IN THE WEEDS

A Thesis

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IN THE WEEDS

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Thesis

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I dug my toes in the mud,
felt wet dirt suck like tongues
and called this place home.

Twelve paces from creek bank
to fence post. Beneath
a fallen hawthorn
with barbs two inches long
and wide as pencil tips,
I built my fortress
of sticks and strings,
kept out my lurking sister
and her irreverent friends.

I climbed the wooded hill
to the sweet gum tree,
watched semis fly past like dragons,
traced incantations in black soil
with dirty fingernails,
licked the scent of honeysuckle,
and counted clouds between boughs
to the cadence of an old Ford tractor.

Wild raspberries kept me full
until boys came across the creek,
tore crab apples from branches
and pelted me. My hands
were stained with berry blood.
I wanted to fight, but had nothing,
not tall enough to reach
or fast enough to run.
I bent to their insistence.
My toes forgot the mud
as I learned of other tongues,
sweeter than honeysuckle,
fresher than the grass beneath my back.
Beyond This Kitchen Table

Each night, we sat five around the oak table. My chair didn’t match and I was pinned between mother and sister against the wall. Later, we tore that wall down, enclosed the front porch, but I was still hemmed by women who wanted to own me.

One never bore children, said I satisfied the nurturing impulse before it began, lived at home until twenty-seven, waiting for something to resonate beyond this kitchen table. The other tended four before me, needed someone to keep her still when the rest stopped wanting what she provided.

Another baby, another hungry mouth, I delayed what wouldn’t stop: the cold teeth of disease already bitten into her chest.

Daddy’s belly pressed against the wood, his elbows on either side of his plate. When he stood, the table-lip left a white slash across his sunburned skin. He didn’t bother with formalities like shirts, but insisted we stay while he jawed every morsel between his toothless gums.
My other sister, the one called
Bird-Witching Carla, sat silent beside us
for so long we were shocked
when she spoke. Words like needles
threaded her lips. I wanted to share
my chalk dust, dizzy-dancing and knock-
kneed wisdom with the little girl
who never learned to skip. She wanted
to shut us out, find someone
to be silent with.
Failed Farmers

Weekends, we climbed
on the blue Ford tractor,
rake in one hand, the other
classing steel as we crossed
the ditch into the orchard.

All week, Dad worked at the plant,
but now, he drove the tractor
in shorts and a bandana,
still smelling of Old Spice.

He never planned to live
off this land, but hoped
for more than crab apples
and wild berries. First,

a steer, its coat dull, meat
tough as shoe tongues.
Next, a family of goats.
Each morning, Mom teased
udders with rough, cold
hands until milk steamed
into her pail with steady splinks.

When she got sick, they butchered
the goats, mixed meat
with fennel seed for sausage.
Then, only the land,
nine acres of grass to rake
while our palms blistered and bled
against rough wooden handles.
Theology

Daddy was an atheist. He hung a sign in the barn that said:

We’ll get along fine,
as soon as you realize
I’m God.

Mama was Catholic. Crossed herself before yelling, muttered Jesus, Mary, and Joseph at least six times a day.

She told us
she didn’t believe in atheists
until the day she gave birth
to my oldest sister.
She asked Daddy to pray.
He said, To who?
Bird-Witching Carla

She was born cross-eyed,
flat thumbed and broad toed
like our grandfather,
like kids with Downs.
No one told our mother.
She had enough to worry about,
this fourth daughter small enough
to fit across her palm.

Kindergarten came early,
August birthday.
They should have held her back,
but she was smart, betrayed
the secret prophecy of thumbs.

Still, smart is not enough at five,
and the little girl could not control
her stick limbs and long neck.
A gym class failure, playground pariah,

kids filled her with a recess of insults,
told stories of a burnt down barn
the bus passed each afternoon,
named my sister a witch, a coven
of black birds sleeping inside.

Bird-Witching Carla was born.
Anger steeped inside until slumber,
when torment turned to nightmares,
sleepwalking, black eye
from a doorknob in the dark.
Sex Ed

Before little girls learn
to cross their legs in dresses,
they already know
that Barbie likes Ken
and someday, they’ll make babies.

I gave birth on the front porch
to a Cabbage Patch doll
with corn-silk colored hair
while Mom watched
from the kitchen window, appalled.
Bugs

She must have struggled
to define cancer, to leave
lymph nodes and malignancy
out of her speech. Instead,
she told me, cancer is a bug
that eats you from the inside out.

I couldn’t look at Grandpa after that.
When I closed my eyes, termites
crawled in his veins.

The next time I saw those bugs,
they feasted on my father.
Insects swarmed a sickle-shaped incision,
sutures stretched and split.
He melted into the couch,
two-hundred and fifty pounds
turning to butter, losing shape
while he explored the empty space
where his kidney used to be.

Bile forgot the way to his liver,
found the coffee table instead,
burning through lips and polyurethane,
the color of antifreeze, but without
the candy-sweet smell.
Ornithology

Like crows, she is drawn
to shiny objects, baubles and charms,
gum wrappers, tin foil, broken glass.
Inside the barn, she hoards
her trinkets like a dragon,
chews gold nuggets between meals.

Here, a needle to pierce her skin,
a length of barbed wire coated in blood,
twin scars where metal stitched her arm.
She knows the ache of rheumatism,
the shallow breath of pneumonia.
Seven years and she is old,
stops smiling for pictures.

Where she goes,
starlings gather in doorways.
Blue jays fly into closed windows.
She wonders if her own bones are hollow.
At the lake, she sends geese
to nip the heels of little boys.
At the pet store, the parrot
squawks her name.
Donny, on his Ninth Birthday

He caught crows on his tongue,
 washed his hair in the rain,
 and waited for his baby brother
to grow arms.

