the back of my tongue, trying to feel

what boiled underneath. Once, when I was warming your baby food,
cute glass jars of smoothed-out squash and peas, the swarming pleas

of our hunger—we were both starved for what wouldn't speak—
and there was the *thud-thud-thud* of your dad's darts playing

in the garage that gripped me like some crazy woman I'd said
I'll never be. I hurled his size-13 shoes into the wall

behind you, caterwauled
clear from the creases behind my knees.

Power Outage

When darkness swallowed
the lone, bone-colored
nightlight in a storm, I'd probe
the soft gray hallway,
five-year-old bare
feet on brown shag, palms pressed
to the texture-papered
wall, reading brail
of chair rail until at last their doorframe fell
into my fingers. Asleep in deep
breath and night sweats and pelting
rain, momma always faced one way,
daddy another and when I woke
them, he rose. He led me
to the antique rocker next
to the bookcase he made
with the shop teacher where he taught
teenagers Shakespeare and Twain,
that bookcase crammed
with all those Bible commentaries
side-by-side like the youth lodged
into our back pews at church—arguments,
debates, church was the main artery of hate
I recall as a child. I wanted to hear
God, but feared
what peppered the roof those nights, rain slapping
upside the windows like anger snapping
wet bedsheets off the line. Saturday nights Daddy lit
his roll-top desk fluorescent white and gnawed
a yellow highlighter—reading some book
along side his black leather
covered Bible, American Standard—
he excavated for truth, shoveled scripture
back and forth, mined for mercy,
lobbied for grace in a Bible Belt
that left invisible welts. He did
what he thought he was supposed to do—
took us to the assembly
twice on Sunday and back again
every Wednesday night before buying us
a chance on the punch board
at Magik Market and a fresh pack
of Garbage Pail Kids to trade. Never let
a summer break go by without

a second job. Never above
mowing fairways or capping
bottles at the Coca-Cola plant for extra
pay, never college degreed
his office walls—boxed them
in the attic instead and when the tin roof
of the shed out back flashed
blue-white with wrath and light, the creases
of his arms were safe. He sang louder
You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
and rocked me, robotic
with a sleepy force that came
out of somewhere unforgiven and this was
the only time anyone got to see him
this way—

jaw stubbled from yesterday's shave,
his eyes weighted plates on a bent
barbell, in nothing
but his underwear, chest hair coiled
into my face, and I know he had to get up for work
the next day but he back-and-forthed
between the rhyme, never checking
on the hour, negotiating
not his obligation, nor letting up
until I was limp in his arms.

A Plexiglass Partition

is not the black gap of 3 a.m.
on backroads, my car pirouetting
in week nights' sleeping
cul-de-sacs, my calls caught
by voicemail and worst-case
scenarios blading
down my shoulder's
right side. It is the visitation
stall with its pay-phone clanging
receiver, its fake wood-grain no one bothered
to clean and a shivering
metal stool—his quivering jaw
out of reach on the other side.
It is bottled eyes, empty as busted windows
of vacant buildings, a faded
orange jumpsuit swallowing,
stuttering *please, mom, get me
out of here. You may have to die*

with your eyes open and bring
yourself back without flinching
as you say *nine more days* vowing
not to eat until he's out, recall
the first nine days of his life—how
you both cried and he clawed
his jaundiced-perfect face when you
put him down, so you dropped
everything and everyone else,
wore the same sweatpants
three days straight, cradled
him into your left armpit
and sank into the handed-down bed
by the oak-veneer dresser
you didn't care to clean
and took one breath
at a time.

At least he is alive.

Why I Share Blame For the DUI

Struck you with the belt, tried time-out, then spanked you

bare-bottomed. Screamed

at your baby brother. Screamed

divorce, filed but reconciled

finally got us all to church.

Refused to work

full-time, ended up working

all the time. Barked

from the stands

when you drew

in the dirt, freaked

when you feared

the baseball until you took it

on the chin made us proud.

Snarled at your first girlfriend,

again at your report card's first B,

warned: *do not embarrass*

me. Tried to control

you like a drone

above our home,

took distance running

like a drug. I ran

in the dark, ran

in sun and through ice, years running

miles of meekness into calloused dawn

never far enough

nor fast enough, always

busy

noble

and numb.

