

Memory/Erasure

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A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

April 8, 2014

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Introduction

Memory/Erasure is a volume comprised of largely autobiographical poetry. In the first section, Memory, the work focuses on my interpretation of memories, both familial and personal. The second section, titled Erasure, interprets how the memories in the first section impacted my life and my conception of self. Even though some of the poems in the second section are less autobiographical or more fantastic, they are all reflective of my identity, the pieces of my memory that I have re-imagined or buried.

With the increasing popularity of psychology and therapeutic treatments in the 1950s and 1960s came the rise of a new school of poetry called the Confessionals. Among these poets are Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, both of whom wrote extensively about their personal lives, especially through the lens of their psychotherapy. Sexton was initially encouraged to start writing by her therapist as a creative outlet.

The Confessionals birthed an entire movement in poetry where a poet's breadth of work stems completely from their own experience. Confessional elements can be found in many practicing poets' bodies of works, including Kimiko Hahn, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Natasha Trethewey.

Like with most autobiographical work, the largest struggle that I faced while working on many of the poems in *Memory/Erasure* was maintaining the proper level of distance from my subject matter. For example, the poems about breakups could not be written—rather, could not be written *well*—while I was going through the initial stages of that event. Likewise, when I wrote poems about my coming out story and my relationship with my parents and God, I had to wait several years before I was enough removed from the initial trauma to create solid poetry. Otherwise, I would have run the risk of coming off sentimental or making myself the victim of circumstance, which I desperately did not want to do.

Memory/Erasure began years ago. Pieces of the volume have existed, in one form or another, for nearly five years. The work represents many aspects of my life, growing up Southern Baptist, having a mother who suffers from mental illness, a father who never quite understood me, and being a homosexual man. I believe that all of these elements are highly relatable to the reader, whoever that individual may be. Many of the pieces in the volume are experimental, playing with form and spacing. Poetry, as a genre, continues to grow in new and unexpected ways, and *Memory/Erasure* represents a fusion of more traditional forms and lines with experimental breaks and spacing.

Throughout the work, there are many themes or motifs present. A large number of the poems deal heavily in religious imagery due to my Southern Baptist upbringing. These poems embody much of the struggle I faced when I came out. Another major motif of the work is water. Of course, water has plenty of ties to the Christian faith, including baptism. However, water also represents a catharsis for me, a means by which to collect scattered thoughts, to recover that which has been lost.

Memory

Watermarked Memory

Momma always told me
God saved me for something
special. I'm not talking about
being dunked in a bathtub in front
of gawking pews, ladies sucking
hard candy, men trimming
their nails with knives. I'm talking

something truly extraordinary. Of course,
Momma said this following a baptism of
a different sort. I've heard this story
since I was five,
the story of the time I drowned
in Aunt Stacy's pool
out on Miller Drive.
I was nearly two,

surrounded by all my aunts,
cousins, floating in lime green
ring. They must've got to chatting
because I slipped out, sunk to
cement. Nobody knows
how long I sat shrouded in chlorine
water, longer than in the church tub,
for sure. I drank it in, dissolving

my essence into universe. Robi
pulled me out, sat me on concrete next to
a gaggle of crying sisters. Stacy starts mouth
to mouth, pumping billow lungs so
mini geysers erupt from pale blue lips.
Someone else called an ambulance, not
Momma though—she never left my side,
pebbles stuck to knees. I must've

been wearing my Batman t-shirt
in the pool, because they sure as
shit cut that thing off of me
when they plugged me into that ventilator,
attached IV drip. I don't actually
remember any of this, but memories
are my own, at least this version

that plays out in my imagination

like an old time motion picture reel,
everything in Technicolor tones
with brightness turned up two
notches too high. The film
always begins with Momma saying,
“God saved you for something special.”

Overload
-for Mom

blue and yellow ducks
quack inside headboard,
dresser.

*jesus loves me
this I know*

voices call
from void

for the bible tells me so

devil's
tones saturate
brain
honey
dripping
from comb.

*yes, jesus
loves me*

fingers tremble—
i claw arms, try to
extract infestation
thoughts coursing
through veins.

*little ones
to him belong*

i must scream—
joe and jordan
see pill bottle
in left hand, lid
in right

*yes, jesus
loves me*

can't swallow

silence madness.

they are weak

jordan slaps
my face—
 pills
fall to sheets

but he is strong

Memory's Eve
-for our Mother

Fragments of memory
have existed for hundreds
of millennia. One woman
from East Africa delivered
us all, pressing
mitochondria into tender
fetuses—seeds into earth.
She gave us her internal

sun, ensuring her children
would know survival.
She gave us her
memory, weaving
into matrices in night
while men slept. She
whispered incantation,
blessing, over strands,

asking our Goddess to preserve
heritage. Her supplications
must have been answered.
How else could I know
this violent beauty
of floods. The necessary purging
—fire.

Nanny's Memories

*It's hard to think
that many years ago.*

I.

I was happiest at Christmastime.
I could talk my dad into
opening my presents about a week ahead of time.
He said, "Well you can, but at Christmas,
if your friends' stuff all looks new and yours looks
a little ratty, you're just gonna have to take it."

I'd get this new baby doll, and oh
I'd try to keep it so well, you know, so its
blanket wouldn't get dirty or anything. I probably
just sat it on a bed and wouldn't play with it
'til Christmas. "Oh! See what I got!"

What I always wanted, a baby doll.

My life ambition was to get married
and have four kids. That's what they remember me for
when I was in sixth grade, that's all I ever wanted
out of my life.

I used to talk about it all the time.

II.

My brother would fix up my bicycle, fix it up,
fix it up for me 'cause I'd get flats. I'd ride it over
everything, shortcuts and things. I climbed trees,
tore my dresses from climbing fences.

