NOTES FROM THE GARDEN

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by

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Introduction

A writer was the last thing my parents wanted to raise, and certainly the last thing they wanted to explain to the neighbors, but when I was seventeen, I plucked my first metaphors from my grandmother's garden with the green beans and ran. I grew up in the kitchens and gardens of conservative, devout women in rural Ohio—my mother's, my grandmother's, and my Mennonite babysitter's. As they gave me beaters to lick, I listened to them talk—on the phone, to each other, to me, or sometimes just to themselves. Often, they enthralled me with the sweetness of their jam, the flick of their wrists as they chopped onions, and the deft way they cradled the phone between their ears and their shoulders, but as I grew older, I sometimes detected flashes of anxiety in their otherwise peaceful expressions. A quiet child with an observant disposition, I gathered up the details of these women, pausing to ponder them alone in the dark recesses of the haymow. Their private anxieties, which surfaced only at the most unguarded moments, stayed with me, especially as I began to harbor budding sentiments of feminism, gleaned from the pages of a library copy of *Fear of Flying*.

My new convictions, however, only confused my perspective. I struggled then, and still occasionally do today, with a sense of feminist obligation. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" Adrienne Rich states that "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (35). Of course the assumptions to which Rich refers are

definitively patriarchal, and the fresh perspective is a feminist one. In fact, she suggests that a "radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse" is crucial for women poets because only by knowing the literary tradition and recognizing its patriarchal nature can women poets learn "to break its hold" (35).

While I agree with Rich that a "re-vision" of tradition from a feminist perspective is important for the female poet, and though I recognize that both literary and social traditions in which Western society is rooted are strongly patriarchal, I am not convinced that a radical reinterpretation is an "act of survival" for the woman poet. Though Rich raises valid points about this perspective's role in breaking tradition, I believe that assuming such an extreme position leaves little room for complexity and ambiguity of feeling and oversimplifies lived experience. A woman poet who carries the weight of the idea that the injustice of tradition should always be in her mind tends toward the polemic and didactic, casting women like my mother unfairly, flattening them into paper dolls and dressing them in the identical garments of the oppressive patriarchy. By not considering the complexity of their characters, the ambiguities of their feelings, or the uniqueness of their situations, and, most importantly, denying that domestic women are capable of experiencing joy, the woman poet loses in the process not only truth, but the beauty and metaphorical intensity of complexity.

Eavan Boland expresses a similar concern in her essay "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma" when she notes that "gradual emphasis on the appropriate subject matter and the correct feelings" which are associated with anti-traditionalist reactions and reinterpretations become "constricting and corrupt within feminism" (243). She

elaborates on separatist reinterpretation: “It tempts her to disregard the whole poetic past as patriarchal betrayal. It pleads with her to disregard the complexities of the true feeling for the relative simplicity of anger. [. . .] Above all it encourages her to feminize her perceptions rather than humanize her femininity” (244).

This humanization of femininity is ultimately what I hope to achieve in my collection of poetry, which will focus on my own “re-vision” of the tightly woven social, religious, and literary traditions of the rural community I grew up in. I intend to undertake this “re-vision” through a series of biblical, gardening, and domestic metaphors. I have titled my collection *Notes from the Garden,* the word *garden* having both Edenic significance and being an apt ground for cultural and domestic metaphors regarding a rural community.

The reason that I have chosen to work with biblical metaphors is that they reflect the most widely accepted religious and literary tradition in my community. Additionally, the bible is a text that has been interpreted in fundamentalist Christian communities in an extremely patriarchal manner. Biblical and Christian influences permeate the culture and help to construct the social order and its mores. In the preface to her book *Rewriting the Word: American Women Writers and the Bible*, Amy Benson Brown notes that “American women writers find themselves struggling with a Bible that they inherit but that never seems as monovocal or monolithic as church officials and policy makers have suggested” (xi). Thus, many women poets find themselves revising existing biblical myths from a new—often explicitly female—perspective.

