MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES

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MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES

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ABSTRACT

*MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES*

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*My Mother’s Missing Bees* is a multi-genre project bound by the unifying theme of absence. Half short stories and half poetry, the work is driven by the image of a vacant beehive and its missing bees. The stories and poems all explore in some way the haunting presence of absence that this image evokes. Moving between, and sometimes blurring, the natural and human world, image plays a vital role in creating elements of tension and narrative throughout the work. The two parts and their subsequent stories and poems work together to present the reader with a cohesive narrative of absence.
Dedicated to Scott, Lisa, Kali, Sam, Marianne,

& the bees.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................................. iv
DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................................... v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. vi
INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

*MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES*

PART I. .................................................................................................................................................. 10
  Roadside Honey .......................................................................................................................... 11
  The Rabbit ..................................................................................................................................... 12
  Ray Price ....................................................................................................................................... 18
  A Long List of Things To Do ........................................................................................................ 22
  Triple Crown Trick ...................................................................................................................... 28
  Save Your Handmaids ............................................................................................................... 34

PART II. ............................................................................................................................................... 43
  Cicadas .......................................................................................................................................... 44
  Huertas ......................................................................................................................................... 46
  Birth ............................................................................................................................................. 47
  Three Kids .................................................................................................................................. 48
  Queen Bee ................................................................................................................................... 49
  Big Ugly ....................................................................................................................................... 50
Come Down Corn .................................................................51
Dog ......................................................................................52
Burying Goldie .................................................................53
Beehive ..............................................................................54
Southbound .................................................................55
Salve .................................................................................56
Ceremony ............................................................................57
Windmills .......................................................................58
Spider Film ......................................................................59
The Crowd .......................................................................60
Cotton .............................................................................61
My Mother’s Missing Bees ...............................................62
Curio ..............................................................................63
WORKS CITED .....................................................................64
INTRODUCTION

In the foreword to *The Poetic Species: A Conversation with Edward O. Wilson and Robert Hass* Lee Briccetti writes, "When people experience poetry, they are often surprised and delighted. But if you tell them that it is coming, they get nervous" (15). Setting the stage for the conversation between scientist and poet that follows, she goes on to make the same observation about science. And indeed, the conversation between Wilson and Hass reveals profound and surprising similarities in the ways that humanity needs and deals with both poetry and science. As Hass posits, “If the children of New York are not wandering through here [the American Museum of Natural History] and seeing those North American mammals and feeling some kind of wonder in their presence, if they don’t know the names of the trees in Central Park, then how are they going to be stewards or caretakers of them?” (73-74). Wonder must come before discovery—whether scientific or poetic.

*My Mother’s Missing Bees* is a multi-genre work born from this sense of wonder over the natural world. Through short stories and poetry, the work uses the image of an empty beehive to explore the theme of absence in both the natural and emotional worlds, and the ways in which this theme seeps into the human experience.

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1 If you count yourself among this crowd, skip to page 41
The Multi-Genre Project

Half short fiction and half poetry, *My Mother’s Missing Bees* is a project that can be read as a whole, in two parts, or as individual units of work. As a writer of both short stories and poetry, I have always been interested in how the two genres inform and play off of one another. Certainly story has a place in poetry, while poetic language can add vital layers of meaning to a short story. Through *My Mother’s Missing Bees*, I sought to bind the genres and to explore what boundaries, if any, must be kept between the two. The results of this exploration do not bend or defy either genre. *My Mother’s Missing Bees* is not a poetry-fiction hybrid, but rather a short story collection and poetry collection fused in theme and style, while remaining two separate works.

In terms of reader reception, each genre unfortunately shares a place at the back of the line. For while, as Briccetti claims, poetry makes people nervous, Charles May asserts that, “Because American readers are more interested in nonfiction and the occasional novel than the short story, the form is currently in the literary doldrums in the United States” (May 324). In “The American Short Story in the Twenty-First Century” May elaborates:

Once you get started with a novel, you become friends, get familiar, take up residence. With a short story, you are no sooner introduced to a character than the story is over, leaving you a bit dazed. With a collection of stories, you have to do this over and over again. Unlike chapters in a novel, which tease you with the illusion of continuity, short stories are
always ending. And often those conclusions – one of the form’s most important aspects – are frustrating in their inconclusiveness. (299-300)

According to May, it is the brevity of the short story that condemns it. Not only are short stories doomed to end sooner than the reader wants, but the form lends to endings that are unsatisfying in their openness. In this way of thinking, the poem, often shorter, often built on the premise of inconclusiveness, is even worse off. Yet in an age where communication occurs in ever shrinking units of size, this is surprising. Would not the short story, or better yet short poem, be the perfect bite of letters for today’s readers? Perhaps. Or perhaps this is the very reason readers take comfort in the novel: at a time when everything else leaves them so quickly, a novel is something to hold on to.

While I do not offer a lasting relationship with characters, or satisfyingly conclusive endings, binding the poetry and story collections offers readers a project that is more than a sum of the two parts. My goal was not to alienate or ignore readers who prefer the novel, but to invite them to use an understanding of story to inform their reading of poetry, and to then use their understanding of poetry, whatever this may be, to add to their reading of the stories. In his essay "Northern Iowa: Short Story & Poetry" Amiri Baraka writes, "Poetry wants, short story wants something. Something is what poetry is. Short story gives it a name" (37). Though this may read as a verbal display of smoke and mirrors, it captures the relationship between the two genres (and perhaps this can only be done with smoke and mirrors). Paired together, the poem and the short story provide the reader with more space to experience wonder and obtain understanding.
An Explanation of Theme

Theme is the unifying thread in the stories and poems of *My Mother’s Missing Bees*. Each individual story and poem seeks to address the themes of leaving and absence, and the tension that occurs when these themes rub up against the themes of staying and presence. I was interested in exploring the haunting presence of absence— as the “presence” that is left behind after an act of leaving takes place permeates daily life in countless ways ranging from the grandiose to minute, public to private.

This theme was inspired quite literally by my mother’s missing bees. An amateur beekeeper, the first hive she owned simply vanished after a few years in her care. The causes of colony collapse disorder are still unknown, and she is not the first beekeeper to experience a missing hive. I was struck by the mystery of this loss and the possible explanations for it. And then, while working on the project, an entire second hive perished—their bodies present as evidence of the loss. This more finite example of absence added another, darker, dimension to the theme.

The image of a deserted beehive was the driving force behind each piece in the work: its structure, complex and functional, is perfectly intact, and though completely empty it is situated in a setting that buzzes with wildlife. Beyond the physicality of this driving image, or perhaps in connection to it, I also sought to explore the concept of nostalgia and its relationship to both absence and presence, as well as the ways in which absence impacts or plays out in human relationships.
A Survey of the Fiction

While “Roadside Honey” is the only story that plays into the narrative of the bees and explicitly reflects the title of the work, all of the stories respond to the theme of absence in some way. In the initial flash fiction piece, “Roadside Honey,” the bees are just being delivered, though the talons of absence are already present (the son sends the bees but is not present, the dogwood tree can’t flower). And of course, here we meet the first dead bee.

