THERE WILL BE CASUALTIES

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by

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Direct Avoidance

Say passed away, passed on, reached the final curtain call, took the last bow, croaked, lights-out, blackout, dropped the curtain, bowed out. Say my number is up, all bets are off. I’ve gone to the races, handed in my chips, crapped out, played my last hand, threw up the cards, threw sixes, tossed in my marbles, lost the race, cashed in, got my ticket punched, dropped the cue, gone to feed the fishes, went to Davy Jones’s locker, made a hole in the water, took my last drink.

Say, all washed up, caught in the tide, kissed this world good-bye, greased the tracks, gone to meet my maker, crossed the Jordan, headed for cloud nine, gone to pay St. Peter a visit, headed for the Great Beyond, took the big dirt nap, called it a day. I’m pushing up daises, going out the back door.

I’ve laid down my fork and knife, bit the dust, cheated the gallows, shuffled off, coiled up my cable, gone belly up. Say I’m eating dandelions by the root, stepping off the carpet, pulling in the last terminal, putting out my nightlight, swallowing my birth certificate, hanging up my hat, stalling the engine, taking a dirt bath, put to bed with a shovel. Say, I’m riding the pale horse home.
Obituary

You at the tender age of 30, one ice thawing afternoon collapsed from laughter induced asthma, while watching Kung Fu movies in your home. You were discovered minutes later when your boyfriend arrived with Chinese food. Having lived half as long as you were supposed to, but not a minute longer than you wanted. You left behind no regrets. Not even the time you smoked pot driving across state lines, stole baseball cards from the craft store, or kicked your brother in the balls repeatedly, and on purpose for fun (okay maybe you regret that, but he did double-wedgie you to the ceiling). You, at one point or another, had been known as Twinkie, T-Bolt, Shorty, and 360. You made the boys heads spin the way you turned on the dance floor, or the way you spun those records on Saturday nights deejaying at the hotspots. You were a pleasure-seeking eccentric, a multi-faceted host of extravagant potlucks involving pierogies, khaula balls, and grandma’s moonshine. An avid collector of bones, you were not to be mistaken with a Satan worshiper or a Voodoo priestess just fascinated with permanence in an impermanent world; at the time of your death, all metacarpals in your right hand were broken from pushing down on the coffee table while you attempted to catch your breath. Your personal collection included yak teeth, a skull bowl, and your prized third eye bone of a deer. Your friends and family will miss your combined “narcissism and sarcasm.” Your boyfriend of 10 years will particularly miss your pancakes and assless chaps. You are survived by a large family of blue eyed blonds who can’t decide to put you in the earth or cremate your remains. What is left of your wishes reside unread on a rolled up scroll in a coffee can above the microwave. *Donate my bones to an artist, it says, make my femur into a trumpet, my knuckles into dangling earrings, my mandible to a choker.*
Advice From The Afterlife

It’s your debut as a dead person. Do it up right. Give yourself permission to have the funeral you fantasize about. Cover your casket in stars, dahlias, Harley Davidsons, lyrics from *Hot Pants*, Da Vinci’s Last Supper, airbrushed portraits of Michael Jackson, The Joker, words to “Song of Myself,” Steelers insignia, angels, hell even Jesus. If you like choosing tile for the bathroom, you’ll love casket pickin. Coffins are manufactured to your liking, perhaps a tropical fish design, think coelacanth, converse tennis shoe, a Louis Vuitton bag, cockpit of a Kamikaze plane, a pill bottle. Have it carved out of bamboo, wood, fiberglass, crystal, even soapstone. Buy in advance, put it in your basement; and in the interim, use it to store letters from old lovers. After the Halloween party, slip into it with your significant other and test its seams. See if you can make them pop like the old Irish custom of removing the nails before lowering the coffin in the ground, so there’s no difficulty in freeing oneself for the resurrection. Be gentle with people, but ask in advance for willing pallbearers. Choose six to eight people, preferably those who can carry several hundred pounds of metal, velvet, stuffing, and dead weight (you). Perhaps you should cruise the local gym for candidates. Why not try dating them first? It’s good to know your pallbearers intimately. Consider the funeral a multi-media show. A life-size reproduction of you—winking, thumbs up—to greet the mourners as they arrive. Personally, I like mixed tapes that play on a loop when friends kneel at the casket. Think *Whoomp There It Is*, or *Break On Through* (live version). Thank everyone for putting you on display like a rare ruby or meteorite. Pass out good-bye bags to the mourners as they leave, include calendars with your picture on every month, tulip bulbs, your spaghetti sauce recipe, sandalwood incense, and a lock of your hair. Nothing says love like hair from the dead worn in a locket. Leave disposable cameras around the room. Let friends get one last candid shot with you in your final pose. Finally, have the mortician sew your lips up with a smile, preferably, with your teeth showing. Give them one last grin before they send you to the grave.
The B-Spot

At the climax of my life, don’t plunge me in a grave. It’s too morose. Don’t pick a plot of land and dig, sounds like you’re planning an assassination. Find a nice burial spot and lay me there. Or do it old-school like in Mongolia. Place me on a horse, make it gallop. When I fall off, start digging there. Bury me with a bag of mint tea leaves, a rolled joint, Reese’s Pieces, and a mood ring on my index finger. Sing Halleluiah at my grave,

better yet, hire some strippers Taiwanese style and throw dollars and exchange hard core commentary on my virility. Cover all mirrors, and stop the clocks at 3 p.m., believe in omens.