Alicia Ostriker points out another reason that biblical revisionism, specifically of gendered imagery, is so attractive to women writers: it serves as “a means of redefining both woman and culture” (211). Ostriker argues that mythology has precipitated the belief that woman must be “angel or monster,” good or evil per se, because myths are passed down from generation to generation and acquire a kind of cultural, religious and educational authority, that a writer, especially a women writer, would not have were she to write out of her own private sphere (212 -13). As a result, revisionist mythmaking not only imbues women's writing with an authority that patriarchal culture denies it, it enables women to reevaluate and redefine their own place within that culture.

Two myths frequently revised by women writers are the creation accounts in the book of Genesis, perhaps because in their original biblical and midrashic forms they roughly exemplify Ostriker's concept of the patriarchal, mythic “angel or monster” binary understanding of women. In the first account, in Genesis 1: 26-27, man and woman are created simultaneously, and while God notes that they have been created in his image and commands them to be fruitful and multiply, he does not give them names. The second account, in Genesis 2: 4-25, tells the more traditionally recognized story of creation in which Eve was created out of Adam's rib to be his helper. While the Christian church tends to gloss over the first account in favor of the second, Jewish scholars have noted the inconsistency between the two accounts, and created Lilith, Adam's first wife, through midrashic literature to reconcile them.

According to the traditional Jewish texts such as the *Talmud* and the *Alphabet*

of Ben Sira, Lilith is nearly the antithesis of Eve. Because she was created simultaneously with Adam out of the same earth, she has an independent attitude and does not see herself as subservient. However, when Adam refuses to let her lie on top of him during sexual intercourse, telling her that he is superior to her, and therefore, she must lie on the bottom, she speaks the ineffable name of God and flies out of Eden. As a punishment for her actions, she is sentenced to give birth to a hundred demon children every day, who are conceived from semen she steals from men during wet dreams. These demon children will die after they are born. Additionally, she is dangerous to newborns if their mothers do not wear amulets protecting them from her.

Thus, while the patriarchal Christian entirely tradition dismisses the notion that woman was at one point equal to man, the Jewish tradition wholly vilifies an archetypal independent woman for daring to desire sexual pleasure and the presumption that she should even be allowed to ask for it. Lilith, though, is not entirely antithetical to Eve. In her essay "Lilith and Eve: Secret Sisters and Successive Wives" Naomi Goodman points out that "The sisters [Eve and Lilith] represent two sides of female character as perceived by males: Eve is too weak, while Lilith is too strong. Women would always appear to be wrong" (191). Eve, already inferior by virtue of her status as helpmeet, shoulders the full blame for the fall of humanity.

Although women writers have revised and reinterpreted the Eve and Lilith myths in a wide variety of ways, most of their revisions seem to share the common goal of complicating, though not necessarily venerating, their characters and situations. Lilith has been transformed into somewhat of an icon in Jewish feminist

circles, where she is praised for the very qualities—independence, assertiveness, self-determination—that the patriarchal tradition uses to vilify her, though on occasion she appears as dangerous or pitiable. The relationship between Lilith and Eve has been portrayed in an equally multifaceted manner; while they are sometimes depicted as enemies, more often they appear as lesbian lovers, sisters, or in a mentor-mentee kind of relationship.

In her poem "Eden" Jacqueline Lapidus depicts Lilith and Eve both as lesbian lovers and as in a sort of mentor-mentee relationship. Eve, as the speaker in the poem, describes an incidental meeting with Lilith, which blossoms into a sexual encounter. Before Eve encounters Lilith, she hints at discontent:

> Adam was asleep
> and I, restless, strolling
> in the orchard
> climbed the apple tree
> for exercise and heard her (8-12)

In this passage Eve indicates a disconnect between herself and Adam. His companionship is not sufficient to keep her from feeling restless, and the fact that he sleeps while she seeks exercise elsewhere suggests that he lacks interest in what she is feeling. Lilith, on the other hand, demonstrates an immediate sexual interest in Eve, emphasizing the ease with which their bodies fit together:

> touch me, she said, see
> how my flesh fits
> the folds and hollows
> of your body [. . .] (14-17)

The ease with which Lilith's body fits sexually to Eve's implies more than just a physical connection. Eve, connected intimately with Lilith, gains a kind of power she

is incapable of commanding on her own. However, with Lilith as her teacher, she begins to see herself in Lilith's reflection: “her image came dancing to me / like sunlight, reflecting / myself” (27-29).

