THE BAREST RIB

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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December, 2009
THE BAREST RIB

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Thesis

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SECTION I.
Family History Commandeered by a Third Party

Among wild berries and high grasses, Norsemen on expedition to a new world hid huts and huddled through Maine’s gusty winters. There they fathered sons stillborn and buried in the first signs of spring: earth supple with decomposing leaves and ships of fresh timber ashore to sail families away. Who can blame the men for crating blankets sheer with overuse and leather shoes, soles worn through, for trampling weeds to meet arms hasty in loading cargo?

Who can blame the women left alone to dress this last morning for startling with the approach of skrelings, for slapping swords against bare breasts still heavy with milk, for defending what little they have left, their own bodies a swell of land so soon deserted? And who can blame me for dressing the women quickly then like paper dolls flat between my fingers and smooth is the water off the coast because this is my story, and I am afraid of waves, the way they lap and crash a rhythm too heavy for a lullaby, just strong enough for a dirge.
The Barest Rib

This is how we celebrate: grill
in the driveway chalked with cannons

and flags, a circle of men watching meat,
big feet covering the A, leaving only US

in fading red. There’s still an erection
at the center of our country, a stone monument

constantly screwing the sky, the sky
filled with fireworks and a once-distant moon,

men walking all over her now. We don’t know
what we want, freedom or its opposite,

another daughter at home on her back,
stretching herself thin, fitting fingers

flat between her ribs. She likes
the way bone matches bone, not worried

about the sins of flesh, that tender casing
on any other animal men kill for.
A Sacrifice for Sleep

At one you begin impaling sheep, planting a stake on the other side of the fence, each spring and skewer so gruesome you count by twos, until two, when you need dispose of the ewes, all of them bleating for their babes to be saved. You listen, go looking for the lost lambs, find three among the trees, heavy as you walk all ways watching for four, each hour less hopeful than the one before. You stop, hearing a muffled moan, shuffle through high leaves, discover hiding your inner child, hooded, knees rubbed raw. She has no voice now, only a body abused by other travelers, seeking in her something they could not find, though they tried. Each thrust its own spear, shoved straight through, a slow dying since five, those days still awake in you. You kneel next to her, push the cloak from her face, hold her tight with your eyes. This looking is not rest, so you lift her body, light as shadow, start your trek. Now silent in the sun, six mothers will not miss the lambs you left, traded for the one who does not wake, even as you fling her over the fence, wait for the scream.
Due Process

Draft 1

I left the door open and the room began to fill: a sparrow hawk grass clippings from yesterday’s mow a three-legged dog my best childhood friend a bottle of red wine age 12 my dead grandfather fatigues from Korea a thing with feathers the calm after a storm church bells the cord puller attached the year I grew hair numbers, all of them the color of spring

Draft 2

I closed the door turned on the fan watched my dead grandfather uncork the bottle a puddle of red where he leaked laid my friend, age 12 on the floor fatiguing fatigued the clang of church bells too loud too late, my friend

Draft 3

I exhaled after the storm and the hawk circled, the hawk it circled

Draft 4

I reopened the door let the three-legged dog out but kept one leg for my friend broken in grass clippings on the floor in Korea there’s grass to smoke while they suture you those cord pullers, calm the color of spring

Draft 5

I cracked a window, pushed out age 12 the year I grew hair the color of spring a thing with feathers numbers, some of them my childhood, dead grandfather that cordless puller below yesterday’s mow church bells, sparrows

Draft 6

I painted the windows shut the doors, from the inside clawed out my dyed roots
Anne’s Daughter in Autumn

My mother’s uterus is falling out.
Falling out like an overripe pear
from its tree. What can be done
with fruit that’s gone soft and sour?

Mother, I am sorry.
Mother, I am the bird that flew,
left your branches quaking.
All these years, a sensation
you ignored, blaming age
for bladder pangs and spotting.

You’ve always avoided doctors,
they who watched your mother
die when you still had down
for feathers. Mother, doctors
have mothers and daughters
and wings of feathers. Softly
will they lull you to sleep.
Softly will they touch you,
remove your uterus. Softly
will they set it in a basket
woven like my fingers
in prayer while I wait—

_Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee._

_Blessed art thou among women
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb_—and softly
will they wake you, only
you will not wake.  
When doctors ask if I want

to see you, I say,  
*Her uterus*, and follow,

chirping and quaking,  
to where it lies, bloody

and deflated in a metal tray.  
Mother, I am sorry.