But don’t make my burial a one woman show. Bring the block, have a party, raise the roof. Give everyone a shovel, make them work for it, sweat & grind, keep the feet moving, the hands wavin,

the hips swayin. Grab my Aunt Carol and make her jitterbug. Make my B-Spot pulse & hum. And when you want to do it again, I’ll be waitin. Just make sure you can find me.
Advance Directive Aptitude Test

In case of emergency you:
   a.) Want cardiopulmonary resuscitation
   b.) Do not want cardiopulmonary resuscitation
   c.) Transported to the local ER
   d.) Nothing—wait for aliens to come and get you

If your pain becomes unbearable you want comfort care in the form of:
   a.) Hospice
   b.) I.V. fluids such as morphine
   c.) Being rocked by your mother
   d.) The Thriller album on repeat

If you are brain dead:
   a) Pull the plug, call Kevorkian if you can’t do it
   b) Wipe the slobber from your chin daily
   c) Kneel in prayer
   d) Keep the ventilator humming like an iron lung

You are against:
   a.) Feeding tubes
   b.) Blood transfusions
   c.) Intubations
   d.) Thin hospital robes

When you die you want:
   a.) Your organs donated
   b.) Mummification
   c.) Cryogenics head only
   d.) Plastinated in lotus position
Pulse

When in doubt touch the tip of a candle’s flame to the toes of my supposed corpse. Does a blister bubble, full of air, and then burst? If I am living, it shouldn’t. Keep my naked body under close watch, twenty four hours at most, and hold a looking glass to my mouth. Is there any fog? Place a bowl of water on my abdomen. Notice the presence of ripples, tiny waves? Still not sure if I’m beating for you? Cut the jugulars, separate the carotid arteries, slice the medulla, take scissors and stab my heart.
Love for the Undertaker

When I think of my daddy’s corpse I think of Michael
the undertaker, alone with his first body. All my daddy’s
nakedness: sunken skin gripping bones, cheeks hollow,

bed sores biting at his back, now inserted with tubes.
Alone, the two of them in that windowless room.
It’s been a long time since I’ve been held by a man,

perhaps I’ve never been. My daddy used to lift me to his lap.
I pulled on his nose, rubbed my baby skin against his scratchy cheeks,
those days he wore a beard. Michael’s hands lift him now,

tie his jaw tight, slide the crevice of his eyelids closed.
There were no words, only echoes—forceps striking stainless steel.
I want his forearms, the push from his shoulder blades

needed to get deep inside, the artery that runs straight from the heart,
to have his weight cover me under the white hot light of the mortuary,
turned over and over as he turned my daddy on the gurney. I only get a ride

to the cemetery. Michael’s stiff knuckles grip the wheel handle.
I stare from the backseat to catch a glimpse of his clean blue
eyes as the sun slices through the grey sky.
Elegy

I buried my rapture in your gloved palm
no matter which hand it was.
I never stretched far enough to touch you
through the glass/gloss/vinyl that you spun on.

You made streetlamps flicker, subways steam.
   You left a high-pitched-exclamation
finger-snapping-heel-kick-kiss on my cheek. And oh, that slide
   on your patent leather, made my body dip and falter
from shoulder blade to knee.

Then you tipped on your toes, leaned into my skin
   and seared me with your serenade.

You did not stop,
   spinning like an ember you made me shiver. Fickle,
with no one to blame, I came unstrung
   with a fever
to ignite your sad eyes and watch the flames.
There Will Be Casualties

i. [apprehension]
Pick me up outside of Tempe, and we’ll ride the road to Asheville where I know this man who sells plutonium and love opal, a good trade.

ii. [impulse]
I’ve decided not to take the bathing suit, but, I am taking the razorblades and my Sherpa shoes, in case I encounter high altitudes.

iii. [the push]
It’s your turn to bring the hand grenades. Sell the noose if you have to. In the spirit of little recoil I’ve also packed the .38, in case you’re wondering.

iv. [outcome]
My note on your nightstand reads:
   a.) dust all ammunition thoroughly while facing west
   b.) count pocket knives
   c.) wrap rope clockwise around left palm and elbow
Not necessarily in that order. Remember, it’s like dismantling a bomb, and you are good at dismantling bombs.

v. [the seal]
There are things I am leaving behind, on purpose, pictures of us at the zoo, the bull horn, a chisel, battery charger, return address labels.
vi. [residual]

I lied.
I cannot tell what I want—forever,
unless it’s Kevlar.

Are you five times
stronger than steel?
The Empty Bed

He curled his fist into a ball
  the bedroom lit in peeping sun
drenched in sweat, I held still,
  waiting for a return like kissing back.

Peeping sun lit the bedroom
  the bed empty & he punched a wall
kissing back, I waited for a return
  *if only I were more beautiful.*

The bed empty, he punched the wall
  swore at the roof until the house collapsed.
If only I were more beautiful.
  I rode the bus all evening past the same demolition.

He swore at the roof, until the house collapsed,
  chiseled rock in the basement until 3 a.m.
I rode the bus passing the same demolition.
  The bruises healed from lack of touch.

He chiseled rock in the basement until 3 a.m.
  The bed tilted on its side; it was that forgiving.
The bruises healed from lack of touch.
  I remember his footsteps on the concrete.

The bed tilted on its side; it was that forgiving.
  He painted black handprints on the walls.
I remember his footsteps on the concrete.
  His index finger pushed up the tip of my nose.

On the walls he painted black handprints.
  One sixteenth of an inch made all the difference.
His index finger pushed up the tip of my nose.
  He claimed the fault: I was a flawed system.

