

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2021

End of an Animal

Alyx Brittany Chandler
University of Montana, Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Chandler, Alyx Brittany, "End of an Animal" (2021). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11726.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11726>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

END OF AN ANIMAL

By

ALYX BRITTANY CHANDLER

Bachelor of Arts in Communication & Information Sciences, The University of Alabama,
Tuscaloosa, AL, 2016

Bachelor of Science in Commerce & Business Administration, The University of Alabama,
Tuscaloosa, AL, 2016

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Poetry

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2021

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Keetje Kuipers, Chair
Department of Creative Writing

Sean Hill
Department of Creative Writing

Dr. Sara Hayden
Department of Communication Studies

End of an Animal

Chairperson: Keetje Kuipers

Co-Chairpeople: Sean Hill, Sara Hayden

End of an Animal explores the imagined and the contradictory realities of growing up in the South near the Gulf through lyrical poetics and uncompromising language. The speaker dwells in a space of recognition and longing, one that is only found by leaving the place they know best. Danger as well as memory reconciliation act as binding threads that result, by the end of the poems, in a reckoning that embraces emotional dissonance in the lives of humans and animals and memories, the love for what we understand and what we don't. Loss is reconfigured into something strange and uneasy. By incorporating the hermitess series, a woman who has decided to leave society and be alone, into a manuscript where the speaker willingly looks at close familial relationships, readers are able to develop empathy for the speaker. Bodies are on display continuously in *End of an Animal*, allowing the speaker to bring to light double standards and the changing face of family dynamics.

End of an Animal

poems

by Alyx Chandler

CONTENTS

Empty Bucket ...	1
Never Went to Space Camp ...	3
Conversation with Mom ...	5
Gut into Growth ...	6
How We Devein Distance ...	7
I've Left ...	8
Hook My Teeth ...	9
Grease Booth ...	10
Female Viscus ...	11
Out Late ...	12
Third Shift ...	13
Don't Bother with Burial ...	14
Feeding a Mouth a Myth ...	15
Last to Leave ...	16
Upheaval ...	17
Inheritance ...	18
In the Woods ...	19
Safe to Eat ...	20
Peace Offering with my Demon ...	21
Charley Horse ...	22
Reasons I'm Closing My Mouth ...	25
Fingers that Refuse to Core ...	26
Underwater ...	27
What's Built Up ...	28
I Call in Conflict with my Hands (Excoriation) ...	29
Off the Rails ...	30
Home of the Hermitess ...	32
Bath House ...	33
The Brooder ...	34
Get the Pretty Ones ...	35
Lacuna ...	37
In my Grandmother's Jaw ...	38
A Love that Can Survive Getting Stepped On ...	39

“How can you not fear humanity, want to lick the creek bottom dry, to suck the deadly water up into your own lungs, like venom?” -Ada Limón

“Oh bright laundry: I like it when my stomach feels starved for home.” -Amy Woolard

Empty Bucket

Clasp is not the right word—
maybe hijack or wrench.

I go back and forth, gorging on emotion
then splitting it in two. *Come here. Don't.*

A body pulls memory like water
from a well. Now on to a bigger source,

one with teeth. Always, I'm interested
in gratification of the task at hand.

Plucking a tongue from the tide,
tasting scrutiny in surprise.

Restraint is to compulsion
as salt is to ocean,

and oh how they can't
be without the other.

I calculate days spent wiping pretty off
only to slather it right back on.

Before, I have been called
fishy. Accused of dwelling

in the wrong water source.
What a long time coming:

the snap of the backpack strap
no longer holds me together.

It floats on past me.
It sharks. I'll admit

I'm not at ease muzzling myself
and I find it agonizing to tether to anything

but short-haul joy. Fingers to face.
I find no more catharsis

in singling out pleasure
from pain.

Never Went to Space Camp

Instead I strap myself snug and barred
into the Moon Shot simulator's arms,

get slung open-mouthed above Rocket City.
Only takes 2.5 seconds, quick as a judgement

to see the backroads ballet: a turtle creep
of Toyotas, old airfields, short-leaf pines

hug-haunting a highway. My home
a little speck I can't quite make out.

Height is hypnotic in a town that hunts it.
Nice and wide open. When I sing,

I'm serenading against the silence
of a broken sound system all the way

to the devil's billboard on I-65. He's lovable:
bright red, long-tailed and with a scythe

Go to Church or the Devil Will Get You.
When a storm strikes him down, my brother

gets me the t-shirt, but I only wear it at night
when I'm on high alert for cloven hoofs.