He tolerated balloons and bicycles,
 but wanted an orange,
an elephant,
 and a penny
to scratch his grandmother's lottery tickets.

He carried baby powder in a basket,
 wanted to eat bullets, not bologna,
 and breathe thick, cold milk into his lungs.

His mother gave him bad advice.
Her voice, the whir of a sewing machine
without a needle.
Nothing she said could hold vapor in a cloud
or make blackberries taste less sweet.
Two Wombs

I.

My cousin Stella was born
during a rainstorm that knocked
the last brown leaves from their branches.
The next morning, my mother caught
snowflakes on her tongue between
contractions. The hospital was still
decorated with pumpkins
and broomsticks.

We were so small, the nurses
put us in one crib like twins.
Our mothers found us holding hands,
foreheads pressed together
as if telling secrets. When they
took us home, we wouldn’t sleep apart.
By Thanksgiving, Aunt Jill was living
on the couch, Stella and I curled
like spoons in the same bassinet.

II.

Uncle Ted took a job in Tucson
when we were five. Stella chewed
cactus in protest, spent the first week
in the hospital, a tube down her throat.
I slept only when it rained, the rattle
of leaves like her little chest breathing.

My sister tried to comfort me
with silence, a silver coin, a curl wrapped
around my finger. Stella was an only child.
Her mother slipped belladonna
in a cup of milk. Just enough for rest.
III.

At fifteen, Stella dyed her hair blond, eyebrows too, used SPF 60 and wore long sleeves all summer. She said it wasn’t right to have blue eyes and olive skin, that this just confused people. The Mexican boys at school liked her pálida, led her behind the bleachers and told her so.

I slathered my skin with baby oil, put vinegar in my hair and slept afternoons in the grass, begged the sun to change me. My blue eyes went unnoticed. At night, my boyfriend pulled me into the woods, traced my tan lines with his tongue.

IV.

Uncle Ted quit his job, moved back to Ohio, but Stella and I couldn’t remember sharing our beds. We were seventeen and she was still angry, still sipping belladonna to sleep. I counted the rings on her pale fingers, traded her turquoise for pearls. She wore my sweaters but couldn’t stay warm.

I’m leaving in June, she whispered. I wanted her to stay. In the minutes between our birthdays, I explained how snow tastes sweeter at night. I took scissors to her hair, cut away the blond. It was raining and we carried clippings to the woods, scattered strands of gold among the branches.
Arbor Day

The Bushmen of South Africa think that, by a glance of a girl’s eye at the time when she ought to be kept in strict retirement, men become fixed in whatever positions they happen to occupy, with whatever they were holding in their hands, and are changed into trees that talk.

—Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough

How many men I must have turned to trees those days before I knew. An audience of teachers, brothers, middle-school boyfriends growing leaves while I sang, off-pitch, in the sixth-grade girls’ choir.

An orchard conjured in the cafeteria. What words would they have for me now, speaking through lips of creased bark? What fruits would they bear? What thorns?

The boy whose birthday cake I couldn’t eat, my stomach lurching, his mutt’s head burrowed between my knees, wrapped me in a shroud of weeping. Safe in his shadowed place, he whispered through blossoms that we loved his best friend in the same, gut-curling way, that in high school, he never came in a girl’s hand.
One boy bent his head to kiss me
in the back seat of an ’89 Cutlass,
his fingers inching up the edge of my shirt.
His roots pierced the floorboards,
thorns held fast to my blouse.
I struggled out the back window,
walked home topless.

My father, supine in a hospital bed
grew roots that sprawled, choked pipes,
left everyone gasping for breath.
Some days I find my mother tucked
against his trunk, her eyes closed
as he tells her what he’s seen.
At the UAW 1250 picnic

we gathered around a table with initials cut into the top by sweaty teenagers after a few whirls on the Witch’s Wheel. We huddled around the cooler, an ice chest full of salami and cold chicken cutlets. My mother had stayed up all night slicing olives for muffuletta, counting cheese slices to make sure each had one. I was twelve, thought my tiny breasts meant teenage boys might look my way. Remember him? The one we saw on our first coaster ride of the day. He wore a striped polo shirt and I wanted to look beneath the collar to see if he was all tan. Later, we watched him play volleyball, cat-called as if we had nothing to lose. That was before rejection. Before we learned sometimes boys kiss us just to kiss someone, and we have nothing to do with it. We called him Stripes. He was the first to earn a nickname, but later there was Spud, Drummer Boy, Guido, Hoover, Black-Eye. Little stalkers, we went where Stripes went, rode what Stripes rode, but never said a word. Not like two years later when we found the seventeen-year-olds from Cleveland. Those big-city boys took us to the dock to teach us tongue kissing, knew which rides were slow and in the dark so they had time to inch their fingers up the legs of our shorts, still wet from the toboggan ride.
Summer of Hammers and Whiskey

She wore a red racer back. My suit
hand-me-down floral. Loose

at the legs. I asked her to hold my breath
while I went under. We practiced

the dead man’s float, butterfly stroke.
Listened to water tangling our hair.

Across the drive, Queen Anne’s Lace,
buttercup, bloodroot. Stained fingertips,

white petals. I got lost in the woods,
found black walnuts, sphagnum moss.

She stretched out on the glider,
shrugged straps off her shoulders.

Inside, trash bags on windows,
box fans in doorways. She plastered

her walls with Bushmills labels,
kept a bottle under the bed.
In the airport smoking lounge, Stella stared at the tarmac through windows tinted tar-yellow. Beyond the concrete, a field of saguaro and ocotillo, cracks in the hard-packed dirt like lines pointing home, a two-bedroom duplex shadowed by Mule Mountain. Empty now.