Additionally, in the poem Lapidus illustrates the downright uneasiness with which men traditionally view independent women through Eve and Lilith's assumption of the masculine task of naming. Eve now finds joy in “inventing with [Lilith] names / for swallow, quartz anemone” (32-33), a duty that God, according to Genesis, explicitly assigned to Adam. Eve, acutely aware of her newfound power over Adam, notes that he “notices but says nothing / this knowledge of our power / sticks in his throat” (38-40). Adam's uneasiness stems from the knowledge that Eve has found companionship and sexual satisfaction in Lilith, and now that she has taken over his job, he is virtually useless to her; he has no leverage left to assert his authority over her.

Furthermore, Lapidus's treatment of pregnancy in the poem, though brief, implies another aspect of a woman's life in which men are no longer necessary. Lapidus mentions pregnancy only twice in the poem, once during the sexual encounter between Lilith and Eve (“listen to the life / in my womb” [20-21]) and once later as an aspect over which Lilith and Eve bond, “laughing as our bellies grow / round as the moon” (35-36). This bond that pregnancy forges between Lilith and Eve is exclusive; while Eve's pregnancy may have begun as a way for Adam to display his virility, exercise his rights as a husband, or produce offspring, Lilith's companionship, all the more fulfilling because she is going through the same experience, serves as an

excellent surrogate for Adam's and ultimately makes his unnecessary. He has become nothing more than a glorified sperm donor.

The lack of preoccupation with childbearing and rearing that Eve and Lilith display as their pregnancies advance together flouts patriarchal conceptions of gender roles as well. The lightness with which they treat their pregnancies ("laughing as our bellies grow round / as the moon") unsettles Adam. Having found other things that fulfill them—chiefly each other's company and their naming exploits—they view their pregnancies as somewhat coincidental, even laughable. Additionally, Lapidus's placement of this line in the poem indicates the degree to which pregnancy is a focal point for both Adam and Eve. For Eve, the line appears at the end of her account of her relationship with Lilith, almost as an afterthought, again suggesting that pregnancy is a matter of little importance to her. For Adam, however, the line is placed immediately before the introduction of his uneasiness, indicating that it is perhaps the source of his concern.

While Lapidus's poem focuses on the relationship between Eve and Lilith and conveys the heightened sense of independence and self-worth women (like Eve) have to gain if they will only learn from Lilith, Barbara D. Holender's poem "Drifting Like Smoke" focuses on a feminist version of the Lilith/Eve dichotomy. In Holender's poem, Lilith is the speaker. She adopts an accusatory tone, highlighting Adam's patriarchally rooted presumption that he knows what is best for her, even better does: "I know you better than you know yourself, he said / defining me. Oh, he knew it all / but he knew it all wrong" (1-2). Still, he ignores her protestations, and in a truly

paternalistic manner, suggests that his giving her what he thinks she wants is his “gift” (6). Furthermore, he emphasizes woman's “need” to be passive, both in terms of her sexuality and of her lack of ability to determine even something as simple as her own desires: “I know what you need, he said, you need to be taken, / I will take you, drain you, I know what you need” (7-8). Lilith, true to feminist form, will have none of this and leaves.

