



FILAMENTS

By Kristen Valenski



OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE
HONORS THESIS

Abstract

Filament [fil-uh-muh nt]

noun

1. a very **fine thread** or threadlike structure; a fiber or fibril. Ex) **filaments of gold**.
2. a single fibril of natural or synthetic textile fiber, of indefinite length, sometimes several miles long.
3. a long slender cell or series of attached **cells**, as in some algae and fungi.
4. Botany. the stalklike portion of a stamen, supporting the anther.
5. Ornithology. the **barb** of a down **feather**.
6. (in a light bulb or other incandescent lamp) the **threadlike conductor**, often of tungsten, in the bulb that is **heated to incandescence** by the passage of current.
7. Electronics. the heating element (sometimes also acting as a cathode) of a vacuum tube, resembling the filament in an incandescent bulb.
8. Astronomy. a **solar prominence**, as viewed within the sun's limb.

Poetically, I have found my poems to be more energized, naturally flowing/constructed, and overall stronger my senior year. This is due to several factors: the response poems stemmed from other poets' work we read, the exercises done in class and material/ideas covered. The poems I disliked the most (my response poems by Som, Foust and Corral), poems I never workshopped, I ended up realizing were some of my strongest. By mimicking the poets' styles, and language I was forced to stretch myself past poetry that came easily to me and I had to experiment instead. This experimentation, which forced me to expand as a poet, expanded my writing abilities, poetic voice and art overall.

I chose the title of my portfolio as Filaments for all of the reasons listed above: prominence, conductor, incandescence, barbed feather, cells and fine. Not just my poetry, but language in general is a cell or organism created by poets that conducts heat or energy. Poetry creates a presence within the artist and its readers; poetry engages, and exercises language and thought. Each of my poems are small gatherings of filaments, threads or individual cells that illuminate in unique and varying ways. Each poem is brought together into a conducting tube that creates heat and energy through language. To energize language, ideas with readers and

artists alike is my overall goal as a poet. I want to share my thoughts, memories through my writing and give others enjoyment or to make them think about something; I want my poetry to become embedded in my readers' mind, to sit there and marinate.

I have discovered in my poetry that I enjoy telling stories, snapshots of events, memories or places. The more focused or specific I get in a poem the stronger it is; my poems thrive through the specific and detailed, and lack on the abstract. Brandon Som, like Corral and Foust, I particularly struggled with and found myself going line by line, word by word, in order to invigorate my poems. Kristin Naca, Mary Ruefle, and Stacey Waite especially, have a tight focused lens that pierced each word and experience whereas Corral, Som and Foust used varying craft elements and a focus on language itself, varying styles and forms to a greater degree. All of these poets helped me grow as a poet greatly this semester. My portfolio is a series of snapshots that are weaved together into a filament, illuminating their presence to the reader.

I began with Aloha, Oregon because this poem introduces the styles and ideas I would be presenting in many of my other poems: a narrative style and thread interwoven throughout my work as a whole, and a returning to place. The speaker returns to their childhood home in Aloha and discovers the kind of area, dark and beautiful, they grew up in. This juxtaposition between natural beauty surrounding the speaker through rich, imagery driven lines to that of the brutal acts and crimes taken place in the area creates a distinctive voice and style I have discovered to be my own. While my poems deal with many varying ideas such as death, crime, and sexual violence, these instances are juxtaposed with light imagery and tone so the poem comes across as almost playful. This prevents the content from getting too heavy, but is also a stylistic choice that I prefer; juxtapositions between imagery and the visceral forces the audience to look at their relationship.

My second poem in my portfolio is *Elegy for Rian 'Star'*. I chose this to be my second piece because it introduces the narrative thread or filament I will be weaving throughout my poems: my friend, Rian Star. I originally wasn't willing to switch around the lines, but upon receiving feedback from my Director, 2nd reader, and fellow poet, Charlie Mohn, I realized by ending the poem with 'I often made lists of why I didn't see you:' rather than 'Illuminate me', I was opening the floor so that every poem following *Elegy* would be a part of that list I was making about why I couldn't see my friend Rian. This strengthened the narrative thread of my work as a whole and prepared my audience for this thread to be returned through throughout my portfolio.

The first poem that follows *Elegy* is *August 3rd//Severance*, my only prose poem in my portfolio. This poem was an exercise based on Claudia Rankine's poetry book, *Citizen*. While I have no other prose poems, this poem does maintain the same narrative style that *Aloha, Oregon* does and captures the first instance of this 'severance' where the speaker is unable to see or connect to Rian and themselves.