She lit one Newport on the burning end of the last, each inhale a silent fuck you to her mother, waiting at gate seventeen for a plane to take them to Cleveland, a place Stella knew only from pictures and Christmas cards, a city her mother said they never should have left. But Stella didn’t remember much before the old lady at the hospital in Tucson, wiping her tears and crooning, Why so sad, Mija?

So when a boy in fatigues (desert browns, not olive drab) sat down beside her, said You’re awfully young to be chain smoking, Stella rolled her eyes and flicked a long ash between their feet. Angry, too, he laughed. I like an angry girl.

She gave her best I’m-mature-for-my-age smile and extended her hand. She was too young for a lot of things, but old enough to like a man in uniform, the spit shine of his boots, the patch across his pocket: Harper.
Donny, on his Seventeenth Birthday

Spider-cracked windshield, dented fender, chicken-legged boy leaning on the bumper. He holds keys in his right hand, smiles a mouth full of teeth in need of braces, too proud of his rust-bitten truck to remember he usually grins with tight lips and quiet eyes. Later, he will lay a girl across the naugahyde seat cover, try not to bump the steering wheel when he fumbles for her panties. But now, he is a boy whose mother has just given him a gift, a second-hand, hand-me-down, I'll pay you to get it off my lawn gift, and he is still a child, cake and candles waiting inside, his mother snapping photos on a CVS disposable camera she bought with her employee discount, and in the glove box, twelve condoms she pretends he’ll never need to use.
Self-Exam

I did as they taught: lie on my back, stretch one arm above my head and search, two fingers radiating neat circles over my breast, spiral to nipple then out again. I practiced each month after my mother lost her breast, believed my ritual appeased genetics. I was sixteen the night I found it, a pebble beneath flesh, beneath fingertips. I explored its circumference, felt it shift like an out-of-place knee cap.

The first man to touch my breast, the only to see it un-scarred, was a nurse who tried to ease my fear while rubbing iodine on my skin, told me I’d love the morphine, and had I ever been drunk? That’s the last I remember, until I woke with a crown of stitches around areola, shivering in a recovery room I shared with old men whose cancer scares were real. Mine, just a cluster of fiber.

I imagined future lovers scowling at my marred skin, the lopsided twist of scar tissue where the knot was tied.
Harper smoked Reds, had three tattoos, and insisted his first name, Eugene, must never be spoken. In his first letter, what he missed most about Ohio was the scent of dead leaves, the sharp spark of a wooden match against his father’s thumbnail. Stella wrote of red earth, the needle throb of scorpion tails, not mothballs and cedar chips, snow tires and rock salt residue. I couldn’t convince her that Ohio was a place she should stay, but Harper made her believe in one star-dark night. Home for two days, he kept her at his side each hour, held her hand until both palms were sweat slick. Six months and fifty letters had passed before their first kiss. Now, naked except his dog tags, he spoke of Japan, holidays half-way across the universe, letters traveling too slow to keep warm. He said she would forget him. She said *kiss me so I won’t*. That night, she slept on soft grass and woke up damp, never knew a place where water came from nothing.
Making Silence Whole

We knew each other before broken hearts, criminal records, aborted babies. Before things mattered.

We sit with the shadows of shared past, two little girls, two scrawny boys, together when we learned telekinesis, when holding hands made bellies twitch. Tonight, we know to shiver and shake takes more than cold water and tiny fish. We wish for something so easy.

Beside me, my best friend of fifteen years rolls her eyes at another cracked silence. We don’t need language for each other, but for these boys now men, we cannot find words to fill the holes.

We ask, Do you remember? We laugh, nod. Yes, we remember wading in the creek. We left our innocence in that water, on the sandstone steps between banks.

Memories dwindle. We find new stories to share: mothers without breasts, forty-year-old lovers, hopes too fearsome to name.

Loath to let go, to admit some things best remain where they were left, in lockers and on the cafeteria floor, we sit for hours seeking recognition, pretend that when we meet again, we will find ways to make silence whole.
Absence

You say to be specific,  
tell the truth. I count  
the words I write for you,  
balance those that leave me open  
with the ones that cut me down.  
*You matter and I don’t know why.*  
In the morning, lemongrass  
on your palms, at night,  
mouthwash and chapstick.  
A lesson in carpentry.  
Measure twice. You only  
have one chance.
CHAPTER IV

IN FLANNEL

Stella Gives Up

She will remember how each tendon jumped beneath skin, breath trickling from lips like so much saliva and hunger, how each nerve ending twirled over muscle, tiny flamencos in the guitar strum of heartbeat and downbeat, the moment between pulses when she imagines what death feels like, what happens to the world when she is no longer in it. Who will find his letters? Who will sift through these boxes trying to piece together a moment when they were breathing the same air, tasting the same sweet something they couldn’t define or hold on to? They never gave it a name, that throb of gut and loin. Love some would say, but no, that word is too pretty, too soft for the knotted thrush of hope they carried. Possession.

Wanting to own each word whispered, to keep each downward glance in a safe place, locked and fireproof. No, they never tried to keep each other, never made a promise not to leave—but if he had said wait, she would have stood in one place until the grass died beneath her.
Because Someone Called Amy a Slut

