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ASKED FOR ANOTHER MOUNTAIN

By

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BA in English, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY, 2015  
MA in English, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY, 2020

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## Mapping

I go home and relearn.  
Redrive the angles of the bends  
in each road.  
At the steakhouse I play

stranger;  
in family homes,  
visitor.

Roadside chicory  
is a bookmark.  
Honeysuckle  
a permanent fixture  
on the hillsides.

The mountains here roll  
snug like sweet buns  
after the first rise.

Closeness  
is a word I forget  
beneath the realty billboard  
behind violet walls of ironweed  
not yet gone to rust.

On my grandparents' porch,  
the late-day yawn of light.  
A train sounds  
behind the wall of maple  
and my grandpa bounces his knee  
as I try to tell them what it means  
to sit on their porch in the damp  
evening eating tomato slices  
with them.

I try to say

*thank you for that time*

or *I love that we've always*  
or *do you ever wish we*

but it feels selfish.

And we're quiet.

And the night warblers carry  
on and someone says

*Do ya know that tree?*

And I do—

I recognize the way  
it flowers like one thing  
and fruits like another—

but I can't bring myself  
to share that part of me  
with them.

We say

*I've missed you*  
and  
*do ya know that bird?*

None of us does but we listen

like we might  
figure something out.

PART I

A child played in the branches of a Thundercloud Plum Tree.

She was collected, eventually,  
at the neighbor boy's behest.

Back on the ground they smashed robin eggs  
one by one into dirt—little monsters.

What it would have been like for them both  
to be boys, to hold their fathers' middle names.

Instead, her vulva—denying  
at her birth some eager prayer.

The children showed themselves for the first time  
in the side-yard near the broken yolks

and she saw for the first time  
that difference on her body,

worked to slink out of the skin,  
its slow ripening toward

that silhouette of a pregnant body  
on her mother's lotion bottle.

Today sees an unhealed wound  
where the plum tree was years ago felled.

And how impossible it suddenly seems  
to go back, to be the girl sitting up high

in those leaves—who were not yet sick, not yet  
rotting, not yet asking questions of the yard.



Agamemnon

I have known an angry father  
but mostly he is soft.

After watching *The Good Son* I ask him  
which child he'd save from the edge

of a cliff. He says he wouldn't choose—  
that we would all die for his indecision.

You, my father's mother, knew less love.  
And your mother, even less.

Remember the story she told you?  
Of mockingbirds in the morning, west end

of her city still with the weight of choice—  
learning, then, that her father was given a task.

That walk to the river, the longest part, dragging  
her knuckles through each honeysuckle bush

like they might have held some sweetness over  
from spring. Girl child on a death march,

knowing not where she walked but that she walked  
for a violent man and his mistakes.

She never knew the seriousness of a bridge's arch  
until she walked it with her own small legs.

On the other side, great walls of oak and tulip poplar,  
birds flying closer to the uncemented land,

and she thought she was going there, across the river,  
until a force lifting her by the armpits, until her little toes

hugging suddenly the last edge of barrier  
between her and a freefall to the mucky river.

She wondered who made this demand—who  
found this evil man and knew he would deliver?

To the boaters below, a child whose father had made  
a decision. To the mockingbirds, a sacred deer.

Funny that you descend from a man whose child  
would die because he could so easily give her away.

And that you raised a man whose children  
would die because he could not let them go.

## Praising Carpet Beetles in Light of Their Crimes

They've eaten through  
each and every square  
of a condescending quilt.

Someone stitched it into  
a warped reality that made  
itself again and again.

There's circuitry to a life like this.  
Several beginnings begging  
the same end separately.

In the backyard, packed  
beneath 20 years of weather,  
is a soup spoon because

it was decided the children  
would bury the soup spoons.  
Family logic doesn't move

from one point to another  
but from one incorrectness  
to a similar incorrectness.

Cats shit in the tomato beds  
when too hastily sung to  
at night. At some point a family

learns to repel such injustices,  
for instance, when the garage floods  
and there's nothing to be done

but lay belly-up in the gray of it,  
bowling balls and gas cans bumping  
up against incredulous cement walls.

There is a way to be named  
and then root differently.  
The trees on quilts aren't but

unraveled thread and so when  
silverfish get to them, they're  
already some version of undone.

Tumbling leaves aren't always

such a romantic thing. The family,  
though, would like to know

if the stitching precipitated  
the death in the basement,  
or the one in the back room,

or the violence of  
scraped scalp against  
the pebbledash

outside. A tuft of hair  
sticks stubborn to such a place  
and outlives its former body.

Dead skin cells or something  
like that, come alive with  
all this inevitability,

this burying and unburying  
of reminders stowed away  
for unsuspecting selves.

## Case Study

Assume a child begins a walk alone.

Assume the child picks the leaves of spicebush  
and crushes them to lemon-lime bits of pulp.

Assume that same child swallows fistfuls  
of wet loam and calls it *honey*, axes at bark  
of hickory and calls it *an inclination to break*.

Assume for a moment the forest is cool  
on this particular day and the child savors  
the chill, rips raspberries off the vine and crushes

the fragile globes to gelatinous goop.  
The child's body is alkaline, is boreal,  
is neutralized by the acid of lonely play.

In this forest on this day this distempered child  
pulverizes bug and bluebell and berry gut between  
two flat stones and prepares a paste for absolute

nothingness, for abandonment at the base  
of that haunted hickory.

Just beyond the tree-line is  
a little house with a little boat,

both in disrepair. Just a football field away  
from the river, the house sinks and the boat rots  
and the child slowly blinks away the boundaries

of the yard. Bleeds deeper into the forest in search  
of a similar destruction, one they can take into  
their own small and unremarkable hands

and, on a distant day, in a state of honest reflection,  
can call *an inevitable sort of coming apart*.

## Occupational Proficiency

At twenty-five I am a cliché as I cross the Mississippi River for the first time and learn there are antelope in the US. I learn the hills unfold differently and the interstate feels different barreling west than it does east. In Nebraska the box topper pops open at 85 miles per hour and my gear scatters across the interstate. No one is hurt or even fazed. My sleeping pad is punctured and that's that. I sleep on the ground like I did when I was young, when my uncles led me through the damp gorge in autumn. At the campground I meet people from Washington, Vancouver, Idaho. They say the conditions are not best for friction. Too hot. But I find the rock rough and dry. It cuts into my fingers when I slap at its slopes. I mention the antelope to folks from Colorado and they laugh because there aren't any antelope in the US after all. Driving east again, I practice the right words. Prong horn. Prong horn. The interstate is smooth and without bottlenecks. The day jackknifes itself into a crude dark. My dad told me it would be like this out here.

