

4-2014

## Her Body Breathes Into Mine

Zarah C. Moeggenberg  
Northern Michigan University, [zmoeggen@nmu.edu](mailto:zmoeggen@nmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Moeggenberg, Zarah C., "Her Body Breathes Into Mine" (2014). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 13.  
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/13>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact [kmcdonou@nmu.edu](mailto:kmcdonou@nmu.edu), [bsarjean@nmu.edu](mailto:bsarjean@nmu.edu).

HER BODY BREATHES INTO MINE

By

Zarah Catherine Moeggenberg

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2014

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Zarah Catherine Moeggenberg is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

---

Committee Chair: Dr. Beverly Matherne Date

---

First Reader: Professor Matt Bell Date

---

Second Reader: Dr. Austin Hummell Date

---

Department Head: Dr. Ray Ventre Date

---

Dr. Brian D. Cherry  
Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research

## ABSTRACT

### HER BODY BREATHES INTO MINE

By

Zarah Catherine Moeggenberg

This collection of poetry highlights the complex human experience of what it means to be a woman who loves women. Adding to the discourse of lesbian poetry, within spoken word poetry and for-the-page poetry, these poems doubly voice silenced perspectives and identities. A large portion of the work is spoken word poetry, which seeks to make the subgenre more accessible to a larger audience. Set primarily in the Midwest, these poems voice queer identity that asks us to consider what makes someone a person, as identity is much more than sexuality. Love, sex, loss, sexuality and gender expression are themes that bind these poems.

Copyright by  
Zarah Catherine Moeggenberg  
2014

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend, Miranda Badour, who drives down to the lake with me at any time to listen, who taught me dirt trail and wet boots, who showed me what it means to love harder than I ever thought I could, and who challenges my perspective with heart.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I thank my thesis director, Dr. Beverly Matherne, for her close eye, for her honest questions, for her genuine interest and support, and for teaching me to be specific in and outside of a poem. I would also like to thank my readers, Dr. Austin Hummell and Professor Matt Bell. Dr. Hummell challenged me to stretch weird, to challenge sound, and to push convention. Professor Bell provided me with great conversations and genuine support.

I thank Dr. Elizabeth Monske for being such a great mentor. I thank her for guiding me towards my interest in composition and rhetoric, for being there to listen, and for asking me the challenging questions that matter. I thank Professor Laura Soldner, who helped me learn to balance my poetry self with my teaching self and who taught me to pursue what makes me happiest. I thank Dr. Heidi Stevenson for teaching me what it means to be passionate about what I do and how I live. I thank Dr. Ray Ventre for his continual support and for showing me that what I do and who I am matters.

I thank my parents, Ronald Moeggenberg and Mollie Murphy. My mother, even though it was sometimes a necessary four or five phone calls a day, was a constant voice in my head: “You can do this.” My dad, throughout my life, has provided me with the expectation that I finish on top and as a leader. This drives me and everything that I seek to accomplish. I thank my brother for helping me feel loved. I thank my dog, Teddy, and my cat, Lucille, for licks and purrs and long walks. I thank Ashley, my office wife, for making me coffee even when I didn’t need it.

Finally, I thank my other best friend, Cameron Contois. I thank him for being there when I needed him most, for teaching me to let go and live, and for giving me such positive emotional support throughout graduate school.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Tallying Single and Gay in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, in No Particular Order ..... 12

Things I Haven’t Told My Father ..... 14

Kitchen Table ..... 15

Pomeranian ..... 16

Home Haircut..... 17

The Women that Come to the Bar on Saturdays ..... 18

Girl Texting at the Bar ..... 19

Plastic Stars ..... 20

Fossil..... 21

Wednesday Nights at Applebee’s ..... 22

Drawing Her ..... 23

Watching Angelika Talk to Saliim, Our Cab Driver ..... 24

All the Pretty Girls Go Out on Saturday Night ..... 25

Brian(ne)..... 26

I Always Cover Their Faces ..... 27

Hendrix, Oklahoma..... 28

Fucking on the Boat Dock at a Pond Six Miles North ..... 29

Fucking on the Black Rocks..... 30

Fucking Against the Bookcase..... 31

Fucking in the Impala..... 32

When You Stop Loving Her ..... 33

When You Start to Fall .....	34
Purge .....	35
For Sherrie Something .....	36
It's Not Not a Date .....	37
Ending .....	38
Lines .....	39
Pull of Body .....	40
Son .....	41
A Story I've Never Told You.....	42
Steak Knife.....	43
Stripper Girl.....	44
Craigslist Girl.....	45
Dolphin Talk .....	46
Spoon.....	47
Kiss of Hips .....	48
Splitter.....	49
Drag Queen .....	50
To the Last Girl Who Dumped Me, a Doctor .....	51
To the PetSmart Assistant Manager.....	52
To the Bitch Standing in Front of Me at the Bar Who Stole My Best Friend's Girlfriend .....	53
Drag King .....	54
White Fence.....	55
Perfect.....	56
Petting My Cat Backwards.....	57

How to Un-Love Someone .....	58
Cartography .....	59
Sleeve .....	60
Homecoming: Youkam, Texas .....	61
Self-Portrait: January 14 <sup>th</sup> 2014 .....	62
To Allie, Who Sat in the Back Corner .....	63
Mohawk.....	64
How to Love Someone .....	66
When I Tell a Lover I Have an STD .....	68
Sheets .....	70
Promises to a Son .....	72
Certain .....	76
Dear Anne,.....	77
Growing Up Screaming .....	81

## Introduction

In reflecting on my thesis, I wish I could say it all out loud, as that is what my thesis attempts to do. I came to Northern Michigan University's MFA program because I wanted to work with my thesis director, Dr. Beverly Matherne, because she was the only person in the country who had a background in performance poetry and who would embrace having a student who wanted to marry the subgenre of spoken word poetry to for-the-page poetry. To have someone to help guide me toward writing a unique thesis with untraditional content and structural implications has been invaluable.

Narrative tradition, as far back as before the Greeks, was passed on by word of mouth. As many of us know, all writing was at one point oral and aural, everything performed. Once committed to the page, however, literature lost some of its earlier magic. The spoken word movement, across the world, attempts to recapture this immediacy. As Billy Collins notes, in his introduction to *The Spoken Word Revolution*,

In its purest form, in the classical mode in which it was created, poetry was used to remember stories. Homer was a blind storyteller. That's all. Forget everything else about poetry. When there wasn't any TV or radio, people like Homer were paid to come out and entertain. The fire would be ablaze, people would gather in a circle . . . listening to the stories that helped shape the world. But poetry has long been separated from this idea" (10).

Improvisation is key to spoken word performance. One performance is never the same. Who we are year to year, week to week, day to day, and minute to minute always changes. In spoken word, the poem and the content become something different. Inflection changes, entire pieces are taken out,

there is ad lib, and there are pauses where there weren't before. The body is present, the mouth is active, and the listener embraces it all.

So much of my life and that of other LGBT members has been silenced. Our bodies are less present, our mouths are inactive, and we do not necessarily have any listeners. As Judith Butler might agree, we wait years to come out to people, come out over and over again, and are essentially always *performing* in a heteronormed world. I went through my entire undergraduate degree, as well as a large part of my MFA, seeking out queer voices. Through most of my experience in higher education, my professors could not point me toward queer writers they thought would influence my work. I have spent countless hours on YouTube listening to queer and spoken word poetry that I cannot access otherwise. There is a real lack of queer poetry in print.

The queer poetry that is out there does not explore the complexities of what it is to be a woman who loves women. Yes, there are a lot of poems about lesbianism, especially in the spoken word subgenre. But, at the same time, the poems are primarily about being gay and gay rights. We need more texts focused on the intricacies of lesbian love and lesbianism. Generally, we need more texts that are more about who people are at their core. Seeking to bridge this gap, my poems are about discovering hands, some obsess over tattoo sleeves, many explore childhood, memorize another's hips, celebrate and point out a laugh, the pitch of sigh, the killing of a bird on a porch when the sun is violent July.

The lack of accessible spoken word poetry that can be learned, studied, and appreciated in its scripted form is another problem. As poets, we know that the structure, mechanics, positioning, and grammatical articulation all "script" the reader on how they are to read our poems, whether aloud or otherwise. One thing that has frustrated me in reading some of the texts spoken word poets have produced is a lack of care in placing the words on the page. Take Andrea Gibson's *Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns*. If we asked her to recite some of those poems, they would not be written the way they

are performed. This is true in Lauren Zuniga's work as well. These women are the queer poets I have been looking up to for years, but their work is not structurally satisfying. One goal of my thesis is to place performance poetry on the page in an accessible way.

These two factors, lesbian perspective and accessibility to spoken word poetry, are the focal points in my thesis. I did not aim to produce a manuscript about being gay because there are too many heterocentric assumptions derivative of mono-queer identity. I am, really *we* are, so many other things before gay. I also hope that my thesis doubly voices that which is silenced in an accessible way. By doubly voicing I mean to come alive. As Billy Collins wrote,

What the live reading and the recorded reading provide . . . is voice. Surely, we hear an inner voice when we hold a book of poetry in our hands and read in silence, but it is not the voice of the poet. Rather, it is our own internal voice that claims the poem. The intimacy of poetry even allows us to feel that we have replaced the poet. . . . A dependable sign that you like a poem is the pleasurable feeling that you are actually inventing it as you read it (5).

I want readers to feel a sense of inventing what they are reading and reading out loud, just as much as I want them to acquire a sense of the real queer lives I am attempting to create and capture and feel here.

Literature is desperate to be heard. I would agree with Collins that we attend readings because we want to feel that communal exchange of our worlds. We lose the immediacy of voice from print text. There is so much to inflection and pause and rush that we get from the orator. I want to make that voice more accessible in all of my poems. I want these poems to ask the reader to open their mouths again to anyone in their vicinity.

Including my understanding of rhythm, I have progressed a great deal throughout writing my thesis. I now try to read my poems aloud after I have drafted or revised, I make sure my poems take my reader somewhere, I "trim the fat," I pay attention to how music and structure are married

to each other, and I have discovered what kind of a poet I am. David Baker and Ann Townsend's chapter in "The Line/The Form/The Music," from *The Eye of the Poet*; Richard Hugo's essay "Nuts and Bolts"; Eleveld and Smith's *A Spoken Word Revolution*; and Tyler Hoffman's *American Poetry in Performance* have helped me to progress towards these ends.

