

Dust Never Settles

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Thesis Title

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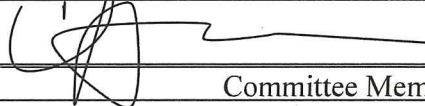
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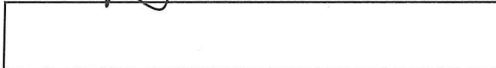
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Dust Never Settles

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Poetry
(after Marianne Moore's "Poetry")

I, too, dislike it: there is so much more going on in this world than pretty words
on white pages.

Let's solve the planet's problems in two dimensions,
interpret and analyze them behind closed university doors or over over-priced
alcoholic beverages.

We walk heads held like prophets, take vows of poverty, our faith is all that
sustains us,
but when will we baptize the unbelievers,
when will we prepare ye the way,
when will we remember, in all our scrolls and edifice, that one day the Word
became flesh, and he walked among us?

the summer grass

we, like a few billion blades of leafy grass,
each stand alone
each grow alone
each cry alone in the dread of a new day

when we'll all dance alone
all kneel alone
all get cut down alone

but in the darkness
in the underneath
in the place we're not supposed to remember

we reach, every one of us, we reach
with our skinny, our starving little fingers
we tangle
we entwine like lovers
embrace like mothers holding silent, tearful children

in our stillness we march arm in fibrous arm
like a family
that's forgotten who we are

One Year

One year it didn't rain,
One year they fought the snakes in the basement before giving up,
One year the wind took the roof and a half a dozen chickens.
They had more kids than they thought they would one year,
And he stood both arms full in the hospital parking lot, the nurse wheeled out his wife and said you're driving them home in *that*,
And he strapped his daughters' car seats in the back, first the wrong way and then another wrong way and then a way that seemed
right enough,
And he looked over at the wires sticking out of the door,
And he released the emergency break and gave the car a nudge down the slope of the parking lot,
And he shifted the car into second,
And he saw the gravel pass beneath him through the holes in the floor,
And they put their daughters to bed in their sock drawers,
And they laid awake on the floor beside them watching close for their rising chests,
And in the morning he went on a long ride on his horse before he sold her to pay for the van for sale in the church parking lot.

Dust Never Settles

I went out in a dust storm once. Before we fled to my uncle's for the summer. Squinted up at the dirty pink sky. Could barely make out the shape of our neighbors—mother and small son—running down the gravel road for the cover of their house. My mouth filled with grains of dirt. They crunched between my teeth. My mom yelled at me to come inside. Asked me why I'd gone out in the first place. I blew mud out my nose and washed dirt from my hair for weeks.

tambourine

standing less than still in my stiff ill-fitting, hand sewn dress
the material thin and rough and cold against my skin
clawing at me from the hems
I watch the tambourine
the grownups pass it around sometimes
I watch their hands as they shake it
God is in that tambourine
I can tell
I see him trying to make his way out
I want to hold that tambourine
I want to shake the entire spirit of God out of it
I lean backwards and try to balance on the back of my clunky heels
I look down and feel the tambourine on its journey around the room
my fingers brush against the chips in the wood of the pew in front of me
it's getting closer
I send a prayer to God as he approaches
I pray for tambourine
when it gets to me I reach for it
and it passes over my head
into hands much larger than mine
I sit down on the floor
I feel a couple hard yanks on my arm
but I stay
I stare at the scuffs on my white shoes
I lick my finger and try to wipe them away

Water

Everyone knows our water isn't safe to drink.

There's all of the notices in the mail that no one really reads.

There's also the way it sometimes sputters and turns brown as it comes out of the sink, or the way your shower will start to smell like the muddy Salt Fork halfway through washing your hair.

If I set up a stand downtown that sold nothing but clean water,

I'd be the richest girl I town,

if people could afford my prices.

The barber sells jugs out of his shop.

Not sure how many or how much he charges

but I wouldn't want to go into competition with him,

my dad would probably take his side.

He buys water from him when he gets a haircut or when he's just hanging out with the guys.

I'm not actually sure he pays for them.

He gets his haircuts for free after he fixed the barber sewer line.

My dad dug a well in our backyard

—I say my dad, I was a part of that process too—

but that water isn't safe to drink either
we had it tested
but he uses it to water his garden.

His tomatoes.

So many tomatoes.

Spent more money than we had planting all those tomatoes overflowing in their rusted cages.

Pick them before they can rot on the vine.

Pick them please.

Pick as many as you can.

We've collected buckets full,

carried them back to the house where they're still stacked high even after we've taken them door to door and to all the restaurants in town and to the grocery store,
fed the whole town more tomatoes than they could want and there's still more.

My mom's canning salsa, sweat on her forehead.

She wasn't gonna can this year,

she was gonna put her foot down,

and now the pantry's full of glass jars of salsa and so's the bathroom counter and the top of the piano.

The kitchen counter would be too if it weren't already covered in so many damned tomatoes.

We take the salsa to our neighbors and they all insist we take a carton or two of eggs.

Why do so many of our neighbors have so many chickens?

And when will they learn what time to crow?

We get most of our drinking water from outside of town about an hour's drive away from an artesian well off the side of the highway
on the way to my grandparents' house.

We all get the water together.

The whole family.

It's a three or four or five or six or nine person job.

We unload one gallon, three gallon, five gallon jugs from the back of the truck,
from the trunk,

from the floor boards,
from any empty seats carry them over to the well where my dad fills the biggest of them his strong arms holding them up to the pipe.

My sisters, my mother, my brother, and I carry them back,
fill up the smaller ones while we wait,
laugh and sing songs to make the lifting easier.

When we're done we each drink straight from the stream,
a kind of lighthearted but sacred communion.

tuna

my sister alone on the steps of our porch
i'm watching her from preschool across the street my face pressed up against the window
she's feeding her lunch —a tuna sandwich— to a stray cat
i see four more cats creeping closer a few behind some trees one behind a car stiff cautious
i watch her as she holds out more tuna on her tiny finger
i watch as she pauses and brings her finger up to her face smears the tuna on her cheek
the cat puts its paw up on her shoulders and licks it off
she sees the other cats approaching
she holds her finger out for them now there are eight cats running around her trying to get close
my sister stands up opens her sandwich smears tuna salad down her arms her legs across her face walks to the center of
the sidewalk lays down the cats there must be at least sixteen or seventeen of them by now are swarming all
around her
when my mom walks outside my sister can't be seen under the cats
my mom tries to shoo them away
then realizes my sister is underneath them
my whole class hears her scream
she starts kicking at the cats grabs a stick starts waving it at them when neither of those works she starts grabbing them
by their tails throwing them across the yard
when she's done she collapses on the concrete arms bloody sobbing
my sister sits up face smeared and bright