Mother, forgive me.  
I did not expect it to end

this way. I am weak with hunger  
and have already said grace.

Mother, mother, please look away.
Picking Strawberries for Preserves

I was twelve and I was fat.
There is nothing you can do about it now.

You were the woman with manicured fingernails and a full basket.
I was the girl with red fingers and even redder lips.

You were not my mother. I was not your daughter.
In strawberry fields, there are no mothers or daughters.

You tried to wipe away the juice from my cheeks.
I understood the bitter permanence of stains.

I refused to eat more strawberries without sprinkles of sugar.
You shattered the sugar bowl.

Every time I swallowed, shards of porcelain lodged in my throat.
Every time I swallowed, I refused to swallow.

That is how I stayed whole. That is how I lost part of me.
There is nothing you can do about it now.

Now the strawberry fields have been razed.
Now cinder blocks and cement speckle the terrain.

A young couple purchases a plat and its brick split-level.
I am not the wife. You are not the wife’s mother.

This time I am telling the truth.
The truth is every strawberry spawns nearly two hundred seeds.

The truth is I am one in two hundred, not one in a million.
You were a liar. There is nothing I can do about it now.
Conditioned

Today I brush my hair because there’s nothing else to do. I brush my hair in long sheets down my back, pull after pull, bristles picking through knots that no longer exist. This brushing brushing brushing is not obsession, only obedience. I can almost hear my mother’s slippered feet approaching, feel her fingers pushing the dark strings back, behind my ear, so I can hear her, her whisper, and I am twelve again, sitting cross-legged on the quilt she stitched to cover me during sleep. There is no mother in this room. There is no father. There is no brother or sister or telephone or television. There are no voices to be obeyed but my own, and it says: 
You’re alone, so alone. It was right, I was right, alone in the world of my head, words spinning like leaves in a storm, spinning sentences to spit at the wall, the door, the hallway, my mother, you, dear reader, in your yellow cap so happy and bald. But my mother always said it was unladylike to spit, so all my head can offer is this hair free and tangled in the wind.
God is One and Three

But we think in pairs.

Because of this body cut like a heart from a sheet of folded construction paper.

Because one arm unfolds into two, one leg into two.

Because one testicle, one breast, unfolding, unfolds.

Because there is always man and woman.

Because there is always man and child.

Because there are always four older brothers and four younger sisters.

Because no one thinks in pairs just then, four brothers removing belts.

Because no one thinks in pairs just then, four sisters missing panties.

Because arms fold into arms fold into arms.

Because legs fold into legs fold into legs.

Because of years unfolding into years.

Because I am the child of the child of the.

Because I am the daughter of the son of the.

Because there is no word for what I am.

Because there is no paper thick enough to hold.

Because only bodies.

Because only bodies.

Because only my brother’s in mine.
Home Remedies

Mom tied a thread of mint floss around his big skin tag, tighter, tighter, strangling the flap of brown flesh that might be cancerous. When it shriveled and died, dead in his pit, she snipped it, floss and flesh dropped in the trash. Painless.

Now he stands, scrotum in hand, thread clinched between lined lips. There are no words for a moment like this. But, Brother, there are other things we could cinch and clip, if only we had enough floss. I will sacrifice my teeth.
Memorial Day

My brother called it Mammorial Day, as if it’s a celebration of humpback whales and hippopotami when locals, like the Fox family, clad in leopard print blouses and coon skin caps, flock to the zoo. Mr. Fox pays $5.75 for the panda bear balloon his son will let loose, fingers wild in highlighting the lion atop his lioness until Mrs. Fox hurries her boy on—not ready for a conversation about live birth—past bushes trimmed like buffalo, past marine life floating in a cement cove, to the primate building. There they find a baboon, red ass pressed against glass, and a crew-cut boy, pants at his knees, poised to mirror the baboon’s pose. His older sister scolds: *Stop fogging the glass!* But what she really means to say is: *Joey, that glass is so thin and hardly separates.* Like the lush patch of grass growing over my own brother’s grave, grass I mat down with my long torso, grass so much like glass I can shatter and celebrate.
Sanctuary

Watch her watch
him, her watch

watching minutes stitch
hours, the night watch

her watch. She must
not drowse. Watch

her wait. Watch her
watch. The winged watch

sings lonely
over the dark ketch.

Oh, to not watch
the watchmaker drown,

waves of breath washing
away. Watch! Watch!

