TEXTUALITY OF FLESH

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the

Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2009
Textuality of Flesh

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Abstract

*Textuality of Flesh* is a poetry manuscript consisting of poems that explore identity and sexuality through a central poetic persona who, biologically and mythically, is a chimera, or a person who has two complete sets of DNA.
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You are flesh of my flesh, bone of bone. In my mottled, sometimes skin. In my hair that doesn’t hold color, in my face changing with the light, sometimes harsh, planed, sometimes like the filtered face of Rita Hayworth. As with rosebushes grafted, I am hybrid, more than my roots. I am two, become one, in those first few hours. While they lay lethargic in some sweaty bed, smoking, loathe to sleep before the sun, we were formed, not as one in the beginning, rather two, alpha, omega. How to know we were a modern ouroboros twisting in on one another, until one, we—I was born through some unknown alchemy, more than the sum of my parts.
Like Breathing

1
As a child—
before the dreams
and the change of skin—
she loved the flight of butterflies,
would watch them
at rest on rocks
along the crick-bed.
The slow flicker of wings
like breath,
the pause
between intake
and exhalation.

2
She was never the girl
with pink shoes, pinafores,
ever wanted to cheer
on the sideline.
She craved contact,
the shoulder driving in below the blade.

3
When the boy down the street
had a birthday—she went.
The only girl at the party,
the boys pretended not to see her.

But when the birthday boy,
with piggish eyes and greasy hair,
smashed wings
in his ham-hock fist,
smeared streaks
down tree bark,

she punched him,
straddled his chest in the grass,
until finally,
plumed in color,
they saw her.
The Voice That Isn’t Hers

Awareness of the niggling voice inside her head grows as she grows. Sometimes it acts as her conscience, other times eggs her on to climb higher, ditch school, pee standing up belly pressed to the rasping bark of the oak in the stand behind her house.

The voice helps her hide when mama comes calling. Not under the bed, she will find you, squeeze behind the dryer, she’ll never look there.

She never doubts this voice that croons to her, that soothes her when loud noises rumble the sash against the sill and blue light strobes against the vellum of her eyelids.
Walking down Main Street,
sky high and clear,
Lorelei sets the dogs to sniffing.
Cats forget the birds they stalk,
watch her as she passes.
They gnaw on tufts of grass,
swat anxiously at gnats
that swarm low in nebulous clouds.
Swallows swoop in shallow dives
to clasp the easy prey.
Silence spreads in rings,
cricket-song slows,
bees flee the meadow,
quickly flood the hive.

In the field empty of buzz,
cows sink to their knees,
sleep, side to side,
tails turned to the east.
The only sound on still air,
frogs in frantic cacophony
down in the pond
at the foot of Miller’s Lane.
In the wake of her footsteps,
trees curl their leaves,
the indigo folds in its petals,
exposes its tender white.
The Whisper of Leaves

On the long drive
from Seattle to New Mexico
Lorelei, like any other child,
longs for the drive to be over.

The Dinosaur Diamond
stretches south through Utah.
With only creosote and
pebbly vistas beyond
the backseat window, she mumbles
to her wavery reflection
in the backseat window.
Mama keeps
the eight-track cranked
over the howling of the wind
through the VW van windows.

No twenty questions,
license plate games,
camp songs,
only the loneliness of
the desert roads heading south,
slightly east, but always south.

Leaving Seattle behind,
she had hoped the rain,
always dropping from clouds
pricked by the vertiginous point
of the Space Needle,
would stay, but the rain
is loathe to let them go.

The van chugs desperately south.
Boredom nibbles at her chest,
makes it hard to breathe
in the desert heat
funneling through the windows.
She drags the silver-handled,
horse-hair brush through
her wind-woven hair, loose strands
fly out the window,
float like streamers.
Rain clouds gather
above the highway,
like the clouds, dark and foreboding,
in the cheap dime-store
novels mama reads,
juice glass of iced Boone’s Farm
in hand, before falling asleep
with the bedside lamp still on.