In the Clouds

I got to drive a four wheeler by myself for the first time down the red dirt private road on my grandpa's farm. My mother told me not to go too fast and I didn't
 until I was out of view of my family. I was cautious, though. I took my time gaining speed and
 gaining speed and gaining speed until it got kind of hard to breathe and it was all I could do to fight the urge to let go of the handlebars
 spread my arms and ascend into the sky
 but letting go I knew meant slowing down and I couldn't slow down I couldn't
 I had to keep going farther and faster, faster. It wouldn't go any faster.
 I needed to give more. More speed. More of the wind ripping at my face.
 More of the power I felt defying my own inertia. I didn't want to see the individual sunflowers dance as I flew by them.
 I wanted them to blur. I wanted everything to blur. To fade. To disappear. I've and

d i s p e r s e
 I wanted to shoot like a bullet or a torpedo or rocket accelerating into space or into some
 hidden dimension traveling on and on for centuries millennia even until I found some undiscovered
 world filled with mysteries and magic and ancient nearly abandoned ruins whose inhabitants
 would tell me the stories and legends of their land long ago. They would teach me cryptic
 lullabies and feed me forbidden fruits from whispering trees whose

branches were shaped like witches' hands and take me on
great expeditions in search of long-lost
treasures locked in enchanted

vaults buried
beneath
miles
of
crumbling
catacombs

but the ground was rougher here
and I was shaken and jolted by the hard dips and soft mounds of powdery red dirt I no longer felt like I was flying I thought turbulence was
something you only felt on the ground the sunflowers rose to meet me and I hit one by mistake
All it wanted was to smile at me and I had broken its back. I felt a few seconds of remorse and then there was

nothing

Then darkness

Then the slightest tinge of red

I knew where I was.

I was trapped in the choking claustrophobic dark of a place I had
heard about all my life though the accounts hadn't always been the
same:

a place filled with flames
that fry your flesh and make your skin sizzle like strips of bacon in
a frying pan a place where sadistic scaly slaves are forced to take
your insides and pull them outside dice them up into little pieces
and pile them on the jagged floor to pull out your fingernails one
by one make deep incisions down the center of your calves and
funnel hordes of fire ants into your brain through your ear canals
only to slowly put you back together and take you apart again and
again without breaks or anesthetics or the ability to pass out from
the pain a place where there is no happiness no light
and no God

God's presence reaches every inch of the universe making all things bearable even to those who hate Him. He has to. If He didn't, those who have yet to accept Him would be in constant agony at His absence, even in the presence of what they loved most, but He won't enter this place—the forever home of those who chose to reject Him.

He won't go where He's not wanted.

the description that stuck with me the most though the one I was beginning to see was the truth
 once from a preacher on the cassette tape that my parents had played one time in their car on a
 trip to somewhere I don't remember any more on a winding road in the middle of nowhere

he'd said that hell is the place where you are completely and utterly isolated from everyone *it is the place where you finally have
 to face yourself because no one else is there to look at—no one else will ever be there to look at, or talk
 to, or hold you ever again. You will be alone for eternity slowly driven mad by the evil that has always
 infected your soul until you are screaming for escape, screaming for mercy, screaming for the privilege to
 die, but there is no death here, there is no grace, no release, just an infinity of nothingness and the
 overwhelming certainty that this is what you deserve.*

My insides ached at my sentence, but I wasn't surprised. I didn't blame God for hating me I
 thought He'd probably made the right choice It only took me a few moments to accept my fate to send a quick goodbye to my family and
 resign myself to my unending solitude as I did my vision grew more and more red my eyes
 started to sting I had to close them my eyelids s k i d e d across the dirt on my eyeballs I lifted my forgotten hands to rub and
 wipe the newly forming mud out of my tightly closed eyes I tried to take a breath but shards of clay and sand filled my
 lungs and coated my throat each time I'd inhale so I waited I waited until the shadow that covered
 me had faded then I cracked my eyes and
 through fading pink clouds I saw the blue of the sky I saw the four wheeler sitting beside me I took a few

 hesitant breaths sat up my whole body aching and I saw my dad and my uncles
 running and tripping over shrubs and a barbed wire fence to get to me.

Revival

Arms raised.
Shaking hands,
heads,
hearts.
Palms pressed to foreheads
collapsing under the weight of a holy ghost.
Secret languages muttered,
shouted,
wailed as if no one will listen.
Make-shift prophets line a sturdy stage
waiting to speak the words of God.

Thus saith the Lord, this generation...
Thus saith the Lord, the rain is coming...

I don't line up with them,
I sit on the floor.
I see heavenly hosts and winged devils
watching from the rafters
—indifferent—
placing bets on who will drink the sour milk
still sitting in the youth room refrigerator.

My Inky Spectre

I'm thinking about getting a tattoo of Karl Marx in his bearded glory
between my hairline and the hem of my collarless shirt black and white

right

at the beginning of my spine

his mustache dark

everything else gray and faded

people behind me

will wonder

What happened to Santa Clause?

Is that our Lord?

Is that a homeless guy?

but that's okay

at least someone will be watching my back.

Lunch Line

The lunch ladies loved us & we loved the lunch ladies. We'd run back for seconds— wait patiently in line. Thirds if there was anything left before running out to recess.

The cafeterias on TV seemed strange to us. Scary lunch ladies. Scarier food.

It all seemed so bizarre. If there was something we

didn't like, someone else would want it, eat it, so we could get back in line.

So weird that the bullies on TV would steal lunch money.

Why would anyone carry lunch money? The food at school was always free.

When they called me to the office to tell me my parents needed to start paying for my lunches & then, after my dad got a job at the oil rig, (the one where he cut off his thumb) needed to started paying full price for my lunches, it felt wrong.

The principal said *This is a good thing. It means your parents are making more money.* It still felt, dirty, I wasn't sure why.

