

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
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Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

Feral

A THESIS
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By Kaycee Chance
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Feral

A THESIS

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By 
Committee Chairperson

Committee Member

Committee Member

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Kaycee Chance

TITLE: *Feral*

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Matthew Hollrah

PAGES: 56

Description of the Form or Genre of the Creative Project:

One of the projects of my thesis collection, *Feral*, was to question, examine, and evaluate the ways in which form influence the function of a piece and its ability to connect with readers. If a poem started as a villanelle but wanted to bust out of the traditional formal structure, I had to ask myself why and take a close look at how form was working to contain the language inside. This helped me to identify my own patterns of repetition and rhythm. Because of this undertaking, my collection contains several forms, including prose poetry, traditional forms like the sonnet, lyric poetry that plays with spacing and pauses, and even a few pieces of flash fiction or micro fiction that take a narrative approach to the poetic form. In a literary world often consumed by genre, *Feral* attempts to challenge traditional formal expectations of what poetry can and should be.

Brief Summary of Relevant Creative Work by Other Artists in the Genre of the Creative Project:

There are other artists currently taking the same approach to poetry and challenging traditional standards of accepted poetic forms. I have been largely inspired and motivated by this respectful subversion of form through the intersection of prose and poetry by writers like Beckian Fritz Goldberg, Glenn Shaheen, and Mary Ruefle. *Egypt From Space* by Beckian Fritz Goldberg is a collection that largely contains prose poetry with a lyric sound; Fritz's use of simple syntax, jarring images, and anaphora in dealing with themes of femininity, sexuality, and strength serve to disturb and challenge the reader. Similarly, Glenn Shaheen's recent chapbook *Unchecked Savagery* walks a very thin line between genres, ebbing effortlessly between prose and the poetic. The vignettes presented in *Unchecked Savagery* use dark humor and sarcasm along with pop culture references to challenge American traditions and ideals. Shaheen's championing of the other in both poetry and fiction is an important feature of his work. Lastly, Mary Ruefle's collection *The Most of It*, although categorized as her first collection of fiction, undeniably contains an edge of the poetic through her rhythms and tonal shifts throughout. Ruefle examines the mundane and interrogates the domestic with a humorous, honest tone. *The Most of It* is a perfect example of the risk of placing collections into one genre over another when they can clearly be read multiple ways.

Statement of the Objectives of the Creative Project:

Feral, as a collection, has several major creative objectives. In addition to disrupting traditional expectations of form, the poems attempt to both highlight and reconcile themes of womanhood, motherhood, mental health, gender, death, acceptance, connectivity, and the fascinating bond between humans and animals. With hints of the socio-political pulsing throughout, *Feral* attempts to bring about discussions and create connections through the unutterable. Additionally, the collection provides a previously unrepresented view to the world of poetry through the perspective of an animal rescue worker.

Identification of Major Creative, Conceptual, or Technical Challenges Posed by the Creative Project:

The creation of *Feral* posed several major creative and conceptual challenges over the course of the last year and a half. First, because the content of each piece varies so much in an attempt to reconcile the major themes of the collection and the different components and experiences of the singular speaker, special attention was required to ensure the cohesiveness of the collection. Although one of the major projects of *Feral* is reconciliation of experiences, I still wanted the collection to feel like a cohesive, organic unit. Additionally, wanting to examine and disrupt a traditional formal structure for the collection posed conceptual challenges when creating content. Playing with form and implementing a wide variety of forms called for special attention to what content was going into what form, and how features of certain forms (like caesuras, repetition, refrains, rhythm) would help further develop the project of the individual piece.

Description of Strategies Employed to Meet the Major Creative, Conceptual, or Technical Challenges Posed by the Creative Project:

In order to overcome the creative and conceptual challenges presented by the creation of *Feral*, I implemented several techniques and strategies. In order to ensure the cohesiveness of *Feral* as a collection, I focused heavily on the ordering of the collection and the experience of the reader moving from one piece to another. Because of the heavy emotional center of some of the pieces, I wanted to create breathing room and space between the poems for the reader by varying tones, themes, and forms throughout. Ideally, the connections between themes and experiences becomes clear through the movement of the collection. Revision of each poem at the formal level was a major part of my conceptual and creative process while crafting *Feral*. Because I wanted to focus on disturbing traditional views of form, I had to ensure that each piece is appropriately representative of the form it is in. To accomplish this, I first identified the overall project and emotional center of each poem and how it would function in the larger collection. While doing so and jotting down a few lines, images, and ideas, I was then able to conceptualize the appropriate form for each piece by identifying what the content required. For example, a poem with a heavier tone and darker subject material calls for

breathing room within the poem through the use of caesuras or special attention to enjambment.

Statement of the Significance of the Creative Project and Its Implications for the Field

Feral is a significant project and collection for several reasons: in addition to challenging traditional views of form, the collection provides a fresh perspective to the field. There is a growing epidemic globally of homeless animals, and as their populations grow, so does the population of animal rescue workers. *Feral* attempts to shed light on many of the dark realities workers in this field face on a daily basis, while maintaining the ability to connect to those outside of the field as well through the major themes pulsing through each poem. I believe *Feral* will have implications in the field of poetry by continuing a new tradition of rejecting genre demands and requirements. Just like Shaheen's *Unchecked Savagery* or Ruefle's *The Most of It*, *Feral* serves to highlight what can be lost artistically by restricting formal elements.

Feral

Priorities

I chase stray dogs
through the streets
through suburbia
through ghetto;
their homelessness adheres to
no boundaries, no cities, no street signs.

I run
bare feet
white dress
in the rain
out of time
running late
always late
but I leash them.

Dinner was at 6:00
but I am here at 7:00
and he smiles but still asks
why I do this
why I always do this.

Another day
another dog
and here I am
dressed for work
brutal heat
out of time
running late
always late
but I leash them.

Dinner was at 6:00
but I am here at 7:00
and this time it is me
who asks.
I look in the mirror
and beg
why are you like this?