But the watch has lost
its way. Lost watch,

which way? Dark’s way.
Sing, watch, sing

over this last watch,
and morning wakes.
SECTION II.
Church of the Sacred Heart

He preaches without a robe
to feel lighter, freer, he said
once, draping his white alb over
a girl who collapsed, tangled
in a pile of polyester. This week
he proclaimed: Christ is stirring
inside you, inside your heart!

Is that this beating, this pulsing,
this motion I can’t control, Christ
clamoring through my chambers
like a child through colored tubes,
hands pressing against red walls,
looking for a way out?

We are all trapped, all of us, me
between the sheets with the preacher,
Jesus pounding, harder with each
arch and thrust, pounding as if
he had something to say, pounding
as if our bodies would listen.
Postpartum

Beneath the maple in our yard, I stand
with arms raised at awkward angles, fingers
stretched wide like limbs, knuckles knots
that mark me. I am learning what it means
to be a tree, what it means to be grounded, tall.
I am learning that summer must end, again,
again, sunned skin traded for turtlenecks,
mittens, and sleep. Leaves, deep red and still
wet with morning’s moisture, start falling,
glazing my skin as they pour down,
and I know right then that I cannot stay
still. I cannot catch the redness, even
with waiting hands, though I try, arms
waving wildly in the silence of storm,
feet skittering, smashing all I have
missed. I am up to my knees in leaves, cry
for my husband to come. Together we tangle
and roll, letting ourselves be swaddled.

This is what it means to remember: to bury
our faces in all that dying and know
that even with gloved fingers and buckets,
there was nothing doctors could do, my husband
pacing, blood pouring from his beloved,
clots the size of persimmons dropping out,
a body ridding itself of life gone wrong.
To believe that the pain passed, that I unhunched,
traded my stained gown for fresh sweats, strode
headlong through hospital doors, let the fall
breeze dry and flush my face, sweep dried leaves
from my feet. Wind ushers away death if we let it.
Unidentified Falling Object

They acted like my fall
was an accident, like I was just
sitting there on the edge
of a fifteen foot wall, swinging

my legs and whistling “Lift
Your Heads,” dreaming of the boy
next door, his pinkness against my—
when I fell asleep, breath

in my chest a rhythm
that rocked me right over
the edge. No, I picked that hour,
that wall, that fall.

I could have eased
into a pot of boiling water
at Grandmother’s house,
she busy drawing my bed sheets
tight around the corners
of the bed, making ready
another night’s dreams. A pot
where I’d only be conscious

the first few moments of my yolk
hardening, yellow mellowing,
shell tightening until only my body
was left there, me somewhere

else, picking strawberries
in a shaded patch with Mother
and Dad. Or I could have
borrowed Grandmother’s cleaver

(a little big for the job, but
it makes the story better), locking
myself in her powder room,
carving a little line
into my wrist, letting my nourishment
slip out onto the rug for the dog
to clean up later. Or I could have
tossed a rope over the fattest branch

in the yard, the one I used to
swing from as a girl. But I couldn’t
convince the tree to help me. That
and my body was a ridiculous shape

(it runs in the family), round
everywhere, nowhere for a noose
to grip. And so I chose the fall—
no grandmother to pull the pot

off the fire or tie a rag around
an oozing arm or sever the rope
from an angry tree. This way
there was no repairing me,

and they tried, all the king’s horses
and all the king’s men huddled over
my broken pieces, half of them white
with surprise, the other half

sifting through my mess
with cold hands looking for some
identifying mark. They never
looked inside my left sock

where they would have found
the opening page of Great Expectations
torn from Grandmother’s first edition
copy. It was buried with me. I know

because I still read it over
and over again lounging beside
Mother and Dad as they learn
how to make stars.
Through Window Panes and Twelve-Hour Work Days

Listen, the trees speak.

The green leaves speak, the red leaves speak, the orange yellow brown leaves speak, the thinnest branches the thickest branches, the trunks, the roots speak below
your asphalt driveway leading to your garage, your kitchen, your hallway den foyer office bathroom stairwell to finished basement stairwell to second floor climbing like its own set of roots keeping you inside, dead-bolted.

Listen, outside your baby cries.

Your baby cries, your baby crows, your baby howls yowls wails with her head stuck, wedged between twin trunks, your baby whimpers and whines dangling upside-down by laces tangled in branches, your baby, your baby.

Listen, outside your baby falls
silent, choking on fistfuls of acorns or apple cores.

Listen, listen.

What I’m saying is we only have
words within words within words within words within words.