Tangles of hair
coil in thermals
above the desert floor,
undulating shimmers of heat
distort funhouse
cacti in the distance.
Lightning jags
the blackened sky stretching
from horizon lip
to the apex
of the bubbled windshield.

Hail pummels
the van, rain sluices
down the glass, Mama
pulls onto the hard-packed grit
beside Highway 191.
Even with the windows up,
she hears that rain
in the desert sounds hard
without the whisper
of leaves.
How She Got Her Name

When I think of Lorelei my head turns all around
As gentle as a butterfly she moves without a sound
-Stryx

Mama won’t say his name,
only that she loved him,
that she knew as the sun dripped
across the sill she was with child.
She waited four months to tell him,
the swell above her panties noticeable.
She knew she would never see him again.

On her way home after the yelling
and the accusations,
Lorelei came on the radio.
She knew it was the name,
ever stopped to pick a boy’s.
She prayed that some man
would be turned by her daughter,
but then, she didn’t know
what I would become.
Lorelei and mama take a day trip up into the mountains. This first desert spring is dry and hard. Lorelei balks at keeping her shoes on for fear of scorpions and diamondbacks; she would rather sink her toes in grass. They leave town, the road becomes narrow and rocky as they climb. The rainy season is just beginning, but already the track is washed out in the dips and culverts. They get to where they can’t drive anymore, so they hike in. The vistas make it worthwhile. In Washington, trees block out the view and moisture seeps into your pores. Rain here is distinct. It falls in sheets, in bands. Rain falling on a town fifty miles away spreads out across the horizon like a veil, like hair across a woman’s eyes. When it comes, it is relief, is power, is life. Some people can’t take months without rain, can’t abide the need to pray for rain. Lorelei knows mama is one of those people. She can see the road reflected in her eyes. She hopes that mama waits until the monsoon ends, but then she will be ready. She hates people’s prayers echoing in her head.
1

The men from neighboring farms
    advance on the back door
without trees
    to camouflage
their approach.
They wait until twilight hovers
    just above the ground,
covers them as they circle.

They skirt on tiptoe
    the tangled patch of tickseed
encroaching on
    the buckled back steps.
In the light of the screen door,
they brace feet firmly.

Mama answers in cutoffs,
    wine glass in hand,
bare-breasted beneath an old wife-beater.

The farmers, decent family men,
    glance,
quickly discover
    flecks of filth on boots.
They never make eye contact,
    but then that would be tough,
standing
    in the dark.
Light bends around Mama,
    leaves them
in her shadow.

She waits silently while they screw up
the courage to ask,
something they find
    mighty difficult.
Voices, low, hesitant,
   they stammer their need.

   
I heard a rumor someone here could help me.

Mama, wordless, backs away from the door,
   leaves them
   in the pool of light
   sifting through the tatty screen.

They wait,
   shifting
   foot to foot,
until she returns
   with me,
self-conscious in a cotton shift
   that barely fig-leafs,
   pulls tight across my swelling chest.
She explains what the men want,
   hands me my sweater
   off the hook behind the door.

2

In the truck, always a truck,
Mama sits by the door.
I sit,
   straddling the stick-shift,
   thigh bumping thigh
   over each dry-rutted hole
   in the rough
   back-country roads.

He never looks at me that I can see.
   But each time
   he shifts gears,
he wipes his sweaty palm
   down the length of the thigh
   pressed to mine,
his fingertips brush the skin
   of my knees as he grabs
the stick between them.
He never speaks,
    probably afraid the quaver in his voice
gives him away. Mama never notices.

She just stares out the window,
    dragging on her Virginia Slim.

He pulls the truck so close to the screen
    of grain outside the door we have to slide across
    the seat to get out Mama's door.
The farmer-man grabs my hand,
    leads me out into the field.

Mama leans against the side of the truck bed,
    shrinks
    into the pinpoint
    of her cigarette.

He pulls me along,
    out to the center
    of the withered wheat.

I know the drill
and I know Mama doesn't care about rain,
just money.