Holender's portrayal of Eve as the passive housewife is equally transparent. Lilith, having left Adam, displays a predictable vitriol toward Eve, who exemplifies Adam's concept of the perfect wife: “His new wife says yes dear, Thank you dear, / Of course dear. She feeds him wholesomely, accepts / his giving and his knowing, seeks herself in his eyes” (18-20). She cooks, she obeys him, and she does not seek a personal identity beyond her relationship to him. She grows “fat with his seed” and bears children that resemble him (21-22). This Eve, unlike the Eve in Lapidus's “Eden,” utterly uncurious and utterly uninteresting, is the embodiment of stereotype.

Adam's persistent desire for Lilith at the end of the poem, despite the fact that he has found an apparently perfect mate in Eve, suggests that even men do not know themselves entirely, that the woman they have elevated as the paragon of femininity does not satisfy them. Lilith observes that “All his knowing / is right where he can grasp it; yet how restlessly / he probes the earth, searches the sky” (23-25). In these lines, Holender conveys the idea that the independent woman, in addition to being self-determined and more substantial, is, in reality, more appealing to men as well, the idea that, in order for a man and a woman to have a satisfying relationship, the woman

must not fall into an entirely passive role.

Though Lapidus and Holender's poems explicitly attempt to venerate Lilith, in other revisionist poems, such as F. Diane Harris's "Chameleon," Lilith is celebrated despite her diabolicalness. Harris's poem plays on a more traditional conception of Lilith, as dangerous seductress, but in the poem, she is locked in a samba with a "cloven-hooved lover" (3) who is equally, if not more, wicked than her. This lover takes on the characteristics of the historically typical patriarchal male throughout the poem, as Harris makes reference to him as a "gentleman" (10), despite his apparent sexual hunger. Lilith, undeceived by his gentlemanly efforts to hide his lust, "[. . .] licks her teeth, tears him apart / limb by ancient limb" (17-18). This mention of his "ancient" limbs also suggests that he embodies the classic patriarchal male that has existed since the creation of the world.

While Harris vilifies man through the character of the devil-lover, she depicts Lilith's actions as equally abhorrent, a kind of monster who sucks away his soul and reconstructs him in a way that suits her:

> Lilith sucks,
> inhales his soul,
> leaves him nothing
> but blind faith,
> sighs back his breath,
> [. . .] his lean, crusty body
> now clamped upon her fiercely
> a chameleon on a leaf. (21-31)

Yet Harris's tone in this poem neither vindicates nor condemns Lilith. Her act of reconstruction is awesomely powerful, but her reduction of man to a "chameleon on a leaf" is not exactly a desirable outcome. In essence he has come to embody a more

“crusty” (29) version of his ideal woman. While he enters the poem ready to dominate Lilith with his lust, she turns the tables on him and dominates him in an equally gross way.

Though ultimately I am unsure exactly what sentiment or message Harris would like her readers to carry away from this poem, its ambiguity and complexity are certainly more thought provoking than Holender's relatively black and white dichotomy. It is perhaps more realistic, as well, in the sense that, as Eavan Boland would remind us, reality rarely fits into the strictures of an -ism and certainly should not be forced into one in a poem. Even Lapidus's poem, with its explicitly feminist message, does not compromise either Lilith or Eve by reducing them to aspects of a philosophy. Additionally, Eve and Lilith's pleasure in their intimacy (sexual and otherwise) suggests that the ideal woman, from both a male and female perspective, combines the characteristics of both women. Indeed, such a woman would seem out of place in the mythical world but fit easily into the human world we inhabit.

In my own revisionist poetry, I seek to write from a perspective similar to Lapidus and Harris's. Though I will enter these texts, as Rich has suggested, from a new, critical, and feminist perspective, examining the lives of biblical women in particular and juxtaposing their stories with the stories of women living in my community today, my purpose is not as much to criticize as to question and gain insight.