Matt threw the first punch, landing solid on the sixteen-year-old’s mouth. Matt threw the only punch. The kid’s lip hung like a slug from his face. When you got in the middle—it was your house, your birthday, after all, your job to keep the peace—the kid’s brother went across the street for his rifle. We were small town; no pistols for us, no handguns. That 336 had spent days in the woods. We heard sirens before the screen door slammed. Two cops were drinking coffee at Dairy Mart three doors down. The cops were always drinking coffee at Dairy Mart. They arrived before I rushed upstairs, climbed onto the toilet tank and was boosted into the attic. I was twenty and drunk on Tequila Rose, had gotten in trouble here before. I sat in front of the tiny window, craning for a look at the front lawn. My eyes stayed on you, the blood on your white shirt. More cops came. Highway Patrol. State Troopers. For one gun and a yard full of drunks. A bevy of bystanders, rubber-neckers. I wanted to be on the front porch. I wanted to tell the police to take the cuffs off your skinny wrists, to let you out of the back seat. It smelled like vomit in there and I knew you wanted to cry. Someone brought me cigarettes, passed a bottle of Bud through the crawl space so I wouldn’t lose my buzz. I don’t know who hid the pot, the pipes, the papers. I saw the cops come to the front porch, heard them come inside. They didn’t arrest anyone. They left and I dropped back into the bathroom. The house was quiet except for a TV, a laugh track, coming from downstairs. In the living room, people sat on couches but no one spoke. You came inside, eyes blank, lips white. That was the first night we shared your bed without touching.
Valley Rain

In July 2003, the Cuyahoga River Valley flooded, destroying three bridges and stranding 200 residents in an apartment complex. For several days, the only way in or out was on foot, over a mud path cut into the hillside.

Around here, rain brings sewage to the surface. Out back, past the dumpster, down the hill, the Cuyahoga detours behind these bars, ripples by the compost plant where storm drains and sewers meet.

Stella moved here in a flood year. Every night the air was heavy with shit and people who lived in the ravine were trapped for three days. She watched a bridge wash away like so much driftwood,

watched her neighbors run like rats up the hill to where she sat, safe on her back porch. No power and the burning end of her cigarette must have been like a lighthouse beacon, but too small, too far away, too quickly snuffed out. She thought about the ark that night, how it must have smelled like this, about Noah waiting for the earth to dry. But here, it didn’t rain forty days and at the end there was nothing redemptive about the mud tracks cut through the woods. She kept trying to figure out what she was waiting for, what she was trying to wash clean. There was a man she had broken, a promise she left behind, but there was nothing and no one to remind her, just that smell, always worse at night, and muddy footprints on her doorstep.
Domestic Bliss

It was real as ice on the road under bald tires, a one-two punch of puppy love and not-what-I-expected, a mutually parasitic exploration of all we didn’t know. It was me watching you sleep in a hotel bed and our first trip to the grocery store together, phone bills and laundromats, a lease with both our names. A commitment, not a promise. You called me princess, but I couldn’t feel the pea. Probably wouldn’t have felt a watermelon, I was that tired. I started to wonder, should I put away my tiara, take my glass slippers out with the trash, exchange my silk gloves for rubber?
Grocery Money

Most nights, you smelled
like diesel fuel, engine oil,
your skin cold and tinny
under my tongue. That night,

you smelled like strawberries
and stale beer, hummed
*Black Velvet* as you walked
through the door, boasted

of lap dances like conquests,
another week’s grocery money
slid between hip-bone and g-string
of your trailer park debutant.

You thought I would enjoy
the story: how she sat down
on the bar in front of you,
crossed her bony ankles

behind your head, how she
almost let you touch her,
your face so close you could—
but you said she’d never

taste as good as me,
while your fingers groped
the button of my jeans.
This Should Have Been a Love Poem

_I lie next to your infidel sleep, all night in pain and lonely with my silenced pleasure._

- Olga Broumas, “Caritas”

She was looking
for something
organic. Unmastered.
Somewhere
to rediscover
without memory
or decision.
She waited
in humid dawn
another night
spent wide awake.

Yesterday, he told her
of the night he lost
his flip flops,
found someone’s chopsticks
in his pocket.
Now, he mumbles,
half sleeping:
this doesn’t make sense.
He will not
remember
that his hands
wandered.

He will let go
before she is ready
to kiss
this waking dream
good morning
and walk back
into noon-time
disregard.
Donny, on his Twenty-Third Birthday

In high-school, he had fumbled against brass,
his lips buzzing limply, until he learned horn players
made the best kissers, and his mouth flexed,
firm for High C. His fingers learned
quick change, his tongue, rhythmic ticking.

He practices now only for himself,
lonely improvisations to old standards,
imagines a microphone and a smoky
lounge, a woman waiting back stage
with lip balm and a tumbler of scotch,
how she’d sing for him while he fingered
Dizzy against her flesh, how he’d press
his bell to the small of her back, a note
vibrating through his brass coils, her copper skin.
Mike lived next to the Dollar Store in a house that used to be an asylum, a house that smelled like wet cats and ashtrays. Broken light bulbs on the coffee table. In his bedroom, Stella studied pictures of his girlfriend, fell asleep with a kitten on her chest. When she woke, he was watching. Twenty-four hours since they met and still he hadn’t slept. Tight-eyed and languid. He wrote her number on the doorframe before she left, walking barefoot down cast-iron steps and across the gravel drive. Her boots were in the backseat, still wet from the flood. How the water had risen the night before, the scent of burning pallets covered the damp. She didn’t mean to drive him home, didn’t mean to come back. He was always in flannel. In denim. She loved his ditch-digger legs. His shoulders, the red freckles that covered his back like paint chips. The collar bone, broken and never set, that jutted against his skin. She knew the baby oil wasn’t for her. At the Star, he played Elvis on the juke box. She drank vodka from a mason jar while learning to throw darts, sat on split black leather, listening to stories about Oriana House and vans driven through living room walls. When they kissed, it was beer and tin on his breath. Nights when he finally slept, she sat on the front porch and stared at the neon sign. In the morning, she walked to the store, still stiff from sleeping, and wandered the aisles, lingered near the Clorox just to smell something clean.
Work Boots

Donny’s steel-toes twitched in time to the country song stuck in his head since last December, the day she said she didn’t love him. She was old shoes, worn and soft, useless in bad weather. Neither managed to care. She never bothered to leave, just held on until he wanted to stop breathing.