Sweat drips
    under my arms,
    between my legs.
In the rising wind, I smell
the scent of fear,
    my feral animal stink.
On my nostril,
    he smells like coyote.

He presses me down
onto wheat and chaff,
shoves into me with the weight
    of body, of fear,
drives into me
    with the rhythm of the
    words on his breath—

*It's for the rain.*
He drags me down
    the storm inside me building,
    rage boils.
As he splits me—
    I want wrath to split him—
    into two,
one part lifts to the wind, the other,
    beats like rain.

He sprays his seed
    into the ground, reveling
    in the rain beating
    on the packed dirt,
    pleased to bring life
    to his crops.

On the drive home,
    Mama pushed to the middle,
I sit smoking,
    rain spattering me
    through the crack
    in the window.

The farmer speaks
    of yields
    and profits.

Mama is silent.
Outporing

The spots surface on skin
that shapes and twists
into something new, a body
I no longer recognize.
They surface first
on the planes of my hands,
a faint burgeoning
of red below the skin.

I keep my hands tuck-twisted
into my cuffs, afraid to be touched,
afraid of the pulling away.
Only doctors touch,
rub their thumbs over
the thin bones that jut
against the skin.

The first time a boy
dares to touch me
I hide my skin beneath a shroud
of night and wind and rain.
The storm winds my
hair around his neck,
drags him closer.
The Scent of Wet

Quiet, withdrawn,

she sits in the corner
    in kindergarten.

Children peek
    through peripheral vision,
sense
she is not like them,
    know
    with simple surety
she is other.

Every year
children edge away,
    leave a ring of empty desks,
a buffer for her difference.

As she gets older,

the bubble
    only magnifies their view of her.
Girls sneer and titter,
    yet find it impossible not to watch her,
    long for her.
Boys,
    when they doze off in study hall,
slip into deep water dreams;
her hair,
    tinged green,
    swirls around them.
When they jerk awake
at the bell’s peal,
elbows slip, chins crack.
Shame-faced,
they stagger out of class,
books firmly pressed
against erections.

Water seeps from their ears
and the scent—

of steam rising from late-July storms,
of lakes swollen
with salt gravel run-off,
teeming with frozen frogs
that twitch and jerk
as torpid heartbeats pump slush
back into thawing flesh,
of sleet in February that stings the nose like coke,
of earthworm-slicked sidewalks after slow autumn rain—

lingers in their nostrils.
Standing at the diving board’s edge, the children’s squeals eddy around the chatter of the girls in bikinis. She lets it wash over her until silence is all she hears. Sunburn laps at the skin of her shoulders. Sweat traces down her chest. Against her soles, sandpaper treads rasp. Chlorine bleaches her thoughts clean. A young mother turns her head towards the lifeguard’s tower, her boy drifts beneath the surface. But the guard’s gaze is on Lorelei. Gripped by silence, he waits for the moment when she springs off the edge into the pool below. By the time Lorelei leaves the board, he, like the drowned boy, has breathed water into his lungs.
High in the Lycian Way,
fire glows through cracks,
chimaera,
flame beneath the cut.

Tracing roots
of what I am,
body fused—
part lion,
with fearsome jaws,
   I am the roar.
   My cry brings death,
to hear is to be devoured,
torn free from all familiarity
into familiarity
more profound, more terrifying.
Part goat,
   I am sin and cleansing.
Part disquieting ooze of serpent’s lash,
   my mother brought
   fear into the world.

The bubble never pricked,
fabrication,
I am chimera,
   fable, falsehood, and fiction.

The nightmare in my airborne castle,
dreamscape of hope,
lull of illusion.

In limbo, I am
the embodied grotesque,
the quixotic ideal,
Mutter’s curiosity,
the monster beneath the stairs,
P.T.’s queer oddity.