One sixteenth of an inch was all the difference.
  He curled his fist into a ball.
The fault was mine, he claimed, a flaw in the system.
  Drenched in sweat, I held still.
Requiem

When I die carve my femur
into a trumpet
for a Tantric tune.

They way you used to play
me those nights we lay
awake listening to crickets
tapping against the aquarium.
We teased each other
with too much knowing.

This time will be holy.
Take me to the river.
You know the spot.

Let me be the sugar
between your tongue & throat.
Let me haunt you
with a sweet note stuck
in my marrow. Raise up
my skull cup near the shore,
edge of the unwanted,
this last time. We’ll kneel
together sing the hymn:

give said the little stream
as it hurried down the hill.
Let’s wrap ourselves in rhapsody.

Though the wind wishes
to rock you to the core,
the rain to devour
our song, blow, loud enough
to drag the demons to drown,
soft enough to stall
the ferocious thunder.
Let our melody roar forth
from my feverish bone.
rigor

not as in mortis, the gradual stiffening of muscles. it starts with the face—the eyelids down to the feet. as the temperature cools, the body’s blood gives into gravity, call it lividity—a discoloration, a black-n-blue mark, his fists bloody from the jab, quick like a severing. unrelated to hardship, the grinding of wheels, the belief that we deserve, attachment (not as in love), a self (not to be confused with the I), suffering—immeasurable. rigor as in treated with stiffness, a two-by-four against the thigh, a snip with shears—the brain stem from the spine, as in I’ll drive you down to the bone, as in not operating freely, as in the constant ticking of rage like an elevator stopping on all floors.
The End Of A Boy Named James

He said,

for the rest of my life I will be a four-year-old boy
getting the shit kicked out of me behind the barn.

And I thought if:
I put my hand on his chest and opened my mouth,
If I swallowed him whole, wiped the black from his eyes
put my head against his lips, he could eat my thoughts
hear my mind hum, saying, undress him, with words
like sanctimony, fire, sweet to the touch.

If he pushed
into me hard enough to erase the barn
& the swing & the hand that came down, the almost fist
in the air, the crack of bone against bone.
If only, I made his eyes gloss over,
made him see the holy light in the angle of my calf,
he wouldn’t have to think again of being four.
He wouldn’t grow taller, get bigger hands, stronger legs
for the kicking & swinging at his own sons & wives,
his almost fist in the air, bricks behind the bowling alley.

But he could not rip
off my lips. At night before bed, at the bus stop in the middle of March,
after coffee, work, I kissed & kissed--a four-year-old boy
wouldn’t knows of houses with holes, that little boys fall,
and sometimes die. Spatulas that woke for school,
and endless picking: thorns off rosebushes, loose lids of pill bottles,
locks on the neighbor’s patio door, the ignition.
I want my lips to resurrect him; and then,
maybe he wouldn’t scar over the more I picked.
Like The Hard Grounded Himalayas

I never ask myself anything that pertains to us,
I accept less than my expectations,

that you don’t love—
that you won’t love—

If we were arrowheads
buried beneath a glacier 21, 000 feet in the sky:

Frozen to the rock. Black. Cold.
Icy on the outside—

We would reach
Out for air

In a mountain with no opening.
All My Skeletons Are Hypocrites

The truth is it’s war I want, although I’d settle for a cover up. I try to hide—the plate with its mounds of white, the rolled up dollar bills—any denomination will do, the scritch scratch of razorblades on glass. The drip down the throat like a steady rain. Some of the burn holes are mine.

You ask me to bury myself, settle in the corners crouched on the floor clutch a latch & bolt. But you forget, there are 206 ways to break you:

#1 Collision with pavement and ankle
#78 one metacarpal at a time
#199 nasal bone bumps into fist
#201 rib cage off of knee

Am I supposed to scream? Admit it?

Or should I remain, meat on the bone?
The Forbidden

There is no entry past the basement’s narrow fissure
where light slants through bent blinds & fixates on him.
     I’m not allowed to touch his work:
obsidian blades fastened by copper to antler bone
the inmost part, fragments of marrow flow to his fingers.
He tips his wrists left to right to left, cleaving the stone’s edge.
     I’ve seen this before:
him huddled under light, tiny rubies resting in his palm
     the red touching skin
     the light touching skin
     my hand chasing skin
desperate to hold. He won’t hand over the gems,
drops them in a field of shards at his feet, finds flint,
begins again. I choose to end at the stairs, rising up
     because no is looking,
no one is ever looking and still he cannot reach for my hand.
White Noise

A violent collision of thunder rises

like him in the morning.

His erection reminds me it is time to ready for work

put on my best resume face, the pale lipstick

with the hint of shine, roll up my shirt sleeves,

start filing in alphabetical order.

There are a few names I’d like to call him,

none I can say with my mouth full.

I glance up at him, like a three year old Caligula

watching his father Germanicus ride

through the streets of Rome

gripping the reins with a tight fist.

I love the lawnmower trimming the green

I love my mother endlessly rocking me,

I love the perpetual motion of train wheels over steel.

I am drowning in syllables, all I swallow

is hallow humming, tastes like distraction, malfunction,

there are better nouns for how I feel, let’s try asphyxiation.

Nothing as deadly as the elbow strike.

He hates this part.
The takedown to the floor.

His head off the pavement, free the blade from his grip,

use it to slice open a fissure in the back of his neck.

No room for regret

Consider it a parting gift, a gold statue of remorse.

Call it folly the way I fancy you.