My dad saves a turtle from out of the road,
takes it 20 miles back to us, shy and alive,

poking its head out for a home. Is pride a wound
or a weapon? What's that make my hometown.

Before Von Braun designed rockets for Huntsville's
Redstone Arsenal he built the V-2 for Hitler.

What my high school history teacher should
have said: Don't trust everything you know.

County Line Road bloats with recent suburbia,
then slips back into what people imagine

Alabama to look like: desolate and empty,
a place where you roll your windows down,

laugh about how Eggbeater Jesus is too expensive
to be saved but First Baptist is doing it anyways.

They're stripping all 14 million faded tiles
of the mosaic to re-render Cosmic Christ

shiny with smalti. What do I really know about nostalgia
when every day I get further away from it, closer to

a bird's eye view. Only that all roads lead me South,
where the whole world is still in my mom's big nylon purse,

bulky but still snuck into a movie theater, with enough
Dollar General candy to get me to the moon.

Conversation with Mom

When a gull eats a fish with a ring
rusting its belly, I realize what's there:

living layers to what we can't touch. Sky
and deep sea—that marriage is over.

Keeping a promise requires some undoing,
doesn't it? Cracking open the mother

daughter bivalve. Like that time a smack
of moon jellies pedicured our feet in sting,

how I welted up nice and pink. I loved
the attention. All those laughing gulls

lovin' on red snappers, how easy it is to
feather doing with the done. I want

independence to be like the man o' war,
shutting down the whole damn beach

with a purple flag. I think it's one
creature but it's not, it's actually

a whole colony. Our tenacles beached.
Was there ever a time you wanted

back that ring? Look. Our toes polished
violet as the creature before us. A warship

under full sail—and here we are, bikinied.
If our mouths marinate in sea for too long,

they're bound to prune truth.

Gut into Growth

I meet my first

bulldozers gleaming across the road

the golden girls

hauling secrets

then mapping the land bare

fingers of honeysuckle

flying I hold hands with a neighborhood

newshiny find my grin just to grow it

and in the South the space is everywhere like a song

coming from a gap in my teeth that one that never

grew in

How We Develin Distance

Another year at the open bar
slathered in melted butter—

this is how the Gulf peels back
my family, like a thin knife

along shrimp entrails,
a quick *slit* then lift. Taught

to pinch tails with teeth, toast
to a messy-eat. What's abundance

more like than laughter?
A soft spot for how

what couldn't heal
suddenly can in the sunlight.

I find forgiveness
where I least expect it:

wild-caught in the
alimentary canal,

that gull-release of nerve
in warm, briny air—

relatives torn open tableside
in the cocktail of sincerity,

savoring what's left
of each other, what we

haven't yet devoured.

I've Left

there is light in my Spine

there is bloody here and I am not careful

Hermitess, I am candied in cat-like love skyline cracks

and I love my scraps irresistible in their ability

to shock my lineage has eaten mirrors

to satiate urges

gone ghost to chill desire

how else have we survived so long

in exile I'm going again into my verbform

watch me fit myself like a worm

here in your dirt belly

my past is an army Hermitess, watch me no

I will not be bribed today

Hook My Teeth

My mother is
a mouthy mother,

which is to say, she is a mother with so many extra mouths
she gives them away to girls like gifts
 until they make more mouths
 until they're loud enough
 to find
 their mother's mouth.

My mother with lips that thunder
after me. Vocal cords
that wake the dead.

Itty bitty mouth, mine peeling
and hers: spitting

in a room with no other women, where speaking is
 a mouth full of dryer sheets

 and my silence: a barbed tongue
 behind teeth
 chattering.

Talking isn't always safe,
I tell my mother
 she understands.

That's why she makes mouths: some like a shook-up soda,
some like an unnamed dance. Others like a locket
or a knife. Mouths that light up the night in noise

 and my mouth
 a large balloon popping at a party.

What an uncomfortable disturbance, a man says,
so we give him a new mouth.

Grease Booth

Just a popcorn machine and metal cash kit.
That's how we had to do it—

crank our cuteness hell-bent into cash
at the Limestone County Flea Market.

Butter people up to be in the bidding wars.
Saturdays swamped with sweat.