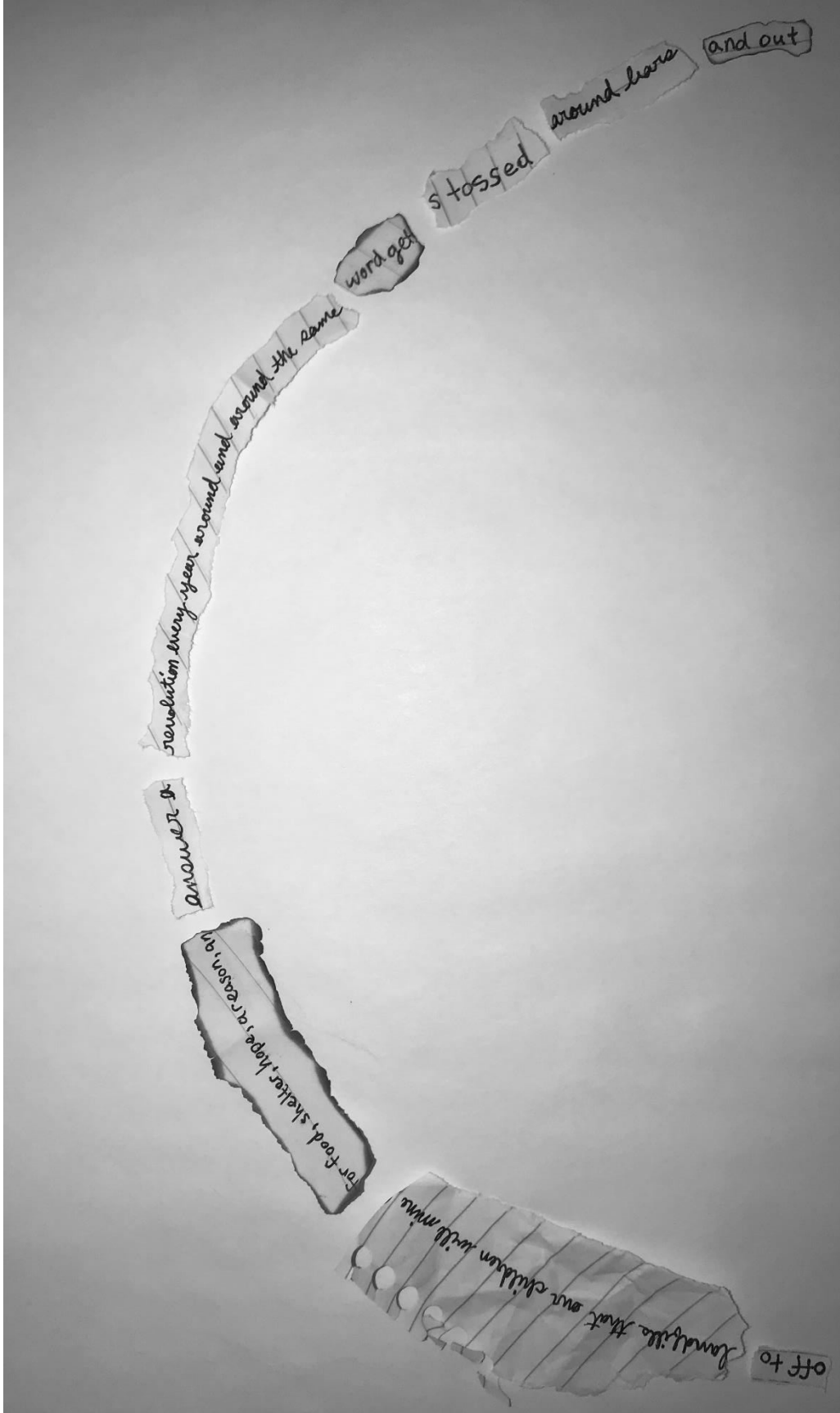
A Northern Oklahoman Sonnet

I'll fly away clappin' my hands like wings fitted backwards
feet on the ground in front of the church's
metal chairs dreamin' of another life — of endin' this one — thinkin'
of the girl who spoke last Sunday “we
lived together for two years” *Glory hallelujah* “I thought
I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.” *Praise Jesus* “I was
so lost”
she looked lost—
eyes dark ‘n sad ‘n lookin’
at the carpet like it was a map she couldn't read—
I walked outside ‘n sat on the steep wheelchair ramp I knew
stared at the sun settin' behind a row of oak trees I knew
I'd have to go back in but nothin' coulda made me do it that night
not a hail storm or a swarm of locust coulda tempted me to take cover in that place

her escape

a rusted out four-door
brown and backlit by a purple sunset
eyes dim and cast down towards the road before
a rusted out four-door
her foot pressed down to the floor
rolling slower and slower and full of regret
a rusted out four-door
brown and backlit by a purple sunset

revolution



cat windows & piles
up in the streets
in the fields
in the factories
we spend our mending
proliferate picking it up with litter sticks
showing it neatly
into plastic bags sending it

Breed, My Sisters, Breed (after Lucia Trent's "Breed, Women, Breed")

Breed, littles sisters,
And do it on your feet
Swollen as your belly
As your breasts when they start leaking
Don't stop to nurse your children
Don't hold them in your arms
But labor. Labor after labor.
You owe the owners and the bankers
The law and war makers
Breed, my sisters, breed.

Breed, my little sisters,
There is no other form of love
You owe a debt, my sisters,
A debt that will not be undone
To the owners and the bankers
The law and war makers
And that debt will be paid
In toil and shame and hunger
Yours, your children's, theirs
But breed, my sisters, breed

Breed, breed and do not think about the rest
Motherless your children will be instructed
Constructed, conscripted, the perfect little machines,
To toil and sweat oil
To consume the leaded fuel of progress
To kill and die for it
To give each moment of their lives for it
And then die gaunt and wasted in a leaking, molding shack
Oh breed, my sisters, breed.

To my Grandpa Lundy,
Twice in my life I've seen love pour out of
someone's eyes as more than just the salty
drip drip of a leaking faucet.
Love in its raw element untainted by ionic
bonds or stored under mineral oil buried in
the kitty litter of a metal-paint-can-
heart.

And both of those times that love came from
you.

You'd think a substance that we take such
precautions with would be more reactive,
with sparks and flames and explosions
igniting as it passes through its watery
doorways,
but it slips through silent and invisible
—almost undetectable—
from one person to another.

I might have missed it if, on its journey, it
didn't warp spacetime the way a seismic
shift warps the water above it, no doubt
destroying civilizations built epochs from
now on the coasts of reality.

The first time I saw it
was at the altar of that little Methodist
church where you and Grandma renewed your
vows for what? the third time?

You were holding her hands struggling through
the words because you couldn't stop crying.
You'd surprised her with the ceremony

and with her wedding ring that you'd had repaired after it'd been cut off her finger the night she crashed into the guardrail of an overpass.

The second time
was the night you couldn't bring my mom back
from whatever world she saw.
You laid next to her and stroked her hair and
called her "Jimmy-moo,"
but I'm not sure she even knew you were
there.

Now your eyes are dry and cold,
like the rest of the world,
rotting away quietly under a couple yards of
gravelly dirt.

On days like today
I think about how I will never see love in
those eyes again.
I think about how I may never see that kind
of love again.

On days like I hope I have tomorrow
I almost believe that one day I'll be able to
love like that.
I almost believe that one day I'll be able to
see love like that
when someone looks at me.

Genuflection

we both go down
to the river to pray
the place we both
have lost our faith
on our knees
in the mud
nothing beats
quite like our blood
when we always
end up here

Spanish Knockdown

I stand
in my grandmother's house
running
a finger down
her textured wall.

I imagine
tiny astronauts
bounding across
its teal surface.