I am my utopia,
ghost of hallowed hallucination,
slip of optical illusion,
rainbow of seeming, of semblance,
snare's trip,
ignis fatuus,
will-o'-the-wisp.
In the Tank

Lorelei’s punishment for skipping home ec is to sit the platform at the spring carnival. She waits for the jerseyed boys, jockeying, stripes blending them into a herd, to hit the target, their aim the only sure thing about them.

She is not the cheerleader who manages a coquettish hair-flip as she goes down spluttering.

When Lorelei goes down, the water is slick as oil against her skin. As she twists in the water, poised to rise to the surface, they see skin stretched between her fingers. Now these boys, the jocks, and their balding fathers too, know the stuff of their dreams. The ringing in their ears is like siren song.

She emerges silent, dry. Rising from her is the faint scent of nightmares. They should have known better than to put her in the tank.
The Press of Blade

It starts the way it always starts,
   with a white trash friend in high school,
the bitchy girl with teased
   black hair and tight, tight jeans.
Squealing, Krystal fucks boys
   in back seats,
      on Wal-Mart-special flip-n-fucks,
         faking her moans to rev him up.

Dirty and tragic,
   the girl likes to carve
      her conquests’ names
         with razor blades into skin,
spiky names that fade away
   quickly—
      without scars.

For Lorelei,
   with too much blood
      in her veins,
letting becomes measured,
   more seductive than the dick of some illiterate.

She lingers over
   where to press,
      to wrist, to inner thigh,
the moment when skin
   bends without breaking,
the instant when it yields,
   the tongue-lick upon steel.
Danger Upon the Skin

She likes boys with the pearlized sheen of danger upon their skin, the ones who skate the cliff’s edge on two wheels, whose fingers on her skin smell of pistol grip, brake fluid, blood, and dirt. She moistens at the careless surety of their hands on her body, the lust-haze in their eyes when she shoots Patrón. These boys are safe, will not drown in her, do not see her in dreams.
The reflection of lover peers back at her from the mirror to which she presses her lips. She applies lipstick, the darker the better. It is the reflection she wants. The doppelganger she desires, the possibility in the mirrored face. Gazing into the eyes before her, searching beneath the surface for some hint, some meaning, she keeps them open, sees the fog of breath the moment before her lips touch. It is she, always she, that she wants, the reflection in the mirror, the sameness of lip, the parallel angle of cheek, the gaze that always meets. She never needs for more, never hungers for the other. The other never satisfies her with backseat gropes, fucks in basements. The hands she feels are her own. The metallic tang at the back of throat says something indecipherable, something lost in the silver behind the glass, something that keeps her up at night, something, some thing.
Emmadora

1

Pain coils through her muscles, 
clenches and grabs like a constrictor.

In her agony, denied relief, denied pills, 
my grandmother twists, trying to ease 
the tension in her legs, legs that 
look like my legs, my mother’s.

the same meaty thighs, scrawny calves, 
the same pudenda shrouded in hair, 

my grandmother’s steelier than the 
snow-spun wisps upon her head.

2

I imagine her as a young woman in love, 
as the woman who ran off with a lover 
from the circus. It was the 40s, she a mother 
already. Did she meet him with little girls 
clinging to her hands, their sweaty, cotton-candy 
fingers feeling to her like quicksand?

Was he the strong man, virile and able to protect 
her from the husband left behind? Or was he 
the horseback acrobat who reminded her 
of the boy she loved as little girl growing up 
in a small Pennsylvania farm-town. Possibly 
he was the lion-tamer, exotic, smelling of sweat 
and animal pheromones. I don’t know what pulled 
her away from her daughters, and I don’t know
what it was that brought her back, a year later, to the man who took it out on her in voltage.
In the Mirror

She assesses bone structure,
   the length of her nose,
smoothes with fingertip
   the arch of eyebrow,
ponders what distinguishes a woman’s lips.

Is it the way
the lower lip slightly droops
   sexy in her, weak in a man?
She firms her lips, but looks angry,
   not strong,

examines the reflection of nipples,
   palms against the swell
   over pubis.
Molds the fat laid above bone,
   flattens contour of hip,

yanks up boxers,
   snaps elastic.
   Clit lengthens, swells,
   bulges the placket.