Zalenski continues this thread of severance or separation between the speaker and themselves as the history of my last name is explored. This poem was also an exercise poem based off Brandon Som. Som, along with Corral, and Foust, forced me to slow down my writing and because of that I was able to focus on another layer of my language. In Zalenski I was able to focus on the meaning of my family's name, but also the sonic value of words, which sounds evoke certain images and sound similar.

Jesus Christ Looks Like Me, an exercise based off a Corral poem, was one of my least favorite poems. I thought it was trying too hard to be like Corral or even worse, it was trying to be different and it was obviously so. However, after putting the poem down and coming back to

it, and making some grammatical corrections, it is one of my stronger poems. The lines, while used from Corral's poetry, are similar to a swerving car on a highway late at night or the mind of someone intoxicated.

To All Beginning Beds was a response poem for Foust and was another poem I truly disliked almost hated, like the Corral response poem I wrote. Once again, this poet really puzzled me and I had a difficult time grasping what they were doing, but through the response poem I was able to begin to discern Foust unintentionally at first. Since so many of these poets stretched my poet's mind's capabilities I had to slow down everything I was doing: my thoughts, writing and mind. This helped focus my writing, maintain energy in the lines, and then allowed me to begin playing with language as well as tell a story. I wrote the opposite word for every word Foust had in his poem and thus my poem was formed.

One of my favorite poems to write this year was Local Hawk. The playfulness of this poem balances out the first three poems with concrete descriptions, and a humorous encounter with a neighborhood hawk. The same imagery (or 'eye candy' as I like to call it) that has become a tell-tale style in my poetry (along with my language and narrative style) is still present but on a more earthy level. This poem came very easily to me since it was based off a real occurrence. The details of the morning had already caught my attention and then the hawk I always look for on my way to and from classes was there, on a fencepost, and his feather made a cowlick. It was one of those rare occasions that you immediately know you have to write a poem or story about it it's so perfect and strange and beautiful.

The last set of poems I end my portfolio with work like bookends for the first five I chose for the beginning. White Barn Pastoral has the same rich imagery and natural setting as seen in Aloha, Oregon. The speaker is instead with another person, and despite not being alone, there is

a disconnect between them to where they cannot look at each other, but can only focus on the land around them.

Death Poems is one of the last sets of poems because it is a montage of snapshots, each picture or section capturing a brief moment, encounter, dream or idea, surrounding death and, truly, change along with finishing the Rian thread. I changed the order of most, if not all, of the sections and threaded the narrative about Rian (the person who has died in the poem and is mentioned in the last section) more throughout so, like the title, the sections weave together; each cell is a part of a larger body.

Like a Starry Bracelet's first line really matches with the ending lines of Death Poems and plays with the narrative thread of Rian further. In Death Poems the speaker is commenting on how they wish to forget Rian and how the earth below is now shaping her. The beginning lines of Starry Bracelet, 'You have come so far', allude to the possibility that this person is Rian or, similar to Rian; they are undergoing a change for better or worse and the speaker is the observer of these changes.

These lines also lead into the last two poems, Bruise and Stripper Heels. We see the speaker, once again, dealing with a sexually violent situation not fully disclosed to us, but through the language we gather what is occurring. The thread of remembering Rian interwoven with these negative, sexually violent or harassing memories such as Bruise, August 3rd// Severance, and On the Occasion of Being Catcalled..., we see multiple layers of lists being made and threads being woven together. Along with the memories of Rian's death and meeting her, there are memories that are violent in nature that seem to be drug out from the mind unwillingly in order to remember and forget Rian. Bruise may seem like a step back, as if the power has been taken away from the speaker, however, by moving my poem Stripper Heels to the end, all

of the threads are woven together tightly. Rian's memory, along with the speaker's power, are ascertained and leave the speaker as a 'New Woman, Tower of Babel'. A course of change has occurred through these series of snapshots and left the audience along with the poet with a stronger sense of who they are, and where they came from. My poems, snapshots of my memories and experiences, not only empower me and the speaker, but allow me to change and become who I/speaker want to be; through language can these events be reevaluated or shifted in order to leave the speaker with greater knowledge, or power, and ultimately, a new self.

Throughout my poetic studies at OSU there have been several poets that have been of great importance to my writing: the poet Ai, Czeslaw Milosz, and Zbigniew Herbert along with some of the poets I read about this spring such as Brandon Som, Stacey Waite, Eduardo Corral, Kristin Naca and Claudia Rankine. The Poet Ai has influenced my narrative structure and style of my poems; I have found through her example that I am at my strongest when telling stories. Czeslaw and Herbert are two of my favorite poets of all time. Their content, language and imagery are always rich, well-structured and vary. They can tell stories with multiple layers and their voices are very distinct, something I will forever be further honing and strengthening as a poet.