III.

Bob took me to the Easter Pageant.
It was our first date. Oh, and I was ugly
the next day. I was up on that hill
at the pageant, and the wind was blowing.
Took all the hide off my face. I had a real
pretty blue Easter dress, frills and a bib
neckline. I looked like a creep
after that wind got ahold of me, just tore my face up.
The Easter Pageant shows the whole

life of Jesus acted out. He grabbed my hand—Jesus entered Jerusalem, palm trees and Hosannas ripping from mouths of townsfolk.

Bob's mother insisted he be married Catholic, so I had to take lessons from the priest. The first time he met me, he told me a baby was germinating inside me, unholy oats sewn from lust, that I could go to a home for the unmarried in the City. They would take the baby. The only reason I wanted to get married *was because I was pregnant*.

IV.

We were married by the Justice of the Peace over at his house. His wife was the principal at my school. There was no camera, no flowers. Bob's mother didn't show up because we lived in Chickasha.

A neighbor of ours made my wedding dress, stitched together hand-me-down lace with a yard of cotton fabric.

After we were married, we took little Brenda trick-or-treating, still in my wedding dress. I carried her from door to door in her monkey costume. She smiled as she chewed on a Mary Jane.

Refrigeration

I can't remember why I told
my sister to get in the fridge,
curiosity about whether that light
bulb stays lit or what polar bears
feel in arctic.

Kaylee climbed into taupe
refrigerator one chubby three-year-old
limb at a time—cocoa brown
eyes shone between
whole milk and red grapes.

Mom got suspicious when
she heard me giggling in the kitchen.
I hid in the recess beside
as she tore the door open,
freeing Kaylee from my game.

Mom didn't spank me
with the toxic green flyswatter.
Kaylee never told me if the light
stays on or if she felt glass
buckle under her scabby knees.

Witnessing a Near-Strangulation

Maybe Dad heard Satan's voice
wrapped like a scarf around
Mom's southern drawl.

That's why his hands
clasped her throat
when she yelled things like

*fuck the Jews. They
deserved to die shrouded
in toxic gases.*

from the comfort of their
bed with the flecking
blue and yellow ducks.

He didn't use a pillow
because it seemed too frail,
too soft to destroy Lucifer.

He didn't consider
that smothering psychotic screams
unleashes greater demons.

Dad could have thought
of Kaylee and me asleep
in the next room, knew Mom

might carry her ranting
into our room, might decapitate
baby dolls and break mirrors

while I watched from my
blue racecar bed, Kaylee from her
brown toddler bed.

His fear mirrored hers,
he couldn't stop her tirades, didn't know
the strength encased in her petite frame.

Dad didn't see me standing
in their doorway, only able
to see his hands and her blue wire-frames.

Christmas Eve, 1995

The air is heavy with aroma
of pie, tension of a family gathering.
Luke 2 has been read; Jesus has been born
again. We each say a prayer,
one by one,
hands joined.

Robi and Bobby the elves
distribute the presents.
A rectangular mountain range
surrounds Nanny.
People express love
with porcelain squaws
in hand-stitched tribal attire.

I bite the corner of a box
wrapped in green paper.
Plastic edge catches in
gummy gap between teeth.

“From: Nanny”

A Barbie with abnormally long locks;
Hollywood Hair, I think.
Dad’s face dances between
G.I. Joe austerity and
Joan Crawford rage.

Daddy wishes Herod’s decree
had come along with Jesus this year.

Grandpa's Finger

Grandpa tells me to grab his finger
as we begin our journey
to the convenience store across the street.
My tiny hand wraps around his
weathered index finger
that once pulled rifle triggers in Vietnam.

For each step grandpa took,
I take three,
trying to keep pace
with his gnarled cane
and gnarled limbs.

He tells me to pick out
three pieces of candy,
whatever I want.
I grab two Blowpops, a Hershey's bar.
He chuckles—a wheezing sound—
tells me he would get me more,
but doesn't want to spoil me
like he did my father.

Grandpa hands the clerk one dollar,
and we cross the street once more.
I unwrap a Blowpop as
he tells a story, a story
about family that I've never met,
places I've never seen,
words I can barely discern over
the flap of his dentures against his gums.

Satan's Baby

Mrs. Susie Carmichael arranges us on the three rows of green plastic bleachers—sopranos in front, basses in back. Fourth grade music class didn't have much of a bass section. Mrs. Carmichael opens her mouth wide to demonstrate the proper articulation of Do and Re, dreams of Julie Andrews teaching Austrian children to sing in perfect harmony.

Marcus stands beside me, waits until Mrs. Carmichael walks toward the black piano. He points brown finger right between my eyes. "You look like Satan with that damn unibrow." Leslie laughs, "Satan's baby!" I can't make eye contact, stare at black ink on green bleachers, pray for Momma to check me out of school early.

Momma walks into my bedroom after school, sees me sitting next to the blue racecar bed with my Fiskar scissors in hand, snipping at eyebrows. Hairs cling to cheeks—fallen angels.

Compulsive Behavior

She always cleans kitchen
floors on hands and knees—
an act of worship to appease
gods of Obsession who
erect altars in her mind.

Bacteria cling to tiles. Waiting.

Her clothes were flecked rust
orange and white with bleach
splash. Bleach made everything white,
erased damn spots from the kids'
soiled underwear, motor oil from
her husband's latest lawnmower repair,
thoughts in her head.

The Jews deserved to die.

She washed her hands, but not
like Pilate. No, she washed her hands
as if heat from water could
expunge sin from her soul—
a lamb or pair of pigeons.

Burnt offerings are insufficient.