Dad drives by trade. We used to go for little rides on Sunday mornings. A game of back and forth with the rivers, jumping over the Licking, crossing at the confluence, this state and that state marking the corners of our lives, delineating self from self from self. Over to Indiana on the ferry, following a state route, looping back to the interstate where all those truckers carried ton after ton of freight. My sisters and I loved the blare of a trucker's horn. I felt close to the drivers, figuring I knew a language

they knew. That when they looked out their windows and spotted me with my little arm bent at the elbow into a perfect right angle, fist balled up and tugging down on an invisible chain, they honked because they saw the trucker's child in me. My tugging and their honking a sweet exchange of *hello, be safe, I know what the road looks like from where you are.*

On weekdays, Dad hauled mattresses and Mom shuttled children across town. Picture us: piled in a green and dusty minivan, moving through the networks of highway and interstate affectionately and absentminded. Picture him: working the dock, unloading, loading, hitching himself to hundreds of miles of pavement. He might run to Indy, Columbus, Chicago. And on a Thursday night he might call from the road as he fixes to leave town. And we might be on the road, too. Heading east to see a grandparent, or play soccer, or drive the baby to sleep. And it's a matter of good timing, overlapping our lives like that when they compel us to separate and fissure. It's timing, and all of us leaning out windows or over middle row headrests, shoving away cleats and french fry bags and other domestic detritus so we might press ourselves nearer the driver's side. And we wait, each of us straining against seatbelts, our hands extended out our windows as if already in a wave, so when the headlights of his cab flash we are already saying hello and goodbye in the short few seconds it takes us to move in and out of view. Just a splinter of time before we continue east on our little journey, and he barrels west into Indiana, away from home.

## A Meditation on Growing Up and Being Alive

How on warm nights the train sounded closer.

How we could hold the gravel of our slipping childhood in our hands and grind it slick into dust.

How J— died then T— died then some others died.

How we got used to the dying.

How NKY hated heroin.

How the summer balm.

How the cracked face of a Spaulding sounded on cement at dark.

How the bodies bodied on other bodies.

How Accutane churned our guts into stone.

How the pileated.

How hashbrowns, covered and diced, swam in grease pools.

How Ms. L— played Michael Jackson during class change for weeks after he died.

How she wore shape-ups.

How moons crept into our dreams like promises.

How we changed our plans.

How some people had babies.

How some people got DUIs.

How the river.

How D— turned the lights off during hide n seek.

How the plum tree came down and came down hard.

How the grass never grew quite right over the wound.

How we thought we'd be old one day.

How we forgot about being small.



How we made ourselves small again.  
How the interstate stood still for Jimmy Buffett.  
How the seeds.  
How there was no wind.  
How the trampoline blew over the fence.  
How there was too much wind.  
How S— and R— skated over and called up from beneath the Callery Pear.  
How it felt sweet.  
How we sent them away.  
How the lightning storm.  
How it felt old to behave in such a way.  
How it was a painful and impossible thing.  
How we didn't think we'd get here.  
How we scattered.  
How we unfenced our yards.  
How the big mean dogs.

I started my period during the workshop of my gender dysphoria poem.

It reminded me of the avocados turning in my fridge,  
and also of the months in childhood I spent thinking

my clitoris  
was a wound.

My dad once tucked chopsticks beneath my sister's upper lip.  
She pretended to be a walrus and, within seconds, banged  
her tusks into the tabletop, drew blood.

Mom's anger  
mushroomed.

She'd been laughing until she saw pain. I know  
what she must have thought—how senseless

to let a child  
be a walrus.

That's how I remember them—careful too late.  
Mom's hands unspooling my hair from a wide-toothed comb.  
Me, leaving town without telling her my name.

At night I whisper  
the lie of my body,

the parts I wish were true. And this contracting of muscle  
in my gut is the scab that always grows back.

Love Letter to Past Self / Hemiptera Nymph

Child running blind toward summer: move slowly.  
Soon your fingernails will release from your palms.  
Shoulders will fall from your ears.  
You will never grow tall,

but you will be growing.

In the legend, a hag leads young men to their love.  
You will find yours in the cold earth by a hickory.

Bury things there. Draw a map.

It will take you to the autumn you played your best  
ball games, ate every seed, grew out of your body.

Child running blind: move quiet. All these years  
and you've forgotten what it means to listen.

Fourth of July in the cul-de-sac has a sound  
like departure—crack of pyrotechnics broken  
into shards by crickets, songbirds, the longest  
lasting cicadas.

Child:

grab their carcasses

from the concrete and build them a temple.  
Be it maple, be it oak, let the noisy dead  
congregate.

Show them your body—

how it, too, will shed a skin,  
lurch forward into light.

## PART II

## I've Only Ever Been Here

### I.

It's Tuesday. I've misplaced my shoes. There's all this snow. Inside every magpie is a smaller magpie that makes the rules. The magpie asks me where are my feet and I learn I've misplaced my feet again. Walk on my hands to the dumpster at the base of the hill and crawl inside. I don't find my feet or my shoes or the wisdom that was promised me at birth. Instead, a map of Kentucky. 119 of 120 counties crossed out. The rivers and interstates remain. And that one county shaped like a beating heart. What a small place. What a big question: have you lost your feet on any land but your own? What work is that possessive language doing here? Tie your shoes. I found mine on the mountain. If you flip any map upside down, it will hurt your feelings.

### II.

My uncle yells at me. I haven't misbehaved, but I've scared him shitless. His anger, or what I perceive as anger, hurts my feelings. The Japanese Maple cries harder than me. I swallow the crying so it feels big and cold in my throat. The robins who belong to the maple say they'll give me something to cry about. My uncle remembers being Buddhist – how my mom and dad would sneak into his room and flip the statue upside down. He cries, now, because he misses believing he was on a poltergeist's shitlist. He cries because Kentucky is just the one county and he can't stay. I rub dirt on my face. He rubs dirt on my face. He says I can be messy but I can't be careless. The maple tree will break my arm, he says. The maple tree will break my arm, it says.