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Aloha, Oregon

I.

My mother bought the house on 32nd street
because a psychic told her to.
A vision of a window spattered with
mountains of gold and flecks of red.

I do not remember this house,
even when we drove past
the thin leaning wood fence
twitching like an irritated tail.
The house I grew up in, they said.
A small white shack distant relative
of a cottage hidden behind a ghost pasture,
fields of speckled grey Arabians and Chestnuts
grazing on marigolds and dry grass.

II.

There was a crack house in our neighborhood,
down the road, they say.
Did you know?
No, I didn't know.
The families grew tired of dealers
taking shady business to their neighborhood.
Parents took turns guarding the condemned building,
armed with rifles, hot cocoa from their wives,
badges of children's stickers pinned onto their gun slings.
The pink house round the bend a woman your mom's age
lived in, had a three year old kid.
He was playing with Hot Wheels in his room
when his mother was raped in the living room.
Never caught the guy.

III.

Aloha, there is no place like you.
No pastoral setting hidden among bleak blankets
of deciduous trees, spinal needles quivering
at the tremble of early Oregon rain.
The white shack near the pasture fence,
thin metal strung between rotten poles,
brushed against rolling mountains of wildflowers,

a bucket of oats and a knotted bracelet of baby's breath,
a white sanctuary coveted in crowns of daisies.
Marigolds.

Elegy for Rian 'Star'

Illuminate me.

An invisible hand, or a star
drowned in pulsing ivory nights,
a broken marble of luminescence,
bleeding fingers of whispers and Jupiter's moons.
You are an immortalized fragment of ephemerality
because you taste lights,
because your fingers pluck invisible piano strings,
because your hair is Mars on fire,
because everything you touch is saintly burning.
I often made lists of why I couldn't see you:

August 3rd // Severance

You are driving your first boyfriend when he asks if he can kiss you. You tell him of course but he responds, not like this. You watch the street lights burn on like sputtering candles and he points for you to pull into the Mormon Church's parking lot. You don't turn off the car when you slide between the thick shadows cast by the surrounding trees. Instead you idle in the strip of glowing yellow light from the street lamps, just wide enough for your car.

Your boyfriend tries to touch you but all you can do is press your foot on the gas pedal while in park. He turns away saying, if you're uncomfortable because it's a church we can go somewhere more private, no need to be prude. You want to tell him that he's never made you comfortable, that you don't even understand what defines comfort for a woman, ask him how your silence is prudish. Is comfort knowing your partner is happy, ignoring your own desires? Or do you have to be selfish to feel comfort? All you have ever done is base your worth, your own comfort against another's like your boyfriend's.

You don't remember driving to the nearby park that's closed, but you're here now. You stare at the baseball diamonds ahead of you, metal half domes jutting forth from the concrete and dirt. After you park, your boyfriend lowers your seat back and you watch the baseball diamond sink from your view.

//

You are parked in front of your garage. You do not smell or feel good. You stare at the tiny crack, the size of a pebble, chipped on your windshield. The flashlight that had blinded you earlier when you were inside the car at the park has you seeing spots across your driveway. The butt of a flashlight had tapped the passenger window. The man had moved you outside, away from the car, away from your boyfriend. He asked if you wanted this, if you were comfortable with the situation. You didn't tell him that word had defined the basis of your relationship, of your life as a woman. Rather you nodded, fully knowing this was what the man was hoping to see.

You stare at the slates of your garage door. The sun rises and you and your car are caught between two strips of light. You pretend the light is pressing around you like the beams of flashlights did hours ago. You imagine that instead of nodding, instead of driving to the park, your car is hit, obliterated in a collision with a sedan, popping you through your windshield, splitting apart your voice, and body.

Zalenski [zə'lənski]

-From Brandon Som

Said, my name was a pair of dancer's feet,
skirted swift & scissored.

The first page was vegetable film left
after wringing and peeling potatoes

all day in a bucket whose wood worms
ringed round so dense some claimed

a black hole for its source.
A kitchen boy when great grandfather first

came over, then a chauffeur for a Jewish CEO
before he knocked up his boss's daughter.

Breath snips sinews, tries
tongues. I breathe in circles, loops, go to seas—

pause between, ancestry. In soaking sewings—
nose up, feather tuft—

breath woods the saplings soak
when sounding aloud a person's bone.