The room behind me
is a vacuum
littered with distant stars.

And I am hovering
a mile above ground—

the Mother
of this unknown world
watching carefully
ready
at any moment
to swoop in
and save her
from the indelicate touch
of man.

When the Garden Freezes Over

I am sore like a sunflower craning my neck to see the fire burning in the sky trying to soak out all my sadness before the darker season comes knocking on nature's door.

When it comes the cold latches onto me, its talons in my bones. Steaming streams of water cannot cleanse or cast or burn its grip away. My muddy marrow freezes over like tiny ponds under yards of snow.

The snow is a comfort. It warms my feet more than socks, more than the hot grate of a furnace. It takes much more than heat to make my atoms vibrate fast enough to stay.

Alone Last November

trying to read a book I love but I keep getting caught up in stories I don't care about feet up on the coffee table toes so cold I should snap them off and throw them in the microwave the fly in the window won't stop roaring through the blinds his voice ricochets off the vibrating dust screams louder and louder I can't escape it I don't know whether to kill it or set it free I think the same of myself if we can't find our own way out we probably don't deserve it I don't smoke never smoked not once but right now I really need a smoke at the very least some nicotine gum I'd put the whole pack in my mouth like when I was a kid until that week after the Big Reds when I couldn't taste anything how much do cigarettes cost anyway how much change do I have by my bedside I could roll up these pages dead in my hands the ones I'll never read again roll myself within them say a prayer or maybe not light a match I seem flammable enough

thinking

thinking
drinking
getting drunk
no I'm just buzzed
I'm alright no really I'm fine
I just stood up
sit back down
I'm not quite ready for this
sit a little closer
let me lean a little closer
on your shoulder
just laugh at whatever we're laughing at
just smile when you look at me
just look at me at all
and I'll imagine
that after all this we'll go home together
because we always go home together
except we've never gone home together
because I never told you
how much I want to go home
with you

First Day of Winter

Outside my bedroom window I see snow falling on the school parking lot. The flakes look like birds struggling, failing to fly. One of my neighbors is playing “Let it Snow” on repeat. Why won’t they just give up. They’ll never make it north. They’re too close to the ground. I sit in my bare feet wanting to crawl under their feathers. Bury myself in their deaths. Or their rest. Or whatever comes after the fall.

Word Problems

You come by and tell me you love me.

I love you.
I tell you.

But my words don't weigh

enough.

I pull out my scales.

They teeter on the coffee table.

You're sprawled out on the loveseat telling me about your day.

I'm on my knees delicately dropping pet names into dishes.

Does *honey* seem too heavy?

I cut off a hunk

weigh *hon* instead.

You're starting to like your history professor.

Baby.

No, *babe.*

No, *babe's* too light.

Your parents are stressing you out again.

I pour in about thirty

“I love you”s.

Some

“I wanna be with you”s.

I pick out a ‘let’s move in together”

but then fold it up and

put it back in my pocket.

You say

I’m “too far away from you.”
I stand up

and

walk over.

You pull me in.

I sit down.

With your arms.

With your legs wrapped around me.

You lean your cheek on my cheek.

You say you love me.

I

say

“I love you.”

Means 35

Bees and Tomato Plants

She picks dead bees up off the cracked sidewalk by the shed and carries them in her tiny cupped hands over to her grandma's back porch, uses a stick to dig graves for them in her grandma's garden, sits on her knees with dirt packed in thick and tight under her short finger nails, and sings to her fallen friends buried beside squash and tomato cages. She wipes her tears away smearing mud across her freckled face and goes inside when her grandma calls.

The scrap of paper soft and smeared from the days it spent clenched in her sweaty hand before she calls the number written on it. She sneaks up to his parents' bedroom, her eyes avoiding the bed and the memories it carries.

She goes through their dressers looking for a roll of bills, opens his father underwear drawer and jerks away.

She closes her eyes and forces her hand inside, tries to relax, hears his father tell her to let him stick

it in. She makes herself breathe deep as her hand searches below until her shaking finger brushes against the money. She takes it to a house across town where a man in gloves tells her to relax as she spreads her knees.

She hasn't sat down in the past fourteen hours, except twice to pee. Pain shoots from her feet to her knees to her back as she climbs the steps up to her apartment. She ignores the calls from her roommates listening to music too loud in the living room. She sits back in her bed and taps her finger

on her sketch book letting her body adjust to being somewhat comfortable. The music carries into her room. It's sad song about love. She draws another tomato plant to stick on her wall. She wants to dream about them, but she only sees dirty dishes and tables full of hungry men as she drifts away.

She's had a migraine all day and now she sits cross-legged on the floor surrounded by white and pink pieces of paper trying to find a way

to pay for everything. Praying to her calculator for a miracle. Her knees

are aching from being bent so long but she won't move. She's not going to give up now. She's going to stick with it until she figures something out. Her head pulses and her eardrums shudder every time a bill collector calls. She doing the math by hand now. It's sloppy and slow. She triple checks each time she carries her ones and twos. She falls asleep on top of it all with nothing to show but ink stains and papercuts on her finger.

It had never occurred to her that she liked women until the night she asks Carrie to finger her in the bathroom of her boss's party. They aren't even drunk. She hasn't been able to look away from Carrie all night. She spends months afterward drawing sketches of a little house with rose bushes until the day she meets Carrie's husband, and then she burns her sketchbooks and Carrie's sweater and all the letters she's written. She spends weeks on her knees throwing up into her toilet bowl. She'll never speak to Carrie again no matter how many times she calls. She tries to fall in love a couple times after that, but she can never make it stick.

She sits on her green recliner wearing worn out slippers her walking stick leaning up against her lap. She scoops the last bit of tuna and cracker crumbs out of a can with her finger. She tries to count how many days it's been since the Meals on Wheels girl has come by. She calls her Bumble Bee because she almost dropped her food once. Bumble Bee usually stays and talks for a few minutes before she drives away. She draws Bumble Bee pictures of flowers and, of course, bees and tomato plants and little girls with cuts on their knees.

She doesn't know if she keeps them. She says she likes them when she asks. She doesn't know that she carries

them back to her house and sticks them in a box by her bed, that she'll never throw one of them away, that she'll finger through them on nights when she can't sleep tears in her eyes the box snug between her knees, that, when she talks about her to her friends, she calls her "Grandma," that her biggest fear is being the one that finds her and everything that carries.