No amount of lotion could
repair chasms in her hands,
nor restore the feather-soft
touch of motherhood to fingertips.

Meeting with Satan

Satan perches on my desk lamp.
I don't recognize him—
at first. He smiles, one of those
sardonic grins that barely reveals two
rows of bone white perfection.

No horned beast with
tomato red skin and black
serpentine tail. No pitchfork
to hoist sinners into
the fires of hell. No odor
of brimstone—damnation.

Satan's porcelain skin glistens with a
post-coital sheen, eyes blue as
the Jordan. He's tiny as a faery,
beautiful as a naiad.

*Easily impressed, aren't you? Satan says.
They've put your mind in a chest
and threw in a handful of truths.*

He laughs.

My eyes quiver as I stare
at crucifix hanging
behind the fallen angel.

*I can open the world to you.
If you ask, it shall be given.*

No Son of Mine

Dad thought I was off to a good start,
at least, maybe in infancy. I
gawked at Aunt Tanya.
She was always dolled
up, lipsticked and rouged,
hair curled and sprayed into place.

He was always confused
when I was Kimberly the pink
Power Ranger in games of make-
believe. She could call the pterodactyl,
fly on prehistoric wings.

When I came home from fourth grade,
crying, Dad stomped so hard the house
quivered. It mirrored my fear.
Jeremy called me "faggot."

I can hear the prayers he must
have shouted to God, as if louder
prayers got more attention.

*No son of mine can be
gay, Lord God. Please Lord,*

no son of mine.

The Package

Momma used to have me go
grocery shopping with her.
She craved companionship
as she pushed the Walmart cart,
looking through aisles for ham,
navy beans. I told her I wanted to look
at clothes. I suppose ogling the packages
of underwear in the men's department
wasn't what she had in mind.

I guess I had reached the point
in life where Momma shouldn't
be picking out my underwear anymore.
Gone were the days of briefs
with Power Rangers and X-Men
printed across the seat, replaced
by plain white skivvies.

I had little interest in the cotton
blend briefs folded, wrapped in
plastic, hidden behind the picture
of an Odyssean man, sculpted,
airbrushed to bronze perfection.

The plastic always incited
some twist of envy, desire.
I never told Momma why I
wanted those underwear. She
thought I was just growing up.

Banishing Demons

I make an annual pilgrimage
to sacred Arbuckle Mountains
in southern Oklahoma, attempt
to banish budding homosexuality
with Bible studies and worship
songs.

Falls Creek feels like grabbing
the rope and swinging across
to Terabithia. Five days
immersed in holy water,
stuffed with Southern cooking.
I walk the aisle
during Friday
invitation—youth group
stares in confusion.

Camp director tells
all recently converted
to walk the trail to pavilion,
people are waiting to talk.
*Give your new brothers and
sisters in Christ a hand!*

Volunteers wait with false smiles.
A college guy in glasses
leads me through camp pamphlets,
no holy glint of God shines
behind spectacles.

He reads the script
in front of him, asks about
conviction. He can't know
about demons, visions
of kissing husband
under moonlit sky.

I've heard preachers say,
*Fear the Great White Throne
Judgment of the Lord! Don't
treat your soul like a poker chip.*

I still wake with
brimstone in nostrils,

sweating from flames,
subliminal hell.

The Day I Learned to Spell “Faggot”

You looked at me,
you, a fourth grader
whose judgment escapes
like mucus from your upturned nose.
A downward gaze from your coal-tinted eyes.

A Coca-Cola machine stands,
monolithic, behind—
a god waiting to dispense
condemnation from refillable refrigerator.

A line forms to return to class.
The spelling bee over,
the trophy goes to a
little boy who knew words other than
faggot.

July 26, 2007
-for Papa

Dad stands too close to
front door as I push the faux oak
inward. Sorrow on his face
a Pekingese dog.
Tears fill laugh lines,
rivers flowing through canyons
etched in soft, malleable flesh.

Papa is dead.
Nail puncture wound became
infected, diabetes blossomed,
flourished, glucose proliferated
like dandelions strewn throughout
his bloodstream. He always

liked dandelions, loved watching
us blow spore-like dreams
across lawn.
Family collects at our house,
casseroles, pies, and meats flock
to kitchen table.
Food fills gaps in stomachs,
blocks aching heart.

July 26,
we lay you to rest,
anniversary of my birth,
marker of your death.
My lips graze your forehead,
Botox firm, devoid of warmth.
Your hair is thinner than I remember,
not slicked back like Fonzie's anymore.
Your new bed, surrounded by peace lilies,
is always out of reach of Nanny's recliner.

Reflections on Flowers

With what does one
express thanks to flowers?
Does anyone bring gifts to congratulate
them on an array of dazzling petals,
lay mulch at their leaves in apology?
How do we show emotion without them?
At the height of blossom,
we decapitate them,
floral sacrifice to appease some
god or goddess—a fatted calf ripe to pluck.
Such a fragile entity to absolve sin.

Mom

White pills explode
from her mouth
like snow—
a scene like *Pulp Fiction*.

Incisive words hurled
from one set of lips to another
like cannonballs
aimed at enemy vessels.

Xanax, consumed
individually,
cleanses body—
colonic for negativity.

Container emptied,
tube hand mouth,
desperate attempts to swallow—
purge body of life.

Left hand strikes cheek,
collides with lapis
framed glasses.
Offspring/caretaker.

White pills explode
from her mouth
like snow—
a scene like *Pulp Fiction*.

Mom's Afternoon in a Chevy Malibu

She drives alone, mindless. No stop signs
interrupt. No destination, an act
to quell loudness, chaotic lines
of thought, a need for peace, a need—distract—

the road shines—haze not from humid heat.
She sighs, a breath clings to lips which do
not cease to move in prayer. She does entreat
someone, something; one voice will ring true.

