

DEBRIDEMENT

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**A THESIS**

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## ABSTRACT

*Debridement* is a collection of poems about subjects including the modern gay male experience and the ways difficult and even traumatic events can become negotiated parts of the self. The collection focuses on the dissolution of a marriage between a man and woman, male intimacy, queer fatherhood, violence and navigating grief. By employing narrative, particularly fable, beside lyric forms, and through the use of images related to mycological phenomenon, the collection asks the reader to consider how shame and feelings of worthlessness might be transformed into self-validation and understanding. The poems encourage the reader to view life as involving calculated risk and liminality, to step foot into a world where arrival is an illusion and becoming is a constant.

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## **Dedication**

To Kelly, Cleo, Laura and Mom

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## Two cardinals

One decomposing log: an orchestra of spores.  
One pair of Goodwill shoes caked in mud.

For some reason, I always find myself making decisions like this.  
In the mud. I thought that once I became an adult,

I would know what the right thing to wear would be.  
One shiny tree. Is that glitter on the tree?

Two rabbit holes in the ground. One Disco tree  
in the middle of the park. It seems out of place.

Two shady spots where the ground is covered in frost.  
One dog not on leash. The tree is too fabulous.

One rabbit's skull picked bleached white.  
I scream at the tree. Hey! Disco Tree!

Get out of here! Didn't you hear about the bill  
those psychos passed in Florida?

Two dogs and one man with a nice butt wearing mud boots  
walking in front of me.

One turkey vulture. It's not safe! But then I remember  
trees don't have ears. One shadow. One cigarette butt.

It was the year I was broke. I picked cigarette butts off the ground  
and smoked them. I guess it's my shadow. 21 ice puddles

that are 21 worlds. What I mean is that I am  
my shadow. Is Beyonce's *Renaissance* a disco album?

I'm not sure. Once, I was in the car with my mom,  
and she hit a bird and killed it.

My daughter is a week-old today.  
21 windowpanes. My shadow is me.

She pulled off to the side of the road and started sobbing.  
Then praying. 20 more puffs in my inhaler.

One memorial Labyrinth that promotes gratitude.  
One year of sobriety.

She told me she couldn't imagine if any of her kids were gay.  
10 geese trespassing into the private pond

against the wishes of the HOA. I'm grateful for geese  
noncompliance. One helicopter that looks like a blackbird.

I still have the scar from when I pushed my arm through  
the windowpane. Her eyes were searching

for something in mine. Turned on thinking  
about the 20-something with the nice legs.

I usually like hairier dudes. One hill perfect for rolling down.  
Hairier dudes like the hairy-armed French café owner.

Five artificial pale pink roses standing at attention  
in memory of a woman who died before she turned 60.

One plaque which instructs us to let her memory  
inspire us in everything we do.

The plaque reminds me that I need to buy  
oat milk if I want to eat cereal

in the morning and get cat food.  
Hairier dudes like Hugh Jackman.

Wolverine in the first *X-Men* movie.  
One profusion flowering crabapple.

One call to Dad on his 70th birthday.  
It's been a while. We talk about his cancer.

He asks me to send him pictures of the baby.  
One dandelion. Would I see my shadow?

No broken glass to pick up. Would there be a sign?  
An epiphany? 57 minutes until my therapy appointment.

She seems competent enough. Besides, what do I know?  
This is my first therapist.

How do you know if it's a good fit or not?  
One little free library.

One endangered owl seen through a telescope.  
I want more of a literary balance to exist

in the little free library's ecosystem,  
so I'm doing my part. Three more cars

pull into the park. Ten cold fingers.  
Between two Michael Crichton books,

I've left a copy of George Oppen's *Selected Poems*.  
I didn't just wear the wrong shoes.

I didn't bring gloves. The moon's outline is peeking  
over the reedy marshland, shadows multiplied

reflect off the barely frozen puddles.

**To beat back loneliness, I drove a town over to deposit a load on a guy's face**

Afterwards, I ate a \$3.49 Blueberry Maple Donut.  
It wasn't the best donut.

A dozen would be \$30.00.  
Double what I make at my job for two hours.