On a less abstract level, the stories address what it takes for people to leave or stay, and the decisions that are made before or after the act of leaving takes place. In “The Rabbit,” Peg refuses to cope with the loss of her husband who has left her, obsessing over her neighbor instead. In “Ray Price,” Lillian is racked with guilt over a sin that is only present in her imagined life, one that she has not actually committed. Though there’s no indication of whether she will leave or stay with Ham, equally absent is her love for him. “Triple Trick Crown” touches on decisions that are made because of an absence as Colette’s childlessness drives her obsession with the racehorse and eventual despair over its defeat. As Anna experiences Jack’s physical act of leaving, “A Long List of Things To Do” explores what is owed to someone you love. Finally, in “Save Your Handmaids,” Amelia feels both the absence of her friend and the ability to “hear God speak.”

A Survey of the Poetry

Some of the poems address the theme quite literally, placing the missing bees in various locations. In “Beehive,” for example, they journey with the deceased family dog
to the center of a wheat field near their hive. “Spider Film” posits a darker fate for the bees; they have perished during the winter. Yet later, “My Mother’s Missing Bees” imagines them living on a sunflower farm in Colorado. In this way, the poems play with the idea of story. Rather than alienate the reader in its inconclusiveness, this thread of narrative invites the reader to imagine their own story for the bees.

Closely linked to this storyline is that of Goldie, the deceased family dog. Buried beneath the hive, Goldie is in a sense present when the bees disappear, though his absence is felt acutely by the family in “Burying Goldie.” “Dog” plays with the idea of perception in describing the act of burial from the point of view of the creatures in the field who witness the act, but are not observed by the family and so remain absent from their experience of grief. In “Ceremony” the speaker reveres the grave site, which readers now know is also the location of the hive, as holy, though through nostalgia rather than observation. This perspective shifts yet again in “Southbound,” where the speaker addresses a lover who was absent from the burial scene in “Dog,” but claims to remember it regardless. In this manipulation of nostalgia, absence becomes a potentially violent vehicle in that through it the “truth” of memory cannot be upheld.

While “Southbound” engages in the above storyline, it is also one of many poems in the series that explores the theme of absence through relationships. Though these poems do not explicitly address the missing bees or the site of their absence, they mirror the complexity of this loss in various aspects of human relationships. In “Three Kids,” nostalgia fails to reproduce childhood innocence and mourns its absence. “Big Ugly” introduces the speaker’s grandmother, who like the bees has fled the place of her birth. The rest of these relationship poems address the presence of absence between lovers or
ex-lovers and the emotional detritus this creates. Braided into the “bee poems,” their resonance with the theme becomes clearer.

“Cotton” and “Curio” explore absence as potential failure. In “Cotton,” the bees reappear not in the speaker’s dream, but in her grandmother’s. Here, the mystery of their absence is so haunting that it has permeated the speaker’s relationships with loved ones. The empty hive is a nightmare, a memory of what she cannot hold onto. In “Curio,” images that have appeared throughout the collection—a sunflower, the sea, and of course a bee—reappear, offering the reader conclusion through imagery, though the poem ends in an inconclusive rumination. The single dead bee in “Curio” also serves as the only physical link between the poems and stories, bookending the collection. Mirroring the single bee that dies in the collection’s first story, “Roadside Honey,” this image reappears in “Curio.”

A Discussion of Process

Image played a vital role in the writing process. Not only was the work’s theme born from the image of a deserted beehive, but image features prominently in most of the poems and stories. The poems, all free verse, rely heavily on image to move the narrative along. In The Portable Poetry Workshop, Jack Myers writes, ”In free verse the most important element of control is tension, creating through the element of a poem a combination of proportional dynamic relationships that act as cohesive forces to unify the work” (Myers 127). Image was the primary mechanism I utilized in creating this tension. The result was a series of image narratives, which Myers defines as “The thematic story,” by way of composed visual tensions, that the seminal images in a poem tell.”
From the most macroscopic view, the poems tell the narrative of my mother’s deserted beehive. As the view becomes more microscopic, the interpretation of the narrative becomes more and more up to the reader.

I approached the short fiction in a similar manner. I view the poem as a snapshot of experience, a compilation of images that together create a narrative, and the story as an expansion of this snapshot. In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1993*, Louise Glück writes

Poems *are* autobiography, but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronomic alternation of anecdote and response.

Moreover, a body of work may change and develop less in reaction to the lived life than in reaction to the poet's prior discoveries, or the discoveries of others. If a poem remains so selectively amplified, so casual with fact, as to seem elusive, we must remember its agenda: not simply to record the actual, but to continuously create the sensation of immersion in the actual. And if, in its striving to be free of the imprisoning self, the poet's gaze trains itself outward, it rests nevertheless on what compels or arrests it. Such choices constitute a portrait. Where the gaze is held, voice, or response, begins. (92)

The mingling of autobiography and gaze that Glück suggests here rings true to my experience of writing. And while she speaks specifically of poetry, I believe the same applies to the craft of fiction. While a longer, perhaps more explicit portrait, the short story is a portrait nonetheless. Yet here, though the two genres met, they did not meld. My goal in writing the short stories was not to create five long story-like poems, but five
stories that were influenced by this understanding of poetry. Many of the stories, for example, end with images rather than obvious conclusions—the rabbit wiggling its nose in the night in “The Rabbit,” the half demolished church in “Save Your Handmaids.” Images function as endings in these stories, leaving the reader to imagine or ruminate on their implications. This lack of explicit finality rings true to the narratives we experience in real life.

As a whole, My Mother’s Missing Bees is just as much an exploration of story as it is of wonder. At the end of their conversation, Hass draws a final link between poetry and science, noting how in both “observation lead[s] to questions lead[s] to methods of answering the questions” (81). The stories and poems that follow are in many ways a result of this process as it plays out in both the natural word, and on the page.
MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES

I
Roadside Honey

The bees are a gift from her son. When they arrive in early April, the white noise of their hum fills her like a sickness, and she has no idea where to put them. The boys from the farm he ordered them from set up the hive in the backyard, near the dogwood tree that hasn't bloomed in years. She watches these boys step into cream colored suits and cover their heads with nets. They are silent while they work—pulling slates of honeycomb covered in bees from the crates they've brought and slotting them into the giant wooden hive they constructed in the time it took her to brew a pot of coffee.

She is drinking a cup of this, black, by the back bay window when she hears one—so close it sounds like something unzipping inside her. It lands on the thumb of her coffee hand. Thick-furred, it stills and drops to the ground, though she has not swatted it. She imagines it must have stung one of the boys and made its way to her to die. She picks it up and drops it into her coffee. It plops deep into the wet dark before floating to the top like a yellow bead. She continues sipping, watching the boys, thinking how nice it would be to sell her own jars of roadside honey, to stir a little into her coffee every morning.
Peg knew about the rabbit because the girl had told her about it. They'd been out
front at the same time, dragging their trash cans up their shared driveway to the curb.
There was no way the girl could know this, but Peg was crazy about rabbits.

"They really keep this lawn nice and fresh, don't they," Peg had said. She tried to
be friendly with the girl whenever she saw her. She really did.

"It's almost an oasis," the girl agreed, flipping her dark hair out of her face. "You
know there's a big fat rabbit that lives in the back?" She hoisted her trash can, nearly
empty, up near Peg's brimming one. "He's enormous. And friendly. He comes right up to
me when I'm back there reading."

The girl seemed cheery enough, but Peg knew it was an act. The girl's eyes were
swollen under the light make-up she wore. And besides, Peg wasn't deaf. She heard the
crying every night. Identical single unit apartments stacked on top of each other, the girl's
bedroom was directly over hers. And from the sound of it, they had similar ideas about
where a bed should go.