What I’m saying is we only have
womb within womb within womb within womb within womb.

What I’m saying is I’ll clean up the blood of stillbirth.

I’ll clean the blood. I’ll up the blood.
I’ll clean up. I’ll clean. I’ll still birth.
You’ll still birth.
Kangaroo Math

Female kangaroos have two vaginas. Where three or four does are gathered, there are more vaginas than I can count on one hand.

I only have five digits on each hand: four fingers and one opposable thumb. Here let one digit equal one vagina.

I know you are thinking about vaginas and fingers. *Stop*, says my flat palm with five digits. Look this way at my five fingers waving.

There are two kangaroos and me. Five vaginas. Or four vaginas and I’m bumming a ride. Thumbs are good for many things.

*I am happy today*, says my thumb. Or I have one vagina and my kangaroo friends have deserted me. Damn does.

I am alone. Here let one woman equal one man minus x. Let x equal one penis. I like math.

Math is the hacksaw in my hand. There won’t be blood. Red ink slashes the equation wrong. One man minus one penis equals zero. There is nothing left to say. I am one woman with one voice. I have one vagina. There will be blood.
Honeymoon

I plant a tent in the front yard,
force the queen bed to fit, frame
and all. I want to be raised up,
goddess above grass and canvas,
up, where days change wind,
where days sashay toward certainty,
wing me with them.
Still in my cocoon,
I wait, touching all sides at once. Here I know
where I am, what I am. I am the filler
of space, too big for where you are.

You yell from the window. I hear,
learn words for when I emerge: dead
leaves fell, death left Fall. You lie.

I can see shadows of bare trees, trace
their tangled maps
on my second skin.

I know which way
to go, start chewing

off my wings, stuffing
them up inside.
Available Year-Round

Toss me in the fruit bowl
with the other apples, all
of us pink ladies, ready
to be handled, teethed
and tongued. We’ll wait
until we’re wanted, compare
weights and blemishes, gossip
about our pickers’ rough hands
or the fate of our falls. Left alone
too long, we’ll begin to like
the bowl, she on top of me
and she and she, a juicy orgy,
all of us turned granny, happy
with our honeys, crisp outfits
wrinkled for good reason. We’ll
forget we ever wanted you
to wash us, whisk us, spotless,
to the gala, dreams disappearing
with sleep. We’ll lay awake long
hours, keep watch for fingers
that never come, leave us
to rest, fruitful and fruitless.
Life-Cycle Management

Off with his head!
Off with his head!
Off with his head!

Heads, heads, heads!

A whole green field speckled with heads
like a billiards table with too many balls.

This is just a game. An invisible hand shoots,
knocks one head into another. They kiss
with open eyes. I see. But what about
your wives? I waste my last breath.

I am spinning, hazy in a world of black
and yellow swirling, where a voice answers,

echoes, There are no rules. There are
no rules, he’s right, and I have no fingers
to pick green blades from my teeth and no
need. My head is not heavy. I know
what I believe. I bare my grassy smile,

lisping, Victory! Victory! Victory!
Dead End

The road we live on is straight and narrow and slippery when wet. Last year a car slipped, smashed through our bay window glass, headlights catching me mid-act, atop a husband who is not mine. Mine discovered a new hobby: dismantling our daughter’s dollhouses, one fake chandelier at a time, leaving piles of pink plastic and her confused cries. Last week she beheaded a Ken doll, poured her milk down inside, To make him strong, she said, handing me his slick body for fixing. On our way to WalMart to pick a replacement, we passed a baby possum iced dead in the berm. She didn’t see, from her car seat, and I didn’t tell, only taught her joyride, an excuse to drive. To pass by the heap of frozen fur. To embrace my urge to swerve. To mash its face. To feel alive.

Each day I steer my tires farther beyond that white line, longing to lose control, to feel the thump, the missed breath, the relief in my chest.

I cannot blame the road for all this brokenness.
The House on Midland Lane

Even the echoes have faded, vacated the hall. I won’t chase them. I won’t
find them hidden between the sheets of my bed, snuggled in my pillowcase
or my husband’s bureau drawer. I won’t know whose echoes they are. My mother’s?