The taste, a mixture of salty and sweet.  
I didn't complain about the soggy bottom. Ate the donut

in two bites. I bet no one ever complains  
about the soggy bottom –

thinking that this is how donuts should be.  
The married man couldn't meet up because of church,

too risky to sneak away, to be  
in another man's bed, legs spread.

## Overheard

A trucker was in front of me  
in line at the doctor's office.

Said he hadn't slept a wink.  
Said he was haunted

by nightmares. He'd watched  
a woman jump off a bridge.

Said her body on the road  
looked like a pile

of dirty clothes. The impact  
had reduced her

to pebbles, dust,  
bones and blood and teeth.

It took the ambulance  
awhile

to get there  
and clean her up.

I sat down not locking  
eyes.

## **Blackout bladder**

As a boy, I couldn't wait to grow up. Friends said they wouldn't live past forty. By 13, liquor drunk in basements. Left to rot in the sun, my twenties were spent pissing through couches. Bleary-eyed.

## **One more being my kryptonite**

After calling the wrong asshole an idiot,  
piss and shit bravado landed me in the E.R.

Drunk and concussed, gauzy strands, jaw broke,  
I drank through a straw for weeks after surgery.

I deserved being attacked on my 23rd birthday.  
That's such a weird shitty thing, but I believe it.

## **Survive**

After I got the piss beat out of me,  
my first move was to shake his hand  
for instilling a new fear in me of men.



## **How to not get murdered**

Don't go to Burnett Woods or Daniel Drake Park.  
You hear footsteps and it's dark.  
Back to the car.  
Don't go to strangers' houses. Opening the door,  
there's a porno on.  
He's on his knees. After,  
you realize you went to grade school with him.

Don't follow pickup trucks, based on only a nod  
and a glance. Wait for confirmation. Wait.  
Ask what kind of car he drives. Wait. Idiot.  
What if it's not the right guy? What if  
you follow him home to his camp site  
what if you get out of your car  
and he shoots you.  
Wait.

Don't go to a farmhouse in a corn field  
on a Sunday. You walk down into the basement.  
He opens the door only in underwear.  
On the walls are pictures of him and his husband.  
When he says go downstairs and you see the bed  
next to the sling  
you just go with it.

## **I tumbled knowing**

I dared you  
down the hill.

I know my limits  
you said.

I bounded on,  
mocking you.

“Alright, limits.”  
“I’ll go on then.”

My ankle unsteady  
under soft dirt.

Falling on my ass,  
there you were.

I told you so.  
I know my limits.

## **Spores shoot**

from swamps  
and landfills.

So fast,  
unseen

messengers  
of the coming.

Through  
the air,

warmed up  
to cause

a shift  
in body

made receptive  
to changes.

## **Subjective rabbitry**

You're in a room  
without access to water  
and you must pretend to be a Christian.

In another part of the warren,  
a different rabbit wants to know  
what it feels like to die.

And the hard light  
construct is buying impulses  
in an imperfect package.

### **Left to pick up the pieces**

of grandfathers who were men  
and who were monsters,  
who were just trying their best  
and who were the scum  
on the bottom of the most  
worn out shoe.

**All in leather, you answer the door and lead me inside**

Speech is the first thing I give to you.  
Reduced to *Yes Sir* and light signals,

you lead me to the basement  
where you give me a collar, locking it.

On my knees, licking your boots  
the leather is smooth against my tongue.

**I never was going to be a structure**

that is, less than  
a liquid. I wonder

who washed whose  
feet? Did Judas deserve

to be buried  
with the beggars?

## Elegy

Dedicated to a man—  
boy who died at 18.  
How might he have died?

Maybe he fell and his body  
was pulverized —  
blew

his bones to dust.  
In reverse.  
If not a fall,

why not cancer  
or a car wreck?  
Or his heart

gave out. Maybe,  
at birth we're given  
just so much time.

Not a minute more.  
At the end of life,  
we are free from time.

Could be cancer  
or his heart gave out.  
Suicide. Could be

brain aneurysm,  
freak accident.  
Could be that dying young

is only a symptom  
of living in a modern age  
in tiny boxes.