Thankful for the white noise cutting through.
deserving is
saying no but taking it anyway, eventually, everyone leaves
behind a pile of glass, green like the color his eyes never were.
striking a match twice just to get the flint to flame.
striking a match twice just to get the flint to flame.
lit by eyelash whips, I never knew how to notice constellations,
but if I look long enough in his eyes I see stars falling.
it’s all about composure. we position ourselves in the midst
of all these revolutions, carrying revolvers to save our heads from exploding.
women point out his flaws, hold grudges like pails of water,
metal chipping at the handle, digging lead into the cracks of their fingers.
they just want the gentle rocking, but they only get the swing.
all the mis-hammered nails, now the walls in here look like the gallows.
it is the rest that does the damage or his black curls clogging the drain.
it’s always me, bent over something, wiping it clean.
Molotov Cocktail

Saturated like a washrag in ethanol
and clogged in a bottle, love’s incendiary

fuse explodes like Chernobyl, a ricochet of
fossils—the erotic curve of red lips, winding

wrap of legs, all side effects. It doesn’t feel like
fun only pressure. Teeth bite like shrapnel at the

ankle, my mandible strangles the jugular.
This guerrilla warfare shatters my tectonics,

causes nightmares. In fields of torsos growing like
weeds I stagger, disappear behind broad bushes

and reach in my armory like a cannibal
wanting more heart, liver, more rubbery stomach.

I come out empty-handed; I’m an amateur
lover, unprepared for the bloody massacre

that eviscerates and leaves a light caramel stain,
a kiss so flammable it sears my clavicle.

Multi-faceted like a hand grenade, I stoke
the body’s midriff, a perpetration of need,

unapologetically. If the bastard wick
never ignited, my arsenal would be full

of cat-o-nine tails and unvarnished violins,
and I’d pluck the slow dirge of an atrophied heart.
I’ll Touch Anything That Looks Like You

I’d finger a pebble if it had your black streaks running through it, multiplying like a dendrite,
synapses signaling all that is right with the world.
If a brazil nut had your shape, I’d sleep inside it,
wait for the agouti, the only rodent in the world with teeth like chisels capable of cracking the shell,
and bury me across the rainforest floor. I’d hover like a hummingbird, heart beating one thousand times a minute, waiting for your petals to let in my wings.
I’d touch anything—the exterior of a thorn sliding through my fingers like the silk of skin & sandpaper—if it looks like you, dark and rough, silhouetted in the midst of so much moon. Like a shadow, I would touch anything, wait for it to grow heavy, and crash over me.
III.
Her Personality

is so polished,
like a river rock after years
of water running it smooth.

So smooth no dent distracts.
You could call her perfect.
I call her a flat line, looking

for a corpse to take over,
stamp out the old heartbeat
and begin breathing with a murmur.

She steals organs for fun,
starts with the lungs—
more breath for the running,

next the heart, that bloody beat
like a conga at a bonfire. She needs
a rhythm she can recognize.

Last she takes the liver, the great
detoxer—to flush out all the lies
swallowed in time.

She knows no fluctuation.
Caution: this is contagious.
A Climate of Apprehension

The weatherman predicts high heat today
with a 60% chance of social anxiety, so pack
your umbrella. Avoid bridges, as they tend
to swell on humid days. Stick to the tunnels.

She scribbles these instructions and staples them
to the inside of her raincoat seam. If she appears
anxious, it is the minutes this adds to her commute.
She straightens her slip, reminds herself that 30,000
viruses fit on the head of a pin. Fully dependent on a host,
they are little thugs invading the body, quickly
tunneling through the veins at night, hunting for oxygen,
and launching missiles into her lungs. Soon they find air,
suck it from her cheeks, leave her face blue. One cough
could be deadly. So frustrating even the coffin makers
will be working at top speed to keep up with the pandemic.
She knows one kiss on the lips increases virulence. Love’s
moisture lethal, another little terrorist raiding villages
in search of headquarters. She likes to think of her head in halves,
neatly divided like a bun, no gelatinous space for love.
She will keep her lips sealed tight like a corpse’s.
Asylum

They say the dreadlocked lunatic roams the halls. In fifteen years, she’s never fought a battle, yet leans against the wall as if one cannot exist without the other.

Her eyelids never close.

They say she sleepwalks past the male wards down the pale blue hall, stops at the only window not barred. She looks at the moon and asks,

*Where are you now?*

She knows when to expect visitors. She dresses for them, showers and pulls the tufts of dust from her dreads.

They come every month. Even though dates are lost to her, she still knows the breath and smell of home.
They Didn’t Use A Straight Jacket

This is the girl who did not know her own mind.

This is the hopscotch game she played
That harpooned her head.

This is the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned the head of the girl that did not know her own mind.

This is the raindrop
That puddled the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

This is the slip & fall from
That raindrop
That puddled the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

This is the ambulance siren
That came after the slip & fall from
That raindrop
That puddled the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

This is the gurney they strapped her to
That sat inside the ambulance
That came after the slip & fall from
That raindrop
That puddled the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

This is the sharp bang when they shut the door
That held the gurney she was strapped to
That sat inside the ambulance
That came after the slip & fall from
That raindrop
That puddled the pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

These are the 3 ½ walls left after
That sharp bang when they shut the door
That held the gurney she was strapped to
That sat inside the ambulance
That came after the slip & fall from
That raindrop
That puddled the playground pebble
That skipped over the white square blocks
That harpooned her head.