It was the best place to be. Fit to burst.
All around us: tire rims, wooden crosses,

machetes, decorated toilet seats, fake
gemstones. If it wasn't at the flea market,

it wasn't anywhere. *Don't let anyone touch you!*
or the money and then she would disappear

into the swarm of shoppers, dart straight
to the long lines of garment racks,

our school clothes hidden in mannequin land
while we'd scour stalls, raid plastic tubs,

haggle for doll heads or broken unicycles,
try not to steal much, instead just dip our claws

into bulk-sized buckets, thrill in weird buttons,
clay marbles like painted into eyeballs.

Children are to tour the touching, *never take*.
We kept a steady supply of hot kernels

rolling round our mouths like hard candy,
salt-saved and warm as we work. *Old maids*,

they're called, the dangerous ones that slip
past lips and crack teeth. Renting out space

is a risk when there's no rich people around,
but it sure does feel good to be in a crowd.

Female Viscus

When my womb gets loose,
 she wanders coast side
 to show off her shape:
 a shark's brain.
She loves games, right? Bocci ball
 by the beach,
 all those heavy-handed tosses.
 Oh, she's fleeing again!
 A bored impulse.
 Plato plays with what he knows:
 the flanks of women,
 their love for smelling salts,
 fear of vapor and smoke
 until spasmodic breath
 causes eyes to close, pink curtains
 wombed. She jerks
hither and thither
 straying about the body
 wildly,
 mega-stretchy and is it like
 an aerial silks performance,
 Hippocrates? Hysterical
 freedom
 to shake myself up,
 a magic eight ball
 oracle organized by chaos & no's
 and my hunger
 more like Ms Pac Man
 tunneling toward solitary madness,
 an animal within an animal,
legs slick with squalene,
 that wet compound
 sharks share with women.
 And my clitoris the cork of a bottle
 shook open—
 I spray blood and moisture
and yes, Villeneuve
 I am a most vicious animal
 without a doubt.

Out Late

and January feels more animal
than igloo bone broth but cold
how easy it is

to stay in
away from the shiver
of a fur coat

lazy the warmth
of a bathroom mirror
let the faucet drip rusty for a bit

bristle black outside
and still we pull mascara
from its grease tube

play on a marbled countertop
my hair in a coat of dye
some rose jelly color

pink lip the snow plow
doesn't come here anymore
but the deer stay dead longer

what is with all this patience
its hue
its soft

inner elbow like an embrace
wadded up towels stained
ice covering a lake

the coaxing of color
streaked cheeks
attraction

where air is heater-pink
my eyelids are the color
tantrum *turmoil*

we both know
but waiting
gets everywhere

we're damp with it
hands
reaching

dye a
blush-loved
stain over the sink

Third Shift

Dealing with the smell is a requirement
for the paychecks, so Dad inhales stench

gladly. Makes a show of it. Everything moneyed,
put to use—even the leftover chicken sludge

spread over farms as biosolids. Crust of feathers
and fat. No one nearby wants to leave their house

for weeks. The power to process: a happy
meal at the poultry plant, and his job: hiring

then firing, bossman on the floor but
neck-slitting behind the scenes. Mastering

the art of letting someone down who intimately
knows the careful slice of a knife. Easy at first, empathy

then opening the door, sudden, sharp, knowing
damn well they'll be re-hired. Not hard if

someone's hungry enough. The trick is making the job
look changed: a five-star meal, southern smothered

with gravy and onions, meat falling right
off the bone. But working the line? A shitstorm,

stuck in the freezer where you gotta flip
the chickens upside down, put their feet

in the metal claws before they get hysterical,
realize they're about to die. Factory cuffed.

Impossible to get ahead or pull wings apart
for long. But hey, he says. not that bad when

you consider the pig slaughterhouse across
the street. I'd choose a squawk over a squeal

any day—his hands near the grill, moving quick,
hovering in the heat— and I'm thankful for that.