## Six in a beige room

We hustle into the predawn, nervous that our reason for living is slipping. At the hospital, the nurse leads us away from the emergency room. On the elevator the nurse is talking and unaware of our fears. Sleep crusting my eyes, I mistake cobwebs for specters hanging in the beige corridor.

I think about the scene with the flying nun in *Death Becomes Her*. The pale blue fluorescence illuminates Ernest as he descends into the hospital to rescue his bride from a body bag. Foreshadowing what the audience already thinks they know. On the third floor, I sit and wait until I am allowed back.

There are candy wrappers on the floor in the waiting room. I feel comforted by the mess. The maternity ward is dead silent. The beige hospital room they have you in is off to the side of the rooms they put new mothers in. Chairs hang on the wall. I take one down and sit next to you. The nurse has deep lines

on the corners of her mouth and by her eyes. The heart monitor doesn't pick anything up. In the beige room we wait for our fate to be decided by the cheerful looking woman. A doctor comes in and he looks young. I start counting in my head how long he has been a doctor. Maybe a year or two years. How old was JD in *Scrubs*?

For the first minute, he can't pick anything up: no heartbeat. On the ultrasound screen, all I see is a gray blob. He can't pick up any movement. For the first minute, my heart sinks into ocean. I escape. Tread water. The doctor has a cigarette burn on his arm. Somehow this is comforting. We wait and in the second minute of no movement,

eyes searching in the beige room for the Goddess are left wanting. I notice a spider in the corner weaving her web, and I think about how she's connected to our fate. Unable to offer reassurance, eyes pried shock open. We wait. Another nurse walks in. Beads of sweat fall from Doogie Howser's forehead. Six in a beige room, waiting.

What's happening? Do you see anything? "I think so." The doctor hedges. His hesitation keeps him distant from questions voiced in desperate tones in this room. Then, we hear you. You sound like whale song. You sound like the universe. Like home.

## **Subjective rabbitry**

Of course! The you  
that closed the book.

The you that opened  
the book. They're *you*,

aren't they? Rabbit said  
in exasperation.

Owl looked up at the sky  
and thought. The me

that woke up today  
and stretched my wings.

That's the me that is here  
with you now.

## **Look just like him**

You wanted to know how my truth matched up  
with your cardboard cutout. My uncalloused hands shy away  
from the physical work that you clung to  
until your body was broken. Jagged metal  
chips fall from your heavy boots into the soft living room rug  
as you perch in your chair unmoved.  
I don't think I ever saw you cook a meal or clean a toilet.  
You thought these tasks were beneath you.  
The grooves in your perch settled by habit.  
What your father taught you.

## Chasing a shadow

A boy is running  
after another boy.

In white hot pursuit,  
he reaches out

and falls  
into a sticker bush.

*Freeze frame.* See the boy,  
eyes narrowed, brow fixed.

One brother out of reach  
of the other.

*Jump cut* to the chase.  
Angry footfalls close in

on outstretched hands.  
Each stride lacerates

soft padding.  
*Jump cut* to the anger

filled boy bleeding,  
His brother won't be

caught. He'll keep  
running and running.

Feet bloody, white  
t-shirt sweat

stained trousers muddy.  
*Zoom in.* Panting,

he turns to go home  
forced to grow up.

## **Subjective rabbitry**

You're in a room  
without access

to water. You're  
a rabbit. At least

you think you are.  
You don't know

what you are  
or why you're here.

## **Dislocated**

Before you were a rabbit, you were the regulatory affairs manager for a mid-size medical device firm. You sold burs. The best burs designed by engineering experts. Your burs cut through skulls of FDA approved anatomically appropriate animal models.

## **Purple hearts and covered bruises**

A tired infant's scream pierces  
into tomorrow's shadow.

Heard in 1960's Brooklyn, New York  
by a single mother who wonders

where they'll go next if this one  
hits. She'll think about him

as she dances around the room  
until the needle sticks. She didn't

want to leave him. How could she?  
She knew his mind was changed

by the drink. By the bombs. By the fire  
and the other men's screams.

When he woke up and pummeled her  
she knew and loved him anyway.