The first night it happened Peg felt bothered and indecent, as if she were listening
to a stranger vomit or have sex. But now, the girl's sobs more or less put her to sleep. It
was always the same. They'd start up slowly, sputtering like an old lawn mower. Then the
girl would give a few desperate wails. The noise made the hair on Peg's arms prick and
no matter how used to it she got, it always made her a little excited. She thought of how
she used to pretend she was afraid when she watched horror movies with her ex-husband
and how he'd let her grab his arm as tight as she wanted. Even when she was a little
scared, she'd always been happy during those movies, deep down so happy. After the
wails the girl would fall into a soft, rhythmic sobbing. Peg always fell asleep before the
crying ended. And lately, she found she couldn't sleep at all until it started.

She knew the girl had a few odd jobs, babysitting and waitressing. Her schedule
wasn't reliable like Joe's, the man who'd lived there before her. Since he'd worked at a
bank downtown Peg always knew she had complete privacy between the weekday hours
of 9 and 5, and she had loved Joe for that. Since moving into the apartment, Peg marveled
at how she could live so close to these people and interact with them so little. The dirt
from their clothes mingled in the same basement washing machine, for heaven's sake. Joe
had been so easy to get to know through the walls. He did laundry on Tuesdays, he left in
gym clothes every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evening. His teen daughter came
over some Saturdays, and he never brought women home. He watched the 10 o'clock
news and had a Sunday paper delivered to him.

The girl though, she was a true stranger. There were never TV noises, and she
listened to classical music and pop music and an electronic type that vibrated Peg's walls
on two horrible, separate occasions. In the beginning, Peg had hoped to catch the girl
smoking marijuana or stumbling home drunk-- that'd be just enough to sum her up. But
she never did. The worst part was that the girl never even introduced herself! Peg
summoned up the courage to look through her mail once, but all she found was a piece of
junk mail intended for Joe. Because there was no telling when she'd pop back home in the middle of the day, Peg never looked again. Some days the girl didn't leave at all.

Once the sobbing started, Peg began to dread the evenings where the girl went off to work the late shift at the restaurant across the street. Peg knew that's where the girl was going because she would wear the black slacks and white button up and the ridiculous little bow tie that the servers there wore.

Peg's daughter had taken her to the restaurant once, for Mother's Day. Her divorce had just been finalized and she'd spent the day moving into the little apartment. Recently retired from the high school secretary position she'd held for 30 proud years, the house they'd lived in since they were married had already been sold and halfway packed when her husband informed her they wouldn't be moving together. For years, they'd planned to move to Florida when they both retired. But why go so far alone? The little apartment was all she could find in same neighborhood on such short notice.

She'd taken care to set the place up so that it resembled the old house as much as possible. Though the kitchen was much smaller, she arranged the appliances in the exact same order they'd been in for years, packing the counter space as tight as possible. She hung the russet curtains that matched the rabbit patterned pillows, and set out every single glass and porcelain rabbit figurine they'd owned. Her daughter picked one up indignantly when she came inside to pick Peg up that evening.

"Aren't you ready for something different mom?"

"Your father and I's first pet was a rabbit! I love them, he loves them! You adored Bunny when you were little. And I think the place looks nice."
"Dad loves Tasha," Jane muttered under her breath, setting the trinket down. Peg pretended not to hear the reference to her ex-husband’s mistress who now lived with him the condo in Florida they’d picked out together. As far as Peg was concerned, the only version of her husband that existed was the one who insisted that they look every rabbit in the pet store in the eye before picking one. This version of her husband named the tan little thing they took home Bunny as an homage to the clerk who’d reprimanded them for calling the RABBITS bunnies. This version cried on her shoulder when they buried Bunny in the backyard 11 years later. This version of her husband did not live in Florida with Tasha his soul mate, but was away on a trip, and could come home any day now.

"Maybe we can look for some new curtains at least," Jane said, ushering Peg out the door.

The girl's restaurant was something else. The white cloth napkins were tied in the strangest knots and placed on top of clean gold rimmed plates and tables set with far too many forks and spoons per person. There'd been a complicated knot in the napkin over the bread basket as well. Peg thought all the knots looked like mice up there on the plates, waiting to be stroked or fed. She wondered if the girl ever tied the knots in the napkins.

***

It was a Friday when Peg finally saw the rabbit. She'd glanced out her kitchen window after lunch and happened to see the girl reading. She was sitting on one of those chairs that can fold up into a little pouch and the pouch was hanging neatly on the back of the chair. The woman had to admit the girl seemed very tidy. Peg was about to go call
Jane when sure enough, out came the rabbit. The girl didn't notice it at first, but then the rabbit really did get right up next to her, nibbling on the grass by her feet. The girl set her book on her lap and stayed very still, watching the rabbit, not trying to touch it or take a picture of it on her phone. Peg wanted to go out there and get a picture for herself. She was about to go and get her cell phone for the picture or maybe even her binoculars when a big truck rumbled by out front, and the rabbit sprinted into the little thicket of trees and brush that separated their yard from the back alley.

The girl watched the rabbit go but did not start reading again. Instead she stared into the thicket for a long time. Peg watched for a while, to see if maybe the girl was watching the rabbit do something interesting in the brush. But the thicket was still. Peg watched the girl watching the thicket, and it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. The girl had sunglasses on and a shadow from the telephone pole ran across her lips. For the first time since her divorce, Peg ached with a loneliness that was as strange to her as the girl was.

Peg didn't see the girl leave for work that night, but the crying never started. Peg tried not to listen for it at first. She lay in bed for what seemed like hours, staring at the ceiling, wondering if her daughter would like the little tea shop that had just opened across the street and whether or not she had enough eggs for a nice omelet in the morning. But she kept picturing the girl, that dark shadow on her lips. She listened to the soft whir of the air conditioning unit and her own heart, thumping loudly now. She turned away from the ceiling to face the wall instead. She thought of the rabbit out back in the
brush, its little nose wiggling like mad in the night air. Tears beginning to well, she wondered if she'd ever really heard the girl cry.
Ray Price

Jim came over and asked to borrow the paper. The truth was that's all that happened. It was Saturday, and somehow the paper boy had skipped them, and he couldn't bear to pass the day without one. The morning was cool, but the kids were already playing outside, their voices chirping like sneakers on a gym floor. Jim stood in the front hallway with his slippers on while Lillian went to fetch the paper, though she was only half finished, and Ham would want it when he came home.

That's all that happened. She gave Jim the newspaper that belonged to her household. Jim took the paper that should have been waiting on the kitchen island when Ham came home from the extra Saturday shift he'd been working for the last few months. But Lillian's stomach shuddered with guilt. She'd pictured the same scene hundreds of times. Only in this scene, the kids were at school and Jim was in his work clothes and brown oxfords. He'd be home on his lunch break and come over on some pretense. "Ham will never love you like I love you," he'd say, putting his hand behind her neck. She would never do more than give Jim her newspaper, but she loved him. She knew he had no idea, but the way he'd stood in those slippers; she felt as if the adultery she dreamed about nightly had finally been committed. Letting him into her home was an irreconcilable sin.
But what could she do? As useless penance, she'd cook Ham a big breakfast and serve it to him for dinner when he got home, because she knew it killed him to miss out on a good weekend breakfast to go to those work meetings. While he was eating, she'd say they needed syrup and take the car down to buy a new paper. But she had a few hours. First she'd clean the house and forget about Jim.