Baker and Townsend, in their discussion of rhythm, note that "[w]hen we hear meter, we hear the ebb and flow of sound as it departs from and returns to a normative pattern" (119) and that "when a poet makes a choice about form . . . that choice will affect the song of the poem, and ultimately, its story as well" (115). This is certainly true. When I look back at old poems—even the first poem that I wrote for my MFA, a prose poem—they lacked rhythm. In a jazz history course, our professor told us that the only real reason that a song hits within the top 10 of pop charts is because of its rhythm. It often does not matter what the song is about—some listeners could not tell you, or care little to know—but if the song's rhythm finds an organic space within the listener, it becomes a sensation. He said that when the song's lyrics are truly complimented by the rhythm, it's platinum. This is true for poetry. I am incredible with rhythm; rhythm is my strength. But what I hadn't realized, even after reading this essay the first time, was that unless I can find how the structure of my poem compliments the rhythm I choose, my poems will never be platinum. They won't stick with people; they won't even stick with me.

When I look at a more recent poem that I wrote, under the influence of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's poems from *Lucky Fish*, I note the ways I have progressed. "When we say that one's poetry is 'musical,' what we often mean is that we notice its phrasing, its way of linking language and story to elements of timing and its use of rhyming or nonrhyming sound techniques" (Baker and Townsend 114). Nezhukumatathil does this in many instances in *Lucky Fish*, especially in the poem "Notes for the Heartbeat at My Feet," where she seeks to marry the sounds of a dog to love, friendship, and emotional breakdown. In many of my poems, such as in "Perfect," I focused

on the marriage between structure and sound. I wanted there to be a musical progression when the reader got to the catalogue, to feel the excitement of falling in love. I wanted a breath at the end. I think that by paying careful attention to sound, I was successful. I focused on enjambment in this thesis and on how I ended each line.

My focus on structure and sound leads me to something else that I learned from Hugo, Baker, and Townsend. Baker and Townsend list several ways that a poem arrives at or does not arrive at closure. What I liked best about this section was their contention that “Good poets show us that they are headed somewhere, with a goal or a destination, even (maybe especially) if that destination is the open space of the unknown. Poems may end by repeating patterns of sound, . . . by answering questions, by posing new ones, by dwelling on a single resonant image, or by walking us toward the future” (112). My poetry has progressed in the sense that I no longer seek to come full circle with *every* poem. I realize now that I don’t have to come to a conclusion. A spoken-word poem in my thesis entitled “Certain,” for example, does not have a conclusion. There is no resolution and the purpose of the poem is to get the audience angry. Many of my poems are like this. Identity is not fixed. As I said earlier, identity is something we perform over and over again, especially as someone who identifies as queer.

Hugo also writes in his discussion of an ineffective poem in “Nuts and Bolts,” that “[it] does not move . . . the poet [milks] every last detail of the situation. He [depends] on the drama of the event,” (50) ignoring all other possibilities. I tried to avoid this in my work. When I look back at poems I had written before I came to graduate school, I realize that I struggled with recognizing the rhetorical progression of my poems. Some did not move at all. As in the faulty poem Hugo discussed, I sought only an emotional reaction. The conclusions in the poems of this thesis, however, are internal ones that resolve themselves separately within each person who reads/hears them. I have learned that it is sometimes okay to dwell, without movement, as Baker and Townsend



would say, but that it is best to infuse narrative within the poem, or to look at all of the possibilities on the subject, so that there is some sort of rhetorical movement.

In addition, I have learned a great deal about *trimming the fat*, which Hugo also stresses (43). It is easy to use unnecessary words in poems, especially in the first few drafts. Usually, when I bring a poem to a class critique, it is in its third or fourth draft or so, and I am always amazed at how much people still find to cut. There is just so much that I feel I need in order to get music, meaning, and bliss to work together in the poem. Hugo cautions the use of unnecessary words like “so,” “such,” “and,” and “while” among others, “the trappings of fiction,” he calls them (40-43). Poetry, however, needs to be more economical. He notes that “almost all young poets are using more syllables than necessary, more words than needed” (43). This is still certainly true for me. When I wanted to keep a certain rhythm for a certain length of time, I generally included excessive details, unnecessary for the progression of the poem’s kernel. I would lose the reader, or listener. Reading my poems over and over again was helpful and necessary for me because of the spoken word quality of my thesis. Aural drafting was imperative as well in this manuscript.

Keying into aural impact was another essential focus of my writing. Ted Kooser, one of my favorite poets, aims to write for the average citizen when he generates poetry. He wants any person to be able to pick up his book and get something out of it. To this end, I worked with various audiences in the writing of my thesis. I attended queer open mics that the undergraduates held, I walked into random offices to read my poems, read my poems out loud at blue collar mom-and-pop bars, and sent my poems in sound files to my friends through iPhone messaging. I asked them what grabbed their chests and focused then on repeating that kind of sensation for my audience, whether the poem was spoken word or not.

During my third year of my MFA, I came across the most influential piece of writing on my thesis. It was the third time I was reading Sierra DeMulder’s *The Bones Below*, and I was primarily

reading it that third time for the creative writing course I was teaching. I had to delve into what DeMulder was doing in her work in order to articulate it to my students. I was struck by her performance poetry on YouTube and other digital platforms. I thought, if this woman can write down the words she performs at colleges and universities successfully, then this is the kind of writing I need to pay attention to and add to the discourse of contemporary poetry.

One incredibly helpful book was *American Poetry in Performance* by Tyler Hoffman. It taught me more about the evolution of performance poetry, particularly how poetry is scripted. Certainly, I know that poetry is scripted, as I discussed above, but the mode and means of scripting, the rhetorical value of the word “script,” these I had not yet explored. Hoffman’s approach to scripting performance poetry on the page truly affected my thesis, the majority of which is meant for the page in the first place. Without Hoffman’s text, my thesis would not have reached the quality it now exhibits. My thesis would not have achieved its purpose.

In addition to scripting, the poet’s compulsive need to speak is an apparent drive in my work. As Edward Hirsch writes, “Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that poetry is ‘what will and must be spoken.’ It is a secret that can no longer be kept secret, a way of knowing. Perhaps poetry exists because it carries necessary human information that cannot be communicated in any other way. Some of that information is joyous, some a distress signal from afar that whispers in the inner ear” (44). A metacognitive example is my poem “Things I Haven’t Told My Father,” which begins as follows:

They keyed my car six different times at Aquinas College,  
Fag to driver’s side, Faggot to hood. My girlfriend wrote  
with a box-cutter from Meijer into her left arm or stomach  
most nights. I did nothing about either.

The rhetoric of the title and what follows suggests that these are unspoken moments, yet the content of the poem begs to be spoken, and, through the speaker, *is* spoken. As Hirsch suggests, my poems, especially “Things I Haven’t Told My Father,” are comprised of secrets that can no longer be kept silent.

Furthermore, poems are meant to bloom within a reader. “Whenever a poem enacts what it is about, it creates a way for itself to live dramatically inside the reader” (Hirsch 45). The only means of doing so is to build rhythm as we layer rhetoric. We have to build rhythm simultaneously as we build narrative content. My prose poem “Wednesday Nights at Applebee’s” accomplishes this in the following excerpt:

They’ll stare always, you say. Always we wait to open your Ford Focus, you turn the engine off, and there’s this pause, and I wanna awkwardly climb on top of you, let the horn blow, twice perhaps by accident, once on purpose when you learn you can touch me back and that I have figured out whether you suck my bottom lip or not. At the same time, I shouldn’t kiss you in the parking lot under glow of apple red.

Within this excerpt, I use these shorter clauses within the grammatical structure of sentences to build toward the longer dependent clause, “once on purpose when you learn you can touch me back and that I have figured out whether you suck my bottom lip or not.” The rhetoric suggests going for that first move with someone we have feelings for. The stuttered staccato of the shorter clauses captures the anticipation and nervousness; the longer clause, the ultimate execution of the physical move. What follows is “At the same time,” the comma not necessitated entirely, but used to interrupt even more the idea of making a move, as the rhetoric shifts to not expressing how the speaker feels. My poetry marries structure to rhetoric, allowing a lived experience for the reader.

What I learned most about poetry, in writing my thesis, was that sometimes I have to let the poem do what I want it to do. Hirsch writes:

We make meaning together, we wrestle with what we read and talk back to it, we become more fully ourselves in the process. We activate the poem inside us by engaging it as deeply as possible, by bringing our lives to it, our associational memories, our past histories, our vocabularies, by letting its verbal music infiltrate our bodies, its ideas seep into our minds, by discovering its pattern emerging, by entering the echo chamber which is the history of poetry, and most of all by listening and paying attention (260).

In two particular examples in my thesis where the poem made more meaning than I did, I had to let go, let the words stew together, let the poem be what it wanted to become. The first example of this is in my “Fucking” series. In these four poems, I place two people in a setting where they make love. I researched the material world that would surround them. Specifically, I collected words for “Fucking on a Boat Dock at a Pond Six Miles North.” I listened to wood frogs online, looked at as many images of foliage as was possible, and even drove out to a pond nearby in the middle of winter to look at the trees and to feel the wind at night. I have never made love on a boat dock, but I listened to water, I felt the leaves stuck in the snow, and I let words like “balsam” and “black ash” and “moon” bring me to the following last three lines:

Loose splinters cling to our wrists and knees, your back arches  
like a crane, and, under the heavy Michigan green,  
you haven’t forgotten, you open only to close.

Each of the poems in this series is taken in different directions, sometimes the speakers feeling distant, sometimes the speakers sewn entirely together, and this is entirely dependent upon letting the words I collected take over the poem. When I began each, I had no idea where the reader would be taken.

My poem “Mohawk” is another example of that which taught me control. This poem was the most meaningful to me in my thesis because I became so invested in the subject: She consumed me. I had the words “I wanted my hair to match my shoes” stuck in my head for weeks. When I

started writing her, the sounds took over, and I had to let the poem create a dark performance piece. The sounds are seamlessly stitched together. The first draft actually ended quite positively, but the assonance and alliteration were off. I felt an uncomfortable shift when I read it out loud, when I performed. I cut the last half and started over. I read the first half over and over again for a month straight until I finally found a word that felt right, repeating the word “close” to bring the listener/reader closer to understanding of identity flux. She does not become a resolved person at the end of the poem. She is still distant and real and tangible. She taught me that I’m not always going to know my poems or the people that I write into them. We can only perform who we are, who they are, in that moment. As Judith Butler would say, we perform ourselves over and over again.

I want to rearticulate the importance of how my thesis adds to discourse on love and loss and how those function together from a lesbian’s perspective. Within and outside of social media, as well as the literary world, we have heteronormed so much of love and loss. This has happened so much so, in fact, that queer writers have lost and continue to lose literary platforms to build themselves upon. Throughout the writing of my MFA thesis, many of my poems have been published in reputable journals, an important outlet for speaking nationally to the queer issues that concern me and my readers. Finally, I hope that my thesis will create more platforms for queer writers, especially outside of spaces reserved solely for poetry.