### III.

The tobacco fields move in every direction. They are all around. They could be on fire, they might be, they smell like fire. Here it is only drought or flood. The tobacco field is hateful – it hurts my feelings. My shoes are on the wrong feet and the laces are all knotted. Time for the harvest, the highway says. Tear it all up. I don't tear it up. I leave the fields. I haven't got the right shoes. The fields are on fire anyway. Tobacco is the county's favorite fruit. The county is crossed out. The highway is upside down. I walk backwards out of town.

Wilson Family Elegy

She was hardly old enough to make  
a memory for influenza.

[*hardly*, here, is a frog in the throat]

She was a twin and their small and similar  
hands plucked fruit and bread from countertops  
and cabinets. They fed themselves and

they fed the parents who lay barely  
alive in bed. Maudie told her daughter  
about this years later. About balancing

precariously atop chairs, judging ripe from rot,  
keeping things alive before knowing

what alive meant. Maudie eulogized  
those sick and dusted days  
from before her name was Smith,

detailing the haggard doctor, the wagon  
and mule working up and down the road.  
Those swollen days of waiting—

and the silent baby put out on the porch  
a mere after-thought.

Somewhere there is a deed to the house.

My father was named for his uncle;  
my mother for her aunt. I think I am

named for fatigue and what it feels like  
to be pregnant with late summer,

my birth a rainforest, my living a thick  
and tired labor of flesh. Peel me back

like wallpaper gone yellow, not  
antiqued but rotted from the inside.

There is wet in the walls—always has been—  
and my great-grandfather sang this song

in the 60's. His shot pealed like folk  
tunes in the carpark, sheet metal and

his hanging face shaped like a lyric.  
And his children, all of us, live somehow

still inside the forest that bred  
his heartache. Mania, my mother says,

is only brain deep.

## Grandfather as Fugitive

There's no tobacco now to collect.  
But my grandfather remembers:  
that summer the crop cracked open,

autumn the cave spilled over into town.  
I want to know if he thought of flooded land  
when he bought that rusted-out car, when he  
made up a sign—Cave City or Bust—  
and busted.

Or the pet goat strung upside-down from the tree.  
My grandfather's last year at school, blood pooling  
into the root system he bloomed from,  
his daddy making decisions.

He worked the land, then, for next to nothing,  
counting winters with brothers and sisters  
up in a frozen farmhouse loft. And once  
he'd left, caught a late bus home to end  
each work week.

A man had hanged in the old barn  
on Route 2. My grandfather wasn't afraid but  
when the bus let him off miles out, he'd dash  
the whole way home. I know

it's not the land that shook him, but what  
lingered in the dry rot of that barn, what lured  
a tobacco farmer up into the rafters and told him  
he'd best go on and swing.

How my grandfather crawled north, then.  
Gave chase to the Ohio until it seemed suddenly slow.  
Enough to build house, enough to sit still, enough to lay  
decades down like bricks between himself  
and those miles of night.



## A Safe Neighborhood for Families

A frozen mop beats against the windshield  
and it seems the glass will give.

It doesn't.

Inside, her boys are happy. They eat  
chocolate chips off the linoleum floor.

There are no streetlights in this neighborhood.  
There won't be for five more years.

The engine turns over. Churns to life.

She sits patiently in moonlight  
deciding whether to press the gas—

remembers groceries  
still need putting up.

The sky goes a bit grey and she thinks it might snow.

She releases her shoulders, fixates on the shadow of  
the mop, now loose and slick in her husband's grip as

he wrings his heart out.

Tonight, she thinks, she will have the best sex  
of her life. Somewhere up the road

a dog howls in kind.

Walker County, Early September

A lilac mountain.  
A blacked-out sun.  
The terraced hillside snaking  
up  
& up

each hairpin a threat of miscalculation  
one wheel straying on a too-tight turn  
an oncoming descender turning up dust.

But then the lot.  
But then the summit.  
But then

six red-tailed hawks circling the valley  
& below them  
fields scattered with gourd rot  
rusted out old augers & Chevys  
a man on his break outside a service station  
slicing dip spit through empty summer air.

He will sell pounds and pounds of trail mix  
& jerky

but the sun—  
but the sun

has only just come up.  
His days are long. The hawks see him  
& they don't.  
His Chevy still runs. He takes it sometimes  
up the mountain just to see  
if his tires are gone bald, but also

to watch that hot red sun sink back down  
swoop on him  
the way the hawk does  
a mouse in a field; he isn't prey, though—I  
thought I'd been clear—

How he'll take the light of the burning earth  
into his own open mouth  
like a breathing coal  
to rest in his cracked and crusting throat,  
burrow deep into his hollow

& melt him  
from the inside  
out

& burn him  
& burn

## Dog Days

Some hot-faced girl is angry that folks from Horse Cave have come to collect their dog. Eight miles, she says. Eight miles they let that dog git.

The girl is fuchsia from play. Her sister has grown itchy with summer. The dog's belly is full of dandelion yellows. Beautiful day for a funeral.

A young woman buys children's jean shorts and tank tops from Goody's. One of her girls got a rash from the fabric of the funeral dress. The woman thinks the girl might've done it on purpose – gotten the rash, that is – to get out of the dress.

Laid up in bed sleeping off antihistamines, she dreams of mean dogs. Meaner'n hell. Dandelion mouths but the yellows have gone. Just seed heads now. Listen : rattle of gristle in their bellies.

Beautiful day. How long has the great-grandmother been dead? How many old men will come asking for what she promised them?

Gray-haired uncle with ponytail enters the kitchen from around back. He carries melon and wine. Has been west for so long.

The old woman is still dead. She is in the ground and the sun is shining and the dogs are smiling out the back window at the pink-faced girl and her itchy sister.

Family portrait. The dogs leave Munfordville and all these folks eat their funeral cornbread and look at old coins. Send the old men away. Hell with'em. In the photo, twenty cousins and aunts and uncles and children and those stray dogs with flowers in their guts.

Twenty of them, it must've been. The girls attempt sleep only when the last full-bellied griever has gone. Cicadas leave their skins just outside the window. That big black dog like a shadow on the wall.