When she spoke, his eyes shifted, fluttered, came to rest on scuff marks from his new work boots. His toes were blistered from a long day in unbroken soles, the leather still tight and uniform around his feet.

Inside, his skin was pruned from sweat and he was ashamed of the stench. He never took his socks off in front of her.
The Frog Prince Debunked

Mothers teach their daughters
to be polite, patient. Submissive.
At each broken heart, they say,
You have to kiss a lot of frogs
before you find your prince,
but they were misinformed.

The princess was not a nice girl.
She cried to get her way,
broke promises made
to her amphibian suitor,
left him in his lonely pond
after he fetched her golden ball.

The king insisted she keep her word,
allowed the frog to join her for supper.
But when he asked to share her bed,
she heaved that frog against the wall.

It was this, and not a kiss
that broke the web-toed curse.
This Kind of Luck

I tried to wash the night off my windows,
but stars kept crawling in. Shadows
disengaged from my fingertips,
tiny wings drifting away. Yesterday,
I prayed for rain, got locusts, prayed for
locusts, and turquoise fell from the sky.

I’ll never win the lottery with luck like this,
but still waste money on scratch-off tickets.
I don’t need a nickel to tell me I lost.

All night I’ve played the memory game;
pictures, old letters, notes I wrote so I wouldn’t repeat myself, but I still can’t say no
to a man in a pickup truck, still want to mend lives with words like stitches. Ragged incantations.
Only fireflies can light this sky. And still,

I’m waiting, still afraid of the dark.
CHAPTER V
SHIFT CHANGE

Cane and Murrah (or The Glass-Blower’s Daughter)

This is a place where bones settle
soft as fog against the earth. Here,
touch is dull knives, broken tongue

of waxy flame. Fissures
of morning sun cross this mattress
where you and I have met before,

pallet of want and whispered
blessing, your eyelash on my cheek.
Tomorrow, our children will melt

before we know they’re born,
the car will break down on a ramp
outside the city and we will walk

to the bar without calling for a tow.
On the juke box, a song
we’re too young to remember

but know anyhow, like we know
our mothers as children, or think
we do. Mine liked maple candy

but not cream, yours tight-roped
the clothesline in red Mary Janes.
We will ignore errands, money

owed, as our blood thins over a pool
table with a slow left tilt. I will
be drunk enough to win the first game
but not the second. You will not gloat when I scratch the eight-ball. At shift-change, there will be nine dollars between us, enough for a cab home, cold cereal before sleep. Box fan in the window. Deadbolts snapped into place, clothes like breadcrumbs from kitchen to bed frame. I will chew ice cubes to stay cool, tiny glass castles. Air heavy in the gulf of our bodies, the steady pulse of pressure rising; rain before morning, before sleep. Your lips a spider, a penny. I’ll want something to hold, sugar or sand, a cigarette lit and passed between us.

We won’t speak but ask questions with each exhale. Who says our sweat on this sheet can’t become glass?
Driving to Port St. Richey

We drove to Florida in a black pick-up, hoping for work, both knowing we’d return without looking. I sprawled across the passenger seat, head in your lap, bare feet out the open window as you steered with one hand. For hours, I studied your face from this odd angle, the hollow of your chin, its dip and shadow when you spoke.

Strangers then, we thought these miles would bring us close, hours in this small space would teach us what to share: Slim-Jims, Fritos, six-pack of PBR. Imagine January and no snow, you said as we rolled over the Ohio. I’ll cook, you’ll work the bar. Some local place, no tourists.

Our plan made sense until we thought about sleep, showers, living somewhere other than the bed of your truck. No matter. It was the excuse we needed, the just get in the car and drive impulse that led us onto the highway that morning.

In West Virginia, only country stations crackled through loose speakers, the soundtrack of small mountains, of signs that warned falling rock and runaway trucks. Neither of us could carry a tune, but we belted Ring of Fire with reckless voices, each sharp note floating on wind.

The evening was all rain, hot concrete, wet dust in our hair. Windshield wipers stuck at half-mast, we detoured at a truck stop, fingered hunting knives, rings of malachite and rose quartz, imagined what we’d buy if we had more than gas money. We didn’t stop again.

By morning, Spanish moss. Beer
sweat and road dirt gritty on our arms. Later, sand in the median, palms along shoulders. Breakfast was donuts and weak coffee, scent of the ocean, a newspaper spread between us.
Advice from a Hotel Maid

I know you have been driving a long time, I know you are tired. Just a few things you should remember before checking in. This isn’t in the brochure. Don’t think who else has slept here. If you do, your skin will itch. Don’t think of the long haul trucker and his girlfriend, the one who works at the diner off Exit 43. His fingers stained with diesel fuel, her fryer-greased hair. How it seeps through the sheets, the pillow case. They love each other. It’s not their fault you can smell sex on the blankets—we only have to wash them ten times a year. Hold your breath. Never lie on your stomach. Keep your socks on and don’t bother to shower before sleep. But the towels, the towels are safe. And I have scoured your bathroom with bleach every morning for the last six years. You can still smell the chlorine, can’t you? Don’t worry about me. While you’re getting in your car, I’ll be pulling on my rubber gloves. While you’re driving away, I’ll be getting on my knees to make sure your hair isn’t in the drain.
Donny, on his Twenty-Seventh Birthday

Finally, his father is proud,
says road work is an honorable
profession and the state
will never let him go hungry.

Donny prays his father is wrong,
thinks about going to school,
learning to type, wearing neckties
to work instead of stained tee-shirts.

He doesn’t know what he wants,
just that he’d like a job that won’t break
his body, leave him stranded
in a faded La-Z-Boy recliner at 53,

that his own son won’t be ashamed
to bring girls home for dinner.
Highway Maintenance

I don’t mind filling chuckholes,
painting lines, plowing snow,
but mornings when I clock in,
see road kill next to my name,
I know the day will be long.