## Works Cited

- Baker, David, and Ann Townsend. *The Eye of the Poet*. Ed. David Citino. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print. Hirsch
- DeMulder, Sierra. *The Bones Below*. Long Beach: Write Bloody Publishing, 2010. Print
- Eleveld, Marc, and Mark Kelly Smith. *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop & The Poetry of a New Generation*. New York: Sourcebooks, 2005. Print.
- Hoffman, Tyler. *American Poetry in Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. Print.
- Hugo, Richard. "Nuts and Bolts." *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Nezhukumatathil, Aimee. *Lucky Fish*. Boston: Tupelo Press, 2011.

Tallying Single and Gay in Michigan's Upper Peninsula  
in No Particular Order

*with thanks to Lauren Zuniga*

1.

I own nine flannel shirts I do not wear  
that hang together in my closet.

7.

The girl in the sauna looks like a naked bird, feathers plucked,  
all but the ones on her head—sienna brown—and the sweat collects,  
slows where her body folds together, hip to quadricep, elbow pit, neck kissing  
her knees. Her nipples are yoga soft.

2.

I cut my hair shoulder-length. It isn't short enough.

8.

One summer, I played on an all lesbian softball team.  
I wasn't invited back the next year.

5.

The girl from my Revolutionary Lit class comes over on Thursdays.  
We watch documentaries about corn, wheat, waistlines.  
She studies the treetops that cling to my windows. Her head is half shaved,  
her arms shapeless. I stop myself from climbing on top of her thighs.  
She always wears the same jeans.

12.

I keep Old Spice deodorant in the upper left drawer of my office desk.  
Sometimes I hope my students can smell me.

6.

One girl texts me from Chicago. Another from Traverse City.  
I do not tell them this makes my chest hurt.  
Sometimes, I sleep naked.

4.

I look in my rearview mirror for reactions to my rainbow  
peace sign car magnet.

3.

My officemate cut her hair off. At a conference, she pulled  
at my waist. I could taste the KBC beer even pushing away.  
Some mornings, while she grades and I'm texting the girls  
from Chicago, Traverse, and I consider shutting the door,  
swiping her desk clean with one arm, throwing her body down,  
to kiss her back.

10.

I am most comfortable in above-knee dresses. My mother taught me mascara, her mouth open wide. I do the same thing with blush.

9.

Sometimes, over beer at Blackrocks, men say they could change me. Just one night.

11.

One girl works at the second-hand sportswear shop down the hill. I buy things I don't need: a shit shovel, a bike rack, a coat too big. She barely looks up from her MacBook, says "28.51" or "17.62"  
I walk home pulling at my hair that's too long.



## Things I Haven't Told My Father

They keyed my car six different times at Aquinas College.  
Fag to driver's side, Faggot to hood. My girlfriend wrote  
with a box-cutter from Meijer into her left arm or stomach  
most nights. I did nothing about either.

During my gap year at The Bier Garten, black tank-topped,  
lace-leggings, spandex skirt, men told me it'd take one night  
to change me back. Called me Carpet Muncher, Pussy Lover,  
cupped my waist with meaty hands. I paid interest off student loans.

In Traverse, teenagers called us dykes. Sierra ran four blocks  
down Division until there were no more streetlights.  
Most yards fenceless, I found her curled behind a garbage can.  
She told me not to cut my hair off. I still haven't

three years later. In Marquette: my first officemate  
said I'm a sinner. More men, one night.  
And yesterday, my eleventh student came out to me  
beside my desk, looked me straight in the eyes.

## Kitchen Table

Your dad wore jeans, tucked  
his collared cotton polo in tight, stood tall  
as belts released your coffin. No one thought  
Hermansville could be that quiet. Two days passed  
and your dad took the rifle, the dishrag,  
the bucket. He wiped the muzzle clean; powder burns  
came off easy. He worked the linseed oil,  
with loose elbows, taut fingertips, clean cotton.

The other bullet clucked onto the kitchen table.  
He sprayed WD-40 down the bore  
in even strokes, sipped on Busch,  
swabbed the channel—repeated twice  
like always.

He stuffed another beer in a koozie, took the shovel, the rifle.  
He walked out of camp to the neighbor's wood.  
He dug the hole slow, the ground summer-soft.  
He stuck it in nose first.  
He held his beer to chest by the crook of his elbow,  
used his other hand to fill the hole,  
one fistful at a time.

Pomeranian

She picked him on Hoobly. I wanted a shepherd,  
but he fits fine on my arm full grown. His breath,  
dick and dirt, eight hour crated, cat-licked and oven bits,  
finds me each morning between sheet and pillow,  
when bodies are cold in strange places. Last summer,  
he taught us that sit takes one collar, three leashes,  
and seventeen treats. He taught us sand and trail,  
Northern lights, that the tight wind in the morning comes  
on the third right 'round the block.

This summer he teaches me how to pluck tomatoes,  
dice, add cilantro, basil, garlic minced and browned.  
How to drown onions long under the faucet.  
How to mix it all with my hands. How to pour  
with his busy nose on my calves, dirtied snot  
and green. He teaches me how to can alone.  
I fill until the glass bends.

## Home Haircut

On the wooden floor in the room still without furniture,  
with your eyes closed and your hands folded over thighs,  
you kneel half naked, ask me if I've ever done this before.  
I lie, say of course, as I dissect tufts of pecan and almond  
into cheap bobby pin constellations crowning your scalp,  
and you look like yoga on Saturdays downtown, the moment  
before Mary begins the Ohm that fills my chest for days.  
Or, perhaps, like nebulous shadows that cast on the trees  
when you climb to the top of the mountain on the city's west side.  
Clouds waltz so slowly. Slowly, I run the pin against your scalp,  
sometimes not even to tame these rooster sparks,  
mostly to learn arch of neck, slope of shoulder, bloom of ear.  
In place, I take razor, snap guard, shave uneven growth  
between us, watch forgotten pieces fall to hardwood.  
I palm porcupine cluster of 32 pins, shave against the grain,  
hope for a mark or scar to ask about. You have two colics  
on your nape that swirl like a current I've seen in a stream nearby  
whose water never warms. But your neck is warm, your skin  
thinner than I thought it would be, smooth under rub of thumb,  
and you lean into my chest, you say it all looks even enough.

The Women that Come to the Bar on Saturdays

Their lines crawl from crow's foot to jaw.  
Their lips are desert-squared with ChapStick.

With side-glance and shoulder hunch  
I know to fill their sweaty pitcher.

Rusted nails spur from stools, the bar, the floor,  
and catch their jeans. They don't complain.

Their hair is shoulder length and there's some kids, I think.  
I know T.C. and Caron better than their parents,

simply from how they pull at their arm hairs,  
tilt their heads, pretend I'm not twenty and they aren't forty.

In silence. With their stares and not-stares,  
we build our cactus skin.

## Girl Texting at the Bar

Her phone is a born line in her palm—textual crease  
from thumb-crotch to wrist-bend. It opens

like clockwork. Her fingertips are all periods, no commas  
in knuckle-twitch. Trace prints

of sweat, shallow dip of hand-bend. She's all hand.  
All arm. All shoulder, jaw, swallow

of stutter-words. I wanna write  
all over her—wild cursive, pulsed line—draw

into her slouch. Breathe her lips warm, make them move.  
Replace Twitter with my hand.

## Plastic Stars

After realizing the impossibility of proving Catherine gay  
in *Pride and Prejudice*, we threw our Nortons down,  
left them spread open on the floor at the Aquinas Library....

After we drove to Pub 43 downtown, took four tequila shots,  
watched heavy women with shaved heads, baggy clothes  
find their hips again to a drag queen screaming Shakira  
which led us to more tequila, then whiskey, then shooting  
down the pretty-pretty straight girls that came from the corner....

After we stumbled back to my Pontiac that still has a cold,  
and jammed ourselves so hard into the brick wall nearby  
you grinned before I knew your lips were cinnamon gum....

After I had run over that rabbit on Fuller,  
my first kill, I told you,  
and we laughed after crying,  
and you took me into your room  
where the limp mattress, no box-spring, laid  
half naked with grey and orange sheets  
shoved into the corner....

After you threw my legs into my chest  
and your lip ring did not bother me at all  
and small lips can feel huge, I learned...

After you stopped to turn the radio up,  
more white noise than music....

After I asked you to take the binder off  
and you said no....

After I only felt above your underwear  
but you shuddered into my shoulder anyway  
bit my clavicle soft, said I taste like soy milk,  
traced your teeth marks with your tongue....

After we laid on our backs, and I pointed up  
to pink and green plastic stars on the ceiling,  
outlined where Orion could be just above  
the leaning floor lamp....

You grabbed my hand from the brown light,  
sucked sweat from my palm, paused,  
asked me, why look for things where they aren't?

## Fossil

Petechiae are small blood blossoms  
beneath the surface of skin. They bloomed in July,  
wild blue bonnets, when I was alone. I closed

my fingertips against their lips, pinched them to see  
their lines, find their heat, my stomach a field  
that only I could read. The braille was crimson

left from her breath, how she'd whisper bouquets  
into my ribcage, watch ink rise into my gasps,  
the stain of her all fossil now.



## Wednesday Nights at Applebee's

I want to kiss you in this Applebee's parking lot they're plowing right now before we go inside and you order gin and tonic for yourself, before top shelf margarita for myself, before the queers stare at me for being too pretty, as you said would happen because I like Revlon, CoverGirl, and OPI nail polish applied weekly at the Chinese Nail Salon on Third Street. They'll stare always, you say. Always we wait to open your Ford Focus, you turn the engine off, and there's this pause, and I wanna awkwardly climb on top of you, let the horn blow, twice perhaps by accident, once on purpose when you learn you can touch me back and that I have figured out whether you suck my bottom lip or not. At the same time, I shouldn't kiss you in the parking lot under glow of apple red, under fluorescent stutter of the sign for Woodland Mall with its four stores. We should be gin and tonic, margarita I cannot finish because the buzz is enough after half. After an hour and a half of seventeen hims and hers and hers leaning to catch glances of me, you should just drive me back, and we should hug across the console, keep three inches between our cheeks.

## Drawing Her

You draw their bodies imperfect: bulge of thigh, jaunt of chin  
spill of stomach. Her eyes point toward yours, which droop  
the blue of Garlic Falls four miles up the road. You drive  
the charcoal with a loose hand against her shoulder, blur her  
body soft with your wrists, say Kleenex pulls the color out,  
that she always gives to skin. You've shifted her brow  
seven times now, lifted her chin twice, but her lips won't curve  
or open. I bite ceramic mug, breathe the green tea you heated  
on the stove, while you pull the pencil down, lick tip of index,  
draw her clavicle out a winter grey I've seen over the lake at dusk.  
Chest full, neck straight, you're close as you can get to her,  
and we listen to etch and stroke, whispered shape and shift,  
pulse you cut and caress thereafter. You've drawn her before  
flat and curved, breast-less, all hip, sometimes as a man  
I couldn't love. She's rushed every page of sketchbook  
on this coffee table, let you touch every angle you've sewn  
into her forearms, every blush of eye, cry of chest. You've wrecked  
her body every time. She's never right enough.