## Nocturne

Last light clasps itself indefinite  
over the back of the stone fence,  
chicory long since closed off  
to the wet-belly heat of idleness.  
One locust learns sleep. Another wakes.  
This is the rate at which things come  
apart. The house and garden separate  
from their pages—jump into violet coal  
night like a murky baptismal. Inside  
the people have washed their sins away  
again and again. Two girls share their bath  
water, hogpink bodies rosy with heat and  
with scrubbing. They are too old for bubbles,  
for little plastic tugboats. This is part chore  
part sacrament. Shiny, they will drain it  
down with the day. In the kitchen, another  
vortex looks out on the yard. Another  
washing, rinsing, wedding band resting  
in the belly of the amber glass chicken dish.  
The woman, young still, worries over the kits  
who nest beneath the white pine.  
Dogs will come for them—stray cats, maybe.  
She is familiar with this ritual of birthing  
and robbing. Sometimes she can't keep up  
with the rate at which she comes apart.  
The girls get into bed and whisper  
about their favorite nightmares, shadows like  
wolves on the wall. The woman closes herself  
into the balmy garage to smoke and to be  
alone and to feel the way night feels when  
it comes down this hard. She watches mayflies  
bounce about in the warm helix of yellow  
cast onto the cement by a single bulb,  
remembering all the small parts of her  
that evaporated without warning  
each time the last thick night  
of summer departed.

## Dog Days II

Allow me to try again:

A woman buys tank tops and denim shorts from Goody's. They are for her second oldest who, after the funeral, became rough with hive.

How is it there are so many mothers? Even her own children, all three, carry delicate specks of DNA inside their small bodies for future use.

Amazing, it seems, that the old woman is dead. She lived to see three husbands meet an end, and lived still. All those old coins in the attic.

Amazing. An old woman is dead and a daughter walks about the house tearlessly and a granddaughter slathers a child's summered limbs in topical Benadryl. Takes a cold palmful and presses it firm into the little inflamed sternum, which has been dragged and dredged by fingernails.

Allow me to keep trying. There is one stray dog, possibly two. There are three children, possibly two. There was a suicide in the car park 30 years ago. Under the tin awning, two children throw tennis balls and snatch up dandelion yellows. Dogs yelp.

Even at night, something amazing. Cicadas knock listless at the window screen. A big brood will come soon. They aren't sure how to communicate this, how to preface such an eventuality. One small, orange-eyed insect leaves a skin on the brick of the house. Feeling young, the woman rubs another layer into the itchy child's chest.

The child—shirtless, dreaming. The other child—hot, dreaming.

Stray dogs move around the unowned house. It is full of grieverers. Full of mothers. Full of little children and discarded skins.

Sapling

I am not her mother.

I have no children, but I have abandoned a child.

Who, now, will remind her she can identify trees even when they've lost their leaves?

My guess: *no one*. The answer: *I am not her mother*.

\*

I open up that gender-bending app and it decides, like everyone else and probably god, too, that I am a woman. Gives me a beard, a thicker jaw – leaves my shaved head alone. And it is irrefutable. I am my father's mirror. I search for *mother* in the resulting photograph and come up dry.

\*

My body is the fawn playing tricks.

\*

When she's three, I teach her *chicory*. She says it with an -s-h- sound. *Shicory*. Lately, there is no one but the child and me. We have been trudging through the marshes of the salt lick all day. Our clothes have only just gone in the wash. I will need another \$1.25 to dry them so I leave for the bank, knowing all the while that boggy stench will last the lifetime of the implicated blue jeans and beyond. All those disintegrated mastodon bones hanging onto thread. For centuries, salt beckoning bison. Children. Caretakers who are mistaken for *mother* by other mothers.

\*

During a fight, her father tells me I am a *pathetic college feminist*.

My mind is *incapable of complex human thought*.

I still wonder what he thinks I think.

If I had agreed to put the child to bed, would I be a normal, grown-up feminist?

Would I be thinking the way he thinks I should be thinking?

I love reading to her, but we have been alone here, the child and I, for so long.

\*

Monday through Wednesday I climb along the riparian zone with a 5-gallon sprayer on my back. I douse honeysuckle seedlings, who suffocate the native flora and lay claim to every roadside, every hill-face, every unmanaged flowerbed. Our project manager likens it to humanity – how we strangle the earth like it's a mission, like we're paid to. Some people, he points out, are literally paid to.

Thursday through Sunday I sling pizza and beer to suburban families and smoke Camels on the milk crates out back. My friend has had an abortion and she is so relieved. We hold hands and talk about motherhood, why we have decided against it. *But you're sort of a mother*, she tells me. I wonder how people decide this. How we pick the name for what an adult is to a child.

In the evenings I practice math problems and spelling lists and flash cards with the child. I bathe her. I let her pick out her own pajamas and watch one episode of Adventure Time. She chooses three books and shouts the words she recognizes on each page. Her favorite parts are the onomatopoeia. Last, I plait her hair neatly and tightly like my mother sometimes did for me. The strands are fine and they dry into tight ringlets, like mine used to. It looks so like mine, everyone says, especially in pigtail braids, though we share no genetic material. It's merely a coincidence. A not-that-unique curl pattern.

Each night I get closer to leaving her.

\*

When I pack my things into my two-door car, I stand with her father and we cry.

My leaving, maybe, is the body's recognition that I couldn't be a mother.

Not in that duplex but also not in this life, under any historical understanding of the word. *Mother*.

\*

After her sixth birthday, I don't see her again. I spend years stripping away habits and decide that my *motherhood* was an honest but ill-fated form of mimicry. Her father still texts sometimes, apologies and well-wishes and curiosities about who I am now. I never answer.

He doesn't ask if I miss what I lost. If he did, I might reply. I need someone to know that I don't. That I like how I feel in the world without it. That I barely even think about it. That I would shed my skin a million times over to be free of it. *Mother*, now, is a thorn in my throat.

And I wish the child well, but I was never her mother. Could never be. Could barely fathom what it meant until I'd lived inside it so long, pretending. And then suddenly, a mirror. In the mirror, the fawn.

\*

My team misidentifies a field of native dogwood.

We soak an entire acre of saplings in glyphosate, thinking them invasive.