To cheer herself, she put on the Ray Price record her sister had given her when she and Ham left Memphis and moved to Cleveland for Ham's job. In Memphis, she would have never loved anyone but Ham, she was sure. But in Cleveland, she could only love him in the nostalgic way she loved her childhood room or her mother's homemade soup. It'd taken her almost a decade to realize it wasn't Cleveland that made her uncomfortable and unhappy, but trying to love Ham in Cleveland. It was like trying to love her childhood room forever-- nightly closing her eyes to the room she really lived in to picture it, the rose wallpaper and the stuffed animals, mangling the nostalgia past use.

Lillian started in on the living room tables with a duster, but then "Crazy Arms" came on.

*Now blue ain't the word for the way that I feel*

*And the storm's brewing in this heart of mine*

*This ain't no crazy dream I know that it's real*

*And you're someone else's love now you're not mine*

How had she forgotten about this song? Had she wanted to hear it all along? Her cheer gone, she went to the kitchen and pried open a beer, because it seemed exactly the thing you were supposed to do while listening to Ray Price.
Up here, she only ever listened to Ray Price when she was alone. He felt like a secret to her. No one would ever understand how, though sad as those twangy songs were, he made her feel like she had just learned to rouge her lips and was laughing with the cherry lines from the front seat of a convertible. This was how she felt about Jim. They'd never had more than a few neighborly conversations, but he gleamed with possibility.

***

Lillian was finishing a fourth beer when the kids bounded in and flipped on the TV, asking what was for supper as they streaked by. She'd wasted the whole afternoon, drinking beer and listening to "Crazy Arms"! Frantic, she threw the bottles away and wiped a rag over the kitchen counters. Forget cleaning, Ham would be home soon, and his breakfast dinner needed to be waiting on the table. She owed him that, at the very least.

Distracted by a new wave of guilt, the garage door startled her as she was taking the carton of eggs from the fridge and she lost her grip on them. All twelve eggs burst from the carton, painting the kitchen with yolk. Lillian was kneeling in the slime when Ham came whistling in.

"I gave our paper to Jim," she sobbed. "I wanted to cook you breakfast for dinner to make up for it but I listened to Ray Price first and he made me sad and told me to drink a beer. And now my crazy arms have ruined everything."
She tried to wipe her tears but her hands were covered in yolk. Ham kneeled down beside her and smeared the yellow away with his thumbs. He brought her up to a kitchen chair and got her a glass of water, stepping carefully around the carnage. He wiped down the kitchen with silent care. When he finished, he kissed Lillian on the forehead before leaving the room.

"Ray Price makes me sad too," he said.
A Long List of Things To Do

Anna hated that she had to stay and live in his world after Jack left. She hated the faded little ghost images she saw of him everywhere she wanted to go. She was madder at the town, she sometimes thought, than she was at him. She hated the strip malls and the bus stops and the people waiting at the bus stops, even if they had children or dogs with them. She hated the brand new outdoor mall the town was so proud of and that she herself had been happy to see open. The town's geography, which she hadn't noticed before he left, drove her mad now. She said awful things about the town on the phone to her friends, but she refused to talk about him. If asked by someone she couldn't be rude to, she said she didn't know where he went (which was a lie), or why (also a lie), and that she had no way to contact him (quite a lie, since they had been in touch several times).

***

They met on a bus, after the woman behind them puked on their backs. Anna boarded after him, and had her pick of isle seats-- she could sit beside him, or beside the woman in the cardigan and slacks, who'd later be sobbing apologies, and sputtering about a pregnancy test. If Anna ever thought about it, she would probably regard the moment she decided to sit next to him, where she'd share the brunt of the acrid shower rather than remain parallel to its path, as one of those fulcrum moments in life. But she never did.
Shocked and dripping, they got off together at the next stop. She'd wanted to cry, but he was laughing so she pretended to find it funny too. They discovered that they'd both been riding to the university, and, vomit crusting on their backs in the sun, both decided they wouldn't be attending their classes that morning. He surveyed the area around the bus stop.

"Well comrade-- looks like it's either McGoggard's Bar and Grille, or we try our luck with the Joneses," he gestured to a bar at the corner, and then swept his hand down a street lined with brownstones.

They filed into the bar and slipped into the bathrooms before the bartender could shoot them any looks. Alone, she took stock of the damage. Maybe it was a little bit funny. She penned an email in her head:

Dear Professor Huffman,

I was unable to make your class this morning because a possibly pregnant woman threw up on me on the bus and I decided to clean up in a bar instead of grabbing a taxi or phoning a friend. Please accept my deepest apologies. I promise to shower before Friday's class.

Smiling genuinely now, she pulled her shirt off and stuffed it into the garbage. Deeming the remaining camisole clean, she scrubbed her hair in the sink with hand soap, and used the entire bottle of hand sanitizer from her unscathed backpack on her neck and shoulders and hands. When she finished, he was waiting for her at the bar, hair also wet, with two beers.

"God, you smell like a doctor's office. We've earned a drink," he said.
"You still have vomit on your neck."

***

The night he told her he was leaving, they'd been at the bar near her new apartment. She had moved out of the city a few months after Jack did, following him to his hometown where he had a job with his dad's company. She was going to wait tables while she applied to graduate schools anyways, and she could do that anywhere. Couldn't she? They'd spent the night deciding whether they'd rather kill, marry, or fuck various mutual friends and famous people. Nathan, who lived in the apartment across from Anna's, had been chiming in all night from a few seats down.

"Fuck-- I'd totally fuck Marnie."

"Nathan, you've never met Marnie."

Jack told her quietly, while Nathan was in the bathroom and the bartender was fetching their third round. He felt restless and bored. He hated working 9-5. He'd taken a position teaching English in South Korea. He would leave in a month. It wasn't a big deal. They could take a little break and be together later, when life didn't feel so urgent.

"Marry Marnie, fuck Angelina, kill Nathan," he said in Nathan's nasaly drawl when he kissed her, stunned, at her door at the end of the night.

Because she always imagined she'd leave first, she refused to ask him to stay. But he never asked her to come. In a week, she became jealous and petty-- Kill/ Marry/ Fuck incited her. He seemed to find the new vileness reassuring, so he found ways to bring up
other girls whenever possible. He talked about girls they both knew in college, he talked about the girls she worked at the restaurant with, he sent her articles about famous girls. He found pictures of South Korean girls. She had nothing to worry about, he'd say. Why was she getting jealous?

She stayed silent through all of this, too shocked to be angry but hurt enough for him to keep it up. She cried about it in front of him just once, and he patted her head and said she wouldn't even miss him. Then he took her in his arms and unsnapped her bra through her shirt and did the whole thing. Early in the morning, she woke to him pulling on his pants. He said he had a long list of things to do. He said to go back to sleep.

***

One week after he left, a pair of hitch hikers and their dog set up camp in the patch of gravel between County Road 237 and the parking lot of the restaurant she worked at. She watched them through the blinds while she filled salt and pepper shakers before the lunch rush. Though covered in dirt, the fist-sized sunflowers that peeked from the folds of the woman's long skirt were almost cheery. The man, his white shirt tied around his wiry waist, kept twirling her around so that the skirt would swell up around them, and it looked like they were dancing with flowers. The dog stood on their only backpack, panting in the heat. After the waltz, she watched the woman pour water into its mouth before taking a small drink for herself.

They were outside for three and a half hours, alternating shifts with their thumbs up by the rode, before the man came inside. Anna watched him slip on his shirt and force
his hair down with a wet palm before pushing the door. He blinked in the restaurant's dim lighting but nodded at Anna, who'd quickly busied herself at the counter. He had a handful of coins in his left hand, and used his right to shield his eyes at the menu, the sun still stinging. It took him a long time to decide what to order, his lips working out the prices of each item.