Jesus Christ Looks Like Me

At half past midnight

drunken adults scurry

into the night to cool

outside of the trailer

and I awaken with them outside.

Cacophony of bird throats

on stitched moon cloth.

I need to leave the party but a drink

is poured, guzzled. A deer's hooves,

tiny lucky horseshoes,

reminding me to brake.

Not swerve. Resist auto pilot or

initial reaction. I am in my car,

farm field where shadow cattle

graze. Headlights

beam at me like amber eyes

film milky

and crusted on the SUV

in the opposing lane. Once

an opossum

crawled in front of my car

discovered on the highway
outside Cushing, Oklahoma.

Instinct prevailed,
animal passion succeeded.

I swerved toward the SUV,

shucking off

cranrape radio haze,
death collecting,
rain on my lower back,
ghosting dusk lightning.

Witness

They found the man inside the tree,
his palm tucked against the back of his neck
as if meaning to sleep.
Fungi crowned his head and medals
pinned on his uniform's jacket
faintly clinked like wind chimes.
They did not move him in fear
of unsettling the motes of dust,
as if displacing him recalled
a time where shrapnel bit knuckles
and a draft of epidermal ash carried northward.

The Bulbs of Ceiling Lights

The community bathroom is down the road.
I walk with my mother, red flip flops sucking
up dirt and spitting clouds at my calves.
We pass a plot filled with a hitched tent
and a white camper. A woman's voice
from inside the tent hums a gospel hymn,
down by the river to pray.
The concrete compound is centered bright,
and the scent of something slowly being burned,
charcoaled over a pit, stings my throat.
All along, as we shower, their fried eyes
and pincers looked down on us from above.
Baby Scorpion lights.
We are bathed in the scent of smoked meat and mildew.
When I hear the woman's voice carry, the plastic ceiling
shivers with black dots, a chorus of chattering exuvia maracas.

On the Occasion of Being Catcalled by a Man My Father's Age on the Strip

Thanks to liquid euphoria, I am finally feeling
 something fuzzy and warm, pregnant
 with two shots of vodka, sunrise blooming
 out from belly to arms, fingertips, lips, eyes.
 I pass the dusty Willie's Saloon,
 bluegrass, country fusion rumbling
 its brown shutters outside where a man
 places his foot on the wall,
 Black and Mild in his lips,
 hazy eyes looking me up and down.

Speaking to his friend and me as I walk past,
 drunken lips spilling out smoke, he shouts,
 "Damn girl, look at those legs."
 I understand I have nice legs, I have had the same pair
 for over 22 years but upon ignoring him, he continues,
 "I wouldn't mind putting my dick up in that."
 He wastes no time in labeling me,
 tagging limbs of my body, stamping
 my bare skin, privates with black ink,
 sludgy words staining my skirt and burning
 marrow. Another tall drink to order,
 to quench that thirst.

Initial thought: Misplaced modifier.
 You cannot put your dick into my leg.
 Not unless a hole is forcibly made.
 Second thought: Legs is plural.
 That, is singular.

He snickers and my voice rises in swells,
 the beams of the sun in my belly striking hot
 and fast up to my throat, out to the man,
 correcting his grammar and condemning his
 immaturity, the prickling tips of my fingers
 nervously tapping the hem of my skirt,
 pulling the black fabric lower,
 sewing it to my leg.

To All Beginning Beds

Out of my fat skin but not my ears, one dark night
soothes unlike a lightbulb. A mattress:
everyone's unoriginal fallback.

Down in the dusk of the attic, are concrete,
vintage shrines—the fuse box, the Papier-mâché cape,
the cross of wafers.

Woman and man— two large, they cannot lose
while attempting a pursuit
on how to find their way.

There the couple is not, not speaking
but alive. There they are not
but alive.

For who can they give this
remembrance but a wave goodbye?
Yes, every taken mask can be brave.

Books

I dry your words like shucks of corn
the shells hung upright, tripped on wire.
Their necks coddled, their ankles
shorn of their ability to pursue
the written word or Nabokov's dream
or flying elevators or—

Stunted, my words are wrung dry,
I open a book and find a hollowed box half
filled with curled, yellow, shredded letters,
an oolong mixture to pour into tea.
Drink me, fall down a hole
fogged in clouds of this seeping tea,
murky undercurrents washing ink off page,
meaning from name.