Scared

to let you miss a day

of school or sleep in or stay home

sick.

Who would have called home that night to ask me for a sober ride?

Momma On Sunday Mornings

A half-second of AM static
through Daddy's alarm-clock radio was ritual
on Sunday mornings just before
its blinking digits & faux-wood faded
into the slate-smooth tone of preacher-voice
at 7:45. Ritual was my momma
up an hour before the rest of us, sorting
through dry pintos, sifting
the smallest rocks. Ritual was
the clicks and taps of pink tubes & tortoise-shelled
compacts on the single, gold & cream swirled
bathroom vanity across the hall
from my little yellow room. She'd jab
the wall, bring heat
to her hot-rollers, huff & sigh between pulling
each cattail off its rod, rolling up
her frosted locks into
rows on her head. Ritual was her eyes—painted
smoke-blue, lashes stiff like a horseshoe,
she'd scurry by my bedroom
on her way to the kitchen to catch
the beans just before
they stuck. Ritual was a moan
from the hinges of an oven door & a cast-iron tongue
full of cornbread pulled
from its electric mouth
paneled in the 1970's overripe
avocado. Ritual was a rush
back to her room, door only half-way shut,
to drop her terrycloth robe.

Ritual was a word she never
used—she'd probably call it
routine. She never questioned or experimented
with less binding things, she'd clamp
stiff 3-inch polyester bands in front, suck
it all in, twist and pull
heavy straps over one shoulder at a time.
This life didn't push up
into cleavage: that bra was a harness.
A thick truce with God for anything softer
than her childhood. She'd crack
the plastic egg, bunch
nylon hose into a ring and point

her toes, unrolling each one over dry
heels & chiseled calves, overpacking
her thighs & controlling her
top to allow the shapeless slip
of decency to slide up and grip
her between breast & belly
underneath her belted dress.

Back in the bathroom,
she'd shake her hair free, then tip
her head, mouth rounded
into focus & aerosol it stiff
before the brick-red rolled
out across her lips.

Momma, I know you never wanted anything
more than our family, but I've seen you
in a hundred other lives, without
the beans and without the bra, without
the wounds to be dressed
every Sunday. In one, you untangle
a thicket of neglected vines and in another, you rake
them up and start a fire, but in this one,
I'm learning why we all load up
into the red Thunderbird
with Daddy, strap ourselves in
and chug across town to church.

Neural Tube Defect

Incompatible
with life—the obstetrician's
mouth rained on me.

We Go To the Cemetery To Buy a Burial Plot

I smelled like churned earth, breasts bouldered and leaked
through my support bra into my shirt
for days after his deathbirth. My uterus—
confused over scraps of stubborn placenta—clinched its fist
and I carried extra-heavy-overnight sanitary
pads instead of infant, one soaked between my thighs
and three in my purse. The room embraced

us with soft hands and tilted heads, offered innocence
and white-ropes of resurrection on the walls, pitied
us with complimentary water, provided
tissues in case my grief woke
from its medicated sleep. I played
Sweet Little Lana, my character polished
in a floral sundress of yellow and soft blue
submission, controlled my motion from
the outside, my hesitation for this script of ceremonial burial locked
inside a game console programmed to please.

The lady—white hair, petite, demeanor
of my kindergarten teacher—played her part.
With cemetery map she set the table and gently crowed
over us to speak about our family being buried
together—the possibility of arranging larger
payments. Meaning, she knew we couldn't
afford it, but the open garden I'd asked
about was *for families*. She quoted

the price per month, shifting diamonds
on her frail fingers like blocks on a Tetris board.
My left eye twitched—a glitch on the screen.
We just want one, I said, and they got us
the other map. We wedged him between one-offs.
Helped them fill their vacancies.

What I Wish We'd Done

In another life I would have cremated
him. Saved the payments and sewed
the sacred ash of his miniature body back
to our humble yard, watched him
spring after winter, called his name
on every fuzzy dandelion prayer we blew
into the wind. But I was young.
Wore adulthood like a handed-down coat
from Saks Fifth Avenue, always trying to prove
I was good enough to shop there.