Watching Angelika Talk to Saliim, Our Cab Driver

Past Halstead he says, How you say the word?

Somalia, is where I come from then.

His name, Saliim—on our smartphones: peace.

He likes the city much. He's got a wife,

a child, a dog. His arms are small and brown,

the hair barely there. It's been five years,

three months. He quit the cigarettes. He has

no lighter here. His swollen eyes know

the streets, just where to turn and how to feed

our drunken interest spent: but what about

the girls who love the girls? Oh they are killed

with open cans, with fists of brown stones.

All the Pretty Girls Go Out on Saturday Night  
*with thanks to Michele Chamuel*

You are Adderall and blow.  
You throw your hips to music  
we cannot hear in this bedroom.  
You are bleach #210 L'Oreal dye,  
blue laxatives you say taste sweet,  
the blunt unlit between your lips  
as you fry your hair straight.  
You look just right.

All the pretty boys try to touch you, buy you  
cranberry vodkas with lime all night.  
And you'll dance their bodies down.  
And you'll dance their bodies close.  
And you'll dance their bodies hard.  
And you'll look just right.

Maybe one song we'll get close enough  
to pull your waist to ours, feel your nails  
claw above our tank tops, drop our hips  
to meet yours when the bass is slow  
and low and in our chests.  
And you'll look just right.

Brian(ne)

Walk down to 69 Division Street  
and you'll find a woman named Brian.  
Lord, she can't add—don't expect  
correct change—can't alphabetize minor IDs.  
She'll call you *Honey* even when you disprove—  
she's a bank teller by day.  
Tell her you gave her a twenty, not a ten,  
and those 46-year-old lips rise  
like wide incredible waves of Grand River,  
just like her high brows—synchronism—perfectly plucked,  
how they cross, rise, ruffle.  
She'll raise them tits towards your bitch bark,  
tuck her ass in straight hips,  
clutch her waist, look you up.  
Naaw-uh.  
You don't fuck with Brian.

But half an hour later, on that shitty black stage,  
Brienne wavers like love, hands held hard,  
stares you down soft, like you and her are gonna burn  
out soon—she smokes while she sings.  
It's a caution-less waning, brush wire, legato bass groan  
beneath her throat-tones.

And you'll think, where'd Brian go?  
'Cause this girl's got something  
and they'd be perfect for each other.

## I Always Cover Their Faces

I always cover their faces. In orange traffic cones  
we overturn, their wings will give,  
their feet will rest against bib overalls.  
I use a curved blade, the rapid stroke up  
and sideways—watch the blood run a red stream

to quiet. We choose to slaughter early,  
the chickens gray, the snow fluorescent spills  
upon hay beds. They know our steady boots,  
their rush of breath slithers up the barn walls.

Their careful wings yawn into our palms. The first  
is young and sleek. My son, he teaches him,  
his steady cluck the cone—and hand releases  
the careful spill of feather body, curl of heart,  
the coo and tut of tight. Sam cups the cone  
between his knees, takes a sip of coffee,  
The mug has made a circle deep in shells  
of grains and press of claw, in winter dirt.  
He works the knife quick, he sees the blood run

warm between his hands. He soothes the body's  
torque into a calm. I count the rest—eighteen  
today. I stay far from the bulb, the stool,  
the cone, the bucket. I taste my Folgers  
black. My son's shoulders sharp, a tense  
I cannot touch.

Hendrix, Oklahoma

Mom found you before the note you'd placed on the bed.  
Your handwriting was becoming so neat, t's curved  
at the bottom. Your shoes were still on.  
I taught you how to double-knot in the front entryway.  
We'd walk together to the bus-stop.  
I wouldn't let them touch you there.  
I've never seen them say those things, but I hear Faggot  
every morning when I pour my cereal six years later,  
mom searching the fields for rain. She hasn't sat down since  
she found you hanging in the closet. Your shirt red  
checkered plaid, your pants too short, you were growing  
like the weeds that grow in patches in the gravel  
drive to the grey barn. Dad's body folded there,  
he pulled the chickweed with his fists,  
those soft ropes of earth. Your coffin was too small,  
edges too sharp, and the Indian paintbrush held still,  
violent orange in those shiny handles.

Fucking on the Boat Dock at a Pond Six Miles North

On this dock, spotted pondweed and birch leaf  
nest in your hair, June bugs creak  
in fleece of sedges, and I press your hips further  
into the damp pine, your chest spotted with sand,  
your mouth smooth as brook trout, you respond  
to every throw, every clutch, every brush of skin.

We don't pause to hear the dull lean of black ash  
or balsam, the faint hooks of wood frogs you pointed out  
when our hands were still foreign in the front seats  
of my Subaru, your eyes green, not the hazel I know now.

These boards wet heels, and calves, and small of back,  
light blue tee shirt I know not to remove. Moon dances  
your chest white and an eastern breeze sews us together.

Loose splinters cling to our wrists and knees, your back arches  
like a crane, and, under the heavy Michigan green,  
you haven't forgotten, you open only to close.



## Fucking on the Black Rocks

Having stripped each other naked, our mittens still on,  
we press our bodies into the Black Rocks, our backs giving  
to point of stone, to sudden cups of lake caught  
from last night's rain. I mouth the places your hair  
has wet itself by accident, you jam my jaw to rock  
only to release. We toss the way the lake drums, how she beats  
her chest red under the sun. But it is night now, November moon,  
and we are winter lunged, warm tongued when we remember  
to use them. Here, we claw beneath wool, spread open  
our hands, finger the ripples of rib, claw crash of hips,  
pin each other down until our backs are raw enough.  
You thrust like waves rush shore. I lunge as silver birch  
to North Wind, and numbed, we meet somewhere in-between.

## Fucking Against the Bookcase

You changed your name to Andy three years ago,  
before we met at yoga, where your body had posed  
in feathered peacock, legs straight, toes pointed at ceiling,  
where tufts of mustard highlights settled  
in balance, kissed the floor's cheek,  
where you kept my eyes open, breath uneven.

Even here, you keep your hips open,  
where forearms clutch fiction,  
where wrists grip oak shelves of the bookcase  
and the room is hardcovers undone.  
I mouth gold letters of Bronte, Eliot, try to hold  
canvas still with my teeth. Sometimes pronouns catch.  
You will not use them. I cannot slip  
under your binder, too tight for curved thumb,  
even rigid index I run toward your sternum.

I fail every time. In bridge pose  
I've searched your shoulders for answers,  
in pigeon pose, curvature of spine.  
Here, I am given greying hairline,  
crow's feet, freckle above your left ear,  
your bite into my bicep, thigh to pelvis,  
the downward slope of tongue,  
and, balanced again, we forget our names.

Fucking in the Impala

Your seats, leather worn, kept the heat  
in winter. You'd take my hand, force it  
between your legs, the squeaky console digging  
a mark into my side, later red, sometimes  
a bruise. You liked my flanks, your teeth  
beneath my ribs. You kissed hard, your lips  
sour, a watermelon Smackers brand  
your mom gave you. You'd fuck me dry  
and red. Sometimes, I couldn't come at all.  
I quit asking you to stop, the sky brown  
and gray even in the day. At night, I'd watch  
the Saginaw flow, boats and cars,  
windows that wouldn't steam.

## When You Stop Loving Her

Cook her breakfast: eggs over easy, maple smoked bacon, orange juice, toast—in bed. Pluck the crumbs from her tee shirt. Then, kiss her shins, forearms, hairline. When she smiles the smile with lines, head cocked, take a picture with your iPhone. Make it your background.

Buy her a fish at Walmart. Admire its fins, the first extension from inch of water into her grandmother's glass pitcher. Name it Blue.

Cover the living room in neon post-it notes. Things only she would know. One hundred eighty three of them. Rent a movie to listen to her breathe. Take a bubble bath together. You'll fit just fine.

When she brushes her teeth, ask her what she's thinking. When she asks you Why, tell her you love her. Repeat.

When You Start to Fall

Keep walking your dog. See where he stops  
and record why.

Keep making coffee the way you like it. At 7:04,  
with vanilla candle lit, dip your fingers  
into the wax.

Take yourself to the northernmost peninsula  
of the lake. Close your eyes and ask yourself  
everything you see.

Take your own hands. Spread them open.  
Note your lines, patches of callous,  
how veins have begun to rise.

Give her your palm face-up when she reaches  
for the first time. Let her find how you fit.

Give her the sunrise on her 34<sup>th</sup> birthday,  
in a text. September sand isn't yet cold,  
and the water will be orange.

Show her the scars on your knees, the mark  
on your left breast.

Show her how your dog likes his leash held,  
taut, two inches above his back. Measure  
how he looks back at her at stoplights.

## Purge

You can wash the sheets, the towels, the sweatshirts  
you both fit into, donate her favorite bowl,  
the ocean green ceramic one from St. Vinnies',  
she cleaned immediately after breakfast,  
stop buying Naked granola with walnuts,  
even change to cinnamon candles in the bathroom  
because she liked to light the pine ones

just before she'd knead your shoulders to putty  
in the bathtub. You both fit just fine.  
You can surprise the dog with a new collar and tags  
because it won't sound like them rushing up the stairs  
to eat your famous meatloaf that was once your mother's

Your mama said you have to ask yourself, Does she build  
you up, or tear you down? She never was good  
with sandcastles in summer. Everything fell apart.  
And you could text her how you're keeping the bed,  
you'll flip the mattress over so that nothing is her

chamomile neck. But none of this is enough.  
Her socks will still appear under dresser and washer,  
strands of her hair stuck to Christmas ornaments  
in red boxes you'd packed with spiced wine  
on her breath and the dog will still lift his head to her name.

For Sherrie Something

At the bar, I listen to the army reserve kids talk  
about the pussy in Iraq. They are three months  
from going back, and my shoulder tattoo  
reminds Private Martinez of her second lieutenant's  
walk off duty, the subtle pulse of her hips,  
her hair longer than she thought it would be.  
Isn't that always true? she asks me. And I pour  
more Jameson over ice. She says she's part Irish,  
will never wear her uniform like the rest of those fuckers  
in a bar—that's disrespect for our country.  
I take her home and understand she doesn't use  
her hands, pulls away with her eyes closed,  
tastes like milkweed, wintergreen, leans into every push.  
We do nothing but lay there, her socks, woolen,  
dig my calves raw, her mouth cool from staying open,  
my hips a sharp she doesn't complain of. She says  
I am smooth as the gun she'll polish in the morning.

It's Not Not a Date

I could tell you every furniture in this apartment: chair,  
painted rainbow when I was twelve, my mother's stained glass  
on that trunk. I keep nothing in it. I could tell you African violet  
on coffee table—Murphy tradition—I own three and one is dying.  
Mahogany bowl, candle I cannot burn, those turquoise curtains  
with their holes. You hold your whiskey with both hands;  
If I saddled your thighs, would you set the glass down?  
Taste my tequila tongue?