Coffee Table Blazon

Your deft hand gouges the book cover of my atlas with a spoon
cutting a white peppered mountain where the villagers
gather round a well, midafternoon in April,
wondering at the spectacle below: bloated macaque,
glistening grey fur swollen like a stuffed monkey fully
expecting it to catch wind and float up,
out of the makeshift hot springs
up from the cover like a bean,
onto spoon and into my mouth.

Linoleum

Dark, chunky boots
fleshing footprints over a thin film.
2% gallon had erupted,
spilled milk,
arterial spray
across the kitchen floor.

My sole's lap at the cream,
a miniature tide.
The whiteness spreads, branching like roots,
splatter painted creamy liquids.
The lip of the shallow pool reaches the edge.
There needs to be a tarp
to lay over the once dry floor,
the scene illuminated by bright lights
now gleaming with bone vitamins,
to pull over onto the carpet,
tuck under the shifty wooden chairs,

and cover the ground like a burial veil,
collecting every drop,
every pump leaking,
an empty carton
draining deep rivulets
across the kitchen floor.

Golgotha

Longinus watches the prophet shudder
against the wooden planks.

Strung up, the man's wrists and ankles
are bleeding into the soil.

There is no contempt from the prophet,
just a short sigh.

Longinus spears the prophet's third rib
sinking the blade into his aorta,

ventricle.
Wriggle it,

dig deeper
to find the Lord.

Longinus raises the left chamber, a lung.
See, he bleeds red like us.

He unsheathes the blade from inside the prophet,
the Holy Lance glimmering with claret tendrils of mortality.

Tucked inside the shadow of Longinus' skepticism, doubt
of the power of God's son, the prophet finds solace,

flayed upon the brown cedar cross, the tear beneath
the third rib flaps opens and white ravines

baptize the shade of Longinus,
his back now turned to the prophet, his spear

glorified by the witnesses. Behold the death
of the son of God.

His body is buckled in the air
like a broken cup.

A woman nearby approaches the empty cross.
She reaches her hand down to the blood puddle

dips her fingers in the pool,
streaking her wet hand through the air,

she paints a red coffin in the sky
nailed shut with stars, God's eyes.

Polaroid

I preferred you at a distance
like a silhouette against the sun,
dark, fleeting, still,
a darkened shadow obscured in layers of heat,
the sun's backburner.

A polaroid filled with orbs of light
dotting the corners of our faces
whitening the edges of a memory.
But even memories can't be forgotten
by a curious thumb,
lighter,
an air seasoned with ashes
and the musk of burning film.

Rehearsal

1930's Appalachia mountains rural
blue dress speckled green from
shuttering theater lights, legs
splayed out across the kaleidoscope
of green foliage.

A church is projected on screen.

Walking up the stairs back stage
during opera rehearsal,

snagged tights, nipping shoe straps,
pleats of a dress scissoring the air
between calves.

Touch the ironed collar,
over flower crystal buttons and trimmed
pockets, small folds like Calla lily lips.

Carnegie Hall, NY

Engagement to purity,
catacomb encrusted,
golden shimmer cave,
gold enamored
everywhere—

Exotic ship toting pink cherubs
mantled with sea urchin infested mermaid
clasping Poseidon's trident,
starfish bosom.

Conductor's baton stickling staccatos,
thrush of tympani and climaxing
bass, fingering cello strings faster,
upend fortissimo, obliterate tone,
peak at fortissississimo—

Gold everywhere, rimmed,
God's intricate
technicalities cascading music,
spinning above asphodel,
singing into Orion's belt,

Amadeus Coronation Mass.

Feeding

The red streamers are confetti guts—
disemboweled banners of hot pink raining
over partygoer's top hats.

The five year olds finger the wrinkled paper,
thin as turtle skin, between fingers sticky from
the remnants of orange sherbert and sprinkle icing
now swirling in their bellies, stretching out Easter
dresses with tulle fringes and purple ribbons.

We are celebrating your 6th birthday at La Madeleine and
Shannon and Niha try to help you unwrap your presents.

I can taste the brightness of the hot pink, a palpable
glowing in my mouth as I watch my daughter
unfold the crisp pages of her wrapped gift.

Her warmth fills me as if her night lite shines out
from under her dress and belly and into my own.

These are not five-year-olds but reflections of their forty- year-old parents.

If Niha works for NASA and Shannon is a Choir Director
then you must be a poet, stomach swollen
with words not cake. The dark crown of your head floats
in the room's light, your mind has recalibrated
the wall's electric flow, absorbing
my speech and warmth.

My own words—confetti guts lurch
from within me, a mother poet can't help but feed
her daughter poet nutritious word food.