In an interview with Naomi Thiers, Lucille Clifton expressed the idea that writing poems is not an explicitly intellectual activity, that poems instead “come out of

human lives and experiences" (18). Though my poetry comes out of the desire and struggle to reconcile my feminist beliefs with the world I came from, ideological and intellectual concerns come only as a product of the originating sentiment. In this collection of poetry, I use the language and images of my home to investigate the women in my community metaphorically, as well as examine my own relationships and the way that growing up in Chuckery has affected my perceptions of myself as a woman and a partner. I seek to write through a lens that merges the perspectives of both my worlds, and thus celebrates and criticizes simultaneously, emphasizing the complexities and ambiguities that make women more than just aspects of a philosophy.

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Notes from the Garden

Original Poems

by

Rachel Elise Rinehart

For my mother Rita,

my grandmother Mae Etta,

and for Jenna.

Chuckery's Homage

Jim shoots

an old .22 rifle
glorified groundhog killer
finger-worn wooden stock.
If only people worshipped their God
as much as their guns, he says.
Closing his glass eye
he aims for the cornfield.

Grandma says

the Amish women
make at least one mistake
in every quilt, a botched
patch and crooked stitches
because only God is perfect,
but they think they're
pretty damn close.

My mother prays

over frumpy petunias
matronly marigolds
unaware that Ishtar,
evening whore, lurks
in the rhododendron,
her thighs soft as
pink geraniums, tongue
sharper than barberries.

Omen

When I was eleven,
my mother found
a black bird in the washer
after the spin cycle,
its body stiff, feathers
sweet-smelling and clean
as towels, film like milk
over the black beads
of its eyes.

Though I knew
it was already dead,
a gift deposited
in the long sleeve
of a jacket by
an overzealous kitten,
I imagined over and over
its watery demise,
the soft flit of its wings
against the lid before
the onslaught
its tiny carcass bobbing
in the blue folds
of a blouse.

Together we buried it
in a shallow grave
by the cornfield,
the sable curl
of its beak peaking
through a shroud
of paper towels,
and though my mother
might have cried
for a robin or a redbird,
she poured vinegar
in the washer
and told me,

Leave the crows
to the cats.

Leviathan

for Will

At seven,
you set up digs
in the carpet,
search for bones
whose history
your father denies
from the pulpit
as Job's sleepy
seamonster
shifts its bulk
in the rafters.

Leviathan,
you imagine
it has eaten
the fossil records,
tucked the
Tyrannosaurus Rex
up under its belly.

After all, these
are just tests
of faith, printed
by God
in the bedrock,
inconsistencies
you must document
in red crayon
before bed, while

the Holy Spirit,
stalks the halls
where your father
sleeps, the cracked
egg of faith clenched
in its talons,
the yellow yolk
bleeding down
into dawn.

Baking for the Church Bazaar

God rubbed my mother's knuckles raw
under mountains of dishes at the church bazaar
ruined her hands in his dirty water.

I watched her in the kitchen turning out pies
turkeys, shivering green jigglers, star-shaped,
her face red and shining over the stove,

Hosts of Christmas Angels with sugary yellow gowns
candy eyes upturned in forced homage.
Jealous, I bit off their wings, gorged myself
on ambrosial feathers
arranged them, broken, human, on the plate.

God left my mother floundering
in an ocean of powdered lemonade.

I threw up in the corner, waiting for His Wrath.

Death by Peach

Standing at the sink, you leave
the dirty plates to soak and reach
with soap slick hands for the paper
peck of peaches you bought
two for five this afternoon
at Yutzy's Farm Market.

Like Eve, you weigh the fruit
in your hand, gauge its firmness
with your fingers, and you are
beguiled by its heaviness, round
and taut like the unsucked breast.
Unaware that death lurks at the center
in a neat little package, you brush
its soft skin against your lips,
and the dinner forks rise up
like soapy serpents in the water.
When the deed is done, juice
dribbles in golden trails down
your chin, and the pit lies
shriveled and naked across your palm.

I once heard the Egyptians
sentenced the priests of Thebes
to die by the peach, forced them
to swallow bitter poison
ground out of the pits,

but your quiet flirtation with death
is over in time to finish the dishes
and Eden is as far away as ever.