I could tell you my brother's olive skinned, sienna-eyed, walks on his toes.  
I'm apple rose when I exercise. My daddy's two heart attacks in.  
I write with the curtains closed, a dim light, coffee rings on my sheets.  
In the morning, I wake up on the left side of the bed. Your chest,  
cherry orchard in July, what if I started with neck instead?

I could tell you my first cat lived to seventeen, I dream  
of elephants most nights, like to fish for waves with worms,  
wrote poems into my sides, learned how to kill a bird alone.



## Ending

As how sunflowers lose their balance toward August,  
cursive themselves forward, we found her on the step,  
brown beak curved to cement. You lifted her with your nose,  
her body breaking to side, exposing only the right leg,

left gone, blood dried into clutch of rose.  
You licked her frame, her back arching, her wings Wisconsin blue,  
spread smooth as a stone. You watched me work  
the shovel, dull and grey, into her neck, how I pressed

with my eyes closed, felt the dry pine push into my palms,  
both our backs sinking in. You watched from the yard  
as I dug by the willow, as I cursed the roots that kept earth  
still, as I searched the sky for anything but the sun.

Lines

with thanks to *K. S.*

The cartilage piece fell into your lap like the wet pebbles  
collected between lake and sand when I was a boy.  
I'd rub them, wet between my hands until palms numbed,  
my thighs glittered Michigan brown. You took it up,  
placed its body on the crest of the dash to examine,  
caressed its rubber back with your dirty thumb. The hum  
of streetlight louder than the new muffler, I see it short,  
cerulean green against your jaw. You shaved today,  
but I noticed earlier when you took my ID to the rock,  
broke the dust to four lines on the hood of the Subaru.  
I felt rush only after you found my back against window,  
rubbed wrench against my chest, kissed scratches you'd left  
on purpose. You examine your nose in the rearview mirror,  
move the shiny piece back closer to the Mary, mutter  
Polish to traffic, your vowels tired.

## Pull of Body

I've memorized the angles of her slouch,  
measured circumference of sigh.  
Her hairline brings me home, each morning,

to the pull of body. Sacred spaces rest  
where neck grows into shoulder,  
in center-point of forearm, nose-tip, eyebrow,  
her shirted back. She was button-up

when our son was born. He was tossed  
onto my chest, wild grey rubbed pink,  
blind naked mole she wouldn't hold.

At home, I undressed her: dress shirt,  
white tee, push-up bra. I laid her down,  
set our son between her breasts. His hair  
poked into her neck.

I weighed every breath then  
where their bodies seamed,  
saw how he pulled at the spaces  
I'd never found before.

Son

*for L.*

He weighed six pounds seven ounces,  
and how he purred into my neck  
has taught my mother how to choose  
chuck and chicken for benefit dinners.

I tried to rip his life from mine months ago,  
but the curl of him showed  
in the dark sea of me. And now  
I hold the oxygen mask to his nose,  
think of a god only my grandparents know,  
see a boy I chose, and hope  
it's not too late to pray.

## A Story I've Never Told You

Each morning, Kanwaldeep would place her baby  
onto my chest, his sweaty black hair loose in his hairband.  
He'd toss like the river between my town and theirs.  
I'd watch her body, loose and soft from the birth,  
fold into the sofa, how she'd lick yogurt off her spoon

with each scoop from the bowl. Here, I learned  
the cluck of Punjabi, how to open my mouth wide for vowel,  
how to fold sari, how to press paneer between cloth.  
I learned how to rub his back to calm, how he smiled,  
his brown lips opening to pink tongue.

One day, his loose arm and cheek on my shoulder,  
she told me how he had come to them,  
how he may have been an ant, perhaps a worm, how the soul must  
travel through many bodies before it finds its birth again.  
How many, I wanted to know.

And you, each time you come back into my life, I imagine you.  
Perhaps a cricket who can sing, apologize the moon.  
Sometimes a fox who can find holes in fences, walls,  
and disappear. Sometimes, I pretend you're an owl,  
you can see everything that moves in my chest,

but owls never come down from trees. Kanwaldeep says  
there are six births in a birth. You are at your third.  
The mouse I didn't see. The fish who swam my heart open  
to the ocean. The sheep, warm, who led me to the cliffs.  
If I jump, will you catch me?

Steak knife

She spins its weight between index and thumb.  
Its smell, metallic hooks of gray and brown

suffused now with pine perfume. She'll drown  
the knife in Lemon Clean. Forget the rag.

Forget the water. Drown the body long  
in toxic wash. She'll thrust its spine and grip

serrated throat—a silent scream  
which comes into her palms, a dirty plum

undone. She loves the taste that's left  
She'll rub until raw.

## Stripper Girl

Her nipples hard as oak, she strokes her thighs,

her hands soft, her lips rose—my throat is open wide  
to slide and pose. Her throw of body, the wraps

around two silver poles. Palms calloused, fingers shellacked,

she runs them down her chest, clutches hips. Head cocked,  
she locks her eyes closed and finds my body near the stage.

She twists and curls, is bass and strobe. I pull  
my arms into my ribs. Perfume of whiskey shots

releases from lips. She dips her chest to stage,  
heel screwed, hands planted, spread

and split, her hips come toward me like a drum.

She knows she's caked with Cover Girl, a blush  
of plum, a Juniper plume of shadow.

She knows my smirk. She hums beneath our throats.

## Craigslist Girl

You keep your dog in tee shirts with faces like Kermit,  
Snoopy, Woody from Toy Story. He stays coiled  
at the foot of the bed beside the register, one eye open  
while we struggle to peel layers of sweatshirts,  
doubled sports-bras off our winter bodies, plump with Christmas,  
New Years Eve. You didn't kiss anyone either,  
and you smell like lemon grass soap from the co-op on Artesian.  
On Artesian and Western, a woman sells tamales three-for-five  
never quite hot enough but worth it when I am already late  
for the Blue Line and I'd tell you this, I'd tell you  
I listen to heartbeats of children in Jefferson Park  
every afternoon until late. Sometimes they woosh  
like how our pants rub, still on. I didn't picture you  
in slacks, and sometimes, the ventricles blow  
like how you throw me down onto your bed,  
your comforter stained with wine  
where my shoulders land. You are heavy-hipped,  
boxer briefs—I work around them,  
tell you I'm better off on top.  
On top, I listen to you tell me your dog is three,  
your ex kicked him twice,  
you like to be fucked from behind,  
but my ear is pinned to your left breast, pierced recently.  
Recently, I've stopped telling the girls I meet on Craigslist  
I listen to crooked heartbeats and loose lungs and rainy chests.  
I pretend I waitress, stock broke, design video games—anything  
with eyes because I have listened for too long  
and there are no songs to remember  
when our bodies breathe together  
after you come.



Dolphin Talk  
*for A.*

Under toss of blue and grey and white  
we pretend to catch each other,  
our hands dolphin backed,  
our knuckles smooth with lotion,  
first time applied all winter  
yours still cracked, mine sweaty  
as lemonade in summer, here,  
in woolen seats of this theatre,  
your dirty moccasins on the chair backs  
my left leg crossed, half asleep  
and we knead each other open,  
try to be soft as wax, every nerve

ending at expose. And we don't try  
to lock together. Fishes never stop  
to touch, but chance in flip and backbend,  
cartwheel the surface like brushes  
on a snare. I watch the shadows dance,  
the flick and twitch of film on wrists  
I've kissed only in the brown light  
of my bedroom, before you pulled away.

I spill into them, finger the valleys  
of your skin, rush the tendon Braille  
I cannot read. And you don't stop  
to pause either at bend of index,  
slope of thumb, rub of palm. You trace  
lines we cannot say now, outline  
veins we cannot hear, stretch  
each angle, ask each scar with waltz,  
with circle, if you could lose her again.

## Spoon

Bath drawn, I do not test the door you've locked already.  
Once, you said Gillette razors are easiest to take apart.  
Curtain hooks squeal towards the wall. Guide wires rip  
best with needle nose pliers. I picture you naked, long-faced.  
I picture curl of your spine, thighs open, freckled back rounded,  
pliers clicking methodically at triple lipped blade.

I keep the T.V. low, listen for shift of water, scrape of porcelain:  
You only need one blade. After a year, you still haven't told me  
where you kept them, your last cut six days before we met.  
These are the good ones, strong, you said once at Target,  
pointing to the pink bags. I asked you if we needed deodorant

in response. I want to open the door, but I spoon at chicken,  
fried rice I cannot taste. If I went in, I know I would find you  
hair dry, eyes wet, subtle folds of your stomach letting into tub,  
each exhale shorter than the last. I won't see pinking water,  
how your sides must have stopped a few moments ago,  
or that you've scratched your biceps raw.  
I won't see index and thumb empty, still pinched together,  
razor clean in soap dish. I'll notice your toenails, cerulean,  
how the color makes no sense.

## Kiss of Hips

Mom and I know the oil of our skin  
pressed into yours, deodorant smeared on shoulder, on forearm.  
We know dull fingernails, indentation of wrist-watch,  
hot slide of your whisper,  
blade of whisker on our cheeks—red marks they leave.

We know the smell of cupped palm, callouses  
pressed into our noses. The spread of hand,  
caress of jaw. Know dirty fingertips in creases of our lips  
and twists of eyelids, loose clutch of neck,  
then clavicle.

We know humid camo, staccato breath,  
know the zip, pull, pop of a button  
like our names.  
I know your forehead, crease of clean wool.  
I know boot polish on my night stand,  
how it stains.

You whispered *You have no more clean underwear*  
to me every time you did it.  
Mom knows *Follow me*.

## Splitter

On the lake, your dad keeps his best friend's jet skis,  
watches how you play chicken with your sister,  
brown blurs he can make out beside the island  
no one lives on, pretends his Busch Light, cold

in his swollen hands, isn't a mortgage payment  
he keeps in his fridge. You shred apart your first ACL  
on the four-wheeler in the woods behind the house,  
the pewter sky ripped open with October. Here, you split

wood with a borrowed splitter in the lean-to, listen to him  
bitch about his brother's drinking, the car insurance,  
your fuckin' cell phone. Physical therapy should be free.  
Who needs someone to tell you how to move? He doesn't

toss his arms when he lectures, his Stoli-tight stomach,  
pulses with each throw of wood into the cord, his abs glow  
even eight Busch in. You do not tell him you've dropped out  
downstate, you're off the team, and your trunk is full of shoes.

You've seen him fold before, over the letter in the garage,  
the one that said you're gay. You've sat down already to his fist  
beating bloody into the workbench, heard his one-hitter  
find his staccato cough you know is bright, and thicker

than two years ago when your mother left. Here, you set log  
onto the splitter, you push the lever forward, bring it back.  
You see how his hands, meaty and chapped, pluck the oak  
that's fallen to the ground.