## Down home

A sawed-off shotgun sits on the front porch  
downhome where my grandfather picked

tobacco until his hands bled. He fled to find  
the new city. He never lost his accent.

He wore it as armor to scam northerners  
who might be caught off guard by the hillbilly

gambler with a sixth-grade education.  
He refused to take his place on the burying hill.

He traded the holler, like so many of them did,  
for a shot at being brand new. So, Mom's proud

of her roots. She refuses to talk like everybody else.  
Rebuilding downhome only way she knows how

through language cherry-picked. Imagine if we all  
could speak in a way that makes us happiest.



## **Rotted**

In another part  
of the forest,  
fleshy sentinels

stand at attention  
ready to greet  
their queen.

See them claim  
morning, burrowing  
through stone.

## **No really it's fine**

And then we thought that the structure was already in place  
so that the only thing we needed to do was build down.

We realized so much work was done, and we went back  
quite a far piece tracking right making a reverse journey

across the expanse and then we kept digging deeper  
wanting to find the bottom for our claws to hit stone

to come across something massive and solid  
but the strangest thing happened then, y'know?

We never did find it, the big solid thing—  
I'm not sure there are solid things. Or ever were.

## Queer soup

How can I be safe while being vulnerable when I've been cut off at the knees—I think about past moments of intimacy lying in our twin-sized bed in the basement. I was someone else entirely.

I don't know what he'll do as I peel away dead skin and show him the tender buds below but I know he's safe and nerdy and patient and it's probably stupid to catch feelings it's probably stupid to grasp for straws to hope for evolution

and he asks me about loneliness and how that's been going and I tell him it's a day at a time and I tell him that I'm not fine and I tell him that I need what reciprocation is

I need to feel safe and I just blurt out my insecurities one by one what if I'm broken what if I can't go on when he asked what it is I want it's couched in the past it's stuck on the shelf like it will be kept

We go back to his place and in his bedroom I'm worried. In the hotel with the flight attendant I couldn't stay hard. I'm worried that I'm broken. I'm worried that I'm broken and I don't know if I'll ever be fixed. Instead of running away I stay and tell him everything. I hope that by being vulnerable I won't crumble, and I tell him that I can't get hard in front of new people and he tells me that maybe I should stop meeting up with new people and I don't know about that because new bodies have been filling up this ache this cavity

## **Continuum of spores**

might  
be infected

lungs fungal fleshy  
fruiting body

putrid smelling  
pitcher plants

sticky red kimchi  
cavity grows

signs of decay  
weeping holes

## **I was a hot hand**

Sweatin, the ink barely dry on the house. Here I am  
putting the acreage up on a hunch that I'll hit. Yessir.  
Don't do me no good thinkin' bout why I'm here.

### **35 Beats Per Minute**

Flashing lights reflect danger on both sides of the room  
as the nurse comes in to reset the clock. Neon glow  
blue cascades melting into a single reflected image.  
This is how it looks as I close my eyes.

The midwife with suns and moons guides you to push.  
She counts backwards softly from twenty  
and I think about beginnings. At 7:35 this morning  
her heartbeat dropped to 35 beats per minute.

During the crash, I count six bodies in the room.  
Then, six more-barrel in. They take you and I wait.  
I wait, and I'm alone. For 3 minutes, I'm alone.  
I start taking pictures of everything: The blankets.

Kept a constant 130 degrees Fahrenheit.  
The white board has the pain scale, the happy  
looking one on the far left has no need to cope.  
The one on the far right, distressed, sobbing,

is not coping. The empty crib. The short distance  
from "Coping Well" to "Difficult." Morning light  
following a full moon. Sky blue, a promised beginning.  
Vaguely uplifting paintings of spring flowers on the beige wall.

I can't tell where I am in space. Then, they call me back  
and ask me if I want to meet her. In the operating room,  
you're splayed-out crimsoned azure skies at some kind of break.  
She's crying, red and covered in poop. Perfect in every way.

### **In another part of the forest**

where we admit to ourselves  
that we had no good models  
to emulate. We find our hands  
stained blue—willing to try it  
even though the bitter metal  
taste lingers on our tongue  
and we might not be who  
we once were in the morning.