Hysterectomy

"A removal of histories,"

my cousin muses, at ten,
letting the dog lick his
fingers. His friend
has just had his tonsils
out, and he knows

the suffix
–ectomy.

My mother smiles at the sink.
Pitting peaches for pie,
she slices methodically.
Golden flesh falls away
in soft rounds, as
the aged pits,

brown and shriveled,
gleam wetly in a white dish.

Peach Dreams

All winter, I dream of peaches,
of quiet inroads in barky pits,
tiny trees ensconced in folds
of summer flesh.
I dream of peaches the way
Eve must have dreamt
of apples for months
after they left the garden,
waking to only the empty
cup of her hand, the sweetness
lost in the white expanse
of sheets.

Cheeseburger Soup

For weeks after they unzipped you
we ate our suppers out of Tupperware
containers and glass dishes with
monogrammed mailing labels peeling
off the bottom, innovations like
spaghetti pie and cheeseburger soup,
entrees which belong to that bastard
family of casseroles that churchwomen
make when one of the flock goes down
because they freeze well and thaw well,
and most men can use a microwave.

Night after night my father pressed
the reheat button while I sat
beside you on the couch, watching
you clip your own funereal recipes
wondering how you could let them
scoop the woman out of you, cut out
the warm sleeve of your womb
where I percolated in the dark,
slowly unflexing my fingers and toes
until one day I emerged pink and alien

no longer part of you.

Imagining My Grandmother at Golgotha

She is used to being on her knees
on hot days. After all, she says,
floors don't scrub themselves, and
she can still smell the vinegar.
In front of the garden tomb
Mennonite women bloom up like
mushrooms in pastel dresses,
adjusting their coverings around
their plain faces.

She does not expect the Earth
to move. Already, she has found
redemption in the barnyard,
between rotting fenceposts
and spokes of barbed wire,
in apples tart and green for pie,
the last spoon of homemade icecream
hand cranked and salt sweet with summer.
Always, she deals in tangibles,
the blonde silk of her babies' curls,
the first handful of dirt
in my grandfather's fresh grave.

Even here, at the Place of the Skull,
she thinks only of Mary, aging,
bereft, unvirginal, her old bones
knocking quietly together.
Later, she will take Jesus home
and fold him away in the winter sheets,
wondering how hard it must be
to mother God.

Wrinkles

for Anne

A lifetime of smoothing
has wrinkled you, pinched
creases into the corners of your
eyes, the soft skin of your neck.
Your hands wear in scars all the
small mistakes, your own and
others'—tiny puckers in the seams,
an uneven cake, juice spilled
and running red on the carpet,
a curling iron left burning for days—
those things fixed easily with
baking soda and washcloths.

The years seep unnoticed under
the cracks in the doors and you
have perfected your methods,
expanded your list of cure-alls and
uses for vinegar, your seams
are crisp and straight, and I wonder
is it fair that as we age we resemble
most our first patchworks, which,
beloved and misshapen, our mothers
cherished and folded in the bottoms
of their dresser drawers for years
like some freak child, at once
too precious and too hideous
to share, that we become that old
stubborn calico, crumpled and
unyielding even under
the hot press of the iron.

After the Accident

Again, we have done evil, like the Israelites,
again we must atone, and a name sweeps
over the church pews like a litany.

Deborah. Deborah. Deborah.

Deborah, like the prophetess who said
the Lord will hand Sisera over to a Woman,
to Jael with her tent peg and hammer,
but never dreamt
the Lord would hand Woman over
to hot screeching tires and the crunch
of steel, though she married Lappidoth,
whose name means flames.

Deborah is dead. My mother recites
family trees with meandering branches,

and names that hang vaguely in daylight
grow clearer at night and whisper
about the undertaker's plight,
how will he nestle the Mother of Israel
in her coffin, so we can forget
she was ever mangled?