"One bbq beef sandwich, a small orange soda, and a large water please," he ordered tentatively, like she had the power to refuse his service.

"Where are you trying to go?" she asked, feeling guilty about his meekness as she sorted his coins into the register's appropriate slots.

"I guess we're trying to go anywhere that counts as east coast. We started in San Jose," he dropped the change she gave him into the tip jar, and she felt her face flush.

"It was a joke at first, really. We'd had a fight, and I told her I'd walk all the way to the other coast to get away from her. She said to go right ahead, so I packed a little bag and started walking. A few minutes later she comes running up behind me with the dog. Now here we are in Ohio-- too hot to walk, too happy to stop."

Back outside, she watched the man split the sandwich three ways and hold the soda straw steady while the woman took a sip. Though they posed for a photo with a family who'd eaten at the diner, no one else slowed for them. They were still there, thumbs out in the smarmy dusk, when the place closed down at nine.

Late that night, Anna went to the bar alone for the first time since she'd moved. Nathan was there, and he pulled his beer with him down the bar to sit next to her. When she let him buy her a drink, he positioned his knee so it was touching hers, and gave her a
little nudge every time he said something that would be italicized in print. While he talked, she watched the bar back scrub a stack of foamy glasses. He had a perfect rhythm, staring down into the water, sweating a little-- "scrubscrub scrubscrub scrubscrub scrubscrub, dunk, dip". Clean glasses piled up by the sink, so easily rinsed. She thought about the traveling couple with their dog sharing the orange soda and bbq sandwich. She said sure to another drink. She said sure all night.
Jim and Colette were up early the morning of the first horse race. They were calm, that Saturday in May, and worked through Colette's to-do list without stopping for lunch. Colette's doctor had recently told her to "slow down", but she felt fine in the newly warm air. And she did move slowly, taking her time with the flowerbeds, awestruck by their ability to appear so vibrant every year, caressing their petals like they were babies, soft and new and pink. They looked up at each other when the school bus chuffed by.

"We haven't had lunch Colette!" Jim exclaimed, and they put their tools away and went inside satisfied.

Together, they made caprese salads with basil from the yard and extra sweet lemonade. They sat in the living room and Jim flipped on the television.

"We could have missed it!" Colette exclaimed, as Jim clicked onto a screen of gleaming horses.

"I wouldn't have missed it," he said, setting the remote down.

They watched the horses mill around in the sunlight and listened to chances and odds, chewing on stringy mozzarella.

"There he is!" Colette exclaimed, pointing to a solemn brown horse with white stripes down his flanks. The camera focused in on the horse too, pausing on him while an announcer read his stats. Brownstone Breeze, it seemed, had a prize-winning lineage—
the very fibers that made his muscles and bones were destined for greatness. He reminded
Colette of the daylilies in her front yard. His success, she knew, was just as inevitable as
the yearly birth of her flowers.

Jim and Colette had long considered themselves horseracing aficionados. Early in
their marriage, when they still held hands while walking, before Colette's miscarriages,
Jim had won $500 on a local race. Not the type to look a gift horse in the mouth, as he
liked to say, he never bet on a race again. But Collette had picked the winning horse that
day. She was sure he'd conveyed something through his gait, in the chic flick of his neck.
Colette was terrified at the thought of losing anything, money included, so she never
contested Jim's policy. But even without money on the books, she liked to pick a horse
every race. She wasn't right all the time; how could she be? But she knew she could still
spot a true winner and even before all the hype, she was sure Brownstone Breeze was the
ticket.

They watched Brownstone Breeze win the Kentucky Derby that afternoon as if
they'd been waiting for the race since his birth.

"I knew it!" Colette cried as he streaked past the finish line. "I'm telling you right
now, this horse is going to win the Triple Crown."

When the Preakness Stakes came around a few weeks later, Jim made them gin
and tonics with mint and Colette wore a floral dress. They were tipsy by the time
Brownstone Breeze streaked into first place. "America's Sweethorse wins again! One
away from the Triple Crown!" the announcer hollered, while Colette danced around the
living room and Jim clapped his hands laughing. Eventually he got up and changed into
his garden jeans to work in the yard. But Colette stayed in front of the television,
watching the horses and their jockeys and listening to interviews. The way she felt about the horse, watching his giant marble brown eyes while they interviewed his jockey, thrilled her. She hadn't been this sure about something in a long time.

For the Belmont Stakes, they went out to the neighborhood bar a short drive up the road. "Brownstone Breeze and Craft Brews" was etched across the front sign in chalk and Colette touched it as she walked by. The soft yellow of a "B" powdered her finger.

The bartender they liked, the girl with purple hair who gave them an extra pickle each with their sandwiches and told stories about her blind Maltese, wasn't there. Her replacement was holding court with a group of women on the evils of Bud Light when they hoisted onto the stools with the best view of the TV.

"Where's Sonia?" Jim asked, when the boy looked their way.

"She moved to L.A. with her boyfriend" I'm Dave. He shook Jim's hand and smiled at Colette.

"I'll have a craft brew please," she said.

Dave smirked and slid a laminated menu in front of her. On the front was a long list of beers, with names like Little Man Big Stout and Bee Free IPA.

"What do the numbers mean?" Colette asked Jim.

"That's the abv" Dave butt in. "Alcohol by volume. So you know how strong they are. And they're all made locally, see?" he pointed to the breweries listed under each beer.

Jim and Colette poured over the list and each settled on a beer.
"That one has the highest abv!" Colette cried when Jim ordered his pick. He smiled and flicked one of her dangling plastic earrings.

"We'll have a hummus plate too," he said to Dave.

Though it was bright outside, the bar was dim and Colette could see dust glittering in the gaps of sunlight. She drank her thick beer and watched the place buzz. There was a party on upstairs and waitresses were running up and down the steps. The race was getting close when a woman came down from the party. Her tan legs were beautiful and long under black shorts and an expensive looking white blouse, her brown hair a ponytailed afterthought. A few kids were following her ambiguously. She stopped looking around when she saw the TV.

"Kids! Go upstairs! Get my purse!"

She climbed onto the stool next to Colette and ordered a beer.

"I'll need to see your ID ma'am," Dave said winking.

"I have six kids!" She was already a little drunk. "Look around! They're my ID."

A little curly haired boy came up beside her stool and started crying. She patted him on the head.

"Louis go find Lily and play with her."

The boy toddled away and she turned to Jim and Colette with her beer. "I've been waiting for this race all week!" she said. "Are you here to watch the race?"
Colette was giddy and a little buzzed. Everybody loved the horse. This beautiful woman loved the horse. He was beloved. He was theirs. He belonged to everyone who loved him.

"We are! We're here to watch Brownstone Breeze win the triple trick!"

"It's triple crown" Dave chimed in, smiling at the woman.

The woman ignored him and put her hand on the shoulder of a different crying kid. "Do you have any kids?" she asked Jim and Colette.

Colette took a long sip of her beer while Jim told the woman no and slid his arm around her back.

"Oh my god you two are so cute! I hope I'm as cute as you when I'm old!" the woman said.

The race was about to start and people from upstairs crowded around the bar to watch. Dave turned off the music and put the TV volume as loud as it would go. Colette was flustered, and it all seemed to happen quicker than the last two races. Somehow she lost track of him and wasn't sure who won until she looked over at Jim.