She says
*because, we are all
strays
somewhere.*

Communion

Mom lets us skip church when we see a stray dog. She'll have her own wine later at home.

Eighty Years of Rush Hour Traffic

Boundless, running down the never-ending line,
clenching in my teeth a list titled "to do,"
time is all around us, but it was never mine.

I say I'm doing fine;
I could always lie to you.
Boundless down the never-ending line.

So we grow old, like shitty wine,
that much I know is true.
Time is all around us it was never mine.

For sleep-filled nights I pine,
but much is left to do.
 running down the never-ending line.

Searching for a way, grasping for a vine
to ground myself with you.
Time was never mine.

Someday our eyes will cease to shine;
skin turning shades of blue.
Boundless, running down the never-ending line.
Time is all around us, but it was never mine.

The Things We Carry

I come home and check the mail, lock my tiny box back up, bills still inside, and shrug off another disappointment. That's when I see you. No bigger than my teacup hand, a squirrel, a baby, dead on the concrete.

I hover over you—waiting, watching, hoping—inhaled humidity stuck in my chest. I study the details of your eggshell body:
Two little bone-white teeth peeking out over dried lips,
whiskers much too big for your small frame,
and a fleck of white fur painted across your swollen belly.
Tiny clenched fists held blooms from the Redbud tree above—you knew what was coming.

A neighbor passes by as I try to blink away tears. “Dumb little fucker probably fell out of the tree.” I shrug him off, too, and run back to my apartment.

I find an old pair of gloves for the garden we don't have, wondering if they were destined for this moment. I race back down, shaken with the fear that someone's pet could come carry you away. But they didn't. You remained; no one cared.

I scoop you up gently and trek down to the ravine by the apartment complex, ignoring the sounds of traffic on the other side of the brick wall. Cars, horns, voices, gas, brakes, exhaust, fumes have no right to follow you in death. I find the quietest, dirtiest, most secluded spot to put you back into the earth.

Through the Dollar Store gardening gloves I feel each nail snap as I pull back the red earth, kneeling knee-deep in leaves and mud and dog shit,
hollowing out a home.
For you.

I place you gently inside the muddy cradle and watch a tear fall from the plains of my face and land right on your whisker. I hold my breath, hoping deep down that your eyes fly open and say WHAT THE FUCK?
But they don't.

I cover you with Redbud blossoms and dirt until I can't see you anymore, crying and cussing while I pack down your grave. You are buried to the sound of “why?”
I place a Daffodil on top
say goodbye
and walk away.

*

He came home and asked why I was crying.
He shrugs, “Did you wear gloves?”

Midwestern Girls

You'll grow up in pigtails
and dresses
stained from the red dirt.
If you're poor like me
you'll wear them to church anyway
and watch the powdery faces
of Oklahoma girls grown
scoff at you from behind
fake eyelashes.
But you'll just sink into the
wooden pew and
pretend to pray
to someone else's God.

You'll go to Cotillion to learn
all about manners.
What you'll learn instead
is how many times you can have
your ass grabbed
without anyone saying a word.
They're still just concerned
with the dirt
on your dress.

You'll wear Converse to prom
and paint your nails black
and your Grandma will ask herself
where Mom and Dad went wrong
and there will be no more pictures of you
on her wall.

You'll step red earth on the hem
of your dress before you make it inside
and you'll start to ask yourself
if Grandma was right.
And no one will notice
if you leave early,
a shame to everyone
but you
that you got your dress dirty.

Maybe you'll grow up
and love someone and then

they'll all cry: *babies!*
Because they won't care if you're
still raising yourself,
Midwestern girls
are meant to raise
somebody else.

And they'll laugh at your goals
and think *what a pity*,
and you'll still be
the little girl from church
who got her dress dirty.

Distance

In a crowded room—school of people
everywhere

or slow move like fish and pulsing fast

effortlessly

but still

too soft

to breach

fragile boundaries
myself

I've set between

and

everything.

He Said Wounds Make Writers

All of the students were in love with their writing teacher. Men, women. Not boys or girls, but they felt that way. One night, he told them: to be a writer is to be wounded, vulnerable, damaged. Some ran, the damage not worth the creation. Some stayed, because they loved him more. They wanted him to love them back. His hands on their brains, his words in their mouths, his fractures in their hearts—they all felt important. So important that they weren't at all.

In the night, she dreamed of him whispering his heartbreaks into her ear, his arms wrapped around the small frame of her shoulders to cushion her heart through her chest. Skin on skin to catch the pieces as they fall. To hold them in place. To hold her in place. His nails pressing the suppleness of her chest, digging into the feelings of her youth and replacing them with thorns. Rides with Dad in the El Camino as a little girl now waning under the weight of his father walking out. Mom singing Stevie Nicks while braiding her hair, shattered and retold with raspy whiskey breath. The first boy she ever kissed now an illusion of him. Every time she practiced she felt him there. Holding the pen in her hand. His words on her page. His thoughts from her mouth. His wounds on top of hers pushing shards beneath the surface, mangled from the inside out. Twenty-five years older in a matter of hours—that's what love did to time. She heaved a breath that was his.

Even when she was happy she could still conjure him, the outline of a memory. This bone-fracture love. When she came to their next lesson he removed the tip of a pen from his mouth and smiled at everyone a smile that was meant for her. Those who loved him smiled back. She felt a pain in her wrist from where he held her pen, her words escaping all at once like an open vein.

Cash Crops

1.1

Sin bent, eyes retracted to the ground, I'm*
surrounded: the sea of having nothing.
The streets are dirty and the dead dogs lie,
city of angels with a splintered wing.
Melting and thinned as from a dark blue wave,*
shiny cars—and people—charge past me. Too
many fractures in the concrete to save
let dead dogs lie, and living do what they do.
The bitches fuck and birth and no one does
a thing, lonely dawn, stolen soon as born.
Breeding for living, mothers just because.
Taking their kin to acid streets, war torn.
It doesn't hurt anymore, fire steeped soul,
bodies on bodies in a backyard hole.

Postcard from the Edge of...