These streamers will fill you
and after the party, too big for your car seat,
you will look out the backseat window,
softly breathe out syllables like the steam from an iron,
your words pressing out my wrinkles.

Identity

I lost my shoe and wallet in a grate last Monday
along with my identity.

Monday I started off right:
5 tabs opened at McGrath's Irish Pub.
2 martinis, 5 shots of Tequila, a dash of Vodka, nursing on some Bourbon.
I think I am a drinker.

Tuesday was spent running errands for that nasty hangover:
24 pack of bottled water, aspirin, chewing gum, condoms and cigarettes.
I bought 3 packs that day, and several Black and Mild's.
I think I am a smoker.

Wednesday I visited a high-end retail mall:
Luis Vuitton, Prada, kitten heels, trimmed spring dresses,
Sipping mint water, tasting timid morsels at Venetio's Italian Bistro.
I think I have a girlfriend.

Thursday I shop for necessities:
Ice cream, fresh fish, filleted steaks, chicken nuggets, lettuce,
vinaigrette, 2 pounds of avocados and peppers.
I think I like to cook.

Friday I visit the Peppermint Elephant:
I dump over \$200 on a vulgar girl named Alyx Bowie,
with used hips, and an aged face, puckered like a raisin.
I grab a room at the Motel Hotel Desperado.
I think I am an adulterer.

Saturday I take my van to a soccer field:
Trunk stuffed with busting coolers, Gatorade, soccer bags.
I grab gas, \$56.71 worth for my SUV and buy a pack of Scooby-Doo Band-Aids.
I think I am a soccer Dad.

Sunday is the Holy Day:
I withdrew \$50 I could not spare, repentance in green slips of paper
folded into a wicker basket, passed along the pew.
I am guilty.
I think I am Catholic.

Local Hawk Returns and Is Challenged by Kristen in a Staring Contest

The neighborhood hawk
sits on a low fencepost.
Tousled looking with dull,
stony feathers. He stares
at my idling car in the middle
of the road.
Early morning sun, dreamy
and hidden behind red clouds
filled with clay sediment
stretched like bloody tissues.
We watch each other as Oklahoma
sneezes again and flips up a cowlick
on his head, his stern yellow beak
and marble eyes glaring
as I drive away for morning service.

Speaking with Cotton Mouth is Like

Liquid marijuana drink, radioactive green, red straw and maraschino cherry.

Or mine: peach orange, liquid sunset. Add a cherry, please.

An orange kettle, black leper spots rimming the bottom—

My roommates no longer use you, electric is quicker—

The clicking of natural gas, hissing earth's subterranean vapors into my kitchen.

Purple blue egg bruising my thigh and my head floating in a peculiar way.

Last first day of school, and I cried in my church's parking lot while singing Space Oddity.

David Bowie was a cowboy.

Stacking chopped, blunt blocks of 2x4's, drunken adult sized Jenga.

The startling crash of flat orange and black wooden tiles, another round of adult Connect 4 ended.

The conversation: Can you get pregnant if you have cysts? Jesus, Jenn, you don't just ask someone if they're fertile or not.

Sleeping with Lavoue, the lanky waiter with splattered orange sauce along his cuffs.

Timmy eavesdropping from the edge of the broken leather seat.

30,000 ft. above Newark

Land flesh below:
white leper specks,
kneecapped mountains,
cracked stadium domes
of stark white patellae.
Frozen lake lesions,
urban paisley
camouflaging phantom
varicose creek veins,
passing the spine of the East,
crooked Appalachian vertebrae.

There are 206 bones in the body.
Watching the bones from above,
crunched packs of concrete arthritis
eroded into cartilage dust,
dispersed across
Newark:
the back of New York's knee.

Shades of Places

I found a stray marble
in the gutter, split

like a lip and gray,
a homeless eye.

I am veiled in a cloak
of apathy and remembrance.

It is like a hand outreached
or a table shrouded with cloth,

An item, a place,
begging to be visited.

We remember the shades,
beating in your dark heart,

when we cut the grey,
the spaces in-between.