Cow Poem

You say you really love cows
You say that they're your spirit animal
You say when you were young a herd blocked a mountain road and one looked into your soul

I want to tell you that you remind me of a cow
I know it would mean a lot to you

But your face is too soft
Your tongue isn't slimy enough
Your lips taste too good

If I undressed a cow
Unbuttoned her hide
If I kissed her the whole way down
Before pulling it off her shoulders
She wouldn't feel like you
Wouldn't smell like you
Taste like you

Your stomach
Your chest
Your neck

The small flecks of brown in your left eye will never grow large enough
Never grow dark enough
To see my soul
But they see me
They see all of me
And they call me home

won't you come out tonight

I can't lasso the moon for you
I could barely lasso my parents' mailbox
and now I'm out of practice
but I'm working on a rocket ship
I made the frame out of old pallets
and the heat shield out of aluminum cans
I've been stockpiling water jugs of jet fuel
and a bubble wrap air supply
I'll fly right past the moon
slingshot around the sun
and collect all the hypoallergenic rings of Saturn
bring them home
and let you have your pick

BALMING THE CAPITOL

A guy was running from the cops through a field behind my mom's school. There wasn't any danger. But they had a lockdown just in case. The principal went door to door to let the teachers know they could go back to teaching. Just keep their doors locked. It was almost an hour before she realized the light was still off in one of the classrooms. She opened the door and saw the kids still crouching in the corner next to their cubbies. Their teacher in front of them holding a trophy and broken pair of scissors. Preparing herself for a fight. My mom told me

That's just what you do.

She said

We're all nurturers. We all want to try to talk them down. But you can't at that point.

That was something they went over and over at their active shooter training. She said

They're our kids. We would die for them. We would kill to save them if we had to. That's just what you do.

I ask her why they don't organize. They don't want their kids at home to lose their health insurance. I was getting buzzed in a bar when providence hit me.

Guys, what if we balmed the capitol?

That's one way to go about it.

No. Balm. B-A-L-M. We march on the capitol Burt's Bees in hand. Cover every inch in a thin layer. Mildly inconvenience them. Lip balm would probably be banned from the premises. Their lips will all be chapped.

I told my mom about it later. She couldn't stop laughing. She told her teacher friends about it. She still brings it up when we talk. Sometimes she just pulls the ChapStick out of her purse so I can see it.

Home

A place where I only know the time by the anxiety of climbing dishes and the slow death of a cactus I won at work has crumbled from window frame to shower tile pulled from their perches by what could only be the mass of my own center of gravity...
When bowls can't hold up what the sky rejects, what the roof can't hold onto, what the grass may never drink...
The lost meaning of locks when doors open and close alone in a gentle breeze that only they can feel...
Cellophane and two sided tape can only hold it together so long before I have to start hiding the cutlery in a different drawer...
At least the roaches with their long and powerful legs have left to find themselves a better home...

yarn

You show me a YouTube video you made when you were 14. You think our relationship can handle it, but 20 seconds in you're already creeping out the door and then you're gone.

You don't answer your phone for a few days, and I'm worried so I knock on your parents' door. They inform me it's only been an hour, but that you've already packed enough salt packets to last a few months and have gone into hiding.

My first fear is that you've left for Norway, but you'd never hide somewhere so obvious

so lonely

so full of potatoes.

But where could you be? Where would I never look?

I pull out maps and tape them to my bedroom walls. I use sharpies to mark out all the places we want to go together. I've never seen so much black.

I take some deep breaths and call a few numbers looking for leads, but no one picks up, and I leave absurd, rambling messages. Some of them call back confused and say they might have seen you in such and such when such and such, and I take notes and connect different points on my map with push pins and red yarn.

I go on epic quests to those tiny green islands peeking through the black, only I can't seem to stay away very long. It's like somebody's tied that red yarn around me and keeps pulling me back. My room still smells like you, and I sleep better there. I don't know why. I don't realize that you're the one who's been drinking all the water I leave on my nightstand. I don't realize that you're

the one who's been sorting my laundry into clothes that I actually wear and clothes I never wear but keep washing over and over for some reason. I don't realize that you're the one who's been playing Darth Vader's theme song on the keyboard under my bed as I dramatically plot each expedition.

I don't understand until I wake up one night and you're next to me.

You say you were kind of afraid I'd punch you in the face, but all I want to do is cuddle. You ask if this is how I always react to people randomly showing up in my bed

and I have to explain that waking up without you is like going to scratch my nose with an arm that I keep forgetting was amputated and if it grew back it'd take me a while to realize it was a miracle and even then I'd rather keep scratching my nose than freak out about it.

You say that's very romantic.

I say you're my right-hand man.

You say that's less romantic.

I say I love you.

You say I know, and I'm kind of pissed because everyone knows I'm the Han Solo in this relationship, but I let it go.

You look good in a vest.

An Important Message

Your grandma whispered a message to the woman holding her hand through the broken car window. *Please, please make sure she knows. It's important.* The woman was from out of state. Had gotten lost passing through. God only knows how she'd gotten that lost. She promised she'd deliver the message. Though she didn't know where or how. Had she lived anywhere in that county. She'd have known your grandma. She would have known how to get you that message.

When your grandma died her face was peaceful. The way they said they found her. She knew you'd get her message. The woman was shaking when she got back in her car. Tried to call 911 again, but there's no service out there. Tried to find the closest town on her GPS, but those won't work out there either. She followed the highway. Didn't notice the little roads that led to little towns full of people who knew who to call. Didn't notice one county sign, two county signs. Didn't think to stop at the small farm houses. Didn't think to stop at the churches. Didn't think to stop at the funeral home. Didn't think to stop at the factory your grandpa worked at—the one your aunt and uncle work at. Didn't notice she was in town when she finally got to one. At least at first. You can't blame her though. It's hard to tell out there.

Finally stopped at a gas station. One your cousin used to work at. She asked if anyone knew you. If she'd known your grandma's name, they'd have known who to call. But she only knew yours. Your married name. And no one recognized it. She drove to a Braum's. One your cousin used to work at. But it was the same. She drove to another gas station. Another fast food place. A grocery store. All the same. She kept stopping. Kept asking. And no one knew. Even when she found her way home she kept asking. She's still asking. Anytime she meets anyone new, she asks. Her husband won't drive anywhere with her anymore, because she has to stop at every business, now every church, now every house to ask. She lost her job because she had to make too many stops on her way. All she does now is drive and ask and drive and ask again. Someday somewhere someone will know you. Will know your new name. They have to. One day they'll know. One day you'll know. One day this will all make sense.

the tarnished

frayed

the falling apart

the rusted

bleached

yellowed

chipped

the sagging

crumbling

stained

wind-worn

water-damaged

charred

dented

fragmented

overgrown

the fractured

the unkempt

the unclean

the scattered

the jagged

broken

bits

these I trust

I believe in nothing else

Footnote to a Funeral

-
- ¹holy is the first apocalypse of the year
 - ²holy the third and fourth
 - ³holy the ninth and tenth
 - ⁴holy the revolution on the lips of our friends
 - ⁵holy on the lips of my coworkers who don't know what a boycott is
 - ⁶holy on the lips of my conservative family members over ham sandwiches and pickles
 - ⁷holy is the child who made my t-shirt