The Serpent Explains Himself

I found him one morning
in the shade of my grandmother's cabbages
sleek and black, belly down in the dirt,
last evening's rain blooming
on his back like pustules.
I turned to run, but he called to me
lonely for conversation, without
enough currency to buy even my soul,
and when I asked, he said
I am responsible for only
the desire for sweet apple flesh.
Remember the time you took
a scissor to Linda's tomatoes,
remember how you enjoyed
the seedy green carnage?

Turbulence

Prodigal daughter,
I return to the church
doors at 30,000 feet
ready to bargain,
ready to scoop out
forkfuls of my soul
for life on terra firma.

Higher than birds
we have presumed
too much. There is
a reason, my mother
says, the air grows
thinner, the closer
you are to God.

Delilah

She was buying bath salts
when the temple went down—
her pockets heavy
with silver shekels.
In her tent, Samson's eyes
trembled in a dish,
they had given them to her
like beads for a necklace,
and she would wear them,
wear the milk of his eyes
like pearls

to remind her

that he liked to be tied up,
liked her to sit on his face
and pant, "Oh, Samson,
Samson, the Philistines
are coming!"

that once
as she released him,
he told her he had eaten
honey from the belly
of a lion's carcass,

that he could eat
the sweetness
out of death,

but she would not
let him feed
on her.

Potiphar's Wife

I only wanted him
to fix the faucet, which
had been leaky for days,
and when he appeared, smelling
of sweat and summer wheat,
my husband's thriving crops,
I was watering my geraniums
at the windowsill.

Hot, he slid over me
like butter, and I bit into
the rippling muscles
of his shoulders, we collapsed
in tangled white sheets
and slept, his dreams
growing up around us
like pear trees, branches
bowed and heavy
with portentous fruit,
while the sun fell low
in the sky.

When I woke to the drip
drip of the faucet,
his shirt lay damp
and wilted beside me.
He was gone, so

I hollered.

Magnolia

The Poet called her Maggie for short
or sometimes Noli, but only
in bed, and then only when
they made love backwards.
The reviewers hated her
for the same reasons he loved her,
her crooked teeth and the soft
    pink petals that unfurled like
    saucers across her back.

They met—the quiet result
of a lavender dress, backless,
that frothed around her knees
as she wobbled on dirty stilettos—
though she did not tell him she had been
another man's canvas, that he
    had planted a garden on her back
    then ceased to tend it.

So The Poet took her home and
unfolded her as the screen faded to black,
and when she woke in the morning
he had written her, flattened her
onto a piece of yellow paper
with green lines, and as the
critics criticized her too-flawed beauty,
inked, mismatched, and exotic,
    she peeked silently over
    the edges of a poem.

Four Days Late

I.

Anxious flutter, you exist,
tap-tap in my fingers, the
half shadow of possibility,

feather embryo, deep
in my belly, limbs poised
to unfurl across the coming months.

II.

I see my mother, knees
in the dirt, breasts
swinging low like melons

in the evening garden,
the placenta throbs, a hot
red tomato in the mud.

III.

Wombless my grandmother
reaches out of the sepia,
eyes empty, she lops

green beans into old baby food
jars with peeling stickers, the
rocker gathers dust in the corner.

IV.

Garden Baby, you will make
me old before my time, and
shriveled, my face like gourds.

You will invade my stomach
like a worm, hollow me out,
send me back to the loam screaming.

Garden Baby—

You were already mine.
Tiny string bean, accidental whisper, I
cultivated you in my mind, wispy
eyelashes, fingernails like glass.
    I stretched you out across my belly,
my heartbeat quickened your pulse.
Four weeks, I crouched, breathless
in the dirt, sifting the soil for a
glimmer of green, a glimpse of
your body uncurling in mind.
    Instead, you unraveled softly, slid
quietly out of me back to the mud.