Don't Bother with Burial

I don't know empathy
until I exorcize hand-me-downs
on sour
afternoons:

grass stains on thrift-fancy gossamer
shriveled little panties
with a pout of blood

I put to bed
clothespinned ghosts
drive out nightgowns string them unclean
across the yard

my mother & her mother and & hers
dressing
my manners in mud
staining out my sheer

my hands
polishing jawbones of men
lining my yard with them
until I learn

to hollow
my gross let my marrow dry
for the neighbors to see
in midday heat

and when a chickadee hits the windowpane
even the ghosts are surprised
when it survives
and chirps at me waiting

all day and night

Feeding a Mouth a Myth
for Adrienne Rich

She says she still doesn't know
how to relate to men
and I know what she means,

but don't want to. Is it internalized
homophobia when I say the term girl crush?
It feels like it. Our talks:

testy but forgiving. It's never
easy to retrain yourself
that what is deviant actually isn't.

I draw liquid
from a compulsive pool
where my choices feel like chores

and so many of my feelings:
taught. Tied up
into a managed expectation.

Into the ways I have to behave
in order to not defy. But in what ways
am I just doing what I'm told

and do I really love what I choose?
Certainty singed in success
when I play the role I'm assigned.

What do you do with language
that's been pulled from a well
of dark encounters?

Often I'm emptied
and what is lost here
is not lost on me.

Getting a sense of the history
of women loving women
when it's been made dirty

and to disappear
feels impossible,
even with the two of us here digging.

Last to Leave

the spine of the Cahaba River
muddy and glistening
as it empties
out of paddlers
 15 more minutes
mom yells
 and I slink into watersound
up and
under
flatten out on a greened rock
 mossing my palm
 as kids hop in
truck beds they fume g'bye
 I like to wait till
 it's a lick too dark to see
water moccasins
 ropes on water
but I can still hear them
 or maybe just my fear
 of their thick bodies
 listening
less of a good habit
 more of a reaction
 for when my feet
no longer feel like mine

transformation takes time

I am the spitting image after dark
of her sun bitten
persistent and saving us
 from another dry evening

I swim into the snake side
of myself
atop water
 inching out
of my skin
 and moms everywhere listen
 for me to emerge

Upheaval

I demand intimate spaces
room to ricochet
in the neighbor's bouncy house

pee right on
the frilly mesh entrance
make drops jump drunk

so many surfaces stuck with stick
in the Princess Play Castle
my limits inflatable

there wasn't a fence
until they built one
right over where the frogs lived

their short lives
where they jumped
and I followed wet with mistakes

Inheritance

The debate of the nipple lasts for weeks.
Drags out across the countryside. Becomes a third eye.
Get rid of it, mom says. *Keep it*, grandpa says.

Tattoo it into a bouquet, wildflowers galore. The first piece.

Adding artwork is easy. I let them press into my skin
like a jogged memory. Let the mountain form a mountain

as Grandma watches soap operas with us,
covers my eyes for the shirtless scenes,

cackling: *nipples are sacred*.

In Tennessee, mom speeds past cows with bright ear tags.
Windows rolled down and wind loud
as I drape my fingers out,

reach for slopes, rinded but glowing.
Breasts in the dark.

When she got the mastectomy,
I tried to cut my breasts with sewing scissors,
instead I made a scar like a stem,

a crooked line to tattoo.

I used to think all the women in my family
were forced to have them removed, that together
all our breasts would weigh the same as one woman.

I imagined we would bury the bras with them.
Never do laundry again.

Attached to wooden clothespins are bras
polka dot, diaphanous, silk, polyester
wings flapping like birds at me, lace linguistics.

Time is a prioritization of tissue,

a tattoo in an open-backed dress
gripping my ribcage

like hooks of a bra.

In the Woods

Are the necessities of body
intolerant of self
and all its purpled sense?

Hermitess, slow prayer
is like foxglove
begging to be still

in afternoon wind.
Patience isolates a grove
like a lit halo.

Foxglove buds climb
down with bells ringing
goodbye and godlove

and God plays us all
with her poison
common sense.

Does survival stay relevant
or soften like a flower
over your fingertip?

Here the heart
is a solitary shove
kind-worded

and carried home. Hermitess,
you are rife
in personal expense.