The voices remain though radio is off,
they scream for pain; they yell for hurt, wrecked
Mom until she, with glasses smudged, sees rough
escape. A turn and push—black tube ejects;

cigarette lighter pressed tight to her skin.
Upward glance—tears rush—silence settles in.

Purgatorio

Chickasha, Oklahoma, lies nestled in
the bosom of Abraham. Smiling faces
greet all plunged in the sacred bathtub, no sin.

Black pinstriped slacks caress my calves, thighs, trace
lines to royal purple button-down shirt.
Striped silver and gray tie, dismay on my face.

Standing before the firing squad, sweat, dirt
cling to my skin, mar my face. Guns point toward
a fetal form; they aim to destroy, convert.

Lights bedazzle the house with chipped paint, a cat
skulks in front of the screen door, peers in windows.
A man assembles a tree; wears a red hat.

The looming cerulean cell holds it close,
enveloping the solitary convict,
white against the sameness, awaiting the hose.

A gravel pathway over which the autos clicked,
sparse patches of grass line the pasture, barbed wire
contains the cows mourning their boundaries strict.

There is no running from the evil word *fire*.
Once the command is given, a single slug
will end it. They empty the clips, then retire.

I look casket sharp, I think. An old man tugs
at my sleeve, leads me outside. There is no time
to spend, making yourself look so sphinx-like, smug.

They line the church, fill the pews, sing in rhyme.
Stream of machine gun bullets whiz from mouths to strike
down any unholy target in his prime.

Confused Kiss

My first kiss was a boy
who was nearly engaged to
high school sweetheart—female.

He befriended me on Facebook.
We built bonds through cyberspace,
found friendship in computer keys.

He wanted me to visit his dorm,
play video games while his
roommate was away.

Games turn to hands on
shoulders—massage on bunk
bed. Fingers creep lower,

graze button of too tight
jeans, slide like figure skaters
down thighs, pirouette close

to crotch. Leans forward,
plants kiss on cheek, calls
me his buddy. Pulls me

into hug from behind. Hands
on chin, moves in to kiss me,
attempt at Prince Charming.

Can't stop, lips and tongues
intertwine, roots of forbidden
fruit. Hand moves to

unbuttons jeans, reaches
into my briefs, eyes wide—
child caught with cookies.

Opens mouth like taking
communion wafer, prays
this doesn't make him gay.

Swooping Sin

They sit gazing down at me,
perched at the head of bed
with blue and yellow painted ducks
flaking off of headboard,

I fell into a courtroom
with no witness for defense.

Bible verses swarm like
crows around carrion.
Previously held doctrine no sin
is greater than any other unravel.

Momma cries while Daddy
tells me of experiences, iron cages,
needles, compares my
sexuality to addiction.

I sit, words flailing,
wings broken by birth

Home

He wears Turkish Silver

like cologne,

silver haze draped over shoulders,

scarf descending through shirt,

seeping into skin,

mingling with pheromones.

Breath of smoke

clings to lips

held delicately apart

enough space for billows

to creep serpent-like

between skim milk white

teeth.

I slither into crevices—sink into you.

Birth by Water

Water cascades down,
sitting in the shower,
steaming droplets redden
skin. I feel connection
to Mother, a return
to womb, warmth
of amniotic fluid,
nutrient-laced
blood envelop me,
transmit knowledge,
experience, osmosis
through open pores.

Drowning

On the porch

alone

Solitude slithers between the sheets
separating us.

Apart by feet like leagues.
Swallowed by an ocean of blankets,
surrounded by pillow waves
pushing further under.

Words as vast and empty
as the waters encircling,
gurgling into my lungs,
filling with
choking mass.

Man-eater

His fingertips drip
bile that seeps
into eggshell carpets, staining
battery-acid green.

He never ceases to draw
digestive venom up from
the well—his soul.

Even the edges
of his mouth leak
substance. Flecks,
rust-colored remnants cling
to beard hairs.

The twinkle in his eyes—
glistens—radioactive
sheen, silent sirens drawing men
to their demise.

The man gazes into
bathroom mirror, knows
toxic reflection awaits.
A smirk produces new ooze.

Hahn would call this man
toxic flora. She knows
his teeth await flesh, knows
he is never sated.

Memory

Our memories are like annals
of history—the victors decide
which pieces to preserve, which
become brittle, break off into
farthest reaches of gray matter.

But memory can't be consciously
created, even with photographic aid,
stories. Something in the fabric,
our genes, the combination
of adenine, thymine,

clings to forgotten details. As children,
we can see beyond accepted
truths, can see heritage lost,
realize secret tomes hard-
coded on our souls.

Bathwater

I run a bath, steam
floating like souls
above translucent pool.
As I enter, skin reddens,
eyes look toward ceiling,
searching beige for answers.
Wicked memories draft
through frosted glass window.
You embraced me like this
before, like vapor coating
lungs, water caressing hair.

Water caressing hair,
lungs coated with vapor—you
embrace me. Window glass
frosted, drafts of Wicked
memories. Beige answers
gaze down from ceiling,
reddens skin. Translucent pool,
souls float above like steam. I
run a bath.

An Exorcism
-for Warren

A murder of churchwomen engulfs a child.
They bear oil in one hand,
clutch crucifixes to sagging breasts or toward
textured ceiling God hovers just beyond.

“The power of Christ compels you.”

The boy’s tears and perspiration mingle
with anointing oil and spittle
flung from women’s tongues—
tongues metamorphose—rats
to serpents to vultures.

“The power of Christ compels...”