Namesake

Again, I am left to seek solace
in my salty knees and the soreness
of my breasts. You are afraid
of the blood, the way it coils
and knots around your fingers,
that black red serpent, old as the moon,
which slithered first away from Eve
and returned each month
to trouble Rachel with its fangs,
to eat away at the fullness
of her womb.

Across the years we share pain
like names, but I have lost
my father's idols, the household gods
lie discarded in the corner—
the fingerworn bible and the shotgun—
they will bring no curses on my head.
I fear neither my own blood
nor the empty creak of the cradle.

Lilith Menstruates

they have called her
all the worst names
those generations
of protestant women
who press violets into
their bibles and go quietly
to bed, the Shame of Eve
in their cotton sheets

how they have envied her
since she lit out of Eden
to wander across the plains
through green corn and
fireflies, all the best names
swinging in the thick purse
of her uterus
while their stomachs
split open with children

it is no wonder
their daughters seek her
in the dark rafters
of the barn just to learn
the secrets of their own
blooming deltas

inside, she tells them, you
are peach flesh, sweet
and sun warm, blood
orange on certain days,
but from one night bird
to another, be glad
so glad when the Red Sea
bears down

and demons flower out
of you harmless
as geraniums.

The Abortionist

When the nurse asks, I hand
her the exhausted palindrome
of my name, tell her that
no matter how many ways
I fold myself, there is still
the hump of my middle.

I am here, I tell her,
out of guilt for loving
Cain best. When Abel died
I opened my womb to Adam
and though he wants more,
always more, he has lost
the power to name them,
they flock around me
anonymous as gourds
the sting of demand
in their tiny teeth.

With each one, I write
to Lilith, with each one
her reply is the same:
“There are ways, you know,
of preventing these things.
You have been fruitful
enough," as though
children roll out of me
like so many apples, but
I have begun to feel
the pain of the tree, having
to bear and bear again.

Now, with my feet
in the stirrups, I have ridden
up against an end. She appears
between my legs, her eyes
like lamps, hair thick and red
as feathers, and when I feel
the serrated edge of her teeth
I gather up the maps
of my body, knowing

I have found the red river
again, and standing on its banks
I feel the sack of myself
flap once more in my hands.

The Bones of Us

I have only just begun to excavate
the bones of us, buried like evidence
on the banks of the Little Darby.
Between kneecaps and tangled vertebrae
I cannot tell your fingerbones
from mine, as they rest cold
and lunar against our empty ribcages.
It has been two Aprils since
my heart slipped into the mud
and followed yours south on the
roiling currents of the spring floods
and I am still here with my
fingers in the dirt clutching
your ribs like an abandoned god
watching Adam leave the garden
with some other Eve.

White Space

At 55, my father
has begun to forget
little things,
his brown sack lunch
or why
he has wandered
out to the barn with
ribbons of yesterday's
conversation dangling
from his pockets.

My mother says
it's only age,
but he swears
the ghost of Alzheimer's
has its cold fingers
around his neck,
that whiteness falls
in his brain,
dusts his temples
like snow.

He does not want to die
like my grandfather,
nearly buried in it,
the syllables
of our names
pinpoints of starlight
obscured and
out of reach,

so he struggles at night
to punctuate absence
with sticky notes
and alarm clocks,
to seal up
the space where
memories unbind
like sinews
and words drift
away from each other
on the page,

dark clods of dirt
in a snow covered field,
the smudge of an eraser
trailing between them.

Thaw

my mother says
there will be three snows
after the forsythia,
which blooms yellow
and unbridled along
white-streaked ditches
and unkempt driveways

outside, spring toys with
the window latches
fumbling, fingers yet
unformed, straining
to beat back the sharp
bite of winter

still the cold creeps in
a dull ache that settles

like the white cat
licking his paws
at the foot of our bed
his blue eyes relaxed,
cool half almonds
unperturbed by
our lovemaking or
the gray light shivering
at the edges of the comforter

holding the last
of our heat
in our hands,
we button down
and wait.