I was leaving a country of red dirt for somewhere bluer. Shades of sky and water and birds and berries and the way her eyes looked in the sun—not green, but blue. My neighborhood collapsed on top of itself, under the weight of expectation, the weight of stay-at-home-moms, the weight of your bible beating. The red dirt remembers our sins even when we run. Nothing human in my fable neighborhood. The trees dying in the backyard unable to grow in the shade of a lie. The only lie here is love thy neighbor.

The mountains rose up to meet me in a place that had to be god's country, if that country was anywhere.

Mountains Out Of

I was petting my dog near her favorite spot when I noticed something odd. There was a bumpy patch of black skin closely resembling scales situated perfectly above the border where her auburn hair meets aged white, a sudden rocky mountain of anxiety. She didn't flinch, but I did. I asked her if it hurt; she repositioned her above-the-ass-scratch-spot under my dangling hand. I try to convince myself it is not vet-worthy. My bank account tries to convince me it is not vet-worthy. Two days later the vet says allergies and that she needs better food. She's almost fourteen, it's nothing to worry about. I worry about everything, she's almost fourteen, I tell her so on the way home. I frown when the expensive food is delivered and there's a dent in the box. I imagine an Amazon drone flying above and flip it off. Is nothing sacred? The expensive food smells like fish and green beans and leftover gravy and I gag while dishing it into her bowl, which is emblazoned with the phrase "you are my sunshine." It's annoyingly cute, but true. I put a bowl of Ramen in the microwave and watch her tail wag slowly but gracefully while her ancient teeth let bites of expensive food fall through the sides of her mouth. I smile, knowing she will go back for them because even though her eyes are a bit hazy, her nose is not. Many cans of expensive food later and the black and bumpy mountain has lessened into a hill but the progress is not enough. She slops around the expensive food in her bowl as I reposition the bandana around her neck to avoid the mess. I eat a peanut butter sandwich for dinner on the floor next to her, typing into Google "OLD DOG BAD SKIN." The internet says Coconut Oil, Fish Oil, more expensive food, acupuncture, laser therapy. She doesn't seem to mind the Coconut Oil. I ask her if she likes it as I dot my fingers into the oil swimming at the top of the jar and sweep it across the tips of the coarse blonde hair hanging from my head, waiting for a cut that will likely never come. I wonder if the expensive food mixes well with the oil. I wonder if she gets tired of eating the same food over and over again as I heat up my Ramen and think of what to add to it. The hill is now a knoll but still dark and bumpy and ominous so I add the Fish Oil, too. She attempts at first to eat around the pill, I sit and read the back of my Ramen label, trying my best to look inconspicuous. She resigns and bites into it, still covered with the traces of expensive food gravy while I continue to read my label. Enriched Flour, Carmel Color, Citric Acid, something I don't recognize, Salt, something else I don't recognize, Palm Oil. I frown and tell her Palm Oil is killing the habitats of millions of wild animals. Birds, monkeys, tree frogs, shit like that. She licks the bowl for any trace of expensive food. The knoll is now a mound, less bumpy, less black, less threatening. Blissful, rocky-free weeks pass before it starts. A head shake, first subtle, minor, non-threatening. A few days later the shake becomes angrier, more purposeful, threatening. I ask her if it hurts. I try to convince myself it is not vet-worthy. My bank account tries to convince me it is not vet-worthy. Two days later the vet says ear mites and that she needs her ears cleaned, nothing to worry about. I think this must be my peak of motherhood.

Lilies

Sunlight grooves from window to bookshelf, sneaking through the voids of plastic blinds, landing on shades of white and green. Polyester acts like Lily but rays of light are devoid of meaning. Glass appears fluid but aches with the weight of stone. Pulsing with the ache of being held down. Perpetually in polyester bloom. Blooming nothing. Avoidance of growing just to die, stuck in a plastic vase of imaginary

youth. Lilies never die but wilt invisibly.

Math Was Never My Strong Suit

but numbers were.

The bookworm now
articulate in a language
of scribbled numbers
on napkins
 notebooks
 calendars
 worksheets
 journals
 skin.

A permanent record of
forced fluctuation and
pounds on paper heavier
than skin—
the fledgling of a
monster brewing somewhere
underneath.

Once a C+ in Geometry now
a mathematician of the lines
of my body.

Watching
observing
studying
loving
hating
destroying
every surface
of the mass I am buried
underneath.

Dying for acute angles,
straight lines to cut across
the planes of
supple skin
much too close to becoming curves.

Eat, chart,
 weigh, chart.

Eat, chart,
 weigh, chart.

Eat, chart,
 weigh, chart.

Addition and subtraction
no longer the
enemies of my childhood
classroom
and counting on fingers
and
crumpled up notebook paper
and whimpered defeat
of
I CAN'T DO THIS.
A new appreciation for the fluency
of numbers
and their ability to say
what they mean so clearly.

115: Good.

120: Be careful

125: Slipping

Slipping.

Slipping.

130: The body says nothing; it cries.

133: Why do you hate me?

127: You look good in these jeans, but you could look better.

123: Safe.

120: Safer.

118: Safest.

No one questions the
concreteness of
numbers—
they smile the
cool hand of
congratulations! You look great! Never better!

A ritual of numbers summon
nothing but the hatred and
maybe this isn't
my strong suit
either.

Things That Keep Us Up At Night

I thought you would judge me
but you just loved me instead.
And I was so damaged
that I thought
that was worse.

Stop and Smell

I pull up to the mirrored towers and slam the car door shut, cringing at the sight of my gray Camry being swallowed by the tide of cars more expensive than my parent's house. I waddle inside under the weight of Goodwill layers, even though it is only October. The doorman greets me with a smile, a genuine one, because he knows that I, too, am *the help*.

"Can you even imagine once winter comes?" I shake my head; he smiles, showing off a gold tooth in the back of his perfectly crooked mouth. "Did you remember this time?" He flashes the same grin and walks me to the elevator.

I ride fraudulently to the fifteenth floor—even the mirrored elevator knows I am a cheap knockoff of someone who lives here: young and unblemished, even blond and slightly thin, but the Goodwill jeans with holes in the knee scream *other*.