Mary's Birthday Party, 2010

-For Rian

Mary handmade us wands, spiral and leaf
designs glued to sparkling ends tipped with glitter.
Yellow rings of pineapples
settled in the Hawaiian punch and
browned pigs in a blankets lay on their tray
brought onto Mary's deck where her boyfriend's
band performed near dusk.
Mary's neighbor—
the one who would be raped
in her living room 100 feet from Mary's back door
in no more than two months—
approached the chain link fence,
weaving her fingers through the gray loops,
complaining about the noise.
Mary's dog Kiki growled from under the navy
polka dot pattern of her mother's
thrifed dress, where she drank from a Solo cup,
leaning against the pale blue house.
The boys unplugged their amps, skinny jeans hoisted
onto bony hips, Mary's mother lit
the adobe fire pit, small plumes of smoke
seasoning the air with burning wood, freckling
our cheeks with ash.
How could I have known that while Mary curled
atop her boyfriend's lap as the lead singer
plucked an acoustic rendition of Tool's "Schism"
it would be you, close stranger, with your
nubby fingers, bitten cuticles, crooked front tooth,
who would find a place in me, burrow there until
a gap between us was great enough for you to uncover
your head like a mole.
Your nails became mine, chattering bones,
the ash snowing in Mary's backyard a christening,
forcing me to leave Mary behind with our wands,
and coat hanger spokes for marshmallows
for yours, a place where we
sought the rim of where dusk fell on red tiles,
and green lanterns swung
on your porch come August.

St. Eulalia

Bore open to the sky,
her gutted pink abdomen spills
bowels of cotton sheets
a seamstress had laid over her.
They stand at a distance
from the naked girl.
No one covers her. Three pigeons
trip on her hair, shit on the pavement.
A man mistakes one of her painted toenails
for a quarter and grabs her big toe.
Someone, anyone, discards a tabloid,
the paper idly landing on her face as
the onlookers board the subway.

Nemophilist

Temples, cathedral arches entwining branches together bent upwards,
a bow is raised; a hand is clasped together, kneeling beneath silent oaks,
resting their contrite knees upon a bed of moss, littered decaying leaves.

My religion is amongst bark,
conifers, spruce,
black poplars,
ash, beech, holly,
conundrums layered beneath thick sap,
tucked between chips of wooden tissue.

Repentance is never found wrapped along a holly branch, or wound
like a chord of prayer beads along a wrist,
it shivers over shaking limbs,
dribbles over newborn's lips, drowning
you slowly. The rainwater washes over you,
sprinkles through
the trees clasped fingers,
Like a shaking aspen,
aspergillum,
a baptism
among trees.

Memphis

You frisk the bird's feathers,
working between the partridge's plumes
with practiced ease
your knuckles bony and large.
Knots of bleached flesh, skin,
tufts of feathers, flood the tiled floor,
littering around your stained work boots.
The bench is wet with turkey blood,
your palms moistened with pink and water.
You work each wing,
stripping it of its autumn colors.
I watch the season fall to the floor around your workbench.
I ask about the gobbler, what you do with it—
Gullet. It's a gullet.
You pinch the shriveled pouch of skin
and wriggle it between your fingers
over the stripped turkey.
If you could pluck every feather and work
into my skin, I would let you.
We talk about church and God,
we went together last Sunday.
You wore that soft plaid blue button up,
a pressed pair of jeans and boots.
You picked me up in your truck and I couldn't talk about anything.
My gullet wasn't grinding.
If I had a farm the stables would be warm
with Maple horses, Arabians,
lit lanterns swinging low with bushels of hay.
Your barn was dark, empty.
The gate shuddered open against a blast of wind,
someone forgot to lock it.
You push the doors open, dragging the carcass,
tossing it onto a nearby bench beside dank crates.
I noticed how your eyes were soft like your shirt,
as you began to slap the turkey's flesh and soften its body,
the imprints of your palms and fingers streaked
like the purple plumes on a mallard ducks undercoat,
brushstrokes of undercurrents
wading into murky ponds edged with frost.
They bat their webbed feet back and forth in freezing water
mixing the slush, waiting for distant echoes
of thunder, for a silenced gullet
and for the nearing end.

Fall to come, turkey shooting.

Fingers

Any banal being may have walked
out, left paradise.

All are snake heads stripped down
into Buddhist palms.

Do I release them to my mouth?

Do I thread them without utensil
onto whole cabbage?

It is not impossible to know a piece
of that snake:

A hand's head, not like my upturned foot,
is small, snoutless and sightful.