Her slide & thump, slide & thump, cane tracing its way everywhere: the den,
foyer, front yard. Hallways are meant for this: connecting two distant, distinct
lands. My body is a hallway.
For Sale by Owner

He built the house himself, put a window in the kitchen, washed it weekly so his wife could see the sapling in the yard growing. When my family moved in,

there was a tree, branches blocking the view of the street, fruit-patterned fabric draping the still life of limbs. I rolled open the window, swallowed the wind, its weight drawing me out. Beside the trunk, I propped a stump, boosted myself up into the barrenness of winter’s months, straddled the thickest branch, shimmied until it bent. I held there a while, hanging.

Then, when hunger hit, I let go, reaching for the window and all its ripeness.
SECTION III.
Illustration of Lottery Odds

I begin drawing small stick figures on lined paper.
   You know the kind: a circle and five matchsticks
      stuck together just so. Picture twenty-five figures
   per row. Times twenty-five rows. I’m working
      with wide-ruled paper on spiral. I leave white
         in the top margin like a sky above my multiplying
people. Try not to picture them copulating. This
   is asexual reproduction, each one a child of my pen,
      the ink black, their faces white so no one can claim
   racism. Call me sexist, though, and I won’t care.
   These figures are all ladies that I haven’t yet dressed
      because I can’t decide what they should wear. Typical
woman, you think, and that’s perfect. This will be
   a poem about statistics if you stick around and bear
      my puns. I must make this poem less heavy-handed,
more light-hearted somehow. I don’t give my girls
   hearts, those racy pumps, because I can’t draw that
      small, and even men have hearts, so I opt for skirts,
petite triangles cinching each waist and shielding
   all that is below. I know my choice is traditional
      and might pigeon-hole my girls so I fill their sky
with fifty free pigeons. You know the kind: little
   cursive Vs or arcs of cleavage from above. I thought
      about giving my girls breasts, two small circles below
their necks. My pen could manage that much. But
   an old woman once told me it’s impossible to grieve
      the loss of what was never possessed. So I leave
all my ladies with flat chests to spare me
   the burden of returning years later to my paper
      and somehow cutting away the breasts from one
of every eight figures. I’d need the world’s smallest
   scissors and a steady hand. I don’t have one, not
      when I don’t know which of the topless ladies
represents me. I didn’t draw a pen at the end
   of my arm so I could find me among the many
   in rows like an army. Twelve percent of women

will face combat. You know the kind: chemotherapy
   in the body makes them bald and bony. Who must
   fight is random like a draft lottery for women. And

not even I can escape though I’m a mother
   and a writer and the drawer of this picture
   that I’ll now set afire because today the sky

is blue and cloudless and full of birds
   that will not scare with smoke and ashes.
   Brave birds, teach me to puff out my chest.
Before the Game Even Starts

I am bigger than the Greeks,
standing on old Corinthian soil,
hands to hips, chest bulging
just enough to show
I’m a woman. Ohio State
swirls across my shirt,
armpit to armpit, as if Apollo
were betting in Vegas,
his temple behind my head,
three Doric columns pocked with age.

If I lift my hands
I can support the temple myself,
legs spread to distribute
the weight of history and religion.
If I stretch still higher
I can finger the sky,
pushing the clouds back
and forth like a wild fan
drunken before the game even starts.
Where the Book Ends

Somewhere in the middle of a pine forest. Let’s go there, though nothing’s symbolic: the trees, you & me. We are where we are, lost in needles & air. The over under of our bedding leaves you bruised, no, confused. It starts where you left me, a doorstep with no stoop & I should have known: I’m not a puppy in a box or a newborn without breast, but that’s a good guess. I’m a cavalier, foil-wrapped to cover scars, keep me saddled & erect, Ignore the potential penises, please. Here, let me give you a hand. That’s my job. Look! Over there! In the air! Made you look! You took my bait, went fishing in that pond while I watched you cast & recast, your ass proud of nudeness. I laid you
bare, rubbed you like two sticks. Made fire, let it burn,

the forest of pages black & brazen, ashes the only trail to

where the book ends.
In the morning, I am tired because again I dreamed of writing, the slow process of making sense of something beyond myself, an impossible task because even the self doesn’t make sense, not in the waking, not in the dreaming, not in the in-between, wherever that is. I wish I knew because there is where all good poems lie, ready to be fished out with line long enough and hook strong enough and hand steady enough. Every first line is a shore line, and today my beach is rocky, my feet raw and wobbly, but I keep walking, casting and recasting until I feel the tug of biting at my toes and who knew how fat and fresh my catch would be
lying at my feet
while the line still drifts