My first starts with a raccoon,
bloated and sweet on the yellow line
of Route 162. *We usually*
leave small game, Phil explains,
grabbing the body by its ringed tail,
but we hear this one had rabies.
He tosses the coon in the truck bed,
smiles. *Next one’s yours,*

he says over the thunk of meat
on metal. My mouth fills with spit
and the morning’s coffee,
but I swallow and shrug.
I never let him see me sick,
except days I’m still drunk.

Down the road, a deer waits.
She is fat with fawn and fresh—
no maggots eat her skin,
only flies buzz over her belly.
Phil points to the tree line
as he parks. Vulture.
The air is heavy with wild violet.
There is no blood. The doe
watches me approach, neck broken,
head cocked in hindsight.
Medina Street

I touched bone each time I held you,
measured the soft space between ribs.
On your left hip, a scar whispered
under my fingers. You never told its story.

You were always sick or broken, a man
waiting for death, said you wouldn’t—
didn’t want to live past thirty.
Your breath was laced with bleach.

I didn’t want your empty bottles
or glass pipes, just someone else’s life
to tuck mine into, the way I tucked my back
against your belly on the couch

when everyone else had gone. We drove
home in wet clothes, separate cars,
left grease stained aprons on the carpet,
our cigarettes smashed in back pockets.

You always won at Scrabble. The first
time we fought, you said something
about love like tree roots, only
there weren’t any left for me. I said

we had more roots than you knew,
not just smoke breaks by the dumpster.
Remember a school bus and black ice?
It had been years since I decided

I would walk inside this house as my own.
I would find you on the bathroom floor
after too many Jack and Cokes. You would
find me in the kitchen, taking off my shoes.
Stella Explains

I. Why She Wants to Bartend

I’m a cocktail server at Valley Bar and Grill, but they should really drop that grill part—our kitchen closed a month ago. This bar is having an identity crisis. One night, bikers are all over, the next, it’s Delta Gamma girls in mini skirts. The manager’s trying to turn the place into a dance club, but he always forgets to book a DJ. I don’t make near as much as the girls behind the bar. People don’t realize I’m here to get their drinks; they go up front to order half the time. I guess that’s my fault—not pushy enough or something. It’s hard though, to walk up to six guys at a pool table, get their attention, and the girls on the dance floor would rather find some lonely guy at the bar, talk him into getting their drinks. Only people at the tables want to pay me. And there’s only four. Ray says I’m too shy to bartend, but behind the bar, it’s different. I feel seven feet tall back there, everybody vying for my attention, pushing each other out of the way so they can talk to me. Granted, I have something they want, but I can pretend it’s not the beer or the gin they’re trying to get to. I only know this because once, both bartenders called off and I filled in. It was a slow night, just me and the regulars. But these guys, eight or nine of them, came in, started doing shots of Mexican Ball Sweat—you know, cheap tequila. They were drunk when they got here, trashed when they left. They were giving me trouble, coming behind the bar to pour their own drinks. Anyhow, they were good looking and flirting with me, so I didn’t mind much. The bald one (shaved bald, not bald-bald) told me he was going to kiss me before he left, but I didn’t believe him. Thought he was just trying to get free drinks. He did, though—kiss me, I mean. I gave him my number but he hasn’t called yet. That’s okay. He’s probably just busy.

II. Why She Loves The Star Inn

That Valley guy never did call. Whatever. I met Mike a couple weeks later, been hanging out here ever since. I don’t mean to sound cocky, but I know I’m the best looking girl in this bar tonight. Most nights, if we’re being honest. Not like those places in the valley, Abercrombie wearing sluts making out with each other and dancing on the bar. Makes girls like me fade right into the wall paper. But here, most women are fat, missing teeth, still spraying their bangs straight up. Makes me feel like a supermodel. Good for my ego, places like this. These guys buy me drinks, ask me to play pool. If I get enough attention from the others, Mike gets jealous, starts pouting like a three-year-old on time out—which usually works in my favor. He’ll start bugging me to leave soon, and by the time we’re in the car, his hands will be up my shirt.
III. Why She Stayed With Him

It was never exactly right. Not even that first night when he kissed me like he’d been doing it for years. I like a first kiss to be simple, but there was something too familiar in the way he leaned down and found my lips. At first, people who knew him told me things he didn’t want me to know. The drugs. The way he sometimes wore dresses and kissed men. I always laughed. Never was good at taking advice. And so, I came back, and kept coming back. Maybe I wanted to see all those things for myself. Needed him to ask for fifty bucks and pretend I didn’t know my money paid for the coke on the kitchen table. But I had been around for a long time before that happened—even longer before he took my dress and slipped it over his shoulders. I found him in the bedroom with my lipstick. When he asked me to do his eyes, I straddled his lap and lined his lids in jet black, painted his lashes, already so long, with thickening mascara, and dusted his skin with gunmetal glitter. I never told anyone, but I thought he looked good. People thought he was gay, but I knew he liked causing trouble. No, it wasn’t exactly what I’d hoped for, but I fell for him those nights when we stayed home, finished the crossword puzzle together, watched the eleven o’clock news before bed.
Family Planning

Mornings when Donny wakes up, hung over, 
he finds suicide notes scrawled on scraps, 
in strange places: the bathroom sink, 
between pages of the phone book, 
folded into throwing stars, paper footballs 
flicked behind the sofa. He doesn’t remember 
writing them. Every one ends 
You won’t miss me.

He doesn’t know how he got here, in this basement 
efficiency with damp floors, on this road crew, 
his time measured by mile markers. It’s worse 
every day, the drone of motors beneath him, 
the smell of fresh asphalt and heat radiating 
through the thick soles of his shoes.

He could walk on coals after this, sleep on nails. 
Instead, he lies awake most nights 
on an air mattress that hisses beneath him, 
count minutes until his shoulders meet the floor.