## Drag Queen

Chassé—chassé—in pink and rouge.  
False eyelashes fused, blue mascara, tierra.  
She wears a "Rustique" blush, a touch  
of roll-on-glitter defying each eye.

Her mouth is wide; botox busting beneath  
each flash of teeth. Watch each C—tucked.  
Chest hairs already plucked like feathers, tarred first,  
then yanked with precise strength.  
Her legs—strong. Her hips—tight, like a child  
should not rest in that cradle.

But she chassés, chassés, she moves, she moves.  
And her dress fits as a 10 should—perfect.  
And her tights have no holes.  
And her shoes have glass souls.

So let her do her chassé, chassé.  
Let her sing Britney Spears like she's five foot two,  
a natural blonde. Let her make songs  
because if you "boo" her she will continue to  
chassé, chassé—in pink and rouge because too  
many have been dragged down before her.

To the Last Girl Who Dumped Me, a Doctor

I share a pack of Camels with my best friend  
when our chests are on verge of bursting, our lungs filling  
with air sharp as ice, we lay the front seats back, discuss shapes  
waltzing against windshield: Kidneys, quarter-horses, winter storms  
caress dirty glass with their lips like kids on yellow busses. I used to  
make footprints with my fist against the steam I breathed on windows,  
dot on toes with my index, look for what stayed on the way home.

Your mother won't quit smoking Marlboros. She's two-packs-a-day,  
Walmart brand butter, talks slow as Arkansas mornings  
when the wheat is still grey, and newspaper still put together and cold  
on the old kitchen table that leans. Elbows rounded, back slumped,  
she'll set cigarette between chapped lips, it'll slope downward,  
and she doesn't have to look when she flicks thumb against lighter.  
Copper toned, she keeps eyes open with inhale, exhale, sees only wheat,  
the dirt road between field and barn that never got paved,  
leased test strips of corn and soy, rusted trampoline.

I'd tell you, against that lake, against that windshield, we search  
silhouettes of what we left behind. My friend exhales  
her ex's crooked walk, his yellow dog, his boots lined up against hers.  
I release your shoulders while I chopped cilantro, while you answered.

To the PetSmart Assistant Manager.

When I left my Pomeranian with the groomers,  
and you said you'd see me soon, I went home,  
took a shot of Jameson, found my most boyish flannel  
in my walk-in closet, tucked my hair into beanie,  
thickened my eyeliner, drove back, and sat  
in my Subaru for three hours waiting to walk  
back in. Because I didn't see you,  
I tipped them seven dollars, wrote my name legibly  
for the first time in my life on the slip, even peed  
when I didn't have to, bought six Halloween outfits  
and a goldfish that died three days later—returned her  
in a Zip-lock. You weren't on shift again,  
so I scheduled a lion cut for my dog: dumb.  
I wonder how many dog bones will collect  
in my cupboards, how many squeaky toys  
at a dollar a piece I will buy before my Excel  
spreadsheet of your possible work hours completes.  
Squares D7, B4, G16 still need their answers.

To the Bitch Standing in Front of Me at the Bar  
Who Stole My Best Friend's Girlfriend

Your back may be turned, your shoulders relaxed,  
but I can see your cheeks, hidden behind your Great Value  
Wal-Mart hair-sprayed curls, sharp with Revlon Peach 47,  
perfect for your spray-tan from Utopia on Washington Street.  
You reach to drink Captain and diet, your wrists grey brown  
in fluorescent light, and turn slightly to pretend not to see me.  
Do not smile at the mutual friend between us. I may strike you with fist,  
and I wore rings tonight. You turn back around, laugh harder,  
your back heaving heavy as a snare. Stop checking your messages  
because she didn't text you. I'd like to rip your back pockets  
off your knock-off Seven for All Mankind jeans, crack your iPhone  
with my heel, peel the Chinese shellac you Amazon Primed  
and did yourself from your knotty fingers. You couldn't taste sweet.  
You turn your body back to me, and, before I can announce  
how small your tits are, you shout how we've met before.  
The best I can do is nod yes.



## Drag King

He lip syncs evenly to pluck and strum of Nickelback, his cut-off shirt painted acrylic rainbow. Girls flock with dollar bills in their mouths, crowd to finger his limp arms, still girl. Backstage, before pink and green shadow that makes his brown eyes large under silver lights, before the rubber dick he placed in loose underwear, he told you to meet him afterward and the scars, in patches of lines on each shoulder, on left forearm were older than the ones still pink on your thighs. He is all arms, all fist, all jump and thrust and Mohawk head thrash. He lost his hips before the stage.

## White Fence

Mom has always wanted a white picket,  
which reminds me of red rope, face strings  
of body. Where would the gate be? How low,

how high? I do it in the produce section,  
on walks with our dog, put Jackie's hand  
down to touch something—my hair always

in my face—excuse for words, grabs  
for tomato, cereal. I picture punch kick  
combinations, Jackie's body missing,

its limbs found on trees, behind a dumpster  
on Crescent, bloated in Superior. I'd identify  
the eggshell, hazel spruce in her irises.

There are fences everywhere.

Perfect

And then you'll find the blemish beneath the crease in her cheek,  
one reaching her temple, mark behind her ear, how  
the wide slip of her hips surprises her dress, how

she runs on the balls of her feet, never eats melon. And then you'll find  
her scars, one beneath her brow that she didn't notice  
until it gushed at recess—she was five. Then

her hand—it didn't even hurt. Her lip—slipped her tooth  
right through. A slight smile between the hipbones,  
a wrinkle when bent—her right ovary still works. And then

you'll realize she doesn't always say everything when  
she breathes, clears her throat, notes your knuckles, memorizes  
the twitches in the muscles of your back—no one

ever liked that—she doesn't always say what you believe. She  
doesn't cook, hates coffee, skips class, wears sweats,  
ruins every toothbrush, is allergic to your cat,

reads *Twilight*, then laughs at your bookcase, takes  
the blankets at night, won't hold your hand in public, yet  
tells her mom, "I met someone."

## Petting My Cat Backwards

We'll never get that back, Lucille sprawled on my lap  
all hip and paw, drool on my knee. Never  
will the shock of your index  
electrify the base of my thumb, never  
a head-on collision coming,  
bend of her back a slow motion runway, never  
a right turn at the last

moment. We'll never get that back. Never a dare  
to press your palm against mine, find it peculiar  
how thin my fingers, how round my nails,  
how my pinky jaunts right—not the sweat  
of my palm

as I pull away the first time.  
My knee slightly across your thigh  
as we sit side-by-side—that'll never be sexy again.  
Shock of your elbow into my waist, courage of eyes,  
how my wrist twists to scratch that cat's chin,  
how you rush to clear your throat to say  
nothing, cock your neck to find the angle

of my jaw. Love certainly begins peripheral, and lord,  
blind spots may never be sexy again.  
We'll never get that back—how our hands  
make no sense.

## How to Un-Love Someone

Start every night mid-mattress, one pillow,  
even if you still end up on the left. It helps  
to line the other pillows up under the covers  
at first. Don't feel bad.

Grind the coffee the night before, place the filter,  
fill the water so that you only have to press Start  
in the morning. Write love poems in bed  
until you cannot remember her knuckles.

Buy more Tupperware, some Vera Wang towels,  
perhaps a tropical fish with special needs.  
Walk around naked, dance to missed calls,  
fall in love with your cat again. Fuck allergies.

Throw out the Allegra she left. Cry hard  
in the cheese aisle at Wal-Mart. Tell the cashier  
she's lovely. Fry frozen pierogies every night.  
Fall asleep stomach full, chest tight.

## Cartography

Desperate mapping of exhale occurs  
in the smallest of moments, when she pulls

your body into hers, tucks your head  
into her chest—says nothing. Her ribs rise

like ripples, even against your forearms.  
She presses her hands into your back,

her fingers, knots of fist. This is you,  
her, clutching the braille of perfume,

curve of clavicle, skin salt and lotion.  
This is open mouth to shoulder.

This is legato breath rushed  
to remember anything at all.

Sleeve

I want to know if birds fly north  
or south. Have wingtips faded  
from sun, or rub of body?  
I want to feel their feathers,  
rurr of breath. I want to press  
this hand

                  into hook of birch bark,  
ask muscled trunk, if she feels.  
The crooked house—how many rooms?  
I asked her once, why the left arm?  
She said that ink

                  is closest to her heart.  
I want to compare the armband  
to circumference of sigh, taste the sunrise  
I'd place in her sternum.  
I'd heat the ink up—I'd watch it dry.

Homecoming: Youkam, Texas

Once home, you lay on a towel, your book wide  
and bright in sun, the trampoline, its mesh dull,  
sagging beneath your weight. Summer breathes dry  
onto your skin, pale and Chicagoed now.

At dusk, your mother kneads your shoulders.

You wish you could relax, lower your chin.

Green kitchen chairs, faded, are peeling now,  
some spindles broken, kicked by nieces' feet.

She'll pause to take a drag from her Newport,  
set it in the ashtray, cleaned and center-placed.

She likes the river on your collar bone, the ink  
beneath her thumb. Your family's whiskey  
in the morning. They're brisket lungs,  
silent coffee spoons.



Self-Portrait: January 14<sup>th</sup> 2014

You slouch like balsam toward the lake  
on the peninsula closest to the restrooms.  
Shoulders hunched like your cat pissed off,  
you left again. You left the dishes you wash  
in the evening with lavender, a slow faucet,  
left the cluck and click of plate and cup,  
the walk with mug and dog in sharp wind  
with his bad knees, his need to lift a leg  
on every recycling container, every sprig  
of crabgrass taller than he. You left  
the woman on your drive home that students  
say was a chemistry professor who went crazy  
twelve years ago, her violent blush, long coat,  
hunchback, overloaded backpack. Your bag,  
still not cleaned out from last semester,  
you keep filling like the basket of squeaky toys  
by the fireplace, as if you could cover up  
the small turtle your ex-girlfriend bought  
the dog before you'd even named him.  
Your pockets are gum wrappers and receipts  
from a trip you didn't finish. Your hands  
are empty even when they are full of paper stack  
or cheap 4.99 cabernet from Econo Foods  
or your iPhone that won't light up.