-
- ⁸holy is her mother
 - ⁹holy is your mother
 - ¹⁰holy is my mother
 - ¹¹holy is my mother's mother
 - ¹²holy her corpse
 - ¹³holy her soul
 - ¹⁴holy her memories
 - ¹⁵holy her drawers full of jewelry
 - ¹⁶holy are the books I buy but never read
 - ¹⁷holy the food that goes bad in the back of my fridge

¹⁸holy the laughter I hear through my wall at three in the morning
¹⁹holy the candles on my bed stand
²⁰holy the colors they cast on your face
²¹holy your hands on my thighs
²²holy the cramp in my wrist as your about to come
²³holy my new tires

-
- ²⁴holy my Christmas eve
²⁵holy your Christmas day
²⁶holy bows and crumbled wrapping paper fights
²⁷holy bars of soap
²⁸holy sweater
²⁹holy glitter pen
³⁰holy Avon and crystal
³¹holy my collection of high wasted shorts
³²holy the art of sexual lovemaking guide book I found on my grandma's bed stand after her funeral

³³holy her k-y jelly

³⁴holy her nicotine gum

³⁵holy the blister pack

³⁶holy her pink nail polish

³⁷holy her pink lipstick

³⁸holy her pink casket

³⁹holy her big hair in photographs

-
- ⁴⁰holy her eyebrows
⁴¹holy the wreck she survived
⁴²holy the husbands she survived
⁴³holy his love for her
⁴⁴holy my love for you
⁴⁵holy my preoccupation with mortality
⁴⁶holy the crunchy brown flowers I won't throw out
⁴⁷holy the first time I kissed you
⁴⁸holy the first time I threw up in my car with you beside me

⁴⁹holy the time after that
⁵⁰holy the mouthwash I can't stand the taste of anymore
⁵¹holy morning showers
⁵²holy soap
⁵³holy skin
⁵⁴holy steam
⁵⁵holy toothbrush

-
- ⁵⁶holy screen on the screen house
⁵⁷holy as I crushed it between my baby teeth
⁵⁸holy that porch
⁵⁹holy the cracks in the concrete
⁶⁰holy the grass in the concrete
⁶¹holy the gliding chair
⁶²holy the chips in its paint
⁶³holy cold metal folding chairs
⁶⁴holy plastic tablecloth
⁶⁵holy the cotton underneath

⁶⁶holy pink panther

⁶⁷holy scratching post

⁶⁸holy magnifying mirror

⁶⁹holy the shakiest gun in the west

⁷⁰holy her laugh

⁷¹holy the laughs of her daughters trying to find the right lipstick

⁷²holy their anger

⁷³holy their tears

⁷⁴holy the shade they buried her in
⁷⁵holy the shade I'll bury my mother in
⁷⁶holy the word mama
⁷⁷holy the word love
⁷⁸holy the things they mean
⁷⁹holy the people they mean
⁸⁰holy those who say them
⁸¹holy those who mean them
⁸²holy those who believe

⁸³holy faith
⁸⁴holy hope
⁸⁵holy charity
⁸⁶holy the name Claudine
⁸⁷holy the whistles out of both sides of her mouth
⁸⁸holy the melody
⁸⁹holy the harmony
⁹⁰holy the slow way her hands moved
⁹¹holy the peace on her face when they found her

⁹²holy the words she told me after burying my grandpa
⁹³holy her tears
⁹⁴holy the hug I gave her
⁹⁵holy my tears
⁹⁶holy the hug you give me
⁹⁷holy the shit
⁹⁸holy the lilac bush

⁹⁹holy what make us human
¹⁰⁰holy what keeps us sane

¹⁰¹holy your hand in mine

Drive Safe

My grandma would always tell me.
My mom. Dad. Sisters. Aunts. Friends. Teachers. Strangers I'd just met.
It never meant anything to me.
I'd think *Don't tell me what to do*
or the same *Of course I will*
I'd use when told *Stay out of trouble*
as my grandpa kissed me *Goodbye*
but when you tell me
like you're handing me a new born kitten
like you're handing me a box of strike anywhere matches and crumbling Sapphic manuscripts
like I'm protecting something fragile
like I'm protecting something so small
but so cosmic in meaning
like a mother handing me her baby
as I'm buckling myself in.
I don't have a car seat.
The airbag is on.
She knows we have to leave now.
She's trusting me.

Drive safe
you say
and I carry myself
like I'm carrying an infant
holding it close as I change lanes
its tiny hands pulling on my shirt collar
as it drools on my neck.