Dying in the Hospital Bed

Without her teeth, my grandma is lost
in the caverns of her face. Her dentures swept
away on a cafeteria tray with untouched broth
and strawberry gelatin still sealed
with foil. Her flappy jaws don't sing
folk ballads about Floyd Collins but sink
toward the back of her throat like earth sucked
into a sinkhole. According to her wrists,
under protest, strapped
to the bedrails, and the wine-stained splotches
on the backs of her hands—thin-skinned
as a page from her aged
Bible— it is clear my grandma does not plan to go
in peace, although she was not one
to worry about her death.
Mostly, she fixated on what we'd sing
at her funeral, and the promise
of a better place *Where the Roses Never
Fade*. Her roses faded
then unfurled again
each spring, curled
clean from the vine and perfumed
into the sun. But today is iced

in February and smells like Betadine
and rusty urine suspended in a bag from the foot
of her bed. The sound of a body septic
is not a scream. It's more like a disassembly
line. And where is the doctor, who,
when we asked
hours before, what was happening
declared

this is the Lord calling her home

and took off for the day.

Groundwater: A Cadrador

1.

Stalled in the still-quiet centuries of silence,
unnamed caves form at the head of the cove.
Eventually a sinkhole gives way. Empty
bellies leech limestone and ache, praise
the breath and trickle, cracks in Alabama clay.

2.

Porch light, impatiently yellow, fends
off mosquitoes and hums alongside the whippoorwill's
tune. A farmer churns rubber and burns
diesel all night for deposits as banknotes seep
into the midnight musk of fresh-turned dirt.

3.

Lonely hands grow knotty-spined and spliced
with *what's mine*. Fingers vine around property
lines. *Don't throw anything away*. Yard-sale
garments hoard time and fray
pain, bury the living in material graves.

4.

Somewhere a single mother gets lightheaded
and faints on the kitchen floor from the weight of her
own fangs, fractured platters of passed-down Depression
glass bend with the broom sound
of sweeping, a clunk in the bottom of the can.

5.

On the creek banks of March, she sinks into the turquoise-
tinted current at the start of the day, gritty regret scent
somewhere downstream while one robin flies
away from a disappointed other, but a wild
lemon-cream buttercup unclenches its fist.

II.

He was another knife I could feel it. A different sort, but a knife still. I did not care. I thought: give me the blade. Some things are worth spilling blood for.

— Madeline Miller, “Circe”

First Responder

On our run, you tell stories
about your son-in-law—how he stranded you
downtown over having a little fun
with your friends.

You vent about the clock you have to keep to please

them all, retrace the route you took
with a wife that fits
like too-small running shoes
slowing down your best mile.

I tell you how much I love the chirp of my running

shoes in the rain, the feral scent
of cut hay on this idyllic leg of wet
December road, that nobody tells me
how to behave. You gift me
a pint of Jack Daniels as I head
home, tell me you *can't stop*,

but you don't mean the alcohol.

You link my phone later to *Drive All Night*,
push the pace by quoting lyrics—
*I need a girl who calls me baby, I need to know
if she can save me*—
and I hit every split on time,
stretch myself into a net
under every song.

Dopamine

—after Molly Twomey’s “Risk”

What I want is to beg
for my next breath
to run longer than I think
I can, traverse exposed
rock past the splintered
anesthesia of paychecks
and church, PTA fundraisers
and taco Tuesdays with too many
margaritas on the rocks. *I like that
place*, I tell him, *where the body says
no but the mind convinces it anyway.*

I want to wash your hair,
he says, *under the falls*, drowning
my checklist of ultra-endurance races
on the internet, redirecting
our normal out-and-back
through town for the darkest
state park corners, toward
the falls with bare feet. When I slip

in shallow water, he proves
he’s *got me*, turns
up the heat on our chance
of being seen.

We call it *training*,
then *love*, which he says *is different
from obligation*, his wife at home
and my kids still in bed asleep.
I skip breakfast and start taking
the backroads to work, wait
for the phone to quiver,
make the blackbirds in my ribcage
swoop and caw.

Disease of Desire

I tried to stitch what had come
unraveled. Tried to choke my own neck. Tried
to play *I am unworthy*—that ballad
boondocked from my mouth, its cave
of self-doubt echoing insults—stagnant and lack,
cast-iron black.