The doors glide open and push me out, birthing me—for once—into a world of wealth. I follow my feet and notice how the trudging of my Walmart boots makes the carpet seem more expensive. Maybe that is why they hire help like me. I approach apartment 1533 and push my copied key into the unwilling, golden womb of the door, feeling every penny I spent on almost perfect cuts of metal. "The least you could've done is buy me a goddamn key," I grumble.

The door finally swings open and there is he: Maxamillion, slightly cocking his fist-sized head at me with a look of disappointment. Even the dog knows I do not belong. "Max, it costs more for your parents to bring you home than it did for mine to birth me. But then again, I was born in the '90s." He remains unimpressed as I hook his leash to a collar that costs more than my car payment and try to ignore the smiling faces of family wealth that look down on me from crystal frames. I pull his little paws through the armholes of a Gucci sweater while he gnaws on the hem of my coat.

We ride the elevator back down and I ask him, "So, Max, you weren't invited to the Bahamas?" He wags his Yorkie tail in response and I smile. We exit and head to the back of the building, my fingers caressing the marble walls along the way. My feet feel the comfort of expensive carpet underneath, but I hesitate to pause, worried I'll sink too much, leaving the imprint of a poor girl's boot on the floor. Before we can make it out back, red letters reading "DOG PARK CLOSED" redirect us to the front, and we pass his golden smile on the way. We walk laps around the tower as I feel my toes starting to numb. "Go Max, go! Please!" He yips, the image of warmth. "Please! Max, just go! It's cold. It's fucking cold!"

Two laps and many frozen toes later, he finally starts to sniff around, looking for the perfect spot. He goes right next to the rose garden and I laugh while I dig through my pockets for bags to clean up with. I hang my head in defeat when they produce nothing, realizing I've left them upstairs. We start the long journey to the back of the parking lot, and once we get closer to my car, I see a man standing next to it. There's nothing inside for anyone to steal so I watch him in silence instead. He runs his hand surgically over the Mercedes parked next to me and I wonder if he's a Doctor. He continues to examine the

body of his Red mistress, examining the curves of the body and the passenger door; I imagine his head is a dollar sign.

Once he is gone, I proceed to the Camry as Max anxiously dances to go back inside. I grab the bags from my unlocked car and slam the door shut once more. Almost unrecognizable in the menagerie of dents, I notice a swipe of mistress Red paint on the door. The Mercedes glows next to me: bright, luxurious, spotless. I run to catch up with the dollar sign man, but Max's little legs can't keep up. "Max," I semi-yell breathlessly, "I know you cost more than the entire car but this shit is important! Principles and all that shit." He looks at me, disbelieving. "Ok," I concede, "It really is about the principle though."

When we finally make it closer to the front doors I see the man is stopped outside, bending over to create the perfect arch with his back. Before I can open my mouth to unleash the poor girl's fury I realize he is mumbling something under his breath. "Goddamn people and their goddamn dogs," he says while scraping his shoes against the pavement.

Heart Cooks Brain

Voices all around permeate my mind,
but I just stare blankly ahead.
There are some strings you can't unwind.

Tiny pills I don't want to find
inside my body they break their bread.
Voices all around permeate my mind.

All I thought I'd left behind—
still smothering me in bed.
There are some strings you can't unwind.

Heart smiles, as if understanding, but it's not my kind;
you're doing just fine, it said.
Voices all around permeate my mind.

Some glue for my brain, something to bind,
the thoughts my heart puts in my head.
There are some strings you can't unwind.

To this life, I am resigned,
static brain inside my head.
Voices all around permeate my mind;
there are some strings you can't unwind

A Poem With A Tumor In Its Belly

(Maleah)

I couldn't tell who would have the hardest time letting you go. Me or him. Or her. Or her. We all loved you so much. "This is the right decision," we say to each other over and over again. We know that we are right, but we say
walk anymore, so
and you stay. No
not giving up.
we tell each other.
such good care of
on her face is soft,
gentle and I am
watch her watch
floor with you,
you cheese and
you couldn't have
your tail to let us
there, but ready.
life in your eyes
wind. Struggling
Her eyes stay
you ready?" We
another and look
"Yes, we are
place our heads
Place your face in
paws while you
exhale with you,
wonder if I will
Whispers of "I
and this is your
letting go. The
than ourselves.
Your black fur
cheek. I cannot bring myself to wipe them away. We hold your body for a few minutes longer before he finally says, "it's time to go."

(Osteosarcoma)
Everything lets go, shuts down, gets out.
It is more peaceful on the outside
than it is on the inside.
A needle in the paw to send you to sleep,
an act of mercy through your veins.
My head on your chest while you fall asleep
for the last time;
I cannot hear your heart stop
under the tumor.
The cancer somehow growing still.
I want to cut it out but it is all of you
now.
You cannot walk. You cannot move. Are you still there?
Can you still hear me?
Is there such thing as dignity
in death? You lose
everything from inside and the smell
singes my eyelashes.
The acidic scent of
letting go.
We remove you from the shit-covered blanket
and mop up the piss before it seeps into your fur;
no one wants to wash a dead dog.
I am sorry.
You are thankful.

it anyway. You can hardly
he places you on a blanket
will to run. But you are
"This is not giving up,"
The doctor who has taken
you comes in, the smile
and sad. Her eyes are
thankful for that as I
you. We are all on the
crowding around, feeding
ham and all of the things
before. You try to wag
know that you're still
The light of soul, spirit,
flickering like it's in the
to stay. Struggling to care.
gentle as she says, "Are
look around to one
at you. You answer for us.
ready." We hold onto you,
on your chest, your heart.
our hands. Stroke your
drift away. I inhale and
my head on your chest. I
stop breathing, too.
love you" fill the room
final gift. The gift of
gift of loving you more
The gift of goodbye.
stuck to the tears on my

Wild Mushrooms

The heavy ones feel like slabs of beef, meaty and shiny with the blood of the womb
they came from, ripped out by the pull of ecological surgeons.