Yesterday, she told him there would be a child. 
The night they threw beer cans at each other 
but ended up in bed. Donny wonders 
how a man and woman who can’t stand 
the sight of each other still manage to touch, 
what a life conceived in anger will be like, 
if rage in the belly can seep into the womb.

He gathers the letters in a shoe box, puts it in the closet 
with the yearbooks and baseball cards. 
He swears he will get right before 
his baby is born.
In the weeds

is what you say for I’m busy,
for party of ten and six want hot tea,
for no, I cannot take another table,
but rent is due tomorrow and still
you’re $63 short. In the weeds—

wading through tall grass, thistles
purple and grasping at your knees.
You know the woman in pearls
won’t like her salmon, but deliver it
with a smile, wait for the two-minute

check-back when she’ll say it’s dry,
and no, she doesn’t want another.
Like poison ivy or a snake bite
and those guys want four more,
plus another round of margaritas,

no salt, for the girls at table six.
In the weeds—a ditch full
of horehound, skunk cabbage,
crab grass rough against your back.
You didn’t eat today, your boyfriend

left the milk out, and besides, the cereal
was stale, but you just cleared three
plates heavy with food from table
seven. Pride won’t let you eat
from the dish, so you steal French fries

from the warmer, ask the grill cook
for a slice of cheese. The floor was swept
but peanut shells spread faster
than dandelions on fresh cut grass.
Stella Contemplates his Toothbrush

He’d been gone a month, maybe two, and I figured I’d never see him again. He just stopped coming around, probably got tired of me, found someone new. I couldn’t help waiting, though, couldn’t stop sleeping in his tee-shirt. It was snowing the night he showed up, stood on the threshold in Carharts and a skull cap, his boots leaving puddles of sooty water on my welcome mat. He filled the doorway so only shards of night slipped past his shoulders. So tall I almost forgot how he looked in my favorite dress. I didn’t say anything but let him in, went back to making dinner. He shut the door, stood between invitation and intrusion. A minute passed and only spatula on skillet broke the silence. One grilled cheese sandwich, one bowl of soup in the microwave. Could he tell I was lonely? He told me he had a new job, a snow plow hitched to the front of his truck, a call to clear the parking lot of my building. Asked if he could use the bathroom before he moved on. I only shrugged to answer. A minute later, he returned, a red toothbrush in his hand. Stood next to me at the stove and said, You didn’t throw it out. I thought about the cup on the sink, how it tipped over every morning when I took mine out. How every time I set it upright, I thought about tossing his in the trash. There was a pair of boxers in my dresser, too. One sock with gray around the toes. A forty ounce Budweiser in the back of the fridge. I knew what was his, where he left it. And some nights I didn’t lock the door.
Wednesday Night at Valley Bar and Grill

Stella

I’m on my own tonight. No problem, me and this guy are the only ones in the place. He comes in almost every night, sits third stool from the end, drinks enough beer to knock down a man twice his weight. Fifty-cent drafts. I’ve never served him before, but I see him when I’m waiting tables. Some nights, they cut him off, others, they let him lay his head on the bar and he sleeps through last call. When the floors are swept, cash counted, I’m the one who wakes him, sends him stumbling down the hill to his apartment just across the tracks.

He doesn’t say much, usually has his face in a book unless a game’s on. Steelers fan. Says his father worked the mills. I still don’t know what he does, just that the smell from his boots is enough to knock the air right out of me. Wish he’d buy new shoes.

Tonight, he’s drinking faster than usual, so I brew a pot of coffee, pour two cups and light a smoke for us both. Ask him what he’s reading. That’s all you have to do to get him talking, make it feel like a date or an after dinner cigarette and any drunk will tell you his story.

Donny

I’m glad the manager’s making himself scarce tonight, I hate the way he treats the girls who work for him, always looking at their asses when they walk away, then winking at me like we’re in it together.

This girl isn’t usually behind the bar, but I like
when she is. Doesn’t pretend she’s trying
to sleep with me. Just smiles and pours,
smiles and pours. Seems shy. Beer’s going
down easy tonight, so when she switches
me to coffee, I don’t mind. She asks

if I want to talk, settles her elbows on the bar
without waiting for me to answer. A cigarette
hangs from her left hand like an after thought.
There’s another in the ash tray, already lit.

I don’t want to talk about it, about anything,
but words pile up on my tongue, push
each other to get out. I tell her about the baby,
how much I hate its mother—it? What do you
call a fetus, anyway? Too soon to know
boy or girl. Maybe too soon to care.

I’ve always wanted to be a father, but she says
not when beer money is more important
than child support. She’s right; nothing really
works the way I plan. She smiles, pats my hand,
says, Don’t worry. She’s young enough
to think everything works out.
CHAPTER VI

SKIN FROM SKIN

Punnet Squares

We forget that we are made
skin from skin, bone from bone.
We compare the slope of noses,
cheekbone, brow ridge,
the double helix of our hair.
In summer, we press our arms
together, measure pigment.
The darkest is most like mother.
I, the lightest, will always
follow our father. Only
one has brown eyes.

We speak the same cadence,
wake the same stride. Our weight
rests on the outsides of our feet.
These things we share.
Family says we are each our own,
but strangers see our sisters in our faces,
travel twenty years from youngest
to oldest and know
where one began,
where one ends.
Two Questions

Stella, do you remember now?
You left me behind, bleached
me out. One thousand peroxide
bottles and not one call.

Have you stopped hating rain?
We can’t always keep what fits,
hold the one who keeps us warm.
Stop pretending. We’re nearly twins.
Men Like My Father

My dad always tells me to look for a doctor, a lawyer, a man with two feet firmly planted. A bank account that gets bigger with every paycheck.

