

THERE WILL BE CASUALTIES

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by

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I.

## 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 daisies, 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.

II.

## 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 know 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 one 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.  
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 trans-orbital. 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  
across the globe, 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  
engine 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 Dharamasala.  
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

Buddhist Monks

Lead Us

Rioting broke out again

Thy kingdom come

Police open fire on hundreds

Twenty protestors executed

But deliver us from evil

Walk the Jokang clockwise

Lead us not into temptation

Things not reported

Can't go to the hospital

They've been wounded

Put down the violence

In a world of a billion people

Give us this day

Saffron robes

On Earth as it is

A warning shot fired

And forgive us our

Blood on the Barkhor

Thirty shot randomly

Stroke 108 beads of a mala

Our daily bread

Cars burned, turned up side down

As we forgive those who trespass

Where they speak Chinese

In another language

For thine is the kingdom

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.