Red dirt mother doesn't cry like a cow for her calf. Far too familiar with greedy hands
reaching inside for whatever they want.

Pieces of wild flesh simmering butter. Parsley clings like an old drunk friend.

Garlic too early and starting to burn. No one feels a thing.

Cash Crops

1.2

Sin bent, eyes retracted to the ground, avoiding contact, sea of people, sharing in a lucid nightmare—the strange intersection of having everything and desperately wanting. Eyes behind dark shades darting back, forth, down, confrontation with a swarm of bodies and concrete. Everyone will do what it takes. The streets are dirty and littered with roadkill. Dead squirrels, birds, dogs, cats. Probably people, too, if anyone looked up. Everyone looks at it the same, no action, no prayer for the dead. Their bodies rot in the sun and stick to the concrete. We only complain when it stinks. I've tried to break down the empath inside but I'm learning, with age, that she fights back. City of angels

with a splintered wing, maybe not broken completely, but getting there. The sunshine and warmth an ironic sort of cruelty, the only thing growing here is avarice. I am melting and thinned as from a dark blue wave, filter of something good in the distance but we're not able to get there. Not today. People, shiny as their cars charge through, stopping barely and honking always for no one but themselves, apathy brewing in miles per hour. Too many fractures in the concrete to save so we watch them open as faultlines instead. We stand, as if motionless, waiting for them to close themselves. We let the dead dogs lie

and the living do what they do. Ferals roam the dumpsters; strays beg for mercy; bait cowers; the stud eats steak for dinner and the bitches fuck and birth. Over and over. Cashing a check for a stolen womb when everything is a dollar sign. Breeding for living. Stealing from that which can mourn is a sin like murder but no one does a thing. Lonely dawn, born in a cage, in the dark; mothers just because the wrong hands found them. Babies stolen before their eyes can open. We wonder if the strays have it better because at least they have their freedom, but the streets aren't friendly. Acidic and violent, war torn to anyone wandering alone, but even the families don't make it anymore. Numbness, soul charred, wasting away in a cage, but I am drowning under the magnitude of pain, of urgency, of always losing, of never stopping. Bodies on bodies with restless ends.

In-Between

In those days, every in-between knew what it meant to be girl, teen, woman. Blond hair, black skin, freckles, rich, poverty, Catholic, punk—we all knew how to get there. First blood and first breast and first pube and first kiss and first fuck and it all happens so fast. No one tells you that you will never be detached from your bloodiness. No one ever tells you that your body is no longer yours.

To the bus driver you are a stolen spritz of Mom's perfume pulsating against the supple rounding of your youth.

To the volleyball coach you are sweat and spandex.

To your locker-mate you are up the skirt.

Your sunburn is the perfect shade of after-sex.

Your nervous tick of biting your nails becomes seductive and your shyness says *keep trying*.

Your collarbones become filled with landmines.

Your eyes only say *yes* or *no*.

Your bra strap peeking out becomes an invitation.

When they speak they will only look at your tits or mouth.

You will become your shampoo, your perfume, your shade of lipstick.

You will live and die while you stand on a plastic measure of value.

You will wear every scar of the mothers before you.

You will be the tide of every wave of your life and you will do it all, bleeding.

No one ever tells you that you will never be anything but woman.

No one ever tells you that woman is all you will ever need to be.

“Mother” by John Lennon Plays in the Background

I slam on my breaks on the way home
when I see the stray dog I have
been chasing all week.

Leftover rain sloshes into the one pair of nice shoes
I reserve for wearing to work, cold and regret mixing at the heels.
I pull treats from the glove compartment and wait
while my car hums in the background with
music and heat.

He sits with lowered eyes full of lack
lack of trust
lack of love
lack of home
lack of food
lack of name
lack of lack of lack.
He wants to take the treat from me
I can tell after all these days.

I approach the street corner
when a truck, loud and dirty and rude
comes barreling through the intersection
honking and screeching to a halt just beside
us. Windows roll down and men with heads like
pigs say “Go on, now! Get on, leave her alone!
That big ole beast will maul ya, little girl.”

We run, misunderstood, in different directions.
I stumble, open-mouthed with anger backwards
towards my car as he runs to
the streets. John Lennon croons from the radio
I needed you, you didn't need me.

From This Day Forward

I miss you less today
but little thoughts still fill my head
with all the things I
didn't say.

I followed my feet away,
they were heavy, filled with lead.
I miss you less today.

Better off, so come what may.
I take another shot of dread
with all the things I didn't say.

And I don't care that they
might keep you up in bed,
because I miss you less today.

No, it didn't go my way,
and now my roots are dried
and bled
from all the things I didn't say.

And now my voice has left me
stray
with your memories left for dead.
I miss you less today
I guess there's nothing left to say.

The First 100 Days

Heavy drops hit the ground,
I hear them from inside
where I have wisely followed
the sloshing of my boots.

The TV drones on with the sound
of someone
orange
someone
dangerous
someone
violent
empty
indulgent
gold
glass
Swarovski
someone
not mine
never mine.

Violent to the remote
that cannot shun him fast enough.
Click—refuge in electric darkness.
Refuge he cannot
he will not
show.

There is no refuge here
anymore.

The rain speaks loud
like hearts beating fast,
the anxiety of small hands
on

tall walls
First Nations
black skin
our education
our poverty
fucking healthcare
small minds
fracking away

invisible borders
my goddamn uterus

small hands
tightening the noose of
MONEY
SPEAKS.
Grabbing Mother
 Nature
 Liberty

by the pussy.

The rain teaches me
how to speak
back.
Drops forming along
the window screen,
small at first
but growing
 pulsing
 swelling
 relentless
 together.

Surface tension holding
stronger than tiny hands could ever hope to
but still it

 breaks

 eventually.

Water touching windows
100 seconds in,
raining to the sound
of revolution.

Ferals Love Song

Two girls, sisters, children, sharing fear from a womb since long before birth.

Blood pumped with dread and anxiety, born to be running,

running,

running.