His eyes flit from face to face—
all familiar.
His grandmother’s mouth
contorts into fiery whip, lashing
out against Satan’s footholds in the boy.

“The power of Christ...”

The women cry out to God, supplicating
for intervention, deliverance;
Hebrews seeking salvation from Egypt.
Peace enters their hearts like icepicks.
The circle breaks.

“The power...”

Twenty years later, the boy stands
a man. Demons still dance samba
in his soul, demons birthed by exorcism,
nurtured by resentment and confusion.
He cries oil.

Erasure

Erasure

I.

Life is a series
of erasures, palimpsests
that we re-cover and re-imagine,
whiting out details that stab
ice picks or
crunch fingers in closet doors.

grew up hearing banjo cords
plucked in mother's voice,
children's laughter when I
said "warsh." Pledged to distance
myself heritage—maybe
that's why I never

looked through Grandpa's
photo album's attempted
to discern syllables family
history sloshed around with flapping
dentures. I glazed myself clay
the kiln, covering grit
underneath.

how does memory exist
pictures, videos? Oral
tradition shrinking
cerebellum in age
digital media and instant
gratification. We choose
fragments of self nourish
display, ablution

of details. Choose
to absorb parents' beliefs—
condemn self for sexual
orientation Christian
scriptures, leather
bound, gold leaf volumes.
Whitewashed tombs

wrapped desire in strips
Leviticus Romans,

filled prayer journals, supplications
to Jesus remove sinful
thoughts.

II.

Later

when I can't lie anymore,
fall into arms men that
care only about self each
brush stroke more white paint. I
move forward carry

pain poems imprints
re invent self re discover identity
what's wrong broken move
forward. Find love disappointment
buried under furry chest. Engagement
erased. Running low paint
too thick.

Future lovers must not pay
past mistakes. Must move forward
see love in absolving blue
eyes plan future children
first house wedding. He notices
white paint layers, knows
each coat pain strength.

I commit indiscretions
message other men. Something
broken covered layers white
paint. He discovers not offended
saw it coming knew age difference
too large gap couldn't be bridged.

I cried days spent somnambulist
catatonic processing payrolls
at work. Seek solace in other men's
arms mouths pants. Paint's
gone can't cover fresh mistakes.

He forgives me sees A
emblazoned on chest. Brushes image
car Target parking lot

to back of mind. Doesn't stay gone
long. Says love evaporated. I say

it's crisis midlife. Says
can't love me again not
like before. Buy more

white paint move forward move
out re invent re imagine.

What Nanny Taught Me

Truth billows
 from your mouth,
whirls toward
 regurgitated green
ceiling.
 It thumps
cochlea before
 worming into
temporal lobe—
 tongues
Limbic,
 gnaws
Pre-Frontal
 Cortex.

You taught me
 to dance,
to tango with
 empathy
so often
 Medulla
knows
 more intimately
than Pituitary
 knows intercourse.

Oklahoma Spring

Leaves flow toward me in

horizontal vertices,

grazing my face like fingers—

a man clawing

toward the surface

of a ravine.

I stand stark still

during this onslaught,

feeling gut drop

as leaves fall

stem-first

to asphalt—

asphyxiate.

The leaves are tattered,

edges jagged—serrated

knife blades.

I fall to them,

craving their company.

Nicotine Tattoos

There's something

 sexy

about a man

 that needs a

post-coital

 cigarette—

orange embers

 kiss tobacco

as smoke ascends

 skyward, ribbons

creep toward

 stratosphere.

Etchings of smoke

 dwell in lungs—

nicotine tattoos

 marking ebb and flow

of passion—

Sacrifice

-for Brandon

His smile doesn't lift from his lips like it used to,
less light behind those hazel eyes when he looks at me.

Something went wrong down this road we're on.

It's been gravelly, unpaved in spots,
smooth tar for most.

Sold that huge green couch for him,
put all that modern gray and black
cushioned furniture into the living room.

Hung those black and white pictures he took
in Oxford to make it feel like home.

Long day at the news station crunching
budget, paying bills.

Early morning gym battling
age creeping into muscles.

I cooked for him almost every night,
wanted him to spend time reading Trethewey,
writing poems I never quite understood.

Wanted to hand him stars,
see them warm his open hands.

Nymph

She dances,
liquid sunshine drips
from tulip toes
as grass dyes her feet.
It envies her brightness.

Lips curve into a smile,
honey sweat from pores.
Bees flit around her,
jealous of her grace,
her ease.

The motion of her hips
moves earth,
or so it seems.
As if equator
were attached by string.

Liquid sunshine, honey sweat,
moving hips.
Nymph.
Universe gravitates toward her.
Unaware,
she dances.

Sula

She exists
in all of us.

Underneath the surface
of alabaster or ivory,
playing behind the flecks of gold,
digging into the loam.

Longing for escape,
waiting in street corner,
garnering hate like
children collect leaves.
Leaves make lousy shields.

Always.
Craving permanence,
empty space aching.
Never enough.

She exists in all of us,
underneath the surface,
longing for escape.
Always.

Giles Corey Speaks

They claimed to see canaries
hovering over their beds,
floating specters clutching books
of pitch. The girls refused

More weight.

to sign. They took my
Martha, stripped her, searched
for a third teat between her breasts.
Claimed she suckled
demons like piglets.
Steepled hats claw toward

More weight.

Heaven. The girls looked into my
eyes, growing rheumy. They swear
Beelzebub's flame danced, the way
I wriggled around

More weight.

bonfires. I told Reverend Mathers
of quarrels over farming land.
“Politics don't play into
witchcraft,”

More weight.

he said. Maybe Satan does dance
with canaries, black cats. Aproned girls
bored of sewing. Maybe

More weight.

a red corset blooms in Lucifer's garden. Maybe

more weight

Home Remedy: Hickeys

Mom never told me that a quarter
could be an eraser,
that ridges could scatter
broken blood blooms
across skin.