These are her brown eyes bulging out of their sockets in
That room with 3 ½ walls after
That sharp bang of the door being slammed
That gurney she was strapped to
That sat inside the ambulance
That came after the slip & fall
That pouring rain
That puddled the playground pebble
That skipped over the hopscotch blocks
That harpooned her head.

This is the large E next to her name
That is like a scarlet letter for running away
These are her brown eyes and fists in a rage in
That room with 3 ½ walls after
That sharp bang of the door being slammed
That gurney she was strapped to
That sat inside the ambulance’s stinging siren
That came after the slip & fall
That thunderstorm
That puddled the playground, flooded her pebble
That skipped over the hopscotch squares
That harpooned her head.

This is the noose, or shrapnel on the floor after
That large E next to her name,
That is like a scarlet letter for running away fell down
These are her fists set in rigor, eyes bloodshot open in
That room with 3 ½ walls after
That sharp slam of the door
That steel gurney she was strapped to
That sat inside the dizzying ambulance
That came when she slipped & fell when
That torrential downpour
That puddled the playground, scattered her pebbles
That skipped over her white hopscotch squares
That harpooned her head
And left a grey stain on the world.
Over That Sickness

Three thousand six-hundred and fifty-three days
of buried heads in unbleached blanket, deaf

to the jostle between the bunk frames. She felt
good making that wall. From the first clang

of the rail, to the last clang of the rail, between
waiting to be counted for dinner, the extra bowl

of mush at noon, she got good rates. She smuggled
a hacksaw blade through, shortened all the bedposts
so no one could say they didn’t see the moon do it.
emergency lobotomy case notes:

get the ice picks from the kitchen drawer and the hammer. unless one slips, it only lasts three minutes. a good deal of daydreaming after electro-shock knocks us unconscious. the fastest route is always through the eye. remember those nights in the morgue severing frontal lobes, like trimming the edges of a photograph to fit neatly in a frame. without anxiety can we still call ourselves human?

like a gunshot to the head, premeditated, i let you in. just like that. we are lifers now, you and i, plucking madness from the brain in this warehouse of people. call it transorbital. after this there will be no attempted suffocation, apprehension.

when the lobe is dislodged, we are calm, for a second sometimes more, months of melancholy. despite the lack of scarring, no longer agitated, we are never cured.
Rocks

From diamonds we desire fashion’s curse,  
to wear a rock so bright it must be love.  
But I’d rather a barren finger bone  
than severed limbs, civil wars, fought for my  
vanity. What I most want—him possessed  
by thoughts of me. No stone has might or stout.  
Let me not love possessions so extreme  
as one who swallows bait. But let me mock  
the jewels of fancy girls who do subscribe  
to tempests of the marriage lie. Love’s not  
a tool, a sickle cutting down the field.  
Mad in pursuit of wealth, the very woe  
of digging tunnels and endless dirt,  
those, moving others, are themselves as stone.
Proper Rules For Domesticity

The first full moon after the solstice is the best for tearing hair out. Piece by piece, use tweezers, grab it by the root, no weeping. Believe in misdemeanor housekeeping: towels on the floor, shoes stacked by the front door, underwear worn inside-out, another washing in doubt. No tears. Attempt to clog the kitchen sink with strands of hair and grapefruit peels slimy as eels as they slide down the drain. Rearrange spices like chess pieces, no weeping when the fennel screams checkmate.

You are not your grandmother’s doily, all pedicured and lace curtains hung like a funeral parlor nobody lives in. Let your in-laws see how you really dine, without table settings, spotty china filled with wine. Don’t cry. Weeping girls must be shackled to the radiator for making noise. Spill milk in the refrigerator instead, wipe it up later after all the guests have left. Vacuum every other weekend, and never dust with a feather duster only with the tip of your finger. You wouldn’t want the neighbors to look in and wonder what does that girl do to get her windows to glisten.

Settle for civil servitude, handcuffed to the linen closet where sheets need folded and refolded. You’ll be Sisyphus of the cul-de-sac after you trade in your backpack for a shiny new Cadillac, all your wanton desires stacked in the corner like discarded Sunday News, but no weeping. You can be found clipping coupons precisely along the dotted line like an automaton. Buy one plug in air freshener get one free, exactly what you’re looking for to go with your filet mignon.

Don’t shed tears in couch cushions only to find them days later littered with lint and coffee stains, or try to reattach them to your face like some charade. Keep them in your head. Save them for potlucks and bake sales. When all the other women are parading their bunt cakes and banana bread, you can sell them for a dollar a bag and buy a brand new beater.
Olivia Street

The streetlight’s flicker on River Road
barely illuminates the curve,
skunk’s musk trails to the railroad tracks.

Lately, I am only capable of miniscule things:
percolating coffee, running bath water until
the hot water tank is empty. It is easier
to pack my bags & carry myself somewhere else.

A little disappointment.

White picket fences are no longer made of wood.
The bat’s chirp lures from the church bell tower
in between the thin layers of air.

Close enough to hear the halting train’s whistle
far enough away to escape the track’s rumble.
Only one outlet in each room.

The click on the gate latch.

I do not sleep well when the television talks
all night. I place the same clothes on
every morning, eat only butter toast.
Colony Collapse Disorder

For all your suckling you get a stylish new house,  
all the rage in the cul-de-sac.

A guarantee that the neighbors won’t knock, day or night  
you can keep those bone white shutters always closed.

Detached, like a queen bee from labor, you live  
like this forever. All your wants delivered.

No helmets needed when the children bike, and dahlias  
grow in just the right bend toward the sun.

When shutters open on all the faces, they grin back,  
their pale peach skin the same as yours, comforting.