I tried to tame what had escaped. My feet
running fevers. Sly Stone and your fingers
up my spine. I was the Tin Man tap dancing, I was
delightful, do you hear me? Do you
hear me? I hauled happy
bigger-than-bales of hay that fall. You called,
and I crawled. Drank from your bowl
like a thirsty kitty. Purred & pawed, prayed
for mercy, on my knees, scrubbed your carpet
raw. Another unhinged whore
in your white dove dawn—

lips light on the back of my neck
and your wife waiting heavy at home.

Law Enforcement Office

I have known the small-town law enforcement office, no windows, solid wood desk—glass topped— newspapers clipped proudly underneath—scrapbook of the handcuffed, their faces feeding on the ground— swivel leather executive chair burgundy as a budget that gets what it wants. There is the family photo, the American flag, the Bible on the bookshelf and a trophy won over the fire department glowing gold in thin blue light—carpet woven tight enough to keep a secret. Heavy is the door that slides in and locks after everyone else has gone home. It seems no one remains except the front desk dispatch, but there is a crack in the back door, a rock jammed inside the town's frame, and I wait in the parking lot for the invitation text to *come on in*. I am the chief's

divorced friend. In group photos, the one he leans against and always calls to check on my kids. The one he hugs a little longer. The chief is *good people*, now humped over the heat of me, sweat ripping his temple clean, my running shorts clumped on his floor as I stare at stories of captured men, I drip from him, wet with repellent scent of a woman's hope, spent like drug money so he sends me along, says goodnight before getting back to his wife and saves the rest of me for later. Calls his investigator to get a warrant and break the door down at someone else's sorry home.

Surviving February

after Tony Hoagland's "Reasons to Survive November"

February cracks like an ice climb, no—
an ice plunge after a long run, applying
one punishment to medicate the ache
of another, a tingle in the air like Icy Hot.

The ground is a microbial mush underneath
this crackling crust of frozen dirt, but the first spears
of buttercups are stabbing their way through
anyway, and I've still got time to train
for the marathon in Savage Gulf

—or maybe I'll have coffee with Y,
romantic police king from a town over,
ride down to the lake where we can breathe
in his passenger seat. I know most people think

we should be stronger than this, that I
should behave myself and settle
down with a bowl of vanilla cream who will buy me
a shiny SUV, expect a cooked supper after work,

but I resist those people down to the claws
of my wolfwoman toes—my resistance is my power,
and my power their up-tipped

nose, and my freedom would suffocate them
so I breathe pleasure like frostbite
into my skin again and again

and I claim this February throne as kudzu
climbs the South's rights
and wrongs. Pick the ice from my teeth
and go on.

Dukkha

After it got cold on the mountain
I messaged you about the snow,
its powdered confection on drooping
cedar muted the weight of December.
Next morning's trees simple-syruped
in the sun the way we used to leak
pleasure on a long run—sweat that crusted
us in salt and both of us craving more
electrolytes. Two years later, the sun is too bright
for my shotgun eyes. High and mighty
and hoity-toity, it glares
before I'm dressed, like my son's grade
report, and none of us—not I,
nor the sun nor my son—know what to say
about this situation anymore: You keep saying
you will, but you're never
going to leave her, and I've already left
who I was before you. This morning,
before going berserk
over a high school algebra grade, I went running
through the crunch and sludge reciting
our old marathon mantra about pain
being temporary, replayed the finish line
at IronMan how my body, arctic
with ache, ran proudly through the tape. Promised
family I'd be done, I'd rest and run
5ks for a while. Every endurance athlete tries
to explain trashing the body—it endorphins
for days after a 20-mile run, we call it a better
addiction than drugs, brag that *maybe it's cheaper
than therapy*. I knew, when you dropped
your jig into the stagnant pond
of my inbox again I'd meet
you at lunch, knew I'd flop
and gasp, released back
to work undone, spit-thumb
smudged mascara, pretending to be okay
if this time was our last. I knew you'd text
later and we'd swear to *never stop*, both of us knowing
someday we'd have to. You, putting in
a new pool with your wife. Me, trawling
the internet for a longer, harder trail.

Some Kind of Sickness

In the cavity's deepest decay, my office-mate turns
away when I walk in late, pretends
not to hear my fingernail frantic
as a woodpecker to the tree
of my phone's screen.
She asks if I'm *okay* when I choke
on the first coffee, cough up grief
thick as the *no talk* you toggle me on
and off of for your wife.