Cherry and chocolate blossoms
thrive on necks, shoulders, navels.
Lips, teeth till surface,
tongues press seeds into bruised
but ready flesh.

Seeds flourish, sprouts
resilient. Failed attempts cover with
scarves, to bury in borrowed
concealer, hard freeze them.

Finally dig them out with ridged
trowel, extract roots.

Hawthorne couldn't contrive
a more apt symbol for Adultery.

Howl Poem

How quick are we to turn on one another, America?

How much hate festers in our souls like flesh-eating disease

that boys who get kicked off the middle school wrestling team comes to school bearing
assault rifles instead of pencils, bombs for textbooks?

that society still embeds the idea that women are property, pasted on the covers of Sports
Illustrated and Cosmopolitan like high-gloss wanted posters, blurbs about sex tips
and how to please your man float beside perfectly coiffed hair?

How much progress have we made since Puritan feet first touched down on Native soil?

since the days of Salem when children became the delusional mouthpieces for parents'
long-standing anger with neighbors, crying witch because someone prays more
often or wears red corsets?

Letters from Allan Grey

Discovery

Costume jewelry and other trinkets
fill this antique trunk.
Buried underneath lie
yellowed papers.
The ink worn from fingertips
tracing lines like
road maps.

Some are poems sent to her
from young lover, a boy
with flushed cheeks, searching
hazel eyes, with a slight frame.

Other papers were
 discovered
posthumously, the boy's musings
more than anything else.

She's read these pages—these
letters—time and again, poring
over them like scripture,
praying to find answers
embraced by the filigree of curlicues.

Carousel revolves
in her mind.
 riverboat
 plantation house
 chardonnay bottle
 Colt pistol

The last always forces her to slam
the trunk lid closed, breaks
her from reverie.

To Blanche

-June 1939

Something is wrong in me.
A dam has burst;
no repairing
the holes.

You are beyond salvation.

I can't articulate—
palpitations of a hammer-
heart tearing out nails.

*Disgusting, disgraceful,
abomination.*

Can the caresses from a
shovel-hand,
kiss from sandpaper
tongue be so bad?

Hellfire strokes your ankles.

-January 1940

Blanche,

There's ice floating
on the Mississippi—
baby white seals that break
in half when steamboats
charge through.

The chill makes me
long for your body,
the flamingo-esque
grace and pink warmth.

Shipping feels miserable
today, because of frost.
What I would give to glimpse
those delicate lips,
fraternal twins robed
pink, dancing
to those Down Hearted Blues.

February 23, 1940

Blanche has always been good at manufacturing
happiness, at weaving together
a crazed smile out of half-tattered strips
of sunshine-tinged memories.

She trembles at the looking glass,
worried that the woman whose gaze
she cannot quite meet will whisper
a truth her soul covered with mascara.

She covered light bulbs
with ornate Japanesque paper lanterns,
transforming the brilliant white into
warm color—shades all grey.

She could ignore the truth, it seemed,
by sidestepping into
an imaginary world set to the tune
of “It’s Only a Paper Moon.”

Whoever knew glass could
fail to protect and reflect?
How fragile that construct!

-March 1940

I tried to tell you
before you walked into the bedroom—
chardonnay bottle lying flat on eggshell carpet,
dripping, dripping, dripping.

Two bodies tussled between satin sheets,
my own Belle Reve.
Two identities wrestled for dominance—
I fell.

The last tether snapped;
Adrift,
you cannot be my anchor—
I cannot live in plurality.

Oh that the wine was poisoned.
Oh that I could be the man you need.

Optometrist Visit

So much can be seen
in eyes—branching blood
vessels chart family
history, trace glucose

levels from grandparents,
cholesterol, hypertension
from Mom, molecules
metabolize through cells

like oral traditions, show
signs of pollen and ragweed
imprinted on whites.
The secrets of DNA lie

unzipped, exposed,
open to oracles
who look closely at
cornea, sclera.

Night & Day
-from Dr. Michael

“These lenses are the products of years of research. Two companies battled to create the perfect compound—a delicate blend of oil and water fused together.”

Molecular bonds create a spongy texture that absorbs dust and bacteria. Lenses that adhere to the cornea and bring the outside world into sharp focus. The oil

and water blend retains moisture and allows in enough oxygen to keep eyes hydrated.

Breakfast Preparations

On the Formica counter
sits a knife
block, sheathing
serrated, straight-edge
blades in adjacent

slots. Pick one, comic
book *Sching!* as wood
releases steel from confinement.
Toss utensil from left
to right, handle

like cock in hand. He
sits at the table, thumbing
through Facebook posts—
low-carb recipes and
underwear models. Fingers

on right hand drum against
antique oak. Knife edge
kisses flesh, gliding across
surface, biting into red
tomato.

County Health Department: STD Clinic

Arrival

7:30 AM. They stand in a messy
queue waiting to swarm through
the electric doors toward treatment.

The doors won't open for thirty minutes.

The nurses and receptionists slowly
push their way to the front, some jingling
keys as they meander through patients.

The doors seal behind,
leaving infected standing, mouths agape:
this tranquil zombie invasion.

The faces of people belie
their clothing: sweat pants
fit them thirty pounds ago, tattered
flannel shirts missing buttons 1, 2, and 4.

The doors open at 8 o'clock,
we shuffle in. Some walk toward
prenatal care, others toward family
ward for free vaccinations.

I follow the group trudging
toward the STD clinic,
a separate ward containing a waiting
room and full staff of nurses, doctors.