Safe to Eat

we trace chickenshit

up and down

Alabama highways trucks

clucking frantic

laying hens in a frenzy

back home

and Dad cracking eggs

in a butter-slicked pan

doesn't even blink

at the one with a ruptured vessel

blood runnyred

so insistent

on breakfast on

appetite

on not wasting

a single bite

Peace Offering with My Demon

here's a tongue I never really let out
 except for cold showers after a sunburn
 white triangles of skin
left and my mom standing in my spine
 with pain killers
 mouth on the bone hole of a shell
here's my soft stomach I beat
 with the backdoor and its ghost
 taut like trampoline
then torn and here's the longest I let saltwater
 know my nostrils without crying
 into the arms of a towel
the great empty like a knot
 caught in my bulbed hairbrush
 ripped from my wet head
here's the kid-scissors I use
 when I divide myself
 into more lovable portions
where I perform surgery
 better my body in neat collections
 incisions and a big shirt
here's my ceiling of energy
 how my cocoon gets away from me
 a bed of oysters
and here's the animal love of a spoon
 only I clean
 clinging to water
isolation not lamplight
 but a sun so much bigger

Charley Horse

1.

In Alabama I play defense

buckle mid-game to calf spasms and

call it for what it really is

the overworking of sore muscle the shock of dehydration

that shakes me into a sideline cradle.

Let me tell you what.

Nothing goes unnoticed here.

My grandma and her Lasik eyes like lasers on the field,

the coach who makes me

tear mustard packets

open with my teeth choke down quick electrolytes

to stifle a leg cramp its bitter sting a gag of yellow

the sun baking my lips

into a crust of hard sand.

2.

Don't come back girly

till more sweat shows.

Off the soccer field are other warnings

about staying still

how these days it's just racists and rednecks left

and the only people goin' anywhere

grow up to leave the South

I eat my teenage body good as

an orange slice

at halftime

hear about those who stayed tired righteous folks

who have to tie their zeal for change

like bandanas

too-tight around their necks.

Not an accessory

anyone can sustain for long

when it's this hot

is it.

3.

My place contained

in straight white lines

the back-and-forth the up-and-down

as I play intermural on land

the patients at the Alabama Insane Asylum

once grew their own vegetables on

all year a fake-grass field

where I find bats tangled in procreation

little knots untying and retying

in this state I'm under floodlights knowing

the people I love can't afford to leave

what's right in front of them

let alone what's far.

Reasons I'm Closing My Mouth

I put a beehive in my ear
because I like to lick my wounds

clean. Don't want to talk about
how I've made this all about me.

All my own cooked thoughts
fluffed like rice. Wild freedom

of whiteness: to realize whenever
I feel like it. I throw a lit match

to my hivemind, burning it until
I'm at the intersection of sisterhood,

remembering I've been here before.
Where the stop sign sings in the dirt,

there's a blind spot that isn't really
a blind spot, but iridescent-looking,

a soap bubble that pops & recreates
& pops again at a dishwasher shift.

And again and again, at this intersection.
I pull out knots—earplugs, dust, wax,

lies, free food, tricks, blossoms,
a cash box. I open my ear hole

& re-wire my brain. Oppressed
and oppressor? But both. In the street,

I come to a full stop. Close my eyes.
Somewhere inside of me I sang

a fake hymn & read a false history.
It's still been all honey & no blood.

Fingers that Refuse to Core

“Plant peppers when you’re mad or they won’t grow hot”

– Journal of American Folklore, also my grandmother

I don’t mean this ugly
but these here peppers aren’t hot enough to run a nose
got no zing
no mad in ‘em
aren’t fiery enough to be in no one’s mouth
on God’s green earth—
you’re safe as can be hon

eating that jalapeno
never were a pepperhead were you
still gotta be real careful just cause your mouth
ain’t actually on fire don’t mean your mind
won’t burn your body good
and mean and crisp
ignite it, ya know?

don’t you forget your taste buds
are where you come from
a good pepper like a mad woman
painful as can be
a homemade dish meant to
bring you to tears
let you know what you did

careful when you cut out
what’s hot in a person
you hear me? it’s not always gone
the innards got a way of stayin’
and listen, when you find out what strikes flames
in a person you best move fast
or move aside & honey stop your crying

it can’t be that hot I been at peace for years.

Underwater

Each morning the shark of my mother
switches on the ocean, counts the utensils
in her belly. Sharp and few.

I fork over kindness because my ghost is not grown.
She's at the wave break, bound
by table legs and seaweed cloths,

oxidized and angry when she wakes
to my grandmother insisting
utensils are alive inside us.

Within this sea of sisters, I shirk
the death-grip serenade:
flecks of fish and flesh where

hunger skews my reflection
back at me, in the glint
of an unused butter knife,

a mirror buried below us.
Like the browning teeth of a man as he comments
on my grandmother's ghost in a swimsuit,

rust has ridiculed us for generations.
But how good is it now
in this devouring,

how I thrive in the pressure
to clean the teeth of my decisions
and take the hinges off the ocean door.