To Allie, Who Sat in the Back Corner

I have written too many shoulders into poems: hunched  
over a phone or thighs, open as a kite by the lake,  
or bent like a song you wish wasn't on the radio.  
I wanted to start with your wide shoulders, here,  
because I have mouthed the spill of them through cotton,  
and once, when we weren't quite sure of how to sit closer  
on a skinny plaid couch, you told me you believed  
your best friend was singing in my bedroom—she'd loved to  
sing out loud—and there, I watched your shoulders bloom  
for the first time. I'd like the middle of this poem to be  
your laugh, no—the sigh afterward that says you're still  
smiling, eyes buckets of moon. Or maybe, the middle's  
grayish brown lighting your cheeks on a November evening,  
uneven ticking of your Suzuki Vitara, your gaze lost  
in waves that haven't yet frozen, the subtle rock of wind.  
Perhaps middle is your body giving to mine, your cream neck  
undone, your hair a shampoo I still cannot name.  
No matter what, let the end of this poem be the first kiss  
I didn't expect, your long sweater, your black leggings, your palms  
warm on my cheeks, how we kept our eyes closed the whole time.

Mohawk

She cut off her hair to Mohawk because she says she likes her hair  
To match her shoes. And she is through with dresses, and she finds  
That her breasts bind best with ace bandage wrap—the inexpensive kind.  
And she likes her mama most, not because of how her body stood  
When she told her, but because of how she still holds her up with her words.

And she has molded her body down to boy in just a summer-length.  
Her daddy says he don't know her face no more.  
Everyone always said she has his grey-green eyes.  
And she runs Country Road F each morning like a pickup with new lungs.  
She touches the stop sign with her whole palm. It rings  
Like a song on the start back. And that isn't something she says  
To the first girl she fucks—she'll never mean nothing but 'touch me.'

That isn't something you should have to say, but it feels good  
To be felt. And it takes three years of college, eight boys,  
Eleven girls, and blackout weekends with Jim Beam to not realize that.  
And it takes standing in a grocery line at Walmart with a nail file  
And a half gallon of two percent to find how love looks when it catches  
Between two bodies, neither her own, but close as how wishes rub  
Beneath our sternums when we are trying to build our own fires.  
Sometimes fags do not burn.

And she has learned their lines, how their bodies fold under lampshade,  
How to rub their knuckles soft on trains. And she has learned their angles,  
The foot tucked under the table, the thumb strumming under a scarf.  
She's soaked it up soft as she could. And she would take whatever strikes  
But catching lightning is like seeing a prayer go through. It happens  
When we close our eyes. And she's kept hers open since her daddy  
Spread her legs when her mama was out. He taught her to widen, to bruise.

They've all fucked her. Some consider how her hips bend—they love  
Her curves. And others work their hands from clavicle to abdomen,  
Their mouths warm in her ears. And some love like the flicker of streetlight  
Timed to go off sometimes when she's walking right beneath. And sometimes  
She feels their eyes closed when their bodies are brown shadows  
She cannot touch right. One told her that mid-thrust.  
But she finished anyways, let her pull her close.

Close. She has worked her body soft to hard without T. She says  
She don't want none of that change, says her Mama wouldn't understand.  
She says she still likes the way *she* falls off any lover's tongue. She would not  
Hide her name. Her daddy picked it out from a magazine.  
And she has learned to thrift for blue jeans that hide the hips  
She cannot run off. Her boxers will always cling, and she does not let them  
Take them off. There is only so much she'll let them touch.

And they have learned her lines, the ones she keeps beneath her sternum,  
The ones smooth and bubbled between her thighs.  
She likes the stutter of their fingers on rips she's cut fresh into her sides.  
They don't say nothing with their mouths, and she counts the ones that close their eyes.  
And she takes their palms away, writes them into her neck. It feels good  
When they work their hands into her Mohawk, when they pause to breathe.

## How to Love Someone

I was at my first pride and she was high up on the porch and behind a gate  
And I had to pee and sneak past and when I came back I considered  
How her shoulders were soft as hooks and whether to look them down  
Into her crossed arms and red wine. And she looked fine in her long dress  
And her hidden feet and she smiled at me and I said I know you  
And it took me by surprise that I said that because I could have just peed and walked by  
And her eyes are some sort of green

And I want to tell her there is a green that color on a building whose copper  
Is just starting to go and that it throws me on walks with my dog each morning.  
That she is obviously allergic to and I clean with Pine-Sol and dust for hours  
So that some magic powers allow her to breathe and she breathes soft  
Into my sheets which are orange as her lips that I do not tell her are small.  
And she is taller than me and she didn't notice this at first because at first  
It was the stutter of her hands into mine and they are worn

And I am finding how they fit and I want to tell her mine found itself on top  
And it's going to stay there because it feels good. And I want to tell her her laugh  
Sometimes gets stuck with her smile. I can see it in her chest. It bubbles up  
Then erupts to meet her eyes. They always smile first. I wanna ask her  
If she knows that. Sometimes I want to touch her back when it curves  
Like a question but I don't because I don't always have the answer.  
Sometimes I want to find my palm to her jaw and talk to her with nothing  
But my cheeks and Sometimes I want to let my arms find every weak hinge  
In her body and hold her up but I know she doesn't think I'm strong enough.

And sometimes I search for the right word to throw and she catches everything  
That flies and I like the wrinkle of her bridge because I think she wants to get  
To where I am on the other side. And I like her inquisitions because I like to fish too  
And that isn't something she knows about me yet. She says she wants to move slow

And I am slower than a raindrop in an ocean under Texas. I am a waltz on a pin  
And I am careful as the snow that melts long into June in the woods. I am the slowest  
Poem that I have ever written. I want to say my words like an old guitar on a hilltop  
I haven't climbed. And I will show her how the sound bounces off the buildings  
And gets caught somewhere in between. This is how you love her:

You tell her her hands by picking them up. You let nothing go because everything  
Counts and everything is wish. You take her fishing and watch her feel the lake  
With her thighs. You try to tell her You're beautiful with nothing but your eyes.  
But. You say it with your mouth anyways, your chest full as a drum. Her back  
is certain and strong, her shoulders taut. You let it out quiet as the moon reaches  
for the shore. You say it sure. You hear the rushes of cicadas. You count the pause  
before her cast. You watch her line throw soft and slow. This is how you love her.

## When I Tell a Lover I Have an STD

I love how her body breathes into mine in the morning, the way she takes my waist with one arm and calculates how my neck will open for her breath. I rest my fingers into hers. She changes my pulse with her palm and she is as calm as if her dream sequence continued through oatmeal. She feels real as exhale, intake.

She makes my coffee now, fries my eggs, does my laundry, curls in my bed the way movies end, but she is a beginning, and I know how she throws her hair back, holds my wrists, fists when she's angry, twists her nose when I do that throat thing. She sings terribly and she drives like skipping rocks and she talks with her hands,

says it makes her voice tree-strong, and my vowels are longer than hers. She's from out east and her teeth are her daddy's. And I wanna fold my words into her chest, draw her heart into her sternum, stir her body clockwise like my mother did on a Wednesday

with banana bread—Mom said, You gotta make sure the fruit is brown, mash it up with a fork. She worked her eyes from the bowl to my neck. Her hands were flour and my shoulders were dough. Mom said, "You're still lovable." And I've told lovers

with spring salad, on walks, at coffee shops. She'll lock her eyes with mine, arugula squashed into her cheeks and teach me my shoes again. And she lends me her hands as we walk how we'd done for weeks. There's heated

freeze of her slouch. It's happened on couches,

but mostly in chairs at Starbucks. I like the rustle of cups,  
kettle drum of words—hers tear at me like silk—she wears dresses  
and scarves, and I'd love to carve our initials  
into the wood of the table, the burn of the knife  
the cry of her eyes—they've been green before, now blue.  
It happens when I wanna be through with my chest

and arrest my breath to her sigh, silent as clouds.  
I wish I could see through her gaze, steady as waves  
My words wash her face the same way every time.  
I wind my hands the way my dad didn't. He said,  
You're still beautiful, his head cocked to the side.

*Beautiful* has always felt uneven, slanted syllables,  
*Ful* missing an "L." And I'd tell her it's in my palms  
when I pull her hips to my waist. The way she glues  
her forearms up into my back—that's when I imagine  
the morning, when we are two curls of body  
in stir of down. And I wanna stir her body.  
I wanna stir her body. I wanna stir her body  
into mine.



## Sheets

It happened in the sheets your husband chose for your wedding  
You beat me hard as a drum and I wondered what he'd think about that  
Because even though you have that Norwegian back, you are  
Soft. And even though your shoulders are wider than your hips  
Your lips say taste them all—every time. And I find that the freckles  
Spread from your chest to your neck make constellations I will rename  
in the breath I pour to warm you up, so, remember what I know.

I know five grey strands crayoned where your colic smiles at me each morning  
The precise way you part from the bed. That you contemplate that  
Red dress before choosing slacks—you'd fit just fine. I know  
The seconds spent testing the elasticity of the third wrinkle down  
From your left eye and I am sure their lovely because I know  
The spruce that grows on Crescent and Front is caught there. I know  
When you throw the mascara into the bag, that you check your phone  
Before the iron. That you pause to look at me before you go.  
That you don't smile.

But I know you might sometime because I know you prefer cotton  
Over satin, that beanies are better than baseball caps, that Band-Aids  
Are silly cover-ups—we should bleed out loud always. Always leave  
The door unlocked because you never know who hello you.  
You said it at the Laundromat when I was alone. I know now  
That hands can be electric even in the dark when every part of us is naked.  
I know to hold you after the moment your pulse comes into my sternum.  
That words are all palms now. That breath is the nest we build between us.  
I know now that you fly even when you are sitting, that you never watch the television  
Even though it's always on. I know you'll love me longer than a few months  
But my snore will never be your ex-husbands. You loved his lasagna mostly  
Because it stuck together. That hurt.

I know now how you find a root with your hands after it rains. You will pull  
Quick and squint your eyes closed. Never be afraid.  
The spade is always on the left and I know you keep your gloves  
between your legs. You say they're your mother's but we've never met  
And you test me not by your quick look but with your shoulders, like soft hooks  
I've found in books. You look brown in the sun and yellow inside and I'd like  
To tell you that sometimes, but I know you'd just smile. And I like how your voice  
Is higher than I thought it would be. I love surprises like that. And we both hate  
Flowers. Let's grow them together anyways. We...is something that you force

And everything I cling to. I know that you are a storm on the water  
and that not every storm breaks, but isn't it lovely how rain can beat hard  
as a drum into water. I can taste it. I know you rinse yourself long  
under the faucet before washing off your day. I know you start  
with your left arm, that you cock your head when you reach your neck,  
that you pause right here and close your eyes. And I find these  
seconds, when your hair becomes a wet mahogany, when your skin  
softens and lets go, when the air is nothing but dew, that I  
the one you press hard into your body have never really been there.

## Promises to a Son

When you get here I'll search for the dimple your mom holds  
in every smile  
and she'll swear you have the dip of my upper lip and we'll  
rush a million promises into your temples. Like  
both grandmothers will hold you tightly and  
both grandfathers will whistle pop lyrics and  
my brother will note the strength of your fist wrapped around his index  
and her sister will hold you up high to detect your color palette  
and my grandparents will be on the next flight up here  
and hers are on the way  
and they'll all swear you'll have her humor, her wit, her energy,  
and they'll be sure of my crazy hair, serious stare, my lack of coordination,  
and baby, all these promises, they could take a while.