## Dad's driving lesson

Atta boy, nice and easy, slow down.  
Braking is like sleeping with your girlfriend, gentle—  
cruise along at a nice speed now—  
driving is like life, son, there are risks.  
Every lane, see the choices ahead of you.  
For easy listening, a cautious tempo.  
Glide next on the radio turning the dial to more risk.  
Here are the country western listeners.  
Imagine from the front porch looking in, see a life you'll never have.  
Jot all this down, boy, are you  
keeping records about whether your tempo matches your  
listening habits? Until the houses and the road  
melt into one long night.



## **Recanting the monster**

I looked them both  
in the eye  
but decided  
this isn't for me.

Anyone, anytime,  
anywhere, shifted.  
In the car?  
The woods?

Hard pass.  
Besides,  
my hands imagine  
his hairy legs.

Our limbs  
akimbo.  
Entwined until  
morning light.

**But that's wishful thinking**

The next day phantoms,  
his fingers pressed

into my back–  
unafraid of being rough

love. Our bodies folded  
In the shower–after

I notice how tall he is.  
Our bodies are iambs.

Silently, I put on my shoes.  
We share hopes for our next meeting,

a rendezvous.  
Interrupting the script,

I let vulnerable slip,  
tell him that I would like that.

## The haircut

The barber has shaky hands, but he's doing an alright job. He stares me in the eyes and sizes up my symmetry. His tobacco breath.

The only other customer in the barbershop is chatting up his barber about the grief meetings they'd both attended.

Last week during therapy I told my therapist I needed a grief group and now today one is being delivered to me.

It's at a church a couple of towns over. They meet on Tuesdays later in the night and they even have childcare to boot.

I'm not crazy about it being in a church but honestly who else might do that kind of care work.

The super ambitious 22-year-old who works at the crisis hotline ghosted me. I liked him, but y'know I get it.

Not enough time to juggle everything.

I hung out with my wife. And it was almost like we weren't separated.

I don't know what I want, but in the barbershop, I thought about how I'll never have a son, well maybe not never.

The barber's parents were taken from her in a car accident-instant tearing away of roots ripped up

and the other customer's granddaughter passed away after an illness of some kind. She was 13 or 30.

I told them about how Dad went in for a routine thing because he is a diabetic and then I caught myself-was a diabetic.

See, Dad got depressed in 2001 when he couldn't go to work anymore after he blew out his knee and couldn't stand in front of a machine for 60 hours a week any longer.

After Dad got depressed, he didn't have any more goddamn fight in him. When a man loses his fight, sometimes he stays drunk. Sometimes he allows his body to wither.

Sometimes strong bodies are allowed to collapse under the weight of what they should carry.

Dad stayed depressed until the day that I said goodbye to him, incoherent husk wide-eyed as a newborn baby.

In the barber chair, I thought about how I might never have a son and I was relieved.

## **Dad's driving lesson**

Now, I look over while I am driving and you're there.  
I know you tried your very best with the tools you had.  
Understand I was never going to be  
what you wanted me to be—  
xeroxed. Like  
you were. Caged like an animal in the  
zoo.

## **After I became a rabbit**

I raised shrines,  
built effigies and ate

the flesh of carrots.  
I crossed my legs

any way I wished.  
I found safety

in a part of the forest  
I made my own.

## Debridement

Forgiveness is a bridge made  
of tiny things, grief inside  
forgiveness. Something to be made.  
After I tore myself, I ignored  
the frenzied stain. My pain  
penance for daring to be a pervert.

I wanted to be dead. Cavity sweet  
becomes rotten. I let the cavity grow  
for seven years. I told myself a lie  
that I deserved days of wanting to die  
because of who I am, who I dare to love.

I wanted to die in the past  
and the present lives in the past—  
to hollow is an act to reclaim the body.

A friend says *once you find yourself,  
who you are, you're solid after that.*  
Forgiveness is giving up a bit of stability  
for freedom

and my body and mind must weave  
grief back into my body and mind.  
To hollow is an act of weaving.