Cartography

There is a dead June bug in my tea leaves.
 Its hardened exoskeleton sits in the bottom of my empty mug.
 Origins: China.
 Blossoming tea, pink
 thistle adjoined by white Siamese buds
 compacted by green straws tied with Chinese
 strings—China ball. To think, someone found
 these small green leaf tongues & sucked
 on their shoots, the bitter flavor of thistle milk
 or raspberry seeds or black tea twigs,
 completely whole in palette round slurry
 & sour tea loam. I sprinkle more tea.
 Was the June bug exported from the Eastern
 continent to the tea shop in North Dallas
 only to be brought to Payne county Oklahoma?
 The tea stings my tongue's tip like the hearth's
 poker used in a small farming village in China,
 high ponds for rice paddies to wade through,
 the silt sinking into woven fabric, soaking into
 clay jugs & cups of steaming tea. I imagine Zhou
 wading in dark waters at midnight, hands grasping
 damp straws, slithering green snakes weaved
 around his fingers. The plants' petals will dry
 & harden like shriveled fish slit gills,
 tea comforting Zhou's cracked lips before
 the baby wakes, before the sun shudders over mountains
 & tea leaves fall onto the dirt floor. I settle in my kitchen,
 curly leaves sifting in the bottom of my cup, I tilt the rim down
 in an attempt to decipher a clump in the shape of a mountain or wing.

White Barn Pastoral

Brambles of boughs
wrought in blossoms,
buds lit like red salamander tongues,
capsules encrusted in green ocher.
I watch for your eyes to fall
like the ripening skin peels,
buds shedding their skin,
scattering across the pavement
fragmented stars,
adagio springs
swelling.
But instead recall a night
where surrounded us all gleamed,
clipped toenail moon
milk dipped,
and yipping coyote stars.

Death Poems

I.

Still life: sleeping koi
fish floating in shadow pond—
strung red flinted stars.

II.

I keep a shovel
in the back of my pickup
to scrape up roadkill.

III.

You have been leaking heroin,
and mercury into the ground, bleaching
it white like shocked earth touched
by lightning tips.

IV.

I've delivered stillborns, Mom said.
She never brought it up again.

V.

Her face is pinched
as if a carton of lemons was stuffed
into her sinus cavities.
She holds her crotchet hooks,
anorexic lobster claws, and I imagine
myself unthreading
the tight stitches of her face.

VI.

When I die in my dreams
I'm treading in dark waters,
white shadows circling beneath me
like Saturn's rings.

VII.

It's their eyes that bother me.
So easy to fall in.

VIII.

A green lizard
on the backyard porch
curled and fried like calamari.
I wrap him in tissue paper,
place him in the garage.

IX.

She inserts the needle 5 times.
You have tough veins, she says. Very firm.
The nurse reaches for my eye and I stop
my dream, turning into a tiger,
soaking up my black stripes
from your heavy veins.

X.

I will shed this life
once again like snake skin.

XI.

Menial driving
when suddenly— rush of light,
white stalks of feathers dip.
A red-tailed hawk, before me,
in front of me, beyond.

XII.

I will pour
a glass of honey and milk over you
so I can forget how you molded the world
and how the dirt below
is now shaping you.

Like a Starry Bracelet

You have come so far
between a glass carpet,
Maraschino cherries frosting Shirley Temples
and frozen spoonfuls of yellow custard
melting into rainbow sherbert swirls.
You've come so far away from the blinding sun
whose heatwaves strip layers of withered clothing, a season old,
tossed into hedges trimmed in the shapes of circus animals,
elephants tripping on round monkeys.
You walk away from that harsh orb, dip your toes into crystal pools,
a California oasis tucked in a desert plantation. Curved
at your wrist, a delicate turn to night.
You are night, slip into her, wear her
beaded night water like you hug the pool water,
a swathe of liquid midnight tugging a shoreline.

What an absurd life to lead,
caught between expectations, shifting drapes
that flatter the night wind tails or a bare hip.
Fluttering curtains lead outside,
slipping in dying snow, sighing your legs out.
You patter towards the frosted pool,
the silver cracks in the scooped up earth,
the death of a summer swimming pool like
the shocked white roots on your soft scalp.
Since the backyard flooded with shadow snow,
you have come so far.

Bruise

You reach across my lap
and cup my hand like a plum,
kneading the purple pink skin,
your thumb pressing the small, soft, spot
you made there, yesterday
when my family was gone
and the reading room so inviting
you to read between those pages in me,
pushing, until you opened
into the ripe core,
fruit heart marinating
in juice.

Tickle that—
pop that sucker like bubble wrap.
Your mouth wraps around
the wound you punctured with your fist,
pressuring tongue curling my greenness
into meat, devouring
pit, me, whole.

Stripper Heels

Amazonian, Goddess of Height,
prime sexual being as in full, ripe
encased in rays of sun, priestess of
sex, fertility of verbal diseases,
slackened esteem and girl hate.

How silly to desire being jostled
in a crowd, to cheer at one's pedestrian
nature when a pair of heels you can be
Tower—
Tell me again, climb up me and tell me
that again.
New Woman, Tower of Babel.