We each grab a cobalt number
as we enter, sit in old schoolroom
chairs in faded shades of red, yellow,
blue, gray, leave at least one
seat between us.

The receptionists aren't at the labeled
windows when we perch on our chairs.
They proceed like nuns from some back room,
turn on computers running Windows
98, and determinedly do not make
eye contact. They never look
us in the eyes. Never.

Sign In

“Number 1!”

A man in blue athletic shorts, black muscle shirt, and a sideways ball cap approaches the lady at window b, clutching his number, a lottery ticket.

He signs the paperwork, not reading. Glances at receptionist, wondering how many people she asks the same series of questions, how many faces she

commits to memory. He returns to plastic-backed chair, eyes focus intently on television instructing in proper methods for using condoms.

“Number 2!”

A woman this time, floor-length tribal print dress covering beginnings of a child. The scars from needle pricks form words in Braille: “love” and “lies” are only a few hits apart.

She fishes a pack of Turkish Silvers out of an oversized black purse, sniffs the contents of the pack, and places one between her bronze glossy lips. She chews the cigarette, getting a fix of nicotine through ingestion.

She came today in search of answers. She wonders whether the pus-filled blisters above her lips will one day become as familiar as freckles to the child gestating in her womb.

“Number 3!”

His eyes shake, seeing everything, not taking in. Fear penetrates

his body, like his friend's penis
three months ago after a few Bud Lights. He mumbles,
"my father who art in heaven" as he signs
the waiver and pays his \$15.

It's odd for him to think that five minutes
and a few drops of blood can both
read his past and foretell his future.

He contemplates leaving, chalking
the money up as loss. It would be
easier, he thinks, than knowing
months and years ahead will be measured
in hospital visits and experimental medication.

*The voice keeps shouting numbers, one after
the other, ticking off the fallen of society, the lepers
marked with genital warts and cold sores. I drown
them out as I stare at the television, awaiting
the words "Number 9!"*

Office

Number 1 enters the office, the door clicks shut behind the nurse in pink scrubs. She tightens the blood pressure cuff until he feels it strangle his arm. He breathes deeply as it loosens its grip.

The nurse scribbles numbers down on a chart before drawing blood sample. She pushes needle into his vein. His eyes crinkle underneath ballcap. She leaves the room, saying the next nurse will be in momentarily.

She enters five minutes later with a medical student and, in her raspy South African voice, commands the man to drop his blue athletic shorts. His bare ass prickles with goose bumps as this nurse spreads his cheeks, probing anus with cotton swab.

As she works, she explains each action to her student. She grabs a glass slide, turns Number 1 around, grabs his penis. "You normally collect a sample by milking. But his is leaking fluid." She touches the slide to the head

of the penis. She and the student leave, returning after examining slide under microscopes. She produces a syringe, stabs him in the ass, telling him that this will treat the gonorrhoea.

Follow Up

Number 2 prays silently as she walks
into the examination room. She thanks
God that she does not live in the country
her dress design originates from.

She waits days after the blood test
for results, marking each day on the calendar
with a red X. The phone rings one
week later. Telephone cord wraps itself
like a snake around her ankle.
The receiver bites first ear
then lip as the voice on the other end

tells her that the sores are herpes,
that the doctors will need to test
the fetus for virus that seeps
into her bloodstream.

Number 3 sits on a leather couch,
clutching security encoded envelope
in one hand with his friend's hand
in the other. He rips open the envelope
like fortune cookie.

He skims paper.
Sweat beads break out like prisoners
from jail cells as his eyes light
on a single word: *positive*.

Number 3 knew what would
be found in the envelope,
the way a woman
knows that she's pregnant.

Birth of a Queen

I

Jonny creeps into his parents' bedroom,
opens some of mother's drawers
with the flecked ducks painted
in blues and yellows.

He grabs two DD bras,
drapes one across his shoulders
and another becomes his bouffant hair.
He digs in the closet
like cat
in sandbox
for a pair of Skittles red heels. Jonny stumbles

toward the vanity, grabs
a tube of coral lipstick and presses
it to lips, smashing clumps
into the miniscule cracks. He
opens a compact and powders
his face like a donut. As he unsheathes

the black velvet mascara, his father crosses
the threshold, screams that *he won't
have a pussy boy
for a son*. In one motion,
he pulls a belt from his waist,
grips the champion bull riding buckle
and unleashes on Jonny. Jonny cries,

"I just want to be pretty."

II

“I just want to be pretty,”
Jonny says to the clerk
at Queens of Sheba Wigs.

The woman smiles,
flips her kinky curls
over her shoulder, and
gestures toward a long blonde
wig. Plain, straight hair, but
gorgeous synthetic locks.
A nice starter wig.

Jonny practices styling
his new hair, striving for
French Vogue with waves,
braids, twists, buns.
Over the years,
Jonny developed a taste
for elegance,
hiding copies of *Glamour*,
Harper's Bazaar underneath
the mattress of his twin-
sized bed.

Jonny donned the wig,
tucked his manhood in-
between his legs, pulled
on pantyhose. He put on his mother's
old Skittles red heels,
a charcoal asymmetrical
dress. He paints his face
with the concentration of Van Gogh.

He flutters his fake eyelashes
twice, smiles.

“Here's Janelle Garcia.”

III

“Here’s Janelle Garcia!”

Black knee-high boots
cup Janelle’s calves as
she sashays out.

*Black velvet and that
little boy’s smile.*

A red silhouetted dress
conforms to curves made
from foam mattress pads
carved into hips and buttocks.

*Ev’ry word of ev’ry song
that he sang was for you.*

She air-kisses men
as she reaches toward George
Washington’s crumpled face.
Janelle mouths the words as
her body sways and her face
contorts with emotion.