The parent tree is nearby. We know it for its leaves.



You'll likely hear the wood thrush before you see it.

Ride to Scottsville, eat salted country ham  
and great doughy biscuits in the kitchen of an aunt  
whose body is mine in twenty years.

Then dinner at a barbecue joint. Rack of ribs,  
bones clean like I've been taught. Without the meat  
they resemble a birdcage meant to be left open.

In the hotel swimming pool, my body doesn't feel  
like a body. I count somersaults; move  
like a confrontation.

Today my mother made me wear a white bra beneath  
a white blouse to mask the soft pink of my areolas;  
their puffiness an offense against my flat child chest.

Had I known what she'd planned for my soon-breasts  
I would have chosen more wisely—I wore the white blouse  
because it cost someone money.

In the pool, briefly, I don't worry over the curve  
of my satisfied belly or the pinches of flesh  
that gather near my armpits.

I push off the slippery bottom. No one sees what I am  
becoming. Ribs open like a cage. When I breathe  
it is a gasp with a sound like birdsong.

PART III

Artiodactyla

I'm thinking, now, about the evil  
of the bisected hoof.

How two, in all its moreness,  
  
can scatter anything gullible.  
Oh, this holy  
careful  
habit—

In childhood I committed to god  
not for eternal life  
but for communal grape juice

on the first Sunday  
of every month. For prayer  
I left my eyes open.

And summer, stepping  
into adult-  
hood,

finger-banging on a trunk  
blanket in Kentucky-wet grass  
by a county pond,

the heaviness  
of the ungulate step  
louder

than any bullfrog  
cricket

or unbridled moan—  
I had never been

that naked  
or less afraid.

There is godliness  
in the devilish  
arching  
of a back,

in the vast gorge

of a fish-hooked  
mouth.

What a wonder  
that we've been given

hands  
and knees  
and holy places

on which to fuck

and pray.

## Disgust That Tells the Mouth

Gross is the sunburst of morning on that bare-backed waking  
that blanketed sweat of thigh and of remembering too soon  
ugly is the opening of an eye like a sinkhole, like empty bottom  
bottoming out. Bottom of the tongue  
wearing the remembering like a bleeding gash,  
garden of heat-stroked anxiety ripe  
and blistering at the mouth  
I might mix these metaphors  
I might know I could never say  
the sound  
a choked-up gargle of clarification  
I didn't know I could be too clear  
I didn't know  
the bottom of this place is more honest than true  
when lips part to morning and say \_\_\_\_\_  
say it was never meant to be like this, the vines are growing  
too quick in the night to be tended in the day,  
roots and leaves brandishing new versions  
of themselves while a rancid mouth begs  
please go back inside, shutter the windows  
all the little living things sharp as knives off the wet stone  
sharp as the edge on that gash of tongue  
in the gut is an ulcer of disgust that tells the mouth  
it's morning now  
look what you've done

## Weathering

Dad texts to say he deactivated his Twitter  
as a sort of helpless protest. I did the same  
just 12 hours ago, but only because  
I have been struggling  
to focus on actual life, for example:  
in efforts to destigmatize HPV  
I have achieved only the making of myself  
into paranoid, into pariah, labels self-imposed.  
Every day feels like an affliction.  
I want to be screened again  
for the cancer. Double-checked.  
Checked again. My body has a way  
of killing itself. It's just what bodies do  
and so I don't resent it when the blood comes  
black as eggplant, as coal, as snot  
after a campfire, all oxidized and carrying  
with it the hue of some illness.  
This month we looked  
through a telescope at the moon and,  
all of us 30 or nearly 30, yelled  
FUCK and HOLY SHIT  
like we'd never known  
it could be bigger than a thumbprint  
and far more complicated,  
some changing thing, surface morphing always  
into something less known than it was yesterday.  
The moon's surface is completely altered  
every 81,000 years, just one great  
lesion scarred into the sky.

Bathtub Marys line this stretch of highway.

Your smoke is whole here,  
bits of dried tobacco on your snake's tongue.

Copperhead without the venom.

There are no idols on these roads, just the swell  
of your agitation, stream waters rising  
near the trailhead, my ankle throbbing

with a heartbeat.  
I fall over my feet like wisdom  
at the Tuckasegee, remember

snake hearts are three-chambered.  
All that cold bloodedness,  
holding your love beneath the loam

to make you lighter.

Pan wanders Arcadia, disguised.

It's balmy like sex, air between stalks of milkweed,  
bodies of aphids erupting from one another.

Hitchhiker seeds bind to the fabric  
of discarded patchwork squares,  
a quilted heirloom. Tiptoe over thickets

of multiflora like an unfamiliar bedroom,  
someone else's clothes. Bind breasts as if pressure  
and sheer will could suffocate them out of existence.

Pose in lines of boxelder, shrink inward,  
feign deciduous as you feign woman,  
feign not woman –

satyr with a pocket full of tricks.



## Sex Dreams on the Grayson Highlands

This deep into summer there is frost on ironweed blossoms. Halfway up the mountain, stopped on the trail: a pony. Black Phillip, we name him. Set up our camps. Notice whinnying around a salt lick, mountains purple and blue, clouds a hovering mass of delineation, you and I suspended in high summer grass—here, I find the false bottom. Fifteen feet separate us on every plane. Black Phillip salivates into the thickening pall. What would he do, you ask, if god gave him hands. You piss out the fire and go to bed.

I thought we might fuck in my tent—this wet night that ends slowly—but even boredom doesn't bring you across the hillside. I dream of licking and chewing, a fever—something gone hungry for too long nipping at my door. Wake to the heavy sound of horse piss. To sweat, anxiety and the sweet of honeysuckle. Hope for your hands on a zipper, to touch me while it's still dark. Wonder about my own wickedness, what it means to want you after all this time, all these miles.

Upstream I am wetter than ever.

My little sister was born an angry, swollen mess.  
Dad likened her to catfish, all wet and squirming  
and fucking pissed. She's been slippery ever since.

I wonder if they knew I was born a salmon, mouth open  
as Fionn's cooing lips, sucking on the fat of information.  
I don't know who held me first. Who held me last.