But I return

from the restroom contained
inside walls of my slick black slacks,
google for the registration date to another
marathon, avoid checking
my son's grades.
You stop
responding and my boss emails
about reports she needed
yesterday. I can't even recall
the database table I've queried a hundred
times, *Jesus Christ*. I reprogram
an excuse, some bullshit
explanation about duplicate data
when my desk stutters a new
message that you're coming
up for lunch, *heading up the interstate*.
I swallow your words like the lowest
possible dose and watch
out the side window for your truck. I don't drink
that much. A couple red wines with friends
and I'm done. It's the dull weight where the back
of my head meets my neck, though, it aches
like the empty belly of shitty casinos in Mississippi,
same old woman at the slots each day
pulling that arm one more time
one more time
one more time.

After the Sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini

with a line from Louise Glück

In Persephone's feet, I see the beginning. Splayed
toes under threat, nerved metatarsals electric in her
not-yet-calloused skin. No longer standing, she is losing
her garment in Hades' grip.

She knows it.

One hand forms bars of flesh around her thigh—
his other arm cuffs her waist. It's a moment
of theft—burning in his want, satiating his hunger
and banking his bulging quads on her fatigue.

Forearm to his head, perhaps her objection took Hades
by surprise, though I suspect he knew it was coming: lips terse
and tongue on the tips of his teeth. Her neck curls
against the regime—

but even if she escaped,
the teeth of the three-headed canine await

at her back.

Without knowledge of the myth and the sculptor's title: *The Rape
of Persephone*, what do you see? Listen to the wounds

in the sculptor's clay. Her garment is still opening
today.

The Greeks tell us the abduction is smoothed
over in the Underworld while Demeter roams
the earth. There are negotiations with Zeus,

*an argument between the mother and the lover—
the daughter is just meat*

Persephone wasn't *forced* to swallow
the pomegranate seeds. The myth is not only about
rape. My mom, too, saw the demeanor
of defeat, my now-calloused feet. She pled
with me to save my kids if I couldn't save myself,

but I fucked him for six more years.

The Extent of My Reasoning

The last time I met you
in the valley there were mosquitoes
behind your eyes,
ants firing under your skin.
I was fiddling with the hoop
in my left ear and turning up the heat
in your car like I belonged
in the passenger seat. Like my ability to be
nonchalant could release
the pressure. The way
a whole world can live inside
a car until you open
a door. And we could exist
in that world if I could stay
cool. How you could unfold
another worn blanket of *I wish we could*
underneath me and I'd unpack
the picnic basket of my body.
My famine preparing you
a feast. My heart offering
its pear to your teeth.

Yielding to It

Maybe these wild ferns are fans
around a music festival's side stage, swaying
to the notes of the wind and worshipping

their gods. I lean on the tree trunk
in this forest that decomposes
into marsh we trampled
through a few years ago—
our interwoven fingers clinging
to another lunch hour encore.

The nothing left of us hovers
heavy around my neck but never types
goodmorning or links
the longing of Marc Cohn's songs
to my phone, nor cares
about this new trail I cut out here—

which is the best I could do without a chainsaw.

I've got the Carolina Wren
and katydids, but I rewind
again to you

sinking into your leather chair
to start your day behind
the desk where you first fondled
my ambition for local
politics. Where you mansplained
me through the mules
of single-motherhood and asked
if I liked to cuddle, then peeled
my layers of pragmatism and power
off with my polyester suit, spritzed
the glass-top's guilt of my handprints
clean on Monday mornings—

it is strange to see straight through us. Hard

to yield to the truth when lies relieve the pain.
The veins that bulge
on the backs of your hands voice
dead musicians through my radio.

I let them lay in their graves.

Seen

I wrangled the world
before he loved me,
like a female caballero,
blade in one hand, mirror
in the other. My body
was backhoe and mother—
rugged, mechanical, my own
client and collateral. Weaponed
my lashes long, flattery
felt like heat on my hips.
When he first touched me, I began
to look at love underwater,
like a diver, or a kid
in a pool, light bent him
into chelsea blue, laminar
and smooth, he circled my scent
of overpriced perfume and fast food,
the way I *owned the room*, charmed
me with clever love
jingles we belly-laughed to,
it was no mad
pursuit, and it's true
I loitered, we bobbed
and swirled, stuck my feet
in the deep end, for the love
of God—I was feral for him!
If water's light refracted
him closer than truth,
so what? For once I was fluid
and fucked up
and someone saw it.