What's Built Up

Buried under I-565 is Jack, my grandpa's favorite farm hound, home to a bullet hole. You never know

what you're driving over, he says, how much a ghost weighs on your wheels every day

on your way to work. Smiling. What's left? Probably forgiveness. An hour stretching

into a day. We eat fried pie on the porch, talk about how bacteria have a working memory.

Remember when wild turkeys attacked our van one morning in Davy Crockett State Park?

Roadside, we idled, just waiting and waiting. How long have my hands felt reckless in what

I don't understand but want to? Much longer than our longest car ride together, longer than

it would take me to find Jack's grave and cry over it. To find frankness is to go somewhere

safe, to drive knowing. In another life, we get to be the same age at the same time, friends

in a cheap car, ready to duke out our differences cross-country. Sometimes we find truth, other times

a concrete highway extending smack-dab over it. Whenever I look too close at any one memory,

I hunker down to inspect it, to be right there and ready when it still hurts.

I Call in Conflict with My Hands (Excoriation)

you're the enemy of my lineage
pickers & pullers & biters
people made to

clean their habits

hide their claws & cute
turn their face aghast & say
I can't even imagine

who would hold these hands
lesion loved & scarred up
ramshackle & wrecked

I flake confidence halt healing
& never play pretty

but pluck past pink skin

bloom it red-bumped
an eyesore split open
into a gouge

& blemish
is too sweet a word
for what forces a flinch

I want
to be right (& less
self-righteous)

to trust that beauty
ain't shit but it exists
& insists of course
clings like a scab
stubborn on skin

Off the Rails

I used to be one of those high-spirited women who run at night

lace up streetlights
tight like tennis shoes
into county darkness

where dirt roads knot lily-livered thoughts
pull them taut keep them tied in my throat

where owl screeches ring like roll call
and flimsy wooden fences rattle me
through miles of abandoned silos, single-family farms

I never carried a knife I just fantasized
the steel finger clasping my shorts
hard and sharp on my hip bone
that's how I move

aware of the kidnapped women but also lit up by the rage ghost
of them how they awaken like automatic porch lights
how they detect movement
detect me

with all my raw parts revving together
sometimes so tired
I lie on the ground
forgetting my fear
how it clutches me
mice in claws

now I'm older
and the streetlights are like long flaring bones

women pointing at the skinned sky

just the other night I ran all the way
hurled toward haloed highs
and found the stopped hulk

a freight train free of resistance

but is anything free of resistance

when it's housed in such a hurry
a flesh vehicle meant to carry a load

with steel hips made to move to haunt heavy in the mad-bright
tunnel of headlights on a straight track that doesn't deviate

unless it does

Home of the Hermitess

learning to leave

peels back a part of yourself

like a woodpecker holing trees

I growl of rot

of honeycrisp apples

too many for me to eat

the blunt edge of autumn shadowing me

a core of sweet

I drink juice from a carton

skin apples in the evening

forget my face

there's wellness in anchoring to a place

or so they tell me

Bath House

I leave my rented towel
like a crumpled peace flag,

return to Earth's mineral breath,
an eidolon coated in cream-colored walls:

a rich woman in concrete armor I sweat for, let her

fingers of steam curl around my throat,
coax my body into a warm meal

while I float a starfish
in the basin of her mouth.

There's no universal definition for a hot spring,

just radioactive decay and warning signs,
an etiquette of hot and heavy heals.

She teaches me bask and boil,
season limbs with lithium and love.

For twenty minutes I soak bloat

for her a tea bag releasing toxins
corroding

a version of me loose
in pink-fingered travertine.

It's enriching to be digested, I tell her wild
let go.