### **At the *Vikings Exhibit***

a giant wooden rudder  
catches my eye and I sit with the massive  
object. Something solid to steer the ship,  
to not fall off course previous paths  
can't be retraced. My hands  
are steadier now  
and it doesn't matter anyway.



**Muted impressionistic oil on canvas: custom frame: \$599**

At the bourgie café, all the chairs match and fake flowers sit on every table. Follow the woodgrain to plastic sunflowers. How do you know what you want if you don't know what you don't want? Fake sunflowers can be forgiven.

## **When something ends it's not supposed to continue**

I saw a rainbow on the flat drive to meet her—  
It was still fall and she wore gold earrings.  
We kissed in the rain, and both woke up  
the next day with sore throats and colds.

She left Rosary beads in my bed, I found them  
the morning after. I could have loved her—  
but I'm never going to.

## How many times is it appropriate to mention my dad's dead on a date?

Bash against my ribcage fluttering nervousness at every new date  
and I don't mean date as in hooking up in the back of an SUV.

Date as in two strangers awkwardly stumbling through sharing  
bite-sized chunks of ourselves. Okay, she knows I have a kid. Wait.

Does she know I have a kid? Better mention that. And show her  
a picture. Why am I divorced? I was an asshole, but I'm in therapy.

Why am I divorced? Because I should have never been married.  
I should have never had a kid. Why am I divorced?

I woke up one day and didn't want what I wanted the day before.  
Snap out of it. She probably won't linger. Talk about cats.

Oh shit. She's going to ask *what do you do?* And I'll say  
*well I teach, and I write gay poems and read them all over the city—*

*blooming queerness in red states.* I'll tell her with my body language  
I'm uneasy about dating a trans woman.

## **Attached to a married man**

He tells me we'll be friends  
as long I want us to be—

he'll take care of me.  
I don't believe him.

But he cooks for me,  
sends me off with lunch,

makes me feel wanted.  
But I know it's not real—

### **Glass cathedral of last moments**

Time slows down. The room is warm.  
I'm all alone and kept comfortable.  
I chose to be all alone. To be comfortable.  
Pre-selected memories flood into me.  
The shaggy-haired boy in my arms.  
Her first word. Clinking  
vanilla cupcakes with you at LAX.  
Sunsets. Full moons. Firelight.  
Stitched into landscapes so real I leap out  
of my body. Frozen in store-bought honey,  
while my mind is free to eke along.

## **For a split-second**

I didn't know which universe I was in.  
Was it the one where I was still married?  
Before I woke up, I knew where I was  
and was content with it more or less.  
I perform new rituals of autonomy—  
what I'll have for dinner, who I'll see  
what I'll do that I've never done before.  
It's like getting another chance at life.  
Alone, but not lonely. But still, I woke up  
and for a split second I thought about us—  
then I snapped out of it.

## And I did

Go suck some dick and write a poem about it  
and after you're done, you won't notice  
we woke up before *Landslide* was over.  
And when we're both brand new,  
I'll suck a dick and write a poem about it.  
Or lose all my wits and be a lump for a while.  
Lose all my bones (a neat trick this one) –  
losing a body might just be easy to master.  
Accept starts and stops – accept letting go  
and whether it's worth finding again or not  
go, suck a dick and write a poem about it.  
Be honest about how we never really had  
a chance. I put your line in my poem.  
Go. Suck a dick and write a poem about it.

## **I hate you because I love you**

I can't be around you because  
I hate you. We'll try again  
on another planet, in another life.  
It might be easy. And it remains  
easy to be alone. To buy a new bed,  
not too big, or too small  
and chosen by a committee of one.  
In another life it's easy, all the beds  
are new and it remains easy  
and so we'll try again.  
I picked out the new bed  
it's exactly what I want. But,  
I've been sleeping on the couch  
since the new mattress came.



**On the second floor of the parking garage**

in the backseat,  
wondering  
if this man  
settled to invite me  
to this private place  
with no names.

## Uprooted

If you make the mistake  
to clean out, it can kill off  
some crucial gut bacteria.  
How do you reach  
back into family  
when boundaries  
were overstepped?  
How to find home?  
At Hindman,  
I heard about  
putting microphones  
under chairs to record  
stories and voices.  
How to heal in silence?  
Who are we and how  
do we become who we  
are? What does family  
look like if it's not blood?  
If there's no good will  
left? What does it look like  
to be without family?