My friend blocks the wind while I light a cigarette and I think  
it's been years since someone's shielded me with such tender-  
ness. These wild ways to touch one another. Under my coat,

all the iridescent scaling, the flapped gills, the body that reels  
against friction. I ask my friend to put their hand inside my layers,  
hook my breathing, hold. These wild ways I forget to be touched.

In childhood, there's still hope that one day two similarly charged  
magnets will come together, like connection is a thing we can make  
with our hands and our busy persistence. But I still remember

sitting in the kitchen, watching my alphabet magnets leap away  
from one another—even as I forced them, changed the angles—  
deciding this rejection was a form of love, was sweet

in its insistence. Water will always roil, but never the same way  
twice. Upstream there is a chance to respawn. It's not about  
populating, I think—just being something new each time.

Tender in the Flesh

My skin expands further : a moon coming

into full, eating too much  
of the night.

The roundness of me—breasts, crater pores,  
everything soft like butter  
once spread—  
and distance.

When I forget who I am it is easier to be  
no one. My body the weight that anchors me  
at a fork in the stream.

All the feet that have plunged and  
surfaced here, testing tension —

disrupting it —  
only two of them are mine.

1900 miles away

on a different mountain,  
Big Fork knows my feet by name.  
They are planted while my body

falls out of orbit. To find sameness  
I name all the rivers I know.

Everyone likes to write about bodies  
when they are made of water.

Mine is made of salmon, of Pitch Pine.  
When I close my eyes the other bodies  
are kissing rocks. I am flying

upstream, wet and shimmering.

## A Missing Thing

She is a woman. She must be a woman  
because someone's god gave her breasts. Her  
hips are low and wide like the mouth of a cave.  
The cave is dark because she is a woman  
but won't say so. Won't let the words

wet her tongue, rest in her jaws,  
the space that wakes up the body  
when filling a balloon. The space  
that pops when she opens  
her mouth wide to birds  
as if to feed them.

The woman was an aunt but now she is  
a misspoken noun, bouncing from throats  
—marbles off the tightened skin of a drum.

Some leave it, resting in deadened air.  
Some chew it like an error.  
This reminds her of a bird; a  
warbler, who first knew  
another name.

She looks at her body and maps it  
on a nautical chart,  
says—

I am not a woman but a fish. An algal bloom.  
Hypoxic zone forming inside a womb.

When my niece points at my belly  
and asks if I will be a mother  
I tell her        *no.* I say

*the round belly is full of waves  
and other things lost at sea.*

My Thoughts at the Bojangle's in Corbin

There were gods in the Smoky Mountains, you said,  
and we should have brought something to smoke.

It was nearly drought season. You'd always  
loved fire, the clean way it rewrote you.

In the water our bodies looked less naked.  
Stood together, Big Creek wider than the split  
that ran between us, even in the sun our  
bare backs pimpled with cold.

We never came down from a mountain without  
something ending—my ankle rolled again,  
your sandal broken. The gods in those trees smelled  
of wine and rot. The way the sweat came off you,

I knew you were changing.

When we climbed out of the valley into the wet  
sun and stink of pavement, I decided I would not

love you this time next year.

To the Blacknose Dace

When we hike, my sister's kids descend  
each gorge in search of water. The stream's  
silver tail flicks in and out of sight and,  
like famished fish lured to the keenly  
fashioned fly, the children dart.

In the water, the boys' jeans rolled up,  
the baby naked, they set themselves  
to trapping, over-eager and over-sure  
of what they can take for themselves.

Each time a pair of their small hands  
lurches beneath the surface  
I think of you. I want to tell you,

Go

where water blackens rock,  
quick and low, shallow corner  
of respite cloaked from sun,  
from brook trout and hunger.

Though you, too, are hungry,  
famished in a season of making,  
your lateral stripe gone russet  
in a show of virility and intention.

You could live a life of bait  
though you, too, are baited.

Baited to the agile Connecticut  
or a lower Ohio, Little Miami.

Or to the cupped and gentle hands  
of my expectant nephew in search  
of the crawdad. He knows of you  
and of your likeness, flies tied  
in homage to that enticing silver  
sway, that busy dart, that black flag  
along the body extending from a frown.

Show yourself to the child and flee.

Know, somehow, that my nephew  
has some luck pulling critters  
from streams. That on rare days

he might gather you from your  
shady pool. Grateful just to have  
something alive in his palm,  
know that he will look you over  
in the rapidly draining aquarium  
of his hands, will take in your  
simple silver shine, then lower  
you. Release. Move on.  
On such days, return to yourself  
beneath the stacked creek shale.  
Be with the crawdad who, too, hides  
from the child. Who, too, knows  
what it is in water's longevity  
to be brief.

PART IV



## Cetacean Surfacing Behavior and Other Ways of Knowing

You there, with the ocean-sized face—not in  
that it is vast but in that it is so much of you—  
how often do you anchor your body, so calculated,

against the moving mind of the sea? Sometimes  
you look as if you count your life in buoyed trysts  
with fresh air. And what it must be like to bear  
the weight of all those free, swirling bodies.

Gray whales most often mate in groups of three  
or more; it's a buoyancy thing, a two-bodies-  
floating-ever-farther thing. Surely

it is also a friendship thing, the way  
an assisting bull will prop itself into  
the cow's back and thus into another  
bull. They'll swap, mating several times

in the afternoon, one hundred and forty  
feet of shudder and shift, of a dominant fin  
breaking the surface, an invitation.

All of this not unlike you. You there,  
you are not the cow. No, and you are  
neither fin-flashing bull nor the milder  
one with patience. You in some way are

all three at once because when you wet  
your toes you are both breathing and held  
breath. You are helixing mass, spy

hopping for greater understanding of prospect  
and positionality. And then, a subversion  
of self, your rolling guided wholly by

the movement of the cow, the drifting of  
the bull, the pull that necessitates a care-  
ful knowing of everything all the time and then  
rearranging all such knowing.

You, ocean-faced cradle of cooperative conception,  
you will return to a shallow lagoon and bring  
forth waves of birth. You, sky-bodied lover,  
will roll over changed and make your

migration again  
and again.

## Transplanting ferns

from the crumbling silo in Piner, I venture  
to wonder about the point of my spade,

the way it scrapes up brand new wounds.  
When I'm careless, I disturb the root system,

displace the rhizome, sever the stipe.  
Some of the plants come out whole, transfer

from silo to sled, nestle neatly into soil  
collected for traveling. Some, though,

are left butchered, a mash of carelessly  
handled pinnule and fiddlehead. I want to say

I am clumsy—can't plunge the head of my tool  
with the precision of a decades-long laborer.