in and out of waves
waiting for me

to reel it in wet
and empty but I won’t,

would rather dive in
and float, bob

there in the water where
I might dissolve

like paper while Poem
dries with the sunrise

on the coast line, its end
line ever eroding
Border Patrol

You ganglion you
sliding through my forearm,
pushing tendons aside. Like
a flashing cruiser stops traffic,
you stopped all motion in my wrist
until you made it on through,
settled in right there on top
of my hand, let the tectonic plates
of bone push you up, skin bulging
my own little Mount Olympus,
only you had no gods living
on you. So I called on the wrath
of Crowbar, brought him down firm
on your peak. Your clouds
suddenly turned black
and blue, but you, you remained
sky-high and proud. I went
to see Doc, showed him your height,
and he showed you the needle,
bore a hole through you,
a tunnel connecting Manhattan
to the world. You didn’t leak
like we hoped. So I prayed
for another earthquake. And
it happened. In California.
So I prayed for the Ice Age
to return, a glacier to carve you out
like Ohio, leave a fertile plain
good for growing corn. We got
global warning, so I decided
to stop praying, took you back
to Doc. He asked me, How
high is too high? and I pointed
to you, said, I can’t breathe up
there. He said, It’s time.
And so we laid plans,
bought masks and gloves so
you couldn’t identify us in a line-up,
kept a getaway car of anesthesia
on standby, discussed the risks.
I don’t remember much after that,
waking up with my hand bandaged
so I couldn’t see the canyon
that replaced you. It’s sealed up now, a single red stripe that marks me one of the original thirteen colonies and you the conquered. Or the freed.
The Painter’s Son in Red

Sitting on my orange red lunch stool in fourth grade, I told the Russian boy beside me that in America walls can be invisible: *There is a wall between us, taller than our heads, thick and brick red. I’m sorry that you can’t see it,*

*but you’ll have to trust me even though you can’t see me over it.* I like to think he believed me, turning to the girl on his left, going on about his new pack of Crayolas. He moved here because of Chernobyl, chemicals chewing his skin.

Could I be infected by his untrimmed hair, flannel shirts, and broken English? What if he touched me, laying his hand on my forearm for years? That afternoon, the custodian struggled to fold up our table. I know because during gym, names in marker on our shirts, a kickball game with him on the other team, I found pieces of brick and mortar on the floor near where I sat, pieces too small for a broom and dust pan to pick up.

Getting down on hands and knees, I pressed my finger into the dust, letting the sharpness pierce my skin, drawing little red drips of connection.
Big Platter, or This Freckled World We Live In

In February, when no one wants to be in the Windy City,
admission to The Art Institute of Chicago is free. Free
the way a bath in the Seine is free, the way sex
between lovers in tall grass is free, the birds free
in their watching. Birds can see color, can distinguish
my naked skin from my husband’s from the pale earth
beneath us. Dogs see less clearly, reds blending with yellows
seamlessly. I think of this while surveying Seurat’s

_A Sunday on La Grande Jatte_ where a little foo-foo dog
is loosed from the leash of a woman whose blue skirt
poofs out behind her like a pregnancy. Free, the dog is,
to obey my coaxing, spring out onto museum tile
next to me where it could see itself, shape sharp
against the washed out green. Where I can see myself
as the lady in red walking towards me, towards us,
my husband and me tender in the grass at her feet.

For a moment I am her, and I am me, one self looking
at the other. I see we are nothing but thousands of dots
etched so close we appear whole, if you believe in wholeness,
and if you stand far enough away, far enough away
that you could never touch me no matter how long
your reach. And somewhere in the painting, a bird chirps.

Somewhere a dog barks, and somewhere an arm extends,
its pale fist landing on my belly, knocking, beckoning
the child out, into this delicate world beyond
oil on canvas where it can suckle, steal small bits of me.
Diner Conversation

They’re gone now, she says.
You can study now, she says.

Define study: getting to know.
Define define: drawing a line

around, a chalk line, like a boy
kneeling asphalt, palms flat

on a red circle. Cherry, he says.
Sun, he says, at sunset. Suddenly

I want those two old men
back, brittle bodies settled

into their booth, plates returned
with only pie crusts, pitted sweetness

somewhere else: my stomach, miles
of sidewalk, eternity of sky.
At the Hour of Our Marigold Skies