Until the pavement sears too hot on your soles, suddenly,  
you wonder: who builds a new colony when this is over?

A train whistle you recall from youth buzzes inside, you remember  
bridges, rows of bridges like outstretched arms.

The taste of honey sits on your swollen lips, and hills  
high enough to erase the sound of rushing water haunt.

You reach for window’s glass, like paper easily torn by fingers.  
Stretching through, you reach up,  
out, spread your palm wide and push against the swarming wind.
Exit Strategy for Marriage

Time to move on,
Narrowing in on his face, go to him
naked and whisper over a candle’s flame—
*we are in this together*—but never mean it.
His reaction will be as physical as skin,
biting his lip he will arch up to meet you
smooth as a snowy Himalayan slope,
and the floods will come. You push,
and push, and push, until he is unrecognizable.

This is your rebellion, find ways to hurt
him that are revolutionary. Protect your latent
refusal to agree, look mean, break things—
his washing machine & dryer, expensive
china, bowling trophies, and shoes.
Leave him rubbing his thumbs raw
against the doorknob, that never turns.
What Fear Is

Girls with black rings, ribbons
Tied around their necks
Holding all of it in

Her own hand calloused
From too much touching
The edge of an obsidian blade

Not the climbing up
But the looking down
Once it’s all through

Learning how to speak
Her name out loud
After the echoes have cooled
Premature Evacuation

4:10 in the afternoon and it’s raining stones.
   His bent fist in the air inches above.

There were precursors, tiny earthquakes for days,
   shattered glass against the wall.

Magnetic field disturbances, me leaving pumice on his pillow
   and praying for a jagged edge in his dreams.

But the still steaming summit gives way
   my eye browsing for the next hole in the door

It’s not unusual for magma to rise, then stop
   desk in the trunk/clothes in black garbage bags/
   left behind bongo drums/loveseat/key on the coffee table.
after people

within days lights go out
globally, plunged
into darkness like Cro-Magnon
man chiseling flint points
by moonlit campfire, mastodons
marching in the shadow of rubble.
the only thing left is Vegas.
the only thing left is Hoover
Dam, the concrete still
hardening beneath. the only
things left are house cats
& dogs lapping in windows.
within the empty cupboards
rats chew on cardboard and glue.
within weeks tunnels swell
with water. within purses
and backpacks cell phones beep
incessantly. within months
coyotes & bobcats call
welcome the return
of the predator into the empty
subway stations. within years
dandelions are the new
suburbanites, infiltrate cracks
in the pavement like lobbyists
once did on Capital Hill. wildfires
run rampant, all roads disappear.
within centuries stone survives.
but bound books and cd’s are no
match for carvings on caves.
within minutes the steel cables
break. the Brooklyn Bridge
collapses into the East River.
within minutes glass leaps
from skyscrapers like suicide
jumpers. earthen dams
rupture. within seconds
water rushes into mouths,
fills the stomach, lungs,
and throat like a wet blanket.
within seconds the sunlight
sets. termites nibble on cellulose.
the houses collapse, tires deflate.
the boundaries between
inside and out fade. within
hundreds of summers and falls
rubber sticks to Styrofoam,
sticks to corroded metal, sticks
to ground now covered in weeds,
sticks to vines that wind
their way up the Sears Tower
like an apocalyptic strangler fig.
my skin not immune to decay.
within seawater is salt,
within bird droppings,
and polluted air.
within tears.
Timing

Is time a thought that we create, a crack in space meant to alleviate the ache, harness worn on the wrist like a shackled prison bitch? I wonder what is at stake if time is sent away, eternity swept up in flame, forgotten like rampage.

Avoid the tick and tock purposefully, and go on living like we’re in a dream. Is time a scheme of our design? Should we engage in her demise, refuse to teem in quarantine, oh little clock of lies. Steady against all odds till we careen and fall into its vortex, terrified. All our struggle to get from here to there is lost in moments swirling to survive.

If time were our truest friend, she would care about pulling us in and out with ease and not laugh at our expense when affairs of ours fail. Time assails like mescaline, derails our dreams. She’s a black guillotine.
IV.
First House

No matter how many times I stop
at this red light, the building stays
the same. Looms at the end of Tunnel
Way. Filthy brown brick & scalloped
archways rise four stories high
off Route 51 where diesel engines
hum & grind against the concrete, past Silky’s
Gentleman’s Club. On this two lane
road where the Blue Belt follows
the river, my house preoccupies.
Although I don’t remember living
there, I know my mother heard
my father’s footsteps like sirens
coming & coming, closer & closer
to her as she lay strapped to the bedposts
like an electric chair twisting & turning,
a tourniquet wrapped taut in the crook
of an elbow. Inside the comfort,
of a pulled out dresser drawer, I think
I learned wanting is as instinctual
as any hunger. Mother, when I was
in the womb did I hiccup, attempt
to develop my lungs, or did I already
know how arbitrary they would become?
Useless to scream or even ask, my larynx
snapped a long time ago. Was the structure
to blame? My father on top my mother
like quicksand, all that muscle and so much bone
broken at the joints. If you could talk, house
would you say you delivered me like Moses
to my grandparents? When they came
for me after church, there was a struggle.
On the balcony, forty feet above the railroad
tracks, we were almost casualties, two women
& me swaddled. My grandmothers tugged &
tore at one another, and if the railing
were made of wood, it might have snapped,
sent us swirling like a paper airplane off a building.
In the slipstream I imagine echoes like church bells signaling the hour, floating as if we had wings down the long corridor & out. No matter how many seconds I wait to turn right, the light always lingers, steady as rampage.
Gaze