I promise awe of moonshine, magic of ceiling fans, and wisps of my vanilla lotion.  
She has every face for every giggle, and a laugh that surprises even me  
after 10 years,

I'll read my poems for you first,  
and the two of you will have bets on the bears and cubs against my lions and tigers.  
And she'll take the peas out of every veggie medley and I'll  
sneak them into pot pies and she'll  
attempt to make you eggs over-easy and I'll  
replace them as soon as she's off to work  
because you and I both know  
she still gets better every time.

Your mom will teach you how to shoot a basketball and I'll  
teach you how to write poems in finger-paint.  
She'll tell you not to worry about anything and I'll say

you better worry because life isn't all rainbows.

But I know how to make the quietest words scream and she considers her left hook to be something of an anomaly.

And if anyone gives you a hard time about having two moms just say:

*I'm something special.*

Because I promise no sunburns  
and your mother has great rhythm—every girl's  
gonna wanna dance with you.

And I promise you'll get straight A's  
and she's got an incredible jump shot to steal.

And we both have recipes for lasagna.

Baby, I'll make sure you hit hard in football games,  
that you have the best socks always,  
get love notes from us on your napkins even in high school.

*We love you! Love, Moms.*

You don't have to do student council if you don't wanna,  
will know how to coordinate a corsage with courage,  
breathe deep breaths before the biggest of tests,  
make words move like music, appreciate  
the angles of voice, magnificence of movement,  
silhouettes of silent gestures gently rippling here.

She'll teach you how to let go,  
how to grow tall as touch, happy as sand in buckets,  
carefree as she is about being on time for appointments.

She'll show you how to elbow me just so,  
how to make anyone pause,  
how to be simple, sound, certain of sense. She'll

tell you the greatest stories, surprise you with cerebral films  
when you're sure she's more comical than that, tell you  
how she has grown into me. How to stretch love  
into something breathtaking.

We'll rediscover snow melting on carpet together, build  
tents out of sheets in the living room, up the stairs, give ya  
a wall to draw on with markers. Baby,  
we're gonna appreciate how they fold pretzels, present presents  
of dandelion root and grass, give kisses to the windows,  
watch the glass warm back up.  
We'll make houses for the ants,  
discover the pokiest of plants,  
read each other's palms under flashlight,  
marvel at the stars on the hood of the car  
in some field outside the city.

She'll keep you up on the trends and I'll  
teach you how to fend for yourself. She'll  
make you walk the dog and I'll  
tell her you already did. She'll  
stay up late on weeknights with popcorn, and I'll  
ask you to do your homework on weekends. She'll  
take you to midnight showings, and I'll  
wake you up early to watch the sunrise.

I can't remember conversation, and she  
won't always remember to tell you things, and I'm  
ditzzy with little common sense, and she  
can't really read anyone when they're angry. But  
when you get here I'll search for that dimple, and she'll  
look for my upper lip, and our families

will fight over what you've got from who. We'll rush  
a million promises into your temples, swear they'll all come true.  
But we know we're only sure of them because  
you were promised to us—and that's coming true.

## Certain

Remember? The sun  
was violently still that day.  
The wind didn't even creep.  
Remember the sound of daddy's hand on the door—  
strange etchings of height, our names blurred grey?  
I'm certain he could have held the door harder.  
Mother, remember?  
He didn't even scream, let the door wedge his toes.  
Still see the sudden reach of his back?  
He hadn't even locked it, Mother!

I am certain of sound, voices sifting their silhouettes  
as prayer—certain of screams—they reach me beyond sleep.

I am certain of breath, hot waves onto my neck.  
Certain of chests, my breasts torn at.  
Certain of knees in my thighs,  
widening of my hips, shifting of bone,  
behind and in front of me. Mother!  
Remember? You?! Curled like a cat under that cupboard!  
You! Watched my neck twitch there and that,  
my hair flung there and that. There and that,  
sacked and tacked to the table.  
You weren't able to do nothing, mother! You remember  
the heat of their fists! Their wrists! Their fingertips!  
Their eyes fighting behind "You Pig, You swine! You like?! Yeah! You like?!"  
Their faces, their names, the green of their uniforms—green as Bosnian Pine.  
Their lips, their jaws, their palms pulsing louder than prayer!  
I swear, their shoe laces were tied tight, their buttons buttoned,  
their bodies built strong as your silence.

Dear Anne,

When you left I had one hundred and eighty seven questions  
like how much water do I place on the comb when I calm  
Her hair is so beautiful. Like the cedar trees out back  
And how far off do you let her play? And when the moon sways  
Into the night, where was your favorite place to catch the stars  
n' your eyes were yours only. Our daughter has your father's.  
I wanted to ask you how to hold him when it happened.  
I saw him for the first time then—slouch and wet cheeked.  
We talk now mostly about her. He cares and I'd ask you  
if you knew that. When you left us the pond was a soft brown.

I couldn't breathe. And I've stopped fishing. I'd ask you which way  
To cut sandwiches. Diagonal? Or across? She's begun to eat crust.  
I'd ask you if you noticed her nails are shaped just like mine  
And look terrible painted. I'd ask you why there was coupons  
Under silverware and a fork in the sugar. I'd ask you why the cereal  
Is alphabetical and where the coffee filters are now and how  
To say no when you want to say yes and when to test her  
And when to buy her a double bed because her body is a beanpole  
And I still measure every inch on the kitchen wall and I call her Dandy  
Because she picks those yellow weeds at the bus stop. And I stop  
Every drive home to catch my breath.

My chest is compressed as the orange rocks you talked about



When you hiked west. And there are two thousand four hundred  
Sixty one photos of glaciers on the hard drive. And how do I not  
Delete them because they are everything you took in and let out.  
And your smile was a hook and I wanna know what books you've read  
By the table and why they are stacked by size and I've tried  
To find how her shoulders are more like mine but her walk is careful  
As a cat and that's where I see you is in her toes. They are round  
As buttons, and you never showed me how to sew them on  
So we just shop. And she talks with her head cocked to the side  
Like when you were about to say something amazing.  
Like when you'd say, "I love the word 'Amazing' because your mouth  
Opens wide for just a moment. Then settles soft."

Amazing.

And I'd ask you. What moments were loudest?  
And how do you catch them all because they are like fireflies in jars  
And when do you let them go against the tall grass and the soft pines?  
When they erupt then die down, yes. That is amazing.

She likes the cluck of the lid on the glass and her feet on the dash  
And the magic of worms when it rains. She chases the birds away.  
I'd ask you which ones come back and if you knew of the nest  
In the garage. And I left it because I figured you did.  
But I sold that bike of yours because she's going to end up my size.  
And she wears a helmet always  
And she takes my hands when we pray

And she makes my heart be hard as the rains in May

And she makes me believe in God like you did.

And she sways like you did.

And she cries in her gut like you did

And she touches my hands and plays with my veins like you.

And I'd ask you if you ever felt this too because we are seven months

And six days apart. And I am no longer locked on the left side of the bed.

And sometimes the dog digs at your pillow and I let him because I understand.

We find your hair stuck in the couch. And we let the strands go like wishes

Even in the day because you said wishes aren't always for stars and cakes.

You could wish on the back of a bug, you'd say.

Or just tug on a branch and close your eyes.

We keep the bird feeder full and I pull her close to my side

And I rub her shoulders the way you would and I want to ask you

How to keep everything the same when everything changes

Because some nights I wake up in the middle of the night

And I don't feel for your side because I don't have to remember

Because I know.

And I'd ask you, Do you throw into her soft?

Because she is all pause and lock lip.

And this happens especially around lunch.

And sometimes I think she eats the crust because you said she should.

Some nights, we go to the dock and lay on the boards when the sky grows  
Muddy. We whisper against the waves, and I tell her how you never baked  
And read about how to braid and went crazy with turmeric and could make  
Anything grow and know we exist and how you ran every morning at seven  
Until she was born and took her mushroom hunting at two weeks  
And would teach her the moon when she couldn't sleep and had the weakest knees  
But loved to walk in the woods for hours and has magic powers, how you can  
See her always and talked to God out loud because that's perfectly ok.  
He likes things out loud, you'd say. And I'd ask you if you knew how mad I am  
At him. And I tell her you never left that you are in the grass and the air  
even though sometimes I can't feel you at all. And I am barefoot all the time now.  
And so is she. And I'd ask you if all of this is alright.

## Growing Up Screaming

When you are two, you will feel your hips thrust while your mama reads you a book.

When you are three, you will see yourself in the mirror.

When you are four, your uncle will take you into the laundry room. He will shut the curtains. He will hoist you onto the washer. He will feel into your pant legs. You will not scream.

When you are five, that uncle will look at you, ask if you want cheese on your hamburger. You will say yes. You will play tag with your cousin, Matt.

When you are six, your daddy will come home and force your mama up the stairs. Into the bed. You will see her eyes closed the entire time. She will not scream.

When you are seven, your daddy will come home. You asleep, he will feel your flat chest. He will spread you open. Your mama will pull your dress down when she finds you afterwards.

When you are eight, you will not know this.

When you are nine, you will not know this.

When you are ten, your daddy will tell you not to eat so much. You will know this.

When you are eleven, you will see yourself in the mirror.

When you are twelve, you will talk to men

on the internet while your mama is out.

When you are thirteen, you will realize  
Mallory is beautiful.

At fourteen, Zach will touch you.  
You will not like it. He will ask you  
where this extra came from on your hips.  
You will lose 37 pounds.

When you are fifteen, you will see yourself  
in the mirror.

When you are sixteen, you will not let Mallory  
touch you.

When seventeen, you will let Rose  
touch you. It will feel good.

When you are eighteen, you will listen  
to the same song on repeat. It will feel good.

When you are nineteen, you will lose 34 pounds.  
You will cut yourself for the first time  
because Jaimie said it would feel good.

When you are twenty, you will tell Kristyn  
you love her.

When you are twenty-one, you will wake up  
from a dream at 2:48 in the morning, you will call  
your mother across the state and tell her you remember.  
Everything.

When you are twenty-two, Kristyn will say she never loved you.  
You will see yourself in the mirror.

When you are twenty-three, Sierra never loved you either.

When you are twenty-four, you will look at yourself the mirror.  
You'll begin to write yourself down.

When you are twenty-five, on the phone,  
your daddy will tell you it scares him,  
some of the things you might remember.  
You will change the subject. You will not scream.

When you are twenty-six, twenty-seven, you still remember.

When you are twenty-eight, you do not respond to your lover.

When you are twenty-nine, you forgive your mother.

When you are thirty, you do not forgive your uncle.  
You do not forgive your father.

Now, thirty-one, you say it all out loud  
for every girl you ever loved.