Trapped and caged in the name of Sanctuary home given where it isn't wanted food
and shelter a lie. Trust in nothing. Eyes met with growls and shaking and
piss on the floor, dogs melting into concrete living without touch.

My back turned to their sandy fur head lowered in avoidance looking just long
enough to fall in love with coffee colored eyes. Trust built on walls and boundaries and
silent meditations of trying, touch built on distance.

Arms extended in summer fall and winter towards the possibility of something—
palms open presenting food the smell of different an offering. The pain of sacrificial
posture but I tell myself that waiting is a virtue, that patience is a virtue if I can still
learn it. This is the sound of letting go.

Months and months of sitting and sitting and waiting and waiting and believing it would
happen. Eyes fly open at the gentle touch of tongue and slobber on hand not one, but two
eating and eating. I turn around slowly when they are done teeth replaced with curls and
smacks of peanut butter mouths. Our love song is spring; our love song is muffled cries and
laughter into the elbow of my sweatshirt; our love song is tears and tails sweeping concrete
floors; our love song is written and written and

For Valentine

It is really hard to write about losing the things you love. I found this out after my cat died. I was lucky for that, right? What my therapist would want me to say. Think about the positive, the positive, positive. It could always be worse, he would want me to say. So I think, then, about the positive.

Cranky and old, he was mad when I brought him here, to the first and only home he ever lived in. Hissing, growling, clawing. Guttural noises of WHERE THE FUCK AM I? I locked him in the bedroom with a litter box and stood outside the door googling “CATS, XANAX.” I told him I couldn’t answer that for either of us. It lasted hours, maybe. By the next morning he was eating from the dog food bowl and claimed a spot on the bed, meowing at random as the Oklahoma sun darted, dashed, sulked, and eventually disappeared through the bedroom window. He basked in every stage of the ritual. The positive.

People were, well, people when it came to him. They said things like “He’s aging so well,” or “Not a tuft of gray!” as if they thought we believed he would live forever. We didn’t, did we? Their voices sweet and their faces shaped by the soft curves of plaster smiles and sorry eyes. A reflection, a heavy presence of his mortality. They wondered why but didn’t ask.

He used to sit in the window for hours and sunbathe, sometimes moving only to eat or stalk the dogs. Soaking up every ounce of sunlight in his black fur, with only the fleck of white on his chest staying somehow cool and airy. Eventually—paranoid of his overheating—I’d move him and he’d let out a groan that had been refined with age. The positive, positive. Positive. “But what if you fall asleep and never wake up?” Stretching lanky but fat with sunshine he’d situate himself on my chest as if to say “and what if I didn’t?” I wondered what other people considered love.

A day of vomiting later and suddenly he’s shrinking, thinning, disappearing and I am too late. Diabetes, neuropathy, and probably a tumor. All growing bigger while I grew smaller. Draining the money I didn’t have, praying to the God I didn’t believe in. Please, just let me keep him. Just think about positive, the positive, the positive.

The warmth lasted for thirteen months.

His hair was coming out in clumps. His body evaporated no matter how much he ate. The green in his eyes started to fade like watercolors in the light. Every step he took— heavy—with the possibility of being the last.

Twenty one days, a gift from him to me; it was warm—exceptionally—the day that he died. The perfect light in his sunshine spot while I wrapped him in a blanket to leave, the

sharp knife of irony in my ribs. I kissed every inch of the spine now protruding from his back, his once silk hair now matted and frail, coming off in clumps at my lips getting mixed into wet sobs of “please.” Unanswered by anyone but him.

His body growing cold in the sun told me it was time to go, wrapped in the handmade quilt that was always his favorite. Pastel florals, rich plaids and deep stripes to cradle him into the next life. How do you breathe while you drive to death?

Positive. Positive. Positive.

He held my hand, or I, his. When I try to see who was stronger, it looks blurry. Part of me growing cold, too.

Scales

Nothing is heavier to
carry
than the weight of
your own
disappearing act.

Scarlet Begonias

I buried every memory of you
out in the backyard today.
The sky was yellow and the sun was blue
and I said to the trees what was left
to say.
I clutched a bottle by the neck
and tipped it back into my throat.
The second one made me
a wreck,
and in the dirt I wrote
all the names I'd love to call you if I
could say them to your face.
But I don't think I could trust my feet
not to end up at your place.

So instead I called the birds every name
in every book.
Hey you! Go fuck yourself!
But all they did
was look.

Ode to Depression

I slam my laptop shut and
let out an angsty breath.

I ask Josh:

What the fuck is an ode anyway?

*It's when you address a specific thing
and elevate it, make it feel important.*

I type out a million titles:

Ode to Coffee

Ode to My Cats

Ode to Chinese Takeout

Ode to My Husband

Ode to... Drugs?

Ode to Love

Ode to Gin and Tonic(s)

Ode to Jimi Hendrix

Ode to My Favorite Teapot

Ode to My Bong, Cosmic Charlie

Ode to Reading

Ode to My Camry

Ode to Wall Maps

Ode to Bookshelves

Ode to My Favorite Pink Record Player

Ode to Stevie Nicks

Ode to the Million Owl Knick-Knacks I Don't Need

Ode to iPhone

Ode to Sex

But I cannot elevate anything these days.
Anything other than you, anyway.

Ode to Depression:

To razor numbness,

to chemical sadness,

to going four days without showering
because it just doesn't seem possible.

To booze-blinded hatred,

to willful isolation,

to crying yourself to sleep
in the middle of the day.

To palpable emptiness,

to neglecting your husband,

to forgetting to call your grandma

on her birthday because the daylight runs together.

To nothing ever
coming between us.

Normalcy

I drive down the highway to work from the vet, wondering when people started saying “I totally understand” even when they don’t. I pull pieces of fur away from my dress and wipe away the goodbye still planted firmly on my blurred red mouth, a reminder that death waits for no one. Everyone asks me how I do it. I don’t tell them I’m beginning to ask myself.

Portrait After Euthanasia

Twenty-five years drained of blooms; how much
of my life has been spent with death?