When you are pulled into this world by sterile forceps, forced to open your eyes before you are ready. When your baby bottles are kept cold in the snow pile outside the back door, you’re put to sleep in a makeshift crib of a dresser drawer. When you’ve watched your mother get on her knees, sift through men like she might one day find a diamond. When you’ve waited up until there are no more lights on in the house, no dishes clanking to be put away, and all she brings you is some confetti off the dance floor. When you’ve never seen the color of your father’s eyes. When you hear your own father’s voice for the first time in the background say *ask her when she is coming home*. When your mother lets them take you and doesn’t call. When you are born with a whole different name, have to hide behind a middle initial—then you will dodge the mirror, run from your own reflection, the hard lined lip of your mother’s smile, dark retinas of your father that refract off the glass, and the pull deeper into your face.
The Branks

I.

A torture device of the Seventeenth Century, the branks, an iron head piece enclosing the head, was used to punish nagging women. With a flat piece of iron projecting into the mouth pressing the tongue down, this metal plate was often armed with a spike, making it difficult for a woman to swallow. The singular form of the branks is a family surname. When one brank meets another, they are Branks. On March 11, 1980, I was born.

II.

It’s mild torture being evacuated from the womb. I have forceps wounds to prove it. The levee breaks, and my mother pushes, bearing down on all her weight. I refuse to be born, and stall the delivery, waiting in the middle halfway between breathing and floating. I know the minute I cry for air, my tongue will want to latch and suckle; I will be branded. My father’s name will wrap around me like his arms never did. My cry, a piercing nag, a reminder that they lied to one another when they made me. My tongue is a weak muscle too young to lift the heaviness of spoken words.

III.

She liked it soft like a loose tooth jiggled half in half out dangling by a sinewy thread.
My mother liked it soft; 
her hands stroked my back, 
ripped feather from pillows, 
slid the edge of a silk 
blanket between her toes. 
She liked it soft, her pain, 
when my father lifted 
his fist high in the air 
like a tsunami seconds 
before it crashes.

When the floods came, 
she was never prepared, 
and he dragged her 
across the floor on a chain 
linked leash. Manipulated 
by cold metal, she was 
missing a padlock and a key.

IV.

I met my father, once. 

He pulled alongside me 
at the gas station, 
in a black pick-up, driver’s seat, 
& stared at me through the window.

His eyes speared like a flint point 
straight through the skin & back out. 
Behind the blade of black irises, 

I burned. 

He’s where all my dark comes from, 
the pinch of my olive skin, 
pupils so charcoal I cannot look into the sun.
My brother says *that is your father.*

How do I kill a beginning like this? Should I

roll down the window say *hello I’m your daughter*?

No, I remember: he tied a man to a tree, beat him bloody.
Did he live or die? I want to

shrink in the passenger’s side seat
become vinyl / pray for a quick
gallery backfire / a halo / or a fissure
to rupture & pull me under

all the way to the center where I can melt
into magma & be spit back out as solid rock.
I have no artillery, my tongue like a bullet
proof vest & words sink to my stomach
like tiny blood pellets. What I cannot swallow
is left to rot on my tongue for years.
Adoption Day

Against the hard brown courthouse pew, my mother pushed her hands into her purse, scooped out a silver compact mirror. She laid it in my small outstretched hands. I kept turning it over, rubbed its engravings against my palm, like a gift that lets you know you are somebody.

I flipped the lid open & shut, but never once heard it click, lock tight. Played with my face in the mirror, scrunched up my nose, pulled my lips apart, stuck out my tongue. I watched my reflection grow smaller the farther I held it away from me, until, I could see the two of us.

Mother sat there, head cocked to the side, with the deep stare of not listening set permanently in her eyes, cheeks sunken, skin brittle to the touch. I pulled the compact close, so I could look straight in the mirror until I could no longer see her face.
International Orange

My mother’s arrest stopped traffic, in a dream.
   On the Golden Gate Bridge,
we walked the length of the bay, suspended

for seconds in the clouds. Below, a boat was sinking,
   my future husband was on it,
he swam the English Channel, knew how to breathe

underwater. I watched him undulate with the eels as
   my mother wept in the paddy wagon.
She was caught in possession: plutonium, stolen

Spanish tiles. We walked the length of the ocean,
   surrounded by the steel suspension,
knowing she was going to die, swan dive off the railing,

hit the Pacific and grow gills, fall in love with the drowned.
Moist

for Natasha

There are only so many tunnels in Pittsburgh
turbulent enough to tame you. Trestles not included.

But it’s the rivers that frighten you. You know
their wetness wants to ravage you, turn your bleached

Russian bob to mean Monongahela curls that tangle
intangible knots around your neck, drag you
to drown in The Triangle’s trench. So you avoid
bridges, in a city where 446 bridges are all we know,
decide on the back roads of Bloomfield that you’re willing
to ride the alley all the way to 65, straight home to Bellevue,
past the bats that swarm above Alcosan, their sonar thirsty
after six months of sleep and Western State Penitentiary,
the criminals sedentary on concrete. You’ve been penalized
another season; having suffered through all that sun,
you wish for frozen rivers. You’d rather Mongolia than Aliquippa
in the middle of July when humidity’s noose comes knocking.

You pick up pace. The stench of hot tar off the highway’s
pavement is sickening. There are not enough shields to shade
the sun, or your heart, slackened, left in this city with so little snow.
My Himalaya

Monks in saffron & crimson robes
strum malas made from bones.