Before the sun, I rise, struggle into my clothes, the sleeves of my blouse long, hiding my hands. The laces of my shoes, dirtied now from many days of walking, are untied, flipping around my feet as I let the door bang behind me. I cannot call my ritual *pacing*. It is freer than that, this ambling up & down the road’s edge watching the curtains blow in the windows of other homes, watching the greens & pinks & yellows grow, colors encroaching on the road. One morning, weeks ago, when walking wasn’t enough, when I needed my hands to work too, to touch, if not man then something else, I bent, plucked one marigold from the side of the road, trapped its thinness between my palms, rubbed back & forth, its orange head spinning like a lover on the edge. I wanted to drop the flower then, trample it in the street, soil its color, but I couldn’t, carried it back with me, through my door, again banging behind me, in need of fixing, retrieved a glass from the cabinet, filled it with water, took one sip & another before settling the stem in the half-full glass. For days I gazed at it, in the mornings, before my walks, lingered there by the door torn between staying & going, feeling restrained. When the first petal dropped, a shriveled account of what once was, I found another glass, floated the petal to the bottom. Each day another dropped, sometimes two, waited on the table for me, my hands deft in collecting death. This is what life is: a slow moving from one container to another until those men with sterilized hands & paper masks unzipped my husband from his body bag & millions & millions of petals poured out.
SECTION IV.
Remember the Souls in Hell

a monk once said, and so I begin with a slow
dismembering: head from neck, neck
from shoulders, each shoulder from its socket,
because what shape does the soul take if not body?

How else should I recognize these souls
in the flurried circles of hell? My grandfather
still wears a suit and bowtie when he shuffles
past with a line of ducklings trailing behind.

I didn’t expect the ducklings, the ones
my grandfather used to keep cooped
in a house built from plywood scraps
and shingles until the neighbor’s cat caught
his favorite, Francine. He shot the cat, blamed
another neighbor for the bullet, and urged
the remaining ducks to fly by chasing them
with the mower, stray feathers in grass clippings
floating on all sides. I didn’t expect
the ducklings, long flown, though I expected

my grandfather with the dime-sized mole
at his right temple, the one I was careful
to avoid, always kissing his left cheek
given the choice. Now I lean in and peck him,
a sign of what is to come, though I can’t seem
to raise an ax like the one he swung at my father,
a boy racing though the backyard, around
the old maple, around the empty duck hut,

my grandfather in hot pursuit because Dad
was my grandmother’s favorite son, got an extra
slice of bologna on his sandwich for lunch. I think it’s the ducks that keep me from making the first cut, the way they follow my grandfather around like a father, and so I go after one, trimming skin from sinew, draining the blood, duck after duck, until only I am trailing behind, ready to cut,

but I can’t, will keep digressing with these stories about the ducklings, dead now, roasting on a spit over hell’s fire, because a poem about hell is not complete without fire,

and I need nourishment after all this slaughter. I’ve been meaning to try seared duck breast with orange glaze for years, go looking for thyme and sage to season a side of rice,

and find, praying below the blossoms of blood orange trees, the monk, still habit-clothed

and hungry, the one who reminded me kindly to remember the souls in hell.
Abba Paul

In the morning, he picks date plums from his garden, mumbles psalms as he chews, juice of the fruit of the gods slipping down his chin. He does not want to go home, he is home, seven days from any man or market, seven days from being what he is: one man among many. Out here he is alone with his God, and someone must labor, so he weaves baskets from palm fronds, fingers so dry and limber from the under over motion of each day. Each day he earns the day’s wage and prays, My God! My God!

All he can do is give things names: sand, cave, tedium, soreness, rage. All he can do is pile higher and higher his baskets of names, unable to trade, until he cannot move in his room stuffed full with weavings, until he finds himself, defines himself, creator amidst creation. Like God he exists only through relation. He is what he is not, and in the darkness he strikes flame, ignites all he has made, the blaze casting shadows over what will someday be his grave. In the morning, he picks persimmons from his garden, scrawls psalms in the ash as he chews. Father, Father, may my fingers never idle and my lips always name.
Between Voice and Silence

Ribbons of women cascade up aisles in streams of *mmms*, skirts brushing ends of quiet pews as they move toward a soloist at the altar who flutters

Latin over voice and silence the same: *O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramentum.*

I do not comprehend and yet I can feel the alliteration on my tongue as if I were singing too, my mouth pursing, chest vibrating with each *m*.

I am compelled to fold my hands in prayer, skin on skin, an intimacy within myself, my pleas extending up and out, blending with the colors of fresco, blue and yellow, mild like the Christ child in a manger. Mary stirs then, slightly, a delicate reach of stone. I want to touch her, take her firm hand between mine, but she moves only to caress voices, gather them between her hands like a new butterfly, blow them back out again, a lullaby for her winged child.
Circumcision of Isaac

This is not a story of the Jews.
There are plenty of those already.
Stories, that is. Not Jews.