I heard somewhere that women date men like their fathers, and mine is no doctor. Mechanic. Millwright. Weekend farmer. He worked so hard he can barely walk now. But every morning, he kisses my mom and I would like a man who kisses me every morning. I don’t care what he keeps in the bank. I’d rather have a guy who will wax my car on Sunday mornings in February, fix my leaking faucet, come home from work sun burnt and hungry. I’d like us to join a dart league, drink Miller Lite on the front porch, holding hands like old people do.
Pray, Mama

At the hospital, you turn away
the Eucharist,
would turn away last rites,
because you have not confessed
in twenty-five years.
But your hands
hold love like prayer,
each knuckle a rosary bead.
Three metacarpals,
embroidered with blue veins,
press against thin skin
like Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Your chest: concave,
scarred behind prosthesis
and deliberately chosen necklines.
Your heart thumps
with too much faith.

Your lap is the only altar I bow to.
As a child, I climbed to your knees,
pressed my face against yours.
I loved your soft cheeks,
but you were ashamed,
the way years slackened muscle.
I cherished your cashmere humility.

Now you are too small to carry
my weight, my sin.
My neck bent in prayer,
head against your knee
is as close as I can get.
For My Brother-in-Law, the Periodontist

You make money with your hands
in other people’s mouths.
I owe more than I’ll ever get paid.

A can of Bud in hand, you laugh
at me, So, you’re a poet.
I shrug. We can’t all be periodontists.
This isn’t our first conversation
over cheap beer.
Once, you said to me, Sometimes,
I like to bite a nice piece of ass.

You insult my taste in men,
wonder when I’ll bring a doctor
to Thanksgiving dinner, tell me
Only black people and white trash
smoke menthols. I know you don’t
think I’m an exception.

While you studied the way tooth
meets jaw, the route a nerve
travels, the rate of decay,
I learned new words for darkness:
caliginous, tenebrous, crepuscular.

You measure life with dental floss,
I wait for the next blank page.
On the Morning of My Father’s Seventh Surgery

Today, my father will try to die. He has instructed the surgeon to let the scalpel slip, to lacerate a nerve, to pierce his spinal cord. The doctor laughs, thinks my father is trying to be funny, but I know he means every word.

He’s tried before: the day they took his kidney. Replaced his knee. Each scar a suicide: between shoulder blades, along ankle, hip, and tailbone. He makes sure his chart says DNR, and if he was a praying man, he would pray to never wake up. But he doesn’t, and no God will bring him comfort.

This life, quiet with faithlessness, won’t end as long as my mother believes enough for both, prays enough for both. Holy Mary, Mother of God, she whispers while he sleeps, presses her small hand against his back as if to heal, a conduit for her God to pass through.
Donny, on his Thirty-Fourth Birthday

He hasn’t seen his son in six years,
doesn’t know where she took
him, what grade he’s in, if someone
is teaching him to skateboard,
only that his wages are garnished,
that the money he gets to keep
is never enough. In his wallet,
a Walmart portrait of a fat blond baby
curls at the corners. He can
barely remember the smell
of his skin after a bath, the tiny
wail of his hunger. He hasn’t loved
a woman since. Oh, there have
been women, but he’s never
been able to care. Even now,
this girl—too young, too pretty
for a man like him—kissing
his neck, sliding her hand
down his stomach. They’ve been
fucking for a year and still
she thinks he’ll change. Why
don’t they teach girls this in school?
If he doesn’t say he loves you
in the first six weeks, he never will.

And if he doesn’t say it, well,
what are you waiting for? Lightning?
The second coming? Actions
don’t always speak louder. Bodies
move of their own accord, hearts
sometimes hold only blood.
She is Wearing Blue

There are birds in her hair but I only notice when she is wearing blue. When I try to touch them, their feathers turn to milk. How those curls shine, like glossy pages of a magazine, like wax shavings from crayons. I always preferred midnight to navy in a box of sixty-four. She chose periwinkle, powder, cornflower, her colors pale and fading.

She is wearing blue and I am trying to untangle the nests against her skull. She is laughing and I’ve forgotten how to joke. Our voices disengage from our throats like beads and charms: Saint Christopher medals for safety; bull horns to chase away bad luck.

She is wearing blue and I am pulling cotton from her mouth so she can speak without pain. She has never lied but I don’t know the truth yet. Sometimes she shares her questions. More often, she lets me carry the past like carpet bags or suitcases filled to bursting. I am her bellhop, her courier. She is my burden.

She is wearing blue and her hair is trailing across the balcony like Rapunzel’s. No one escapes these curls, a cherry bomb or a starling in her fist. Her fingers stay put. I know this is magic. I cannot defend her to the children whose words she takes away when they misbehave.

She is wearing blue again, but the birds are gone. We are alone, making breakfast before the others wake up. We whisper half-sentences that finish themselves because the only conversation we ever have is the one we started a thousand years ago when the birds were in my hair, not hers.
The Opposite of Magic

*after Kate Greenstreet*

I am alone when you dance,
when you say my name
like it is rough against the roof
of your mouth. Take it back.

Lick the salt off your lips
before you speak.

You will not return. I know
every muzzled footprint,
every boarded window. There
is space for only one ghost,
one October each year.

We couldn’t stand to see
the colors change more often,
wouldn’t be able to sleep
under two hunter’s moons.

This kind of dark has feathers.
And After This

I have nothing holy to say.
I paint his face with ashes
from my cigarettes,
tiny crosses on his forehead.
He says my fingers
smell like clementines,
but his are covered
in motor oil and sea salt.
I tell him about my mother
after surgery, about her face
like a moon
and all my life lost
in her round cheeks.
I want to visit the cemetery,
find a headstone meant for me.
I will rub it onto paper
with a copper crayon.
I will remember
how it hurt to grow wings.