"What can you do?" the woman said. She picked up the kid beside her and bounced him on her lap. She gave him a little sip of beer and laughed when he made a face. Colette convinced Jim to stay for one more. The woman's husband came downstairs with all the kids and took her home. Jim switched to water and tried to convince Colette to leave, but she kept drinking. She tried all the craft beers. People moved in and out of
the seat beside her, and she told all of them about the race. "I'm drinking because that
damn horse didn't get the triple crown trick!"

They were the last people there. Dave told her quietly that they were done closing
up and it was time to go, and Jim held her hand as she wobbled across the mopped floor.
They'd let her stay until the very last minute. They'd let her stay as late as they could.
Save Your Handmaids

On April 9, 1522 Pope Adrian VI, Adrian of Utrecht, in post-mass oil stained robes, took the head of a martyr from its tomb. 1,219 year old cheekbones between his hands-- impossible blood ran-- slick with the oil on his robe.

What I remember most is the sound of flaky bible pages fluttering against the mic on the priest's lapel. If God ever whispered, that is what it would sound like-- a chalky shiver, not wind chimes or rustling leaves. I also remember laughing with Gabe every week while the priest sauntered down the aisle singing the opening song, his Adam's apple bulging from the flesh of his neck. We'd do it silently, mouths quivering and eyes watering, faces tilted up as if in childlike adoration. I'm sure that now, no one would believe that Gabe had ever spent a Thursday morning mass laughing. I'm sure that those who saw her then remember the water in her blue eyes as tears of love and devotion. They probably claim to remember her fiery hair blazing a little brighter in the stained light of the church-- that they knew all along God would call her.

I'm not saying she wasn't special. Everything Gabe did was filled with a kind of grace. Just not the kind they try to pin on her. She commanded thoughtfulness from those around her, so that by the time we were in eighth grade our entire class was not just well behaved, but bizarrely compassionate, for a group of adolescents. Sure, we'd rough each other up on the swath of busted up blacktop that was the school's playground. But when
Jesse chipped my tooth during a touch football game, for instance, he came with me to the nurse’s office, and rode silently in the back seat of my mom’s mini-van to hold my hand at the dentist. As far as I know, no one ever laughed at him, the way twelve year olds do when a boy does something nice for a girl. We weren’t without pubescent love. We had our secret crushes and whispered them in the lunch line. Some weekends, we’d play spin the bottle at Meredith Hadman's house. Who really knew what happened in that third floor bathroom? Who really cared? Gabe was there for all of it, her eyes so light you could almost see through them.

Gabe would later say that she'd always heard God calling her, and I still wonder what that sounds like to her. In religion class, they told us everyone was called to something. Some of us, like the thick necked priest, would be called to a special life with God. You had to listen carefully for this. You couldn't miss it.

"Maybe God will call us both," Gabe said after class, her face flushed with excitement.

"How will we know what it sounds like?" I asked her, worried, playing with the hem of the skirt that I didn't roll up, because Gabe didn't roll hers up.

"It will just sound like your thoughts," she said, taking my hand. Back then, like God, Gabe could have told me to think anything. She could have told any of us to think anything. This was how I understood grace then—as a power that could permeate even my thoughts.

***
But everything started to change after Gabe stole the host to put in Emily’s lunchbox. Alone in the bathroom after Mass that day, she’d slid the wafer out of her knee length navy sock to show me.

“Put this in Emily’s lunchbox!” she said, her eyes gleaming. “You’re always next to her when we line up. We’ll say we can make it appear, like a miracle, before she opens it up.”

I remember obeying her thoughtlessly, like she’d asked me to pass her a pencil sharpener—even forgetting about the miracle we were to perform during the noisy walk from our classroom to the cafeteria. When we all sat down, Gabe was silent. It took Emily a while to notice it, so we were all a few bites into our peanut butter and jellies and crustless ham sandwiches when she screamed.

"How’d this get in here?!" she half cried, half giggled, holding it up to the light. She looked like a little priest in her starched white oxford, ready to bless the wafer. I looked over at Gabe, waiting for her to fess up, or take control of her miracle somehow. But her face was white and she was completely still, as if rooted in fear.

Everyone in the tiny lunch room stared at Emily, some giggling, some gasping. Pandering to her audience now, she raised her face to the host, murmuring in fake Latin.

"In zee babdium mordium blasfium!"

She turned to Stephanie, in fits to her right.

"The body of Christ!"

Stephanie opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue.

"Amen," Stephanie said, solemn now, swallowing the wafer with a gulp of strawberry Hi-C.
The lunch room snickered and started chewing again while Emily fished out the apple slices she'd been looking for in the first place. I looked down the row to see Gabe, hands folded, head bent low. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw a tear roll from her closed eyes. I wanted to ask her if she was okay, why she hadn't done the miracle, but she was too far away. Plus, Jesse had made a face mask out of the cheese from his pizza, and Emily's host was old news.

But we'd hear about it later. The next day, Gabe was absent and both Emily and Stephanie missed recess and lunch. During eighth period, instead of lining us up to change for gym, Mrs. Tee told us to stay put. The priest came in, holding Gabe's hand. She didn't look at me, or at any of us, and she didn't laugh even though the priest was walking in the slow way we always found hilarious.

I knew immediately that she hadn't told him about our miracle. Instead, she'd told on Emily and Stephanie for playing with the host, for degrading it. Because we all encouraged it by laughing, we were all lectured as if we had consumed the Body of Christ in jest. We were reminded of the severity of the sacrament of Communion. We were reminded of the vows we had taken five years ago, as third graders (vows most of us actually didn't remember). We were left to say the rosary in penance until the final bell rang. But the real punishment was watching Gabe stand near the priest, looking small and pale, her eyes fixed on her feet. To the class, she must have looked humiliated, propped up next to him like a martyr for tattling. Maybe she'd wanted that all along. What I really think, is that she planned to work the miracle but chickened out at the last minute—she couldn't make herself think like God. At the time I felt as though I had failed her.
somehow, in my inability to empathize with her motivations. I understood then that regardless of how hard I tried, I'd continue failing her.

By the time Emily and Stephanie returned from their week suspension from lunch and recess, Gabe's strange power had shifted to them. We were no longer ruled by Gabe's commanding grace, but by the whims of two twelve year olds who had suffered an injustice at its expense. I still sat with Gabe at lunch, just the two of us now, and we commiserated like we always had. Around that time though Jesse kissed me, not on a dare at a party but on the couch in his basement, and I didn't tell Gabe. Lent had begun and she was fasting, eating a single tortilla with salsa rolled into it each day. That last spring, I think I might have rolled up my skirt a little.

***

Because I switched to the public high school, I didn't see Gabe much after that. Though we probably talked on the phone every day that first month apart, it's hard to remember that time now. Jesse stayed at St. Vincent’s too, and he and Gabe started dating. They came to a few of my soccer games, sitting alone in the top bleachers, always cheering the hardest. They'd find a friend to ask me to St. Vincent's homecoming dance each year and Gabe and I would scour the thrift store racks for dresses together, her in her uniform, skirt still too long, and me in my blue jeans. I couldn't tell you what college she went to, and though I'm sure we probably said goodbye, I can't remember how or where.

I found out that she'd left Jesse and school to join the convent after her mom ran into mine in the grocery store.
"No one's surprised," my mom told me over the phone.

But the news came over me like an ice bath. Though we hadn't spoken in years, I was sure she would have called before leaving. Though I no longer believed it necessary to listen, she was supposed to tell me what it sounded like when God spoke to you.