Across her breasts,
   bandages subdue rondure,
create pectorals, the illusion
   of brute strength.

She pivots,
   admires the new silhouette in the mirror,

pulls on pants,
   legs lengthen,
   buttons the front, then cuffs of her shirt.
Her shoulders broaden,
   joints stiffen,
   she becomes the image.
She Will Paint the Sounds

of words onto her body.
They will bridge the arc of her back,
conform to the flex of foot,
slither over the slope of hip.

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;*
*Petals on a wet, black bough.*

In verse she will carve the image
of petal on inner thigh.
Skin her tablet, her canvas.

They will skate over shoulder,
down rib, across breast.
They will twine in color, in black,
sink into mottled stretch of skin.
Sketched over bone, sinew,
the taut tendon in her neck,
they will be words that say,

*his words were occupying armies*
*her laughs were an assassin's attempts.*

These words carved deep into dermis
form the textuality of her flesh
and they say,

*Resistance is the secret of joy.*

---

1 Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”
2 Ted Hughes, “Lovesong”
3 Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*
Anchoring

When she turns her head,
her features shift,
    leave her uncertain which parts are real,
    which imagined.
She looks into the mirror,
    eyes wedged like doorstops
    into the corners of the sockets,
the feel of skin
sliding beneath her fingers
frightens her.

    Anchoring the pieces makes them stay in place,
    stops the dissolution.

Geometry makes things make sense.
If she adds or subtracts,
shapes begin to settle themselves.
    First, she plucks eyebrows
    into a definable parabolic curve
    with an eccentricity of one,

    stitches an equation
with needle in ink,
    skin adjacent to muscle,
    parallel to the bone-cage
    beneath.

She weaves
thin strips of metal,
    always perpendicular to the body,
through the gristle of her nose—
    solidifying the strip of bone and skin—
then lances lip, clit, nipples.
We Grew Up Fatherless

When I was twelve,  
my mother tried to find  
    God.  
But in the way  
there was always  
    some long-haired man in cutoffs  
who, with knee balanced  
    on bench or step,  
never realized,  
    or didn’t care,  
that his balls  
were hanging out.  

With that man standing  
    between her and God,  
God didn’t have a chance.
Called by the rain,  
she goes to the Congo.

Sells her house,  
the beater that barely runs,  
the dresses crammed in the back of the closet  
(just in case).

She buys heavy boots  
with steel in the toes,  
bug repellant,  
disposable razors,  
a tiny cross of silver.

She takes flight after flight,  
each plane smaller,  
hotter.

The last circles over  
turbid water  
stretched further than  
any she has seen before.

She has dreamt this water—  
fed by storms  
whose thunder seems  
to never end  
—it rolls in her chest  
where her heart should be.

In a pirogue bought at the river’s edge,  
she strikes off to the opposite shore,  
disappears  
into the trees.
The Tortured Body

bears a thrust beneath the skin
which strains against the tensile
strength of tissue.
Modern medicine has forgotten the power
of letting,
of letting things slip through the fingers,
of letting go,
of letting the blade slip in.

At the edge of the tub,
lip cool against flesh,
I slow,
wait for blood to reach
my fingertips.

The skin
blue as the ocean off costa del azahar,
smooth.

Fractals bloom,
each path determined by
the fine hairs
a razor never cuts.

The rivulets, random.

Lit by sun upon
a bloodflower blossom,
Lorenz’s butterfly
lifts its wings.

A woman high on the cliffs of Oropesa
waits for the breeze.
It lifts the hair
that lies hot upon her neck,
rocks her back on her heels.
You did that thing that I always longed to do—
just stepped away.
One foot into the trees
and you were gone.

At sixteen, on a layover
in Houston, I thought,
maybe I will move through
into a moment of brilliance,

negated against the light,
before I disappear
into someone else’s life.