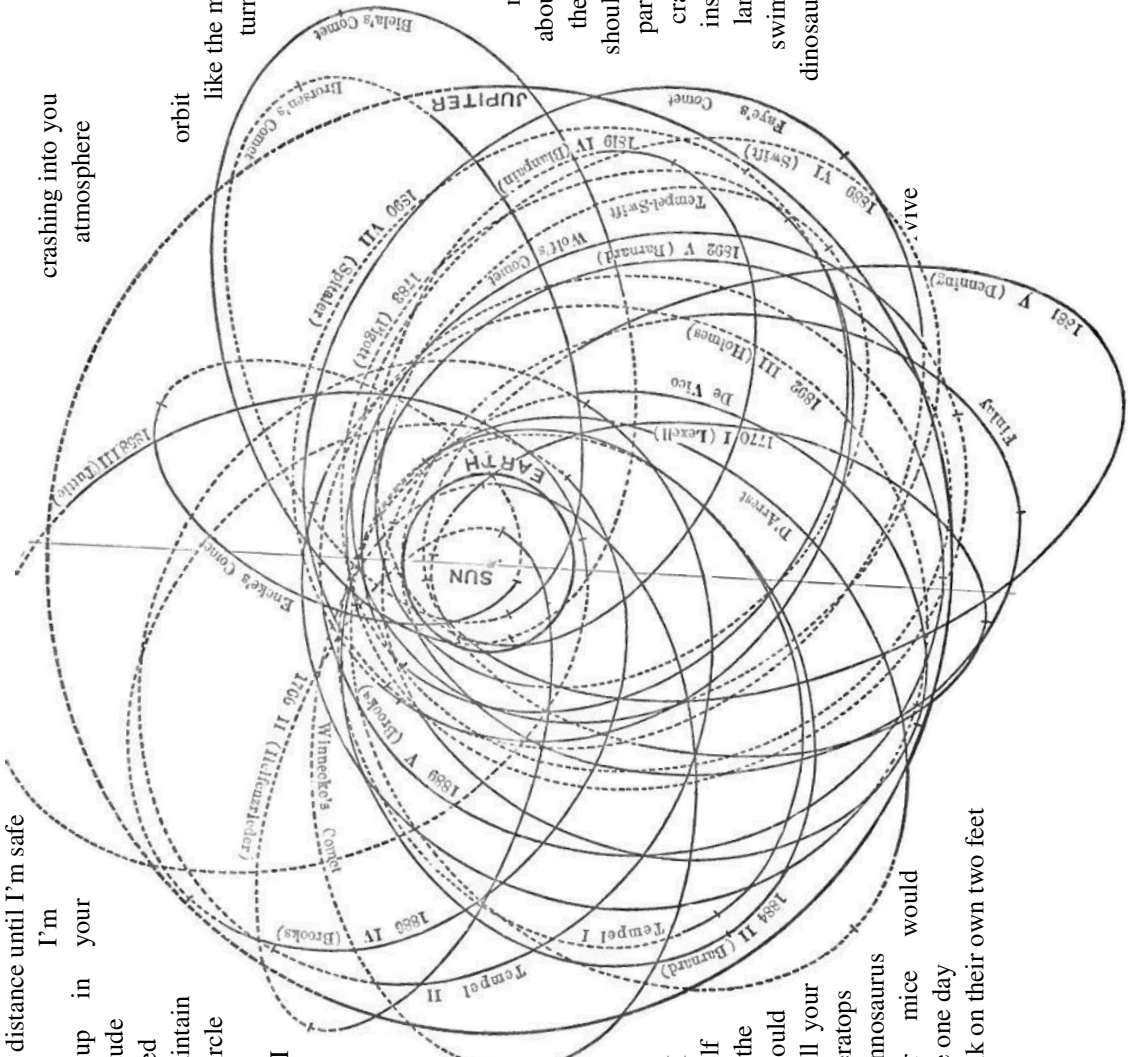
space

how much space should I put between us
 how much distance until I'm safe
 I feel like I'm
 burning up in your
 what altitude
 what speed
 to maintain
 should I circle
 always
 should I
 keeping
 so we
 hand in
 should I
 let you
 have
 we can
 talk
 sleep in
 or
 become a
 should I
 bury myself
 become the
 one we could
 I'll kill all your
 your triceratops
 your tyrannosaurus
 but your mice would
 and maybe one day
 they'll walk on their own two feet

crashing into you
atmosphere

orbit

like the moon
 turning my face towards you
 follow my own path around the sun
 pace with yours
 can walk
 hand through the solar system
 hang back
 travel alone
 your own adventures
 meet up for bagels when we align
 about the stars
 the same bed
 should I burn up
 part of your atmosphere
 crash into you
 inside
 largest crater in your desert
 swim in later
 dinosaurs



Dust Never Settles

My math teacher in second grade at a school long since shut down told us once that she never left the water running when she brushed her teeth. She said it was because she grew up in the Dustbowl. She said her husband wasn't around during the Dustbowl. He would leave the water running when he brushed his teeth. She'd walk over and shut it off. Sometimes she'd get mad. Sometimes they'd tease each other about it. She said he just didn't understand. Now, when my girlfriend and I brush our teeth, she'll leave the water running, and I'll reach down and turn it off. It's a part of our routine. We don't say anything about it anymore.

Brown

Your eyes are bright and brown like the bark
of a tree I tried and failed to climb
when I was young and of use and you
were worlds away from what I dreamed

at night alone and nuzzled near
my pillows praying for good and proper
things to thank the lord that gives
what we never knew we wanted.

But could I climb those callused branches
now? Knowing not to ask for
holy hopes to make me happy
but to reach for the rough and rigid that grows
up and out of the open ground
and to love the mud that covers my own hands.

TEETH

The last time I went to the store I got lost. I walked down aisles pulling my empty cart behind me. I looked side to side unsure of what I came for. I picked up a picture frame. Held it up to my face. I saw giant white teeth as big as a carnival opened wide inviting me in. It was haunted. I could tell. I don't believe in such things, but it was. I sat the frame back on the shelf. Quickly, suddenly. The darkness of the carnival was seeping through the back helped along by the oils in my hand. A woman's children walked past me. The woman was there, too. They stopped. Tiny hands reaching for frames. Laughing at the hollow faces. I tried to laugh too. Their mother saw me and smiled. I looked down at their greasy hands smearing glass. I looked at their mother, tired, trusting of hollow faces in supermarkets. I picked up my haunted frame and sat it in my cart. That night I dreamt of my haunted carnival. I knew I would. When I got home having bought nothing else, I threw those teeth in the dumpster outside our apartment. I knew as soon as I heard the glass shatter I'd made a mistake. I didn't tell you about it. You believe in such things. I dreamt that you wanted to marry me in that carnival. You didn't know it was haunted. You hadn't seen the teeth. I hadn't told you about the teeth. I couldn't find the right wedding. I walked up and down aisles pulling my empty cart behind me. Unsure of what I came for. I got halfway through my vows a half dozen times before looking up to realize that I was marrying someone else. The last time it was the mother, her children surrounding her cart. When I found you, you were holding candy apples. I remembered you've never been to the fair before. You asked me why I'm wearing a wedding dress. I looked down. It was made of teeth. I pulled them off of me one at time and stood naked in front of you. You handed me a candy apple. I tried to eat it, but all my teeth were gone.

Willana

With shaking fumbling inexperienced hands, I opened myself up to you slowly and straining against the rusted hinges of my defiant ribcage, but I never asked you to save me. I thought I'd made that clear. From the beginning,

I was hesitant to disrobe as you stood clothed in the cool breeze of the forest, but your lips said that nakedness was nothing to fear as you took my bare arms with shaking fumbling inexperienced hands. I opened myself up to you

hoping my act of bravery would make you feel safe enough you could take off your armor. I would have helped you unfasten the straps if you had asked, so we could hold each other—our skin exposed—but I never asked you to save me. I thought I'd made that clear. From the beginning,

you sat lance in hand ready to ride towards my dragons' nests. Their steam fluffed your hair and filled your head with visions of valorous intent. You fell to your knees—your eyes closed like prayer—and felt for swords among stones with shaking fumbling inexperienced hands. I opened myself up. To you,

it was a pleading cry for rescue or else a siren's call. Through the fog, you still can't see if I was swimming near rocks or tied to a tree or stoking the fire that kept us both warm, but I never asked you to save me. I thought I'd made that clear. From the beginning,

the thick iron of my common blood protected my chest more than the breast-plated protection of your petite nobility. Those who scale my hobbled stones, I shoot with makeshift arrows. If someone ever made it inside, I'd strangle them with my hair with shaking fumbling inexperienced hands. I opened myself up to you, but I never asked you to save me. I thought I'd made that clear from the beginning.

Drifting into Snow

Your heaven can't be locked inside that gated community. Or on my futon. Or in the home you half-promised me as we started to build. I thought it might have been in me. That was silly. Sentimental. I don't know when I got that way. You made puddles out of me, when what you really needed was snow.