To be fair, though her mother sent me her address in an e-mail with pictures she took of Gabe right before she left, grinning like crazy in the postulant uniform she sewed herself, I never wrote to her either. I felt petty about feeling betrayed, and told myself I had nothing to say. When Gabe’s invitation came two years later, I left it in the mailbox for two weeks before opening it, like I sometimes did with bills or community newsletters. I would have left it there longer, but Jesse called.

“Are you going?”

“Going where?”

“Don’t be coy Amelia. To her first profession of vows.”

“I don’t know, I haven’t opened the letter.”

“We’re going. I’ll drive.”

“Is this where she marries Jesus?” I had the invitation open now, not from Gabe, but from Sister James, to a Profession of First Vows ceremony at the convent in Nashville. The invitation was simple, and only my address was handwritten in her big looping cursive.

“She only gets to invite a few people. And she spent the whole last year cloistered. Her whole family is dying to see her. Remember Isaak? He’s like 5 now. He probably doesn’t even remember her.”
“Why did she choose a boy’s name?”

“I’ll see you in two weeks.”

Jesse got us to Nashville in under four hours, racing down the highway, rolling the windows up and then down the entire time, like he couldn’t decide what kind of road trip he wanted. But we were still late, anxious in the morning traffic, sweating in a heat we weren’t used to. When we snuck in the back, Gabe was already standing by the altar in a white habit and veil, next to six identical women. I could smell the heat from outside clinging to us, the incense still fighting to settle in. Jesse’s blue oxford, pressed and clean hours ago, was clinging in crinkles to his back. Still adjusting to the dark stained glass filtered light, I couldn’t see Gabe’s face. Splotches of pulsing brightness ran across it, so I couldn’t tell her from the others standing beside her. She seemed almost ephemeral, like I’d always imagined Mary in eighth grade religion class.

“My dear sisters, what do you desire?” the priest, a lean man, his Adams apple invisible, was saying now.

“The mercy of God and yours,” their voices were flutelike—an octave I’d never heard Gabe reach.

Then suddenly, all seven of them were prone on the floor, their arms outstretched towards the priest’s feet, faces smashed on the floor. Their feet, in brown shoes, stuck out from the white of their garments, only one set perfectly pointed. To my right, a woman was sobbing softly, rubbing a rosary in her right hand. Something about the stance, their faces smashed to the ground, seemed too violent for the decadent chapel.
“Your superiors are already making plans for the rest of your lives,” the priest intoned, wafting incense over them.

“God save your handmaids,” they responded from the ground.

“Your lives do not make sense.”

“God save your handmaids.”

“You will go where the Church wants you to go, into the trenches of a broken and sinful world.”

“God save your handmaids.”

When they stood, I could see her face clearly. With her fiery hair covered in the white veil, her skin seemed a different shade entirely. Even her eyes were a different hue of blue.

Later at a reception, after the seven women cut a small cake together, each helping to hold the long knife, her mother told me she’d buzzed her hair off, because it was hot, and no one would ever see it again anyways. She spoke to all of us, her parents, her six little siblings, Jesse, me—all together. In front of us like an actress speaking to her fans, holding a piece of lemon cake, she told us that she was so happy we had come. She gave us a tour of the grounds, walking slowly, almost like the priest had walked all those years ago. When she said goodbye, it was to all of us collectively, like we were one big family, getting into the car to drive slowly back to Ohio.

***
Years later they gutted the old school, and due to some miscommunication the church went down with it. For a while, while the city and parish warred over contracts and instructions, demolition paused. The altar, light wooded, stood like a stalwart stage floating on a sea of broken grey and green tiles. The two stained glass windows on the only remaining wall stood muted in the dust like long loaves of bread. When I passed it for the first time on my way home from work, I felt exactly as I had watching Gabe prone at the altar—helpless, embarrassed even, at its nakedness. I wondered if Gabe would hear about the church, if she would mourn the loss of it. I wondered if she’d felt a pithy moment of purity, violent like the church’s demolition, or if she’d slipped into her new life easily, thinking all her own thoughts, believing she heard God in them.
MY MOTHER’S MISSING BEES

II
Cicadas

I.

This was the year cicadas
were supposed to come streaming
from the ground—
thousands of skeletons.
All awake at once.

You can't remember if they came
because it's quiet now--
winged insects swell,
like a stuck tongue, in the heat.
They make a kind of anti-noise
more like a smell— heady, mephitic, spiced.
They remind you of the bloating
in your gut. They remind you that you're heavy,
tired, and will never leave.

Or maybe they did return—
maniac beetles in the dusk,
for once not shells of themselves.
Bodies replete with bodies,
mothers and fathers to rogue cells
and that delirious, cyclical whir.

Maybe this is how your absence
feels, like a sticky,
vacant beehive—
ticking with a last inch of holiness,
as if anything sacred
can still be whispered here.

II.

I wanted you to love me
so much, that you wrote stories
of my father as a child.
III.

There's a moment between morning and night when the roaring inertia of past and present pauses—trembling like a seconds hand about to tick this moment into the next—when memory is weightless when you can't tell if the cicadas arrived or if what you hear is a memory—that summer cicadas streamed from the ground all awake at once.
Huertas

I don't imagine you still alive—
thin now, from cocaine
your skin a dark amber from the sun in Queretaro,
playing your *flauta* on the street,
pretending you don't speak English.

I promised I'd visit
that night with the red wine and the storm
when you came upstairs,
saw me crying and asked
"Are you drawing the dead cat?"
You hung the picture in your room,
though neither of us could pass
where she lay, black,
bloated from the rain.

For weeks after you left
I worried that you didn't exist,
that I never actually saw you bite
the fuzzed skin of a kiwi
or boil an octopus,
it's legs flopping out
of the pot to suction your wrist,
and that the hand-mixer— your Christmas present—
had been in the old Spanish house all along.

I imagine you standing on a porch,
fully clothed in the heat, halving an avocado.
You tooth the pale flesh from the seedless side.
And then, because you are proud, and high,
and on the wrong side of a border you hate
but are pulled to like a heavy magnet
you're gone. Of course a black cat yowls nearby.

It won't rain though.
You said it never rains in Queretaro.
Birth

I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of the way you enter a room, and try to know why I smell the way I smell.

Like a ghost who runs her library white fingers through my shower-wet hair—a reminder that I'm naked, sober.

I'm afraid of yarrow in my belly turning to bile, then lime—a slow green.

I'm afraid of birth, warm and chalklike, a farm fresh egg.
Three Kids

I can't remember
when I stopped hearing the cicadas.
That last barefoot summer
cracking like a cloudy moon
on the counter of dusk
to slip away in diesel night.

It's a story now—
when we ate grass
that smelled like onion
and peeled milky sheaths of bark
from the birch tree.

I can't say what we reached for
soaring up on the backyard's trampoline.
I can't say if we knew
to reach, the soles of our feet black,
shooting up to the leaves
where the cicada's static
crackle was infinite, still.
Queen Bee

How can you blame her—
gibbous moon body
bloated with thousands
of eggs that will hatch
to feed her sweet pearls
of royal jelly all her life. Leaving
is the only decision she makes.
Big Ugly

There's bird shit in my grandmother's left lung. That's what she tells me at least, wild eyed in a beige robe. We're on peeling porch chairs screened, with her orchids and jade plants, from the Florida sun. My grandmother wears expensive face creams and her house is on a country club with a manicured lawn and an azure pool she never swims in. She is not the type of elderly woman who keeps a tissue always, balled in one hand so that you see tiny flashes of white when she moves. She plays Bridge. And golf.