The Brooder

Beneath bones and nest boxes a squawk sinks out
so docile it turns me over

startles me the sudden birdbrain of it all
how domestication is a brawl
stranded in piles of crap

when it's time I clean the coop
I chuck yolkless moon clear
over roof, wait in plumed sky
for an eyeball I push open and memorize
and inside
is the cockatrice
marble blue papering my chicken heart with pockets of wire
peeling back its cuticle, I remove the bloom

of barbed language where the animal's eyes clock back and forth
peak at the meat of the moment a venom habit

and hypnosis is like this

where I'm taught to brood in the dirt hole the warm breath of dog stink

after the mutt mauls the backyard chickens
they power-peck a half loaf of bread
left out for comfort, tear off thin feathers
and leave them scattered between fairy eggs
a child's rock collection
beaming and useless

until a hen digs a crack with her beak
breaks speckled curtains
of turquoise consumes her newest creation
without pity or
pause

Get the Pretty Ones

we talk green things
how summer festers on forever
a belly of rainwater

every July I try to be
brave in my body
but who can with

family like humidity
everyone sweating
angry in their egos

the neighbors commenting
on each other's figure, oh
how much they love

a barbecue of compliments
served up a little burnt
all of us made fake-sweet

in coated meat
dad says pick everyone
some tomatoes out back

throw in a few peppers
show them what a good
year it's been

but I don't
I grab the skimpy lim-thin
ones contorted fists

weather-beaten handfals
hoist them into my t-shirt
the cloth bucket where I let

my belly hang holy
as I hand them

little witch fingers

I swear they taste
the same y'all
these happy little shapes

Lacuna

I am diligent I am praying
for sound, Hermitess
are the good-smelling days gone?
the glow of words wipe me out
like you I have an aloneness
that peels off my thoughts my bark
my taste for more an urge I hang
unto guilt an ancient weapon I wield
and am unwielded by catharsis
a sudden seed I crack with my teeth
pines wind-twisted a storm banging at my door
oh, good this time a sound
that isn't mine

In My Grandmother's Jaw

Difficulty is a fork in the belly of a shark.

Protrude, my mother says
and her words drip down like water.

Below our fins is the Gulf
where seafloor sifts tidy but shadow-shone, every creature

armored with purpose
and I am one of them:

a finned girl ready to feed
at a table lit by lamplight.

At night the kitchen is alive
with the slick skin of my mother,

incubating in her salt and urchins,
setting the table for my sisters

as they yell to the ship of green ghosts:
trash me out loud or close the sea up for good.

Do I ever want a family? The answer is complicated, a mermaid.

When the metal of the fork bends,
preservation is no more than a sunken ship,

a green past in the unused china cabinet,
my mother's snores that slip under the door,

my knot of braided hair.
Out of the playground of fins

I pull myself to shore.

A Love That Can Survive Getting Stepped On

Air tastes like bug spray
as we trail the yellowed tentacles of weak porch light
the flickered backyard
where night doesn't bite

mom says some feelings stay fresh

the time slime tissue
oozed in the cranny
between her two toes

& she sank down into it
a fist-squish a slug about the size of a kid's heart
warm & stickyfast

flinging it airborne
till the rubber bullet detaches
finds its way back

home
to wet grass
where time is slow-dripped
a basin draining from the bladder of July

I don't know why I think of this so much
it's not even my memory

feel it open me up
like we're cheap lawn chairs
suddenly cracked vertical

I want to adhere to her sweat confessions

except she doesn't tell me
much more
than her gut-stained foot pointing up at the ceiling
as she washes it in the bathroom sink
I can only imagine

so I ask her for more I ask her about sex
& she tilts her head back contracts from me

I know mom moved every two years
how she was told

early & often: get rid of them

I won't tell her why I slugged a boy
 how I know she once she did too
how each year I put half-empty beer cans open in my thick flowerbeds
between the pink tongues of Swiss Chard
let it attract

an old trick a beer trap
before I resort to: *let's salt 'em*

those goo creatures
& the inevitable next step
 boys sticky & just down the street

these shell-less
memories enveloped so long
now they're made mostly of water, repurposed matter

some slugs have shells
 within their bodies
I don't know like heart armor or something

I have a slug
not like a pest but a roommate
 who lives in my basil
a reminder to water to eat what's there

I know my plant might die
but I can get a new one I can't get rid of it

we're too much like them
gory slimeballs love lives bloated
 with mistakes trails of mucus
we don't talk about
 just leave behind

I know how to make a scene I know she does too

I'm trying to say lately we only grease the surface
 step wide around each other
avoiding subjects
 on nights like tonight

when I go inside
to make us a spinach salad

I stick the shriveled black wads the rotten bits of leaves
on my flowerpot

and the slug chows down
while it listens to me talk about
boundaries, or lack of

how I wish I could latch on

suck up the empty space
envelop the gaps between us
eat what's dead