Really, though, it's the cool wet center of this  
falling tower, relic of abandoned toiling,

the way a voice will stretch in here, settle into moss,  
fall away. But the ferns—they linger, glow

emerald in the insinuation of sunlight  
which never quite spills over the exposed

opening. And if I'm sure and careful in my  
indelicate work, the horizontal root will remain,

will practice an astonishing patience,  
will send up new shoots once I've gone.

If something is real, it's there all the time.

I wanted to dance in our living room.  
After a few moments, you decided it was enough dancing.  
It felt like when our zucchini plant fruited.  
Our expectations had been low.  
We'd never gardened.  
We were new to the climate.  
There was a coldness, or something adjacent, in our actions.  
There was another garden and you watered it daily.  
That's not a euphemism.  
You were spread too thin.  
I was uninterested in a garden that was your second-favorite garden.  
The zucchini plant was small and lopsided.  
When it fruited, though, it fruited all at once.  
We grew a two-foot zucchini.  
We froze it.  
It's in the freezer now.  
I tried to make light of making things.  
By making things I mean watching things get made.  
We're always just moving in these little circles around one another.  
In the circles is the briefness of you.  
Or rather, the briefness with which you handle my demands.  
This summer, I got on a plane without you.  
At my sister's was a fresh litter of puppies.  
The dam laid on one.  
Be a better mother my sister said.  
Back home, I put a record on and left it for days.  
You told me I've got to take better care.  
You put the record away.  
There was a point at which we stopped trusting each other with ourselves.  
This is a specifically human behavior.  
It occurred to me, slowly, that there is another way of knowing you.  
Prepping our borrowed plot for winter, I tried finding time.  
I separated the bindweed from the purslane.  
We pulled the garden and covered it in straw.  
The rabbit-gnawed cabbage was added to the compost pile.  
The rocks were raked out.  
We cleaned the slate for someone else.  
Like it wasn't even real.  
I told you we could grow all this again and better mind the weeds.  
I don't know if it's true.

A hiker considers the flexibility of matter.

The moment fractures like any other.  
Decisions are just splinters marking interruptions.

On the longest and shortest days of the year,  
know that they are not a difference but a mirror.

They are the same thing staring back at itself like a disruption.  
Scientists might tell you otherwise but for the sake of this poem we must dig

the birch from the thumb. For the sake of saving face we must risk time.  
Days lengthen in the north so they can wane in the south and somehow meet at one center.

The crack of a century-old croquet mallet is both wielder and weapon and fractures itself  
into soft skin so it might become always. Meet its fragment with the needle tip.

Consider what a body will go through to stay stuck in time.  
To move through the eye all the same.

\*\*

In the brief time I was across the river  
and living, I found a mountain hugged by a shifty road.

At its peak, sitting on roots of oak, watching the river : barges, pontoons,  
little eddies following larger clots of driftwood : I made time knowing

what it was to be in many places at once. To be moony-eyed  
and plucked from the crest, suddenly unstuck.

An Itch or an Ache

Chris dreams  
he holds fistfuls of  
bed bug eggs

They are like white  
flax seeds, he says,  
but the dream insists  
they are eggs  
knows no other  
possibility

I dream  
the exterminator  
asks me to open  
my mouth  
sprays Aprehend  
between my teeth  
like fluoride

For a moment  
when I wake  
I think it worked  
that I and my body  
are free

Claire posts  
a close friends story  
from the dump again  
and it occurs to me  
I don't know  
what Claire gets up to  
at the dump

Maybe she'll help me  
drop all my belongings there  
except the documents  
that say where and when  
I was born  
and to whom

Maybe if I  
throw out the couch  
and the bed  
I'll have words  
for what it means  
to go through  
this again

But even then  
I'll still have the bugs  
the way my grandma still has  
that memory of my dad  
not a year old  
being hurt  
at the hospital

A doctor clipped the tether  
beneath his tongue  
setting him free

They wanted to break  
his legs when he was nine

Something about growth plates

But he didn't want that  
and my grandparents  
didn't want  
to make him

Now his ankles bow  
outward

It's this slow  
inevitable thing  
that hurts

He says he wishes  
they'd fixed him  
when he was young,

that sometimes pain  
prevents pain

I sort of agree  
and sort of don't

Pain can make pain  
out of itself,  
can burrow in  
impossible ways,  
that the brain might try  
to solve in sleep  
or might press more deeply  
into the body  
like a pest problem  
in the throat  
in need of treating



## Coyote Vignettes

I dreamt of some terror not remembered. Chris dreamt of coyotes. When my yowls cut through the night and penetrated his sleep, he thought the animals had made their way inside, were circling our sagging bed. His screams woke me and then we screamed together. Poor neighbors. The next day, driving to a friend's, we saw a large coyote hop the concrete barrier that separates the highway from the railyard. It sauntered across the lanes in no hurry, unbothered by us, the only car taking River Road.

Years prior we camped down in the Obed. I stayed in my tent, Chris in a hammock. The coyotes leached into my sleep. Maybe I heard them, maybe I didn't. But I croaked and grunted, trying to call out in my paralyzed state, trying perhaps to wake myself. Chris heard, wondered about the fuss, but stayed in his cocoon, as the night was cold and cumbersome. This is what he tells me, though I just remember that stuck feeling of haunted sleep.

In Missouri, my sister's obedient farm dog scrapped to fend coyotes from the property line. Whether she protected hens, the house, or her massive and fearful brother, we don't know. She came home, though, missing a good few front teeth from her lower row. The hens went untouched.

And there was that time we met my sister and the kids at Land of the Arches. They'd wanted to go back-country, but the weather was sour, the kids were young, my brother-in-law was fickle in his decision to join. We settled into a corner of the grounds, made camp, climbed trees. Full of bourbon, I told evil stories to the kids. At 11 pm the coyotes chattered from miles off. At 3 am, awake in my tent, I heard a rustling along the aisles between our nylon walls, some sniffing near the dead fire, then a loud and long peel of song from the wild dog who'd found us.