I’ll know the road
by the way the wind feels,
carries me all the way
to the monastery.

Which way is home
amongst these rivers of turquoise,
in these slopes of suede?

Stacks of juniper blaze.
Shooting stars and satellites,

I am closer to the clouds,
and dizzy from the rumble of the jeep,
all day spent riding the ridges.

Where are the prayers
that blow, fray these flags?

An avalanche advances,
its echo bellows before
the rolling wave of white.

How much gravity does it take
to hold me to this spinning wheel?
Dharamasala, India

It is when we collide like tectonic plates & rub up against one another that I rise.
Dirtied from the dust of the open fruit market, a little boy opens his palm, his coal eyes look through the eaves of silky black hair.
_A sick brother at home_, he says and offers to shine my shoes for milk.
Except I am wearing sandals.
It takes weeks to discover he lied, would take the milk back for Rupees and run off to buy little pallets of paint.
We cannot escape valleys, leaning rivers, a quest for perfection that has no face or name.
I circumvent the children of this hilltop settlement.
In Defense of Everything

A fire ring below the junipers is fine.
The lull of the creek as well.
The mountain is okay, and the ground
    and the silent, silent echo in them.
The moment is always here, penetrating my
    thoughts. It’s hard to picture
    breath & blood, but they are.
The wind with her ravenous curve, too
    and the broken tree trunk, split from the avalanche.
Explorers locate original comfort zone

They trekked in the Himalayas for weeks. It smelled like honey and cloves, and when the eastern wind swept through, there was a hint of fennel. Sherpa guides tiptoed, careful not to agitate any rocks, around the mountain where the Hindu mystic predicted she might be. Around the bend, nothing. They tired of this mountain, the cold campground, and breakfast of yak cheese and butter tea. The head explorer read a report from the States that calculated a snowball’s chance in hell to be .0000000134%. This was discouraging. They built a fire of juniper branches, and tried sleep, but the sky, bold with stars and satellites, weaved and whipped across their eyes. When their gaze fell from the heavens, there she was sitting next to a small cave. Yellow, circular, her white hot heat penetrated the night, and they wept and cheered. They wanted to walk up to her, but no one, not a single one, was man enough.
Among Foreigners

Every day it rains in Dharamsala.
The rickshaw’s wheels halt in muddy puddles.
A young Tibetan woman offers to fit me,
her only afternoon customer, for a chupa.
She tucks the raw maroon silk around my waist,
hands so soft they beg to be touched
held tight through all of monsoon season.
Her fingers crease the silk; she folds it over,
prepares to tie me in. We could take all day
wrapping and unwrapping me, watching
the quickened pace of the rickshaw outside,
the hazel-skinned little boys, their cupped hands beg
for Rupees. Time moves easily in the Himalayas,
one cold heartbeat at a time, breath by breath.
Dragging too low, the silk needs hemming.
She unwraps me for a moment, her own dress glides
against my forearm. She asks about my home.
I tell her of rivers and blue bridges, buildings
made entirely of plate glass rising up for miles.
She has no country, lives but does not belong
to these cut out hills. Who am I to carry her country
home with me, the smooth river stones, yak teeth,
and skulls from the market, to sleep beneath the satellites
and burn juniper long into the night?
Prayer

Our father  Give us this day
Buddhist Monks  Saffron robes
Lead Us  On Earth as it is
Rioting broke out again  A warning shot fired
Thy kingdom come  And forgive us our
Police open fire on hundreds  Blood on the Barkhor
Twenty protestors executed  Thirty shot randomly
But deliver us from evil  Stroke 108 beads of a mala
Walk the Jokang clockwise  Our daily bread
Lead us not into temptation  Cars burned, turned up side down
Things not reported  As we forgive those who trespass
Can’t go to the hospital  Where they speak Chinese
They’ve been wounded  In another language
Put down the violence  For thine is the kingdom
In a world of a billion people  Is anyone counting?
Thank You For Traveling The Pennsylvania Turnpike

Inside me rivers meander to a perfect point,  
like an arrow shot from Siddhartha’s bow

that travels the Pennsylvania Turnpike
round and round skirting the edge

of every border town. Somewhere
in the Allegheny River Valley,

I was reincarnated, given chestnut eyes  
and words for lullaby. A monk’s hum lulls

me to sleep. I dream of twenty-six bridges
crisscrossing the Three Rivers, and buildings

sculpted out of plate glass that rise up
for miles, like a glacier. Not all roads

I’ve traveled make sense, the pavement’s
gritty question mark, or the curve of River Road

that winds around the Ohio and stops dead
at the railroad tracks. On bus rides to Kathmandu,

I pass tattered flags of Tibet; on one-way roads
in Windgap, I discover only one direction matters.

I rotate prayer wheels clockwise, count beads
with the tip of my thumb. Forward is the stride.

I ascend the mountain; and at 18,000 feet,
I recall home, running up the basement steps

in fear of rushing water. Growing up in a flood plain,
I was haunted each time it rained. Here, in the thin

Himalayan air, my red blood cells steep like tea leaves.
I am too high for rushing water, but not the avalanche.
I hear it—like the crackling of juniper on fire—before the mountain unleashes it. The cascading white so far away it looks romantic. In Pittsburgh, we go to the river to hold hands, peer over Mount Washington at the city lights sparkling like shooting stars. To think, constellations can guide, not a single green highway sign.

As I travel the dusty Tibetan road, I look for a river or one lonely temple glistening, hazy like the mist around a mirage.