At thirty, I gaze north
from Seattle into the trees

think about the first step.
The Dream

She wakes up drenched.
In the dream,
she was swimming
and as she moved her legs
below the water,
still separate and distinct,
she saw scales forming.
First a spot of shiny silver,
then a lovely one of green.
She is parched,
longs to drink the water,
but with each mouthful,
more scales appear,
she is not ready to give in yet,
not ready to give up land,
so she surfaces,
breathes deeply the humid air
of her bedroom.
As a boy, José Manuel swims with the other boys in the lake tucked in the valley’s confluence, loves the slip of fish against skin. Twisting in the ribbon-shots of light, deeper and deeper, the fish coil in his hair, between his legs, fingers, lips. But slowly, God replaces the fish. Prayers, not fish, slip through his lips. He forgets the slide of light through water over skin. But as an old man, in a small Honduran village, it is fish he brings to the starving when he prays for three days, three nights. One hundred and forty years later the fish, not sea water, but fresh water fish, not dead, but alive, not blind, but with eyes, not big fish, but small, fish from the lake tucked away in the valley, fall.
In Mountains

It was in mountains
that I learned of this ending,
that it slipped between my thighs.
It was in mountains
that my mother told me how it ended for her,
for the women of our family.
Flying over mountains
a month later,
I felt again the push,
my womb, my labia
heavy with blood.
The last of my fertility
sapped away in this heat,
in this soil so dry,
but these hills
to whom I have given my children
will know me,
call me home,
wait for me.
She stands in the driveway,
wa...
The Shock

1

She always lies down above
the cover, knees tucked up,
one hand wedged between them.

When she wakes hours later
to put the meatloaf in the oven,
she smooths the coverlet with her hand.

Her hair, white at twenty-three,
thick with the smell
of Aqua Net, never moves.

2

My grandfather is always the center.
We pull to him,
love that he loves the Beach Boys
and red hot fireballs
which he buys for us by the
case down at the bait and tackle shop.

Summers at the lake,
he spends hours tossing us high
over his shoulders into the water.
Even before we swim, we let him,
know he will be there
to swing us back up,
drops spraying in an arc
that follows the line of our toes.

3

He’s been dead for five years
when I learn why she slept,
my grandmother.
Nineteen, I struggle with motherhood.
I am the same age she was
at the birth of her first child.

For the first time,
I see her, without him in the way,
suddenly notice this woman
so much like me.

When my sisters, almost a decade older than me,
let it slip on a cab ride to Brooklyn,
they are surprised by my confusion.

But how was I to know why
her skin hung, bleached, in pleats
around her bones, gathers and folds
over her eyes and across her knuckles.

I never knew that electricity could do that,
could peel the flesh from bone,
ever knew that shock could turn hair white,
ever knew that sleep could be
the only answer.
Imprint of Ice

Ice ripples, distorts the shape of me,
my hair a radiant locus that can’t be seen
where none walk upon the glare crust dazzling.

I am lost beneath the sheeting
of your mind. The story etched on skin
blurs beneath the layers,
compacts, melds, re-freezes.

Impenetrable beneath the sun at noon,
glittering beneath the moon at midnight,

when they pull me from the ice in spring,
the impression still lies upon me.

I was held beautiful by the ice field,
only the shape of the floe
lies upon my skin, twists the images.
Now they tell the ice’s tale.
Unconquerable Longing

She lives near an airport,
spends hours staring up at the sky.
Her eyes follow the trails,
try to discern destination
from the direction of the lines,
the speed of dispersement.

She loves travel,
loves the swoop in her chest
during take off.

In other lands
she tries to decipher
why it feels familiar.

Why,
when she tastes dirt on the
tip of her tongue,
her bones ache, seem to swell.

Why,
when she breathes the air deeply,
the walls of her cunt contract
and why,
when she stands in the rain,

her heart speeds up
in her chest.
She can feel place
tattooing a rhythm against her ribcage.