What I felt wasn't fear at the coyote, who surely sought frogs, squirrels, or trash. Not fear that the baby somehow made his way from his mother's tent and slumbered, exposed, on the crash pad we left near the spent wood. I guess I didn't fear anything, which was unusual, but for a moment felt that same feeling of a paralyzed sleep, a mash-up of dream and truth, real and not-real, nocturnal hunger and stale, dead night.

Dear—

*after Donika Kelly*

We thought ourselves water  
on water. Remember  
only now the myth:

two oceans meet but don't mix.  
Salinity, temperature, tidal direction.  
The falsehood matters little.

Just that we touched there for a time  
and felt—  
How we made ourselves  
into little envelopes to hold each other and—

Maybe the word was *enclose*. I think  
sometimes I closed  
you. I closed me, too.

On the longest day of the year we rode our bikes  
in new places and I wanted to scream  
at you each time you left me behind,  
crossed the road when I couldn't  
beat the traffic.

It wasn't surprising when I changed  
my mind about *all this*,  
when I called you from the midwest  
and said [ ]

and it all got caught inside your oaky body,  
the one you used to warm my feet  
on the Grayson Highlands,  
by the New River,  
under Pigeon Mountain.

I don't want to learn a new way  
to love you.

I'm lazy, or lonely, or the brook trout  
after the crawdad—big mouth  
vacuuming out the insides  
of our hot little nest.

Driving back, I become an ocean.

Back home, you say goodbye.

## Birds and Other Things That Fly

1.

Laying on our backs on a blanket  
in the Memorial Park, I tip my head  
all the way back so that I can see  
the cement slab upside down. I say  
*looks like a phallus* and you, seeing  
only the sky, say that I am mistaken.  
Of course the scene before you is  
a delighted juxtaposition of white  
horse on blue Mediterranean sea,  
your mare perhaps not gallant but  
scrappy and tall and winning  
whatever race her track contends.  
The rain has skipped us weeks over  
but our patch of grass is the sort of  
emerald we see only in jest,  
in the fake lawns of television  
or the artificially alive ones  
of Calabasas and Beverly Hills  
and all those places we've never been  
and, if you've got say in the matter, will  
never be. The sky, then, feels just  
as artificial but you only notice  
that simple scene and its many  
changings. Your cumulonimbus  
horse by the sea has gone seahorse,  
has gone soldier. I tell you what  
I see now — six crows picking  
at our pizza that lays open and yielded  
on the lawn — and you shake your  
head into a happy smile. *No* you say  
*No, it's a soldier. Don't you see his  
arm? The hilt of his sword?*

2.

Returning from a drive to the market  
for cold and fever medicine, I spot  
a smudge of brown on lawn, which  
is wet with the pissing sort of rain

of autumn. Things are changing  
around here. My fever has not broken.  
My hips burn as I squat down  
at the base of the Ponderosa to  
inspect the fallen infant squirrel.  
I poke it gently with a stick to find  
it breathes still. Look around for  
a watchful or worried parent.  
Perhaps the storm has shaken it  
from the tree, its guardians unaware  
that it's gone missing in the on-again  
off-again storm that blew my tomatoes  
clear off the vine. The animal rescue  
woman says they are not certified  
for wildlife. That I can leave it be  
and the mother, when she is ready,  
will descend the stripped trunk  
of their home and gather the pup  
up again, carry it to safety. So I leave  
it hiccupping and dozing in the grass  
and retreat into my messy and sick-  
riddled rooms for my own restless  
sleep, hips aching to the point  
of waking abruptly from violent  
dreams. Some time passes. Out  
my window I spot a number  
of crows strutting and plucking  
at the base of the pine. They rip  
at the ground where the pup had  
lain. *We've got lots of dogs here* I'd said  
on the phone. The animal rescue  
woman had *mmm*'d sympathetically.  
*Sometimes the mother comes. Sometimes  
nature takes its course.*

### 3.

I have been meaning to tighten  
my language — not just saying  
more things in less words, but  
saying words that mean more.  
I can't make sense of such an

impulse, just know that when I say *crow* you don't quite hear its meaning. It's a matter of being on separate pages, I'm sure, because you and I have always shared a reverence of birds and other things that fly. When I tell you, though, that the body is a changed thing you think I mean *trickster*. And I suppose somewhere that is what *crow* means. You are fine with all of it, indifferent to any such changing. Is it fine that I am not, and that I do not wish for you indifference? If I grew wings spontaneously from my own back and lifted off you might suggest we explore new floorplans. You've always been thoughtful that way. And here I am, despising property and your acceptance and the very idea of plans. In the sink are dishes from the weekend's meals and you look straight past them, say *It's been a while since we've eaten together here.*

## Synonyms for Return

I appeared under the mountain  
and asked for another mountain—

these naked slopes wouldn't hold  
the way I wanted to

be held.

I'd been split, smoothed  
over and pressed together again,

fleshy mirror of oak's swell,  
deciduous deviant.

For work, I became delirious  
with distance. Counting the hours

of one's effort is a labor itself—  
three as I flayed my own chest  
and bared it upward,

four as the turkey vultures hovered  
my canopy in wait.

I was always open to this—

a hangnail proffered  
for nervous chewing,

a hunger for decades of banal routes  
between home and earning,

a desire to die the same way  
my folks always die—

and it caught up.

Repetition marched into my blood  
and made real the creases  
of my father's face onto mine.

I asked for a mountain  
that could be honest about poverty.

I asked for a mountain

that melted butter into its seams,

dug Newport butts from the Country Crock  
tub full of sand and lit them

as a way of making  
some perceived fate real.

I returned home and made scavenger of myself.  
An older sister stitched my chest closed,

rubbed me with salve,  
bound me in quilt.

With no promise of return  
the dog left the yard.

Lighting a fire, I asked the leaves  
to make cases for themselves.

They all said the same things  
and none of them were true.

The truth:

we will continue staying and dying  
in our burdensome houses. We will leave  
just to be treed again, corralled by shepherds

or lured by great blocks of salt  
and the boggy scent of home.

We will love on each other, smooth  
wrinkles from the hands of our dead,  
carve a rough notch and keep on.

My point is that the family came together  
to build my sister's fence. It moved her to tears.

The horses found their way  
out again. Hunger brought them home.