*A new religion that’ll
bring her to your knees...
black velvet, if you please.*

Silent Ballads

Sing to me,
but never open your lips.
Sing ballads,
like troubadours in
dragon and castle days.
Compose lines of flawless
verse—transmit through fingertips.

Kiss me,
but never touch.
Pen notes,
a prisoner in
a cell—stone walls.
Write transcendent words,
float off the page.

Love me,
but never pronounce syllables.
Whisper words,
a child telling
secrets to best friends.
Etch forever into my skin,
eternity splayed openly on my flesh.

Antique Prayers

A troupe of brilliantly garbed
dancers pirouette in place,
moving about a fixed axis.
They spring to life,
individually,
as the devout come to offer
thanksgiving and supplications.

The dancers rise on releve,
each blossoming as prayers
inspire feet.
They reach upward, stretch to highest
extent of their bodies, fingers
twitch in anticipation of touching
the Unknown.

The dancers are unable
to convey silent requests,
unable to bring
reformation through their art.
They crumple into themselves,
dormant after a failed magnum opus.

The votive flames do not
sway with my breath
as they did in years past.
They no longer
jete with the same intensity.

Antique prayers lie at Mary's feet.
The bodies, dancers,
are blackened, shriveled.
The whispers of desperation,
the ribbons of smoke ascending
toward the decaying wooden crucifix,
hit ceiling—disperse.

The Birth

Sudden dripping, water,
a light shower on newly varnished floor,
trill of nightingale outside portrait window.
Face crinkles, contractions heighten,
crows dance around edges, eyes,
leaving tender footprints on the nouveau riche skin
pulled taut with pinpricks.

Liberty demands a drive to doctor
who places her under an anesthetic drip.
Pain removed, life slides into
the doctor's waiting hands.
Cut the umbilical cord;
no longer hers.

breakup

cigarette ashes
fall down to concrete, red
fading of embers.

winter breeze blows through
ice-coated branches—swaying
too close to dry earth.

rust spots form on gold
engagement ring, dust now clings
to unspoken vows.

ultrasound, x-rays
search entrails for mutation—
cell mounds on organs.

dirt's fresh scent rises
to meet cement headstone, a
marker of life, death.

Homo sapien homosexualis

It is difficult to mate for life
when abnormal swings
from your name, chimpanzees
on display at the zoo.

Deception becomes ritual—
cosmetics, UV rays, Botox—
to manufacture a peacock
arrangement of feathers.

Strutting in shadows
lighted only by strobes.
Otherness is night
ravens dance with.

Some animals eat
afterbirth.
Others, eat young
who will not survive.

Mom always told me

wounds need to breathe.

For some reason, I imagined
a blonde woman swallowing
deep breaths of air,
an 80s horror movie heroine
breaking free of the smothering pillow
as I pulled the bandage free of my skin.

Wounds require oxygen to heal.
Covering them like manholes
over sewer lines does not allow
the poison to dissipate
into ether, does not enable
white and suffocated skin to grow
pink with livelihood.

time heals all wounds.

As if swath time's scythe
cuts across morning sky
were fairy godmother waving her wand
to make all things much better.

Air and time are enough
to erase all traces of injury.
Wounds will eventually breathe
their last, sink into silence
of surrounding skin.

A Journey

People challenge you, yes they do.
Oh, Lord, people challenge you.

I walked through your front door,
Oh, Lord, did I walk through that door
not expecting to find quite what I did
no, not expecting to find what I did.

I wanted to meet you for weeks,
Good Lord, wanted to meet you.
Haven't walked enough years on this earth, you said,
haven't walked near enough years on this ol' earth.

Text you till my thumbs went raw,
yes I text you till my thumbs were raw.
You wanted to work things out with the one before,
said you needed time to work through things with the one before.

I think I cried over that,
yes I know I cried over that.
Saw something special behind those pale blue eyes,
I felt something cosmic behind pale blue eyes.

I knew you were meant to be in my life,
did I know you were meant to be mine?

It took prodding, down on knees begging,
just a little prodding, on knees begging,
but you asked me to come to your house for a cookout,
your walls broke down when you asked me to cookout.

You grilled some chicken on the patio,
Brandon, you grilled some chicken on the patio.
Roommate Joe was there too,
crazy roommate Joe was there too.

Joe and I talked more than we did,
yes, Joe and I chatted more than we did.
He asked me about school and religion,
boy, did we talk about school and religion!

You kept moving, turning the chicken or steaming broccoli,
never stopped moving, grilling chicken and steaming broccoli.

Smiled shyly and said words in passing,
just smiled shyly, saying things in passing.

I kissed your lips the first time that night,
yes, I pressed my lips to yours that night.
I didn't expect to fall in love with someone like you,
no, never knew I'd fall crazily in love with you.

You said you knew when I walked through your door,
knew you loved me as soon as I stepped through the door.

Momma was worried, asked about the lines around your eyes,
Momma knew you were older, could tell by the lines by your eyes.
She yelled *Jordan Blake* when she found out about the fifteen years,
scolded me *Jordan Blake* about the fifteen years.

I think she knew the hurt my last relationship brought,
knew the Xanax and Zoloft the last relationship brought.
She saw the hurt that fifteen years can cause,
saw the hurt an age difference can cause.

You bought me an anniversary card,
stuffed words of love into an anniversary card
that ended with "Will you marry me?"
I always wanted you to ask, "Will you marry me?"

These days, I feel like a brawler in the ring,
just bobbing and weaving like a brawler in a ring,
trying to fight my way back into your good graces,
praying for mercy restoring me into good graces.

People challenge you, yes they do.
Oh, Lord, people challenge you.

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