In dry blowing winds
she spreads her arms,
thinks, wingspan.
Moths fly out of the southwest, thunderheads ripple with the lift and drop of their wings. They eclipse the moon’s hazy penumbra, shine briefly in the still light. With tidal rhythm, streaks surge wing, to wing, to wing. Asleep, with thunder just beginning to dance over the foothills, I dream of water not seen for years, dream of swimming. In the morning, I cannot tell whether the scales that dust my arms belong to the powdery calletta, or the fish of my dream-sea.
The Breaking Point of Water

Below the surface,
there is balance.

For every up-pull,
there is an undertow.

Water is her world.

In dreams,
she lives below the skin,
surfs like a porpoise, bare-bodied,
feels the click of pleasure in her throat,
slides along the crest, unafraid.

There is no liquid
above the surface of her dreams.
It tenses,
bulging slightly,
over the rim of her waking,
stretches, because,
when liquid behaves,
nothing spills.
Revolution

She keeps her eyes
cast upon the ground.
    No one meets their gaze.

Her irises
cut boldly into holes,
disquiet.

Like sunlight over water, they reflect
    the rippling of algae,
    the fallen leaf mosaic,
    the boulengerina’s undulation.

She strides lightly,
    still branches unbroken
    beneath her tread.

Shadows ripple in her wake.
She knows for what she is searching,
    but it isn’t in the busy streets of Kinshasa,
    the watchful gaze of villagers,
    the steady stares of soldiers.
She has dreamed
    and she knows for whom she searches.
Across the Line
for Rochom P’ngieng

I am no longer me.
When I stepped across the line between light and dark—

(a real line)—
The meadow burned green into my retinas. When I stepped into the cool black under the trees, the blades of grass lingered, an afterimage, in my sight. The bleating of sheep blurred beneath the shadows.

I never took the step. I stood in the doorway, the city’s skyline jutting up behind the parking deck, taxis lined the walk in front of me. The blue smell of exhaust permeated the air, but I could not take that step down off the curb.

I lost myself under the trees. I lost my name, my voice, the smell of my mother’s skin, the fear of being taken, of open fields.

I lost myself here.
Married to a man who doesn’t know me.
He knows my skin, I wake to find his nose pressed to my neck, but he doesn’t know that I dream of airplanes and doorways, that the scent on my skin in the morning is sea salt.
Her Fantasy

She begins to hate the way that he eats, thick, sluggish lips wrapping around each bite. Food roils visibly in his puffy cheeks, he cranes his neck when he swallows.

He brags about her cooking to others, at meals takes more than anyone else, for Christmas buys her knives that twinkle in the lights from the tree.

She is fascinated by the blade’s sheen, slides it over the pad of her finger, the line left behind the same velvet burgundy as the tree skirt.

She daydreams while making dinner. The boning knife would slip easily between ribs, the nasty little point of the paring would fit snugly in the niche between ear and jaw. The butcher’s knife slices such fine fillets.
Cocoon

The forest enfolds her in its limbs,
wraps her in light that
shifts through the bower overhead.

She hacks her way through the brush.
Bitten and bleeding,
she drops
exhausted
with the light.

(On the equator the sun does not set.
It slips into the Congo
which waits
stretched wide
to gather it in.)

In dark’s embrace she dreams,
butterflies spread their wings upon her skin,
lay them open upon her eyes
and through them sees
a patchwork of pattern.
She dreams of change.
She dreams of revolution.
She awakes
with the words in her throat.
Like Subirana, fish fall at her feet.

A soft patter smatters the roof,
    quickens.
Fish drop in liquid
    plops and slaps.
    Frogs skitter, half-hearted,
stunned by the precipitous plummet.

She picks her way across
the aquatic carpet
covering the crabgrass,

    plants her feet,
and howls at clouds heavy,
    coagulated,
screams for deliverance.

It never ends.
She will stagger
into the aftermath,
survey the staple sustenance
of some remote village scattered
like offerings at her feet.