Animalistic ritual now sedated and cold, goodbyes said on hospital blankets on tile floors
and eventually I stop wondering how many times
the blankets have been washed.

A woman emerges from behind closed doors: a leash and purse limp in hand,
makeup smeared around the corners of her mouth,
jeans covered with curly blond heartbreak;
motherhood ripped out like reluctant weeds from summer earth.

I want to say something but

I can't. I want to tell her it will be okay, she will be okay, but maybe
she won't. A vet tech with an earpiece scrubs the room clean of the life
lost before and signals for me and

the one I will be saying goodbye to. "Dog," she says, slightly nodding to the woman
with the leash, "hit by a car." I inhale bleach and shrug with the weight
of everything unwanted, loss thundering through my brain.

Sadness begging for a distraction and familiarity my burden. We never get
desensitized.

The carrier in my hand burdensome yet weightless with the inevitability
of being empty. I tell him energy can neither be created nor destroyed,
it is simply transformed. He still has tuna stuck to his fur. I smile knowing he
will enter the next life with the warmth of a full belly.

Even if it is his spirit's only remembrance of family, it will be enough.

We believe that or we wouldn't do it.

Sometimes it takes longer, after, but I no longer sit, stunned,
immobile with the final image of stiffness and dry eyes
stuck open. I am no longer paralyzed by the blend of bleach and
decay and shit and loss that sticks to my nose hairs,

a painful reminder hours later. I no longer wonder
if my heart will literally break, shards falling and scraping my insides
to the sound of "to have lost is to have loved."

But I still emerge, every time, a leash or carrier limp in hand,
makeup smeared across my face,

covered in hair that can no longer be shed,
the laundry pile of clothes I cannot wash growing higher and higher
in the corner of my bedroom.

Somewhere, I am still under there.

I want to find the woman from before and tell her she will be okay,
but I can't.

I Will Keep My Plants Alive Through Winter

I tell him so while unpacking a heat
lamp delivered minutes ago from Amazon.
Fluorescent purple lights up the cracked tile floor,
highlighting the drooping green of Trader Joe's
plants and Dollar Store pots.

He tells me it looks like we are growing
weed in the bathroom where
I hide the plants to keep them away
from the predatory housecats,
fat and curious. I hang a towel—
purple—in front of the window
to hide the glowing.

I tell him I will stop naming the plants
next time, I promise; he says there is too much
sadness already while I pull away the succulent leaves
that fell in the winter, gray and faded from a plant
called Georgette. Her fat green tendrils, heavy and
hungry, thrived in the dead of Oklahoma
summer.

She needs real sun and warmth
and there is already so much I cannot do.
I cry and put her closest to the lamp
and wonder why my mother never taught me
how to garden.

Meadow Lane

In the house I grew up in, there's writing on the walls;
little marks made by little hands
climb ladders to the sky.
Each one tells me of a little kid
who got a little taller,
and tired thirty-somethings
who worked much harder than they should.

In the bedroom I grew up in, there's a burn in the carpet.
Failed attempts at teenage witchcraft
scorched a perfect circle in
the fringe.

On the house I grew up in, there's missing paint in back,
kicked off by our shoes propped up to the stars.
If you try, you can still hear whispers
talking about
small people with small minds
and all the bones of our buried dogs,
and how we couldn't wait to get away from this town.

What I didn't know then,
is the thing no one knows.
That I would be here, all these years later,
missing...

Lullaby

Three hundred of us & no one
to talk to, or, no one to talk back.
I sit on my porch; watch them &
tell them we are all at home alone.

& it is not always the mournful cicadas that
sing us to sleep or
keep us awake.

Sometimes it is the sound of all of us
howls & sobs mixing in the black of sky,
telling the abstracted night
what daylight cannot stand to know.

The Things We Bury

I've seen a lot of blankets go into the ground
around here hundreds mix deep in the dirt with
bones and tears and favorite toys and
possibilities cut short.

We pick through the donation room each
Wednesday like ferrets digging in the dumpster,
building our stories from everything discarded.
We get more blankets, here, than almost anything else,
given away with a smile and kiss in the mirror they
tell themselves we wouldn't have survived winter without
it. Summer laces, scratchy wool, heavy cotton you
learn a lot about blankets around here. Picking with careful
consideration. The brown plaid matches Simone's almond
eyes so well; Christi gets stuck in anything knit now that her
hips are so bad; Archie will eat anything with stuffing; we
cannot throw away the one Rocko died on the day it
was too cold to dig in the ground his body turned to ash
without it. We see a lot of blankets here. Velvet and cashmere from
the local rich ladies donated when out of season; baby swaddlers
from moon-eyed first-time mothers with babies on their chests,
they smile when I tell them it'll be perfect for the kittens;
local classroom projects paw print fleece from tiny hearts; one
time I found a quilt handmade with the initials RJ sewed
small into the corner I cried that it made its way to us I smiled
when I put it in a kennel on the mesh bed that hovers just above
concrete floors. No body goes alone into the ground here everyone
dug a grave large enough—bodies cradled into whatever comes
next. We start to forget who is buried where and in what. The throw blanket
with bruise-colored flowers immovable in memory but what's lifeless
inside a blur. We do not want to remember them like that. We walk
above them and say their names. Land shared here shared forever.

I've seen a lot of blankets go into the ground
around here hundreds mix deep in the dirt with
bones and goodbyes and guttural pleas for again and
possibilities cut short.

Cash Crops
1.3

Sin bent, sea of people,
desperately wanting.
confrontation swarm of bodies
littered with roadkill.
Everyone
looks bodies rot
the
empath inside

splintered maybe not broken completely, but getting there.
here is avarice
filter of something good in the distance
Not today.
fractures apathy brewing
open as faultlines
the dead dogs lie

bitches fuck and birth.
stolen womb
a sin like murder
mothers just because
the strays have it better because
at least they have their freedom Acidic and violent
Numbness
wasting drowning magnitude of
Bodies on bodies restless ends.