I know no Jews now though
once I knew two: twin brothers
who lost their prepuces

long before I knew them.
The brothers, that is. Not the prepuces
though I’ve not known those either.

I have never attended a bris though
I believe they exist like Dickinson believed
in the seas though she’d never seen them.

See, this is a story of prepuces
because no one knows where they all go
though once we knew. Farmers in the East

sacrificed burnt foreskin to Bes, the god
of song, dance, and infants. Better Bes than bins
of skin in hospital wings. What then

when piles of prepuces overflow
on tile floor? Are they swept away, out
to sea where they float like baby

jellyfish around swimmers’ feet?
I’ve seen the sea and swam the sea, Emily.
I’ve even sexed the sea, possibly

exposed my lush prepuce to the lost
erogenous zones of so many men. I
meant only to make love to one man,

my husband, there where the waves
licked me. I am guilty of being loved
by the waters in the seas, Emily,
and whatever is in them I cannot know. So
I must believe that what lies deep in the deepest
seas is not the foreskin of my forefathers

and their sons and my son asleep
beside me after surgery, but something
beautiful and whole and resting.
Crosswalk

Stop! Stop listening to the clock
mocking me, tocking along
on her daily jog. She has no
stroller to push, no child inside
growing larger, longer, legs
and arms dangling, dragging
ruddy stripes in the street. I
try to bandage bloody hands,
wrap them with gauze, but
nothing works, the growing
and bleeding too fast for me,
too fast, me laying in the street,
screaming for Time to stop,
or else wait while I rock my red
boy sucking his thick, hairy thumb.
One Flesh

1. When I cut my thumb off, my mother held it between her own fingers, brushed the nail blue.

2. I held nothing, could hold nothing, my skin evaporating into its own remote desert.

3. A swimmer came, asked if I would wear his flippers on my hands, and nothing else.

4. In morning’s wind, loose gutters clattered a rhythm, and he sputtered the wettest tune.

5. If only I could draw the sheets higher and tighter, be rocked.

6. Months like waves crest and crash, crest and crash, mocking me, mocking me.

7. There is no baby.
Song for the Thief at Dawn

in a city that is not mine
in a lot unlit and unlined

a lone car offers alarm to the sky
and I am alone by my window

it is glass like the beads I finger
glass like the hours I wait

all the while the alarm sings
its tune one I know though muffled

in all those trees like cotton swabs
their other halves in earth’s ears

and in mine a pulsing song
its rhythm round and urgent

like my son’s heartbeat heard
for the first time like my echo

the doctor with his doppler
smoothing the skin below my navel

and I with my breath held tight
to better hear my boy’s voice

not from tongue and empty gums
but from slick valves

like a trombone blown for hours
like the alarm on this night

that sings while I write
the same song as my son’s

and no one hushes it
for this I am thankful

because while it wails of peril
it also trills of life
these two dance partners
twirling together

I can feel their twist and flutter
their dip and drop

and my water breaks
the earth ever greener and wetter
Two Views of Watercolor on Canvas

There is a porcelain tub, white gone gray from years of high bath tide.

The tub is full of water, to the lip with water. An exposed ceiling bulb reflects yellow on its surface.

A flowered housecoat lies crumpled on the tile floor, spectacles folded on the sink. There are no slippers.

Where is the woman who drew this bath?

Is she roaming the dark city with only slippers to cover her nakedness?

Oh, sweet woman, darkness only covers so much! Go back to your home, to your children. Clean yourself and them. Forget about the one who left you feeling this dirty, this desperate.

The streets crisscross in patterns she cannot decipher in her blindness.

She is lost. Her bath is cold.

In my painting there is a window over the tub. Rain courses its panes.

In this painting there is no window, no door, not even a drain.
When My Own Skin Is Foreign

...so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty...

Isaiah 55:11

I am alone.

I should not say it.

My voice makes it truth, sends it away.

Truth, come down from that palm tree.
Come back, sit beside me on the balcony,
the edge of my world.

We’ll peel the fruit you bring us, feed
each other delicate pieces of red,
our tongues surrendering to their color.

We’ll sway back & forth on the glider,
stare off into the ocean, all its blueness.

This world arches & thrusts, Truth,
arches & thrusts, one shade of gray
always giving way to another.

Stay with me. I will love you.