She will begin to shovel.
1

Grandma made a crazy quilt
stitched with lines that twist and twine,
sewn from tiny patches of her husband,
bits of blue denim,
raspberry satin circles
    snipped in the gin-joint days,
deep velvet strips
torn from a gown she never wore,
seamed in thread that loops and whorls,
    snakes across the tapestry,
dips into shadows and traces,
shape of hare and antelope,
catfish, moon.

2

Lorelei spends years
collecting for her quilt,
carries miniature scissors
    wherever she goes,
pulls them from her pocket,
cuts the shape of memory from
the plaid flannel of her first lover’s shirt,
a snippet of mama’s lavender dressing gown,
a square from the nubby wool blanket
    still gritty from that night at the edge of the world.
    She pieces them together in her mind,
    the flow of water beneath trees,
        wings in flight, moon
            and rain.
The Stage

I yawn, my throat blisters.  
Syrupy perfume lies thick  
over the audience. I long  
for intermission so that I may slip  
down the steps, out the back.

You step onto stage  
and under the lights your hair  
is the copper gleam of a cello’s belly.  
Your voice strides above the guitars,  
hits like a hammer  
of whiskey within my veins.
Cunning Stunts

In your absence, 
in clay I mold.

Remember

the furrow of your cunt, 
run thumb 
along the labial ridge, 
explore the layering of flesh, 
and tendon, 
and bone, 
unable to discern whether 
blood which pulses 
through my thumb-pads 
is mine 
or yours.

Pry back layer upon layer 
stratified like rock face, 
pliable as Carrara 
beneath chisel, 
slide fingertip along 
the vein 
of marbling, 
fluctuation of coloration.

Delve your depths, 
learn dips and grooves, 
cunicular crevices, 
the supple press of liquid stone, 
the give of living clay.

Enact with tongue 
the dance of Ama-no-Uzume, 
spell out the name 
Amaterasu, 
dance around your salt-lick 
rust-iron cunt taste. 
Curl-hocked 
animal cave-pool of spell and bone.
Beckon forth the sun
cloistered deep
within your
dark grotto,
storm-wrath stunned but willing.

I cave into you
persephonic,
lured by fruit you offer me,
fruit that beguiled Eve
claret-hued beaded,
engorged like the ramparts of your cunt
as you come.

But then again like Baubo,
lewd, naked,

I dance for Demeter
and I am she
cuntsstruck.
Carna

Janus was the god of doorways. He was young and old, the sun and moon, the beginning of all things. He made his nymph lover Carna into the goddess of door hinges, handles, and thresholds.

This body is the way to learn the world—
the blades of grass tenderly slice
the feet that walk upon it.
Skin senses the raindrop
the moment before it lands.
A mother’s muscles tense
just before her child falls.
The body feels joy as it leans into the wind
high on a cliff-face,
knows with certainty the feel
of the rocks below,
the heat of the sun
on the swallow’s feathers
as it lifts into the breeze—

flesh is the linch pin on which life turns.

He is life and death,
but, without me,
the door is always shut,
or always open,
I am the hinge that lets them in.
Sunday Morning

He comes in to wake me. He’s been up for hours with the boys. The late winter sun is warm on my skin. The boys follow him in, burrow under covers with cold feet, hone in on my sleepy heat. The baby hates to be snuggled, heads for the stairs and the cartoons that can be heard through the floorboards. The older boy follows his father into the bathroom to piss, brush his teeth. The father comes back to me, fits his body to mine, and listening for the sound of the water shutting off, rocks into me. Silently we come, me, and then him, before leaving the warmth to grind coffee, start breakfast, all in the warm winter light.
From this I am the one who returns.  
From the things I have left behind,  
I return. From my husband, my lover,  
the remnants of a life ill-conceived,  
from myself, split into before and after, I return.

Driving the bridge of the valley,  
the moon sucks burnished light  
from the sun which teeters  
on the curve of the safety fence.  
I feel my legs cradled in the seat,  
my feet in sandals on the pedals.

The sweat upon my skin, the music  
ripping from my mouth, all tug me  
back into this body, no longer alibi,  
but reminder of joy, the reason  
for these words upon the page.