I cannot picture her young, with a Georgian father jailed for running moonshine, barefoot, ripping dead crayfish with stones on the bank of Big Ugly Creek. I can't picture the grouse, their feathered nostrils, or the wild turkeys. Maybe she chased them. Or maybe she never noticed them, just breathed in their shit in the dry summer air. She coughs on the porch by the pool and says this is all I took from that place.

But I read later that symptoms of Bird Fanciers Lung occur within 6 hours of exposure to the pigeon, parakeet or chicken feces. I want to tell her this— I mention her cough on an evening walk past the salmon and champagne houses. But she tells me to shh. "Take in the nature," she says and we come right up next to a buzzard swallowing skunk flesh while white gulls wail above us.
Come Down Corn

A bird fell down our chimney last night.  
It’s stuck in the old fireplace  
behind a straw tinged wall  
put up to prevent fires.

I hear its grizzled wings thrash,  
its blonde beak  
open in the soot.

It's like the time last summer,  
when I found that dead little thing,  
perfect and clean and stone-like on my porch,  
and we didn't speak until we'd buried her  
between thick trees that sizzled with fireflies,  
at the edge of a darkening field.

On the way home, you said the corn  
looked like miles of slender, green women,  
clutching their amber babies.  
I said come down, corn.

Tonight we’ll eat pasta without sauce  
while I slice lemons into our water,  
the bite softened between ice cubes,  
while a bird dies behind us.  
Hundreds of yellow suns will  
appear in patterns against the night.
Dog

We heard them before we saw them, grinding up the gravel road to park by the barn in a darkness steaming with the sling-shot wind up of almost morning. We watched from the field that glittered like ash as the feed corn bent arthritically in the hot breeze while thick mosquitoes sucked from our haunches.

We watched them drag shovels behind the wood pile, to dig between the crabapple trees, their shadows like cockroaches on their backs, legs rowing at the night— desperate, trivial.

We smelled the dead thing before they pulled it swaddled and heavy, too big for a yard, from the van—the woman not helping but stroking its back as they walked to the little yawn they'd made in the ground and dropped it, our hearts racing. The ground shook to welcome a body.
Burying Goldie

When the dog died on the kitchen floor
they buried him right then in the cloudy night,
so that in the morning the house would not appear
as it does after a long trip away—
all the wood frames and doors three shades darker—
and so they wouldn't taste the metal
from their spoons when they ate their cereal.
Beehive

The bees were a gift from her son. When the hive came, a chorus of little growls, she had them place it on the scar where the family dog had been buried on a cloudy August night, between crabapple trees, at the edge of the field that she liked to pretend was the sea—the way on a bright day it seemed to pulse and sparkle. She thought a little industry on that sleepy corner would be nice—the bees with their permanent buzz.

Winter that year was sour with cold. When it warmed, ice retreating in rivulets, she found the hive empty—not a single thawing bee body anywhere.

By the time summer came, it was easy to forget what the cold had done. She liked to imagine that one evening, just before dusk, Goldie had heaved up and lumbered after them as they lifted not up, but out into the heart of the field, his tongue out, the bees quiet now, all the creatures happy in the corn.
Southbound

Southbound, the only passengers on a bus
that stank of piss and the sea,
you cried in my lap and told me
how when your family dog died
at midnight in your kitchen
you hadn't been there to help bury him
in the field by your house.
You told me that even though your brother said
the night was cloudy and hot with darkness
you picture it naked with light—
the sky sandy with stars, your mother's hair glowing.
You say you can remember being there
you can feel the brick place mark in your hands.
As if this should reassure me.
Salve

Your apology sets me off like a top—your name is burnt orange to me, still.

For years
I could thumb
the crust of it—
an earned wound.

Now, it will
slide away
like absolution.
Ceremony

That place is holy—
not churchlike
but unsolved,
like some god bent down
to lick the earth
and left,
everything growing
otherworldly
in his saliva.

Nights, fox eyes
peer from the field
and mockingbirds
talk through the dark
while Orion
yawns into the sky.

As a child, I played
Queen on the dirt pile,
squashed baby crabapples,
barefoot with my brother
and picked the ticks
from my sister's hair.

Because I've never been there
in a storm, I imagine
it never storms there.
It is my world's
only celestial place.

After I left the dog died;
they buried him there.
Ceremony, I'm sure,
it would have been
the closest
I'd ever been to a god.
Windmills

There are windmills at the end of the earth. I've seen them churning sun milk clouds. There's a bar too, but it was closed. This is what I wrote on the page you ripped from my journal to toss in the sea.

You came up behind me like a bandit with a scalpel— a clean slit, the page twirled like an insect wing fulfilling its part without the whole of a body. I saw your face reflected in the rotten emerald waves and suddenly I believed in ghosts.

The only night you touched me, the bed cracked in two — I was so cruel in my description of reckoning. Later, the sky sick with sunset, it would have been too easy to push me from where we sat watching the water jump and shake like white dogs.
Spring comes like morning
spider film—delicate gauze
for winter's bloodspots.
Even the earthworms seem
weak in their stretch.

All the bees are dead
again. Their bodies pile
like sand in the hive—
brown husks of the buzz
we had bet our fertility on.

A graveyard will not
solve this—it is no
time for ceremony,
while the world tingles
like a sleeping limb.

We all push like Monarchs
to unfurl our wet wings—
too intent on flight
to mourn what has beat us to drought.
We will not have
honey this year.
The Crowd

I sheared your head
in the smarmy blue moon light.
Like a dream we both were having—
some underwater scene—
the clippers paused on your neck
for what seemed like the whole night,
until we couldn’t tell
its grainy whine from the cicadas.

In the dream there would have been sex,
tears. But there are neither.
After you left I stayed to watch the waxed moon,
your hair at my feet, almost purple in the glow.
I felt not a loss but a silence—
like we were suddenly strangers in an agnostic crowd
such selfish inertia, so peopled, so blind.

We will never be sundered from
this sick crust of loneliness.
Cotton

The trees are indignant
in their loneliness.
At dusk, fog oozes
towards their slender wrists
like they could hold
on to anything—
lukewarm in the gray,
leaves flapping like trout.

In the silty sound of speaking
through dentures, my grandmother
tells me of a dream where
she wakes covered in bees.
They swab her like cotton,
and smell of berries.

I think, I have haunted her
in my inability
to keep a thing.
In my nightmares, the hive
cracks open in a shotgun
blast, but nothing comes streaming
to pile in mountains.
My Mother’s Missing Bees

My mother's missing bees
live on a sunflower farm in Colorado.
I think she told them to go—
something about the way she cared for them,
lulling them with pine smoke
when she visited the box
so they'd never be angry,
they'd always have everything.

Something about that white suit,
the net over her face,
told them to search
the way people search—
haunted with loneliness
until they find what they're looking for.

The bees do not remember my mother,
her bee suit hanging now, unused,
as they suck from yellow-lashed eyes—
remembering is not their job.
But she'll think of them, I'm sure,
when she notices winter birdsong
or catches a glimpse of mountains, or sea.
Curio

The night before the bee appeared
she dreamed of a dove.
It staggered over her balcony,
it's white wings pumping,
gripping a thick sunflower
so tight, blood dripped
from its beak onto her hand.
In the dream she licked
the blood, tasted salt
and felt a sting. She remembers

the bee like a dream—
how she found the body
serious and still in the morning,
the air thick with sea.
She wondered if she'd killed it while sleeping,
or if it dropped
like the dove would drop—
carrying something too heavy
it didn't need
but died to offer.
Works Cited