Lunch Break at the Sanctuary

Everyone at different times on different days—sometimes together, sometimes alone. We sit and eat, sometimes to keep our energy up, sometimes to fill the voids that open inside of us. Over and over again like potholes in the road filled lazily, with just enough concrete to make it through the winter—unbothered by the cracks that will bottom out by Spring’s rain. Sometimes we can’t even muster a word and the break room fills with the electric hum of an old soda machine, dented by our fists when the fault lines open and the concrete runs out.

*

Once, when I was small, my mother and I sat on the old porch swing hanging ancient and rusted in our backyard. A memory left from the tenants before, it creaked with the pangs of swollen wood and rusted screws, the sounds of growing older. My small, fat hands gripped the chains that held us up in an attempt to hover just above the seat, untrusting. One side of the swing gave out under the pull and we slid, stunned, into the concrete below. The boards above us flailed and shook but continued to swing as if trying to find balance. Shards of old wood splintered our heads and entrapped our hair and we both looked at each other and said “go,” knowing one of us would have to steady and stop it. We sat on the concrete and laughed until dark, our hair now immovable and sturdy with tangles, like a nest carefully built by a mother for her babies.

*

Outside, the dogs down the hill bark and paw at their kennel doors, watching me, layered, lower myself to the ground. Back pushed up to brick, knees shoved into chest, neck and ears covered with hands and elbows, becoming small against the cold. Next to me the cigarette can simmers, filled with the broken bones of tar and nicotine. A final trail of smoke seems ever-present, cotton-like gray drifting up from the can, carried away on a violent breeze, though I swear I watch it travel for miles. I am the only one here who doesn’t smoke, and the retired firefighter warns I never should. He tells me to stay young, for them, as if we all haven’t lived and died thousands of times already.

Mourn

Sometimes he says I
look distant
like I am both
here
and
everywhere.

He tries to understand
what it's like to miss
everything
but
he
can't.

He tells me I should
grieve more,
but there isn't time.
If I lit a candle for all my dead
this house would be
on fire.

Self Portrait As Always On The Verge of Tears

As always hiding blonde nest and bone dried eyes under a worn out hat.
As lipstick thrown on to distract.
As too many rings on dirty hands.
As always covered in dog hair.
As skin burned and chapped like the red dirt.
As body winter wounded.
As why is she always crying?
As awkward at family dinners.
As wearing dirt in public too often.
As always has to leave early.
As running to my bathroom mirror to say *get your shit together*.
As perpetually teary.
As arms wide open.
As bearer of bad news.
As finding your love and letting it kill you.
As always onward.
As always distant.
As lump living in my throat.

Even when I am smiling.

Flickers

The iPhone I barely know how to use lights up in my purse on the floor beside me. It annoys everyone that I keep it on silent, but I don't need buzz and ring at every communication. I am a nerve, a frayed wire. Beat up Converse tap the pasty yellow floor of the vet's office as messages come through, lighting up the screen before it has a chance to go black. A group message with my two closest friends titled "Best Bitches" has been going on for three years and no one has anything better to do. The dying dog at my feet doesn't either. They want to make a candle company. Soy. Organic. They want to name the candles after celebrities and craft each blend. Not organic at all. What would Leonardo Dicaprio smell like? My vet is a mammoth. He swings open the door and his beard greets us first. I cannot pick up her frail shell off of the floor; he has to carry her to the back and for the first time ever I am sad my arms are not bigger. Rihanna, they say, smells like nutmeg and gardenias. I sit on the floor and smell soap and peroxide. Her eyes are barely open. I ask him if she is already dying. You should pick the scents for Stevie Nicks, they tell me. I imagine the tubes coming from her paw draining my brain from the base of my skull. He turns around and shrugs, it will be over soon. Kesha smells like cupcakes with a hint of lavender but is the dollar sign still part of her name? The vet tells her she is a good girl. He doesn't know that he's right, so I feel like he's saying it to me instead. Best Bitches want to know where I am. Does Miley deserve a spot in the collection? 2013 Miley smells like weed and citrus. Miley today smells like wildflowers and cotton. Her body shakes once as the drugs push into her system, I am holding her head in my hands. Drake smells like cinnamon and Cuban cigars. I feel bad when a tear falls and lands on her face as if it would wake her. My purse is heavy with the weight of a dozen candles when I stand, but the leash dangling loose much lighter than before. I tell them Stevie smells like Rose water and cloves. Someone at home digs a hole.

Hands

Dirt under nails deeper than a shovel could dig out, particles floating upwards through fingers, palms, wrists, mixing at the veins, making red dirt redder. If they weren't so small and made smooth by the mud they'd look like my father's, rusted and worn and oiled and machined. Burned and scarred with tattoos slinking down porcelain skin, but not close enough to touch. Hands can grow a lot in twenty-five years. Strong enough to shovel dirt and scoop and scoop and scoop. Gentle enough to cradle lifeless newborns while skinny mothers try to lick and bite them back to life. Brave enough to get back up after. Humble enough to be covered in dirt and shit and piss and blood without complaint. Powerful enough to carry crates and traps frozen to the ground. Selfless enough to give and give and give. Fierce enough to ignore the snap, pop, chip of every nail. Willing enough to heal burns and bites and gunshot wounds. Confident enough to catch and guide. Open enough to mother. Warm enough to hold and love and cradle into the next life. These hands are woman's work.

Feral

Some of us were
just
born
more
Animal
Wild
Feral
than the others.
The blood coursing through
our veins
rooted to be
Fearful
Untrusting
Wild
Anxious
Damaged
Terrified
of anything human,
of everything human
before we even begin.

Every touch is
damaging.
Pancaked to the floor
with all the splatter
of the fear that no one's
taught you.
Losing your insides
on sight
so there's nothing left for them
to take.

Birtherd with the burden
of knowledge that in the end,
no matter what,
every time,
every time
they'll hurt you.

Don't trust them.

Home looks like
Running

Running
Running.

Stray to the
idea that anyone
could love us.
Love us?
Feelings mean
nothing
to the wild.
Some of us were
just
born.