## **In the Art Museum on the second floor**

she's unimpressed by the lone Rothko,  
and she starts to meltdown. I wonder

If I should have taken her here  
in the first place.

In therapy, I complained about  
how I don't have help

whenever I take her anywhere.  
How I chose not to have help.

But today's a little different—  
he's there and we're friends,

making wise cracks about pride,  
ogling the waiter in the café.

Exchanging Cialis for Descovy  
in the elevator. It's effortless.

And as she screams,  
I beeline toward the exit.

I'm used to this now. I eyeball  
the staircase: two flights,

then her, then the baby bag,  
then swoop her up. I'm prepared

to do it alone. But today's  
a little different. He asks

what he can help with. I hand  
him the stroller and he carries it

down the stairs. I'm embarrassed  
to ask for help, but grateful

that we met and wonder  
if we fucked, if we'd still talk

every day. I try to soothe her—  
an unsuccessful effort.

In the hospital room,  
the first night I clutched

her tiny body and swayed,  
moved to some invisible strings

that I couldn't see but could feel.  
And as she screamed, I met her

where she was—scooped her up,  
and our bodies burned as we walked

to the car. And as we left the city,  
she fell asleep, no fight left in her.

**This is my mother's grief and rage on display**  
***After Tai Shani: My Bodily Remains***

How do I contain anger in objects?  
Give their power away?

Dad died this week  
and now I'm standing in front of a statue

of anger and rage.  
*Sir, can you please walk away from the statue?*

Flowers in her hair are metal flowers  
I can pick the frills apart—see the body.

## **On Father's Day**

Mom tells me it's only his body in the ground and I can't help but think that's only partly true. As I started to cry, a robin flew by and landed on a nearby stone. How much of grief remains unsaid? Mom doesn't want to be buried with her own people or with Dad's. She wants to choose a third way and like every time Mom has chosen independence since Dad died, I tell her whatever she wants, I support her.

## **Hairy-chested man**

Once, I saw my love  
of a hairy-chested man

as a weakness. Which is  
a fucked-up way

to think about things.  
The shift

happened when I started  
to consider

myself loudly, frequently,  
and with nothing to lose

as queer. What I mean is  
I was stumped until I wasn't.

On most days  
I'm happy to be alive.

I can breathe as someone  
who takes sides.

## Rural

The Golf World sign is rust.  
This stretch of highway hates gay people.

Tendrils twined buckle posts,  
crash silently. Tunneling through

cornfields. Be aware. Pay attention.  
In this country of so much country.

So many souls to burst,  
with deferred expectations.



## **On the dangers of time travel**

The many selves collapse  
one on the other  
and what's left is a pool

of spilled milk.  
Smelling like shit  
for two days.

This is contentment.  
Maybe choice is an illusion.  
What I really mean to say

is that if I could  
do it over again  
I might change some things –

but, one misstep might start  
many chain reactions,  
might not lead to her beginning.

## **The Photographer**

The shaggy-haired boy I might love is  
moving away and I wonder  
what our life might look like if  
he decided to stay.  
But I know better—  
still, nice to think,  
to let light—  
love seep  
in.

## To find home

Take a right.  
Find lilacs,

juniper, robin's  
egg, tiny

toadstools freshly  
bloomed.

In an old tree  
stump, marvel

at time.  
Take a left.

Find foxglove,  
purple berries

sweet sun-kissed  
mornings. Take

your shoes off,  
feel loamy wet

earth between  
your toes.

Look for signs  
of fairy circles.

## Hello in there

I see your face in every river,  
hear your laugh on the whistling wind  
that carries you back to me.

I know you tried your best  
with the tools you had.

I know it's not easy,  
Dad.

**Tell her how it feels to dance**

to hold space with her limbs  
flailing syncopation legs and arms in union

tell her  
she makes reality

tell her  
the prayer song is a river

tell her about endings  
when you share your prayer

tell her  
it's written on grains

tell her  
your song is love undying

tell her that  
she is beautiful