Anahata

It is possible you wanted me even more
than I wanted you, your 17 years longer

locked inside a body at war with its head,
your reputation re-scrubbed solemn

in some sanctuary every time you agreed
to a truce. In the Earth of it, our freedom

was green: soft moss over stone.
I'd try to move on, date someone

else, and sure enough you'd call trying
to climb a different tree, each time finding

a flower in me more wild than the last—
like the lunch break turned skinny-dip-date—your

starched-collar shirt, my pin-striped skirt branched
on the bank by the lake. Let me say this another way:

before they bulldozed and Bibled
us to save their sanctimonious city,

the way we loved was holy. It was warm
breath rising from soaked dirt after summer rain, it was

worship, it was incense, it was pain, it was protest
against settled-on, locked-in, respectable love

and goddamn, it was good.

Epilogue

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation.

—David Whyte, “Everything is Waiting for You”

Enough

Fangs could have grown through
my jawbone that day
at the funeral home, neither of us close
to the deceased, but you
in the back pew with your wife
and me barely on time—always
cardigan-ed and khaki-ed—
burning inside-out again
like that charred winter

when I swung between bars
of mother and lover, was already buried
beneath my own pine with plum-
splotted skin, bruised hip
bones happy driven between
your hunger and cinderblock, begging
my phone for a hint you still loved
me while watching my son play
baseball or boiling pasta, ramming
my heart into the next silent wall.

After the service, I prodded
into our nothing again, my wipers screeched
and moaned—all the
If we were together and *If I were there*
I'd hold your hand now hushed,
that animal of me starved
and finally surrendered to its own skin.

I never saluted the sun in our days
nor tracked phases of the moon
or laughed with my boys about
mispronouncing *Orion*. Now, I spot
three stars aligned and trace
space up to the broad shoulders
of something else I can't comprehend:
a sky I swim in without begging
to be saved, the color of my son's mood
on any given day, lichen pried
from its tree by the wind. In Zen,
there is a term—*ichigyo-zammai*—for
focusing on one thing
at a time. When I cook, I open
the stove's eye, feel

it creak and pop, smoke
and singe, its dark heart scarlets
into deep desire. I don't need
to check my phone. This is enough.

Armadillo

“Watch any plant or animal and let it teach you acceptance of what is...Let it teach you how to live and how to die, and how not to make living and dying into a problem.”

—Eckhart Tolle

In the potbelly of summer, I pause
from my writing to walk the dog. We quail
at three armadillos, an army: clinky claws,
their needle-nose jaws and helmet shells
formed from scales of skin, their salty rind—
a shield from the thicket, the blades and spikes—
an armor not so abnormal as mine,
now thick from longing and frazzled from fight,
frantically searching for meaning in life
and in this sonnet, which, perhaps,
lies in the lack of armadillo strife,
their four-foot leap and their all-day naps,
a frolicking life without trying to cling
which is nothing, yet may be everything.

A Glimpse Of It

When at last, after long loathing, you cradle
into your palms the scraps left
of yourself, the few slivers
you did not trade, and yield
your pride to the rind of Earth —
the rocks, the weeds, the algae-ed lake
behind the trees; when you submerge
your ear into its hum and stop filtering
its song or googling how it *should* sound,
it's like those first few cranks of the pedals,
or maybe the first flight of a bird — the balance,
the momentum, the release. How the sun blinks
and bends the leaves toward me
in late afternoon and saves me
a seat on the front row of chipped and weather-eaten
concrete steps where lizards skitter
through the tiniest cracks, crack
through me, lizards become me.

At the altar of this crinkling flesh I bow
to the backs of my own hands. Relax.
I spend thirty minutes, still,
in the shallow sea of soft Tennessee
humidity, allow a nervous fly to buzz
above my eye. Go inside
and spend thirty minutes more buzzing
with my old vacuum: thirty minutes scraping
the floor, thirty minutes collecting
dust, connecting the perfect attachment
and watching the corners exhale
debris. Thirty minutes and everything
is swept clean. Thirty minutes of nowhere
else I'd rather be.

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