You should have bought that pair of rain boots. Now I'm soaked into your socks. Hold your feet up to the fire. You should be more careful in the cold. Cover up your ears. Put on a new pair of socks. Drink something warm before you go out to make snow angels in the green and purple of your neighbor's Christmas lights.

Make friends with the snowmen, but don't take them at their word. You fact check the flower petals in the spring, don't trust the chill just because you like the cold. Snows not always a pure as it seems.

Find your own patch, glowing in the night. Look up at the sky, see how it glows too. Let the halo of the earth surround you. Let it remind you where to go. How to lift yourself up. But don't sleep there. Don't sleep in the cold. Your body isn't as strong as it thinks. Your thoughts are not as strong as the snow.

Queen Bee

Crawling like a mound of ants
each whispering its sonnets
filling every inch with rants
or screams or chunks of vomit.
They cracked my skull and wriggled out.
They cling to me like grease and dirt.
But the shower's screaming way too loud
to wash away the oozing hurt.
I grasp the bleeding carpet trying not to lose its texture.
As much as I'm afraid, I don't regret having met her.
The Queen of Bees in her velvet robes
told me lies that no one knows.
She bit my tongue and made me stutter.
Now I live on bread and honey butter.

Enough

Back in my mind,
I remember myself running
stubbornly into the dark
behind my parents' back door.

I remember myself running,
hiding beside a shed, crying
behind my parents' back. A door
broken into pieces lying

hidden beside a shed. Crying
like myself two weeks before,
broken into pieces, lying
to my grandma, promising to act more

like myself. Too weak before
looking out the kitchen window
to my grandma promising to pour
chocolate chips into cookie dough.

Looking out the kitchen window
now, at twenty-five, pouring
chocolate chips into cookie dough
trying to stay alive until morning.

Now, at twenty-five, pouring
pain into poems and imaginary friends
trying to stay alive until morning
even though I know how this ends.

Paint into poems and imaginary friends
real hopes and reasons,
even though I know how this ends
long before I believe in

real hopes and reasons
I should throw those pills away.
Long before I believe in
myself enough to say

I should throw those pills away
like egg shells or broken plates. To call
myself enough. To say,
whether I can stand or fall

like egg shells or broken plates, to call
stubbornly into the dark
whether I can stand or fall
back into my mind.

In the Crevices

I try to clean my apartment on Fridays now. Every Friday. Because I've got to stop letting things go. That's what my therapist told me the last time I saw her. I used to see her on Fridays. Now I clean my apartment. It's weird how much trash can pile up before I notice it. I won't see any of it till Friday when I'm throwing it into bags. Sometimes I start to doubt that I live alone there's so much of it. And I find shirts everywhere. On the couch. The kitchen table. By the sink. I get overwhelmed by them. Take my shirt off. Lay it on the back of my chair. It's been months since all my dishes have been clean. Probably longer. I wash them every Friday, but I can't get through them. There's just so many. I'm making progress though. I've started going through the couch too. But I'm taking my time. There are a lot of deep crevices. How deep I'm not sure yet. But deep. And there's no way of knowing what's in them until I reach my hand down blindly through the cushions and start to pull things out. So far I've found a lot of pens. A couple forks. I'm afraid that one of these days I'm going to pull out what's left of a months old meal. I pulled out a book a few weeks ago. I don't remember reading it or where it came from, but I put it up on my shelf. I pulled out a note from my ex. *I love you soooo much. I can't wait to spend my life with you.* xx I put that in a box in my room. I pulled out the dog I had as a kid. She's always so excited to see me, but my landlord won't allow pets, so I had to buy a muzzle to keep her quiet. Made the mistake of pulling out my grandma's dead hand. Once it was free, it started dragging up the rest of her. I tried to push her back down. First with my hands. Then with my feet. Straining against her shoulders. Tears in my eyes. But she was always so much stronger than she seemed. Now she sits cross legged in my chair cigarette in hand. Tells me she's proud of me. Tells me I need to go out and get laid. I reach down and pull out a Mike's Hard Lemonade. God, I hate those. I drink it anyway. I pull out a mirror and fog swirls around the glass and a voice tells me to ask it questions. Any question I choose. Tells me it will only ever speak the truth. And I smash it against the wall so I don't have to look at myself.

recluse

in a tiny pinprick hole on my left ventricle
lives an itzy bitsy creature
she looks like an ant
but smaller
she talks like an aunt
but a little bit more to the point
she grows yellow flowers outside her stutters
sweeps the dust from her floor
rubs her temples with her sticky front-most feet
thinks about the economy
about how her house keeps falling apart
she makes soup out of whatever she can find in the back of her freezer
tries to sing while she does it
tries to remember a song she likes
tries to keep her voice from croaking
and when her weak spindly legs can't hold her up anymore
she lies down on the pulsing ground
still trying to find a tune
trying to match it with the rhythm around her
trying to whisper a dream she used to have
before she falls asleep

vulva

walking briskly to the back corner of the neighborhood Walmart feeling warm blood start to drip down my leg through my third tampon of the morning the volume of the self-checkout vibrating in my head as it tells me to check my cart for more items I try to calculate my odds of toxic shock trying to decide if two would leak less than one trying to remember how much I've spent this week if I can go back for groceries later like I'll even be hungry like getting there the first time wasn't a miracle like I won't be spending the rest of the day on the floor of my shower praying for more hot water praying for a knife to cut it all out praying for a gun for someone to just bring me a goddam gun for someone just someone I try masturbating not because I want to come I can't come I haven't come in a decade I do it to help with the pain or if I need to cry when I can't even let myself cry and I cry naked on the cold enamel mad at myself after begging for my ex-girlfriend's cock out loud the sound of my voice still echoing through the vacant tiles the water still cold my body still shivering and unable to stand

Equations

I'm just scribbling down equations trying to calculate
how long it will be before I'm ready to date
again. Ink smeared on my hand, chalk on my sleeve—I'm looking scholarly—
hair disheveled, glasses smudged and askew. I'm rubbing my neck absently
like I've learned something, like I'm right on the brink of some great

discovery, some well-researched, well-informed prediction on just how long I should wait
to ask that girl at the bar for her number, some elegant formula that will estimate
down to nearest week how soon someone will slide their hand down past my navel while we're making out, when really
I'm just scribbling down equations

trying to figure out how long it will take until I can masturbate
without crying. Until I can eat falafels. Until I can stop losing weight.
Until I can watch a movie on my couch and not imagine that my head is lying on your lap and your hand is softly
stroking my hair. Until I can see the Diet Dr. Pepper you left in my fridge and hardly
think of you. Until I can write a poem that isn't about you. Until I can find something—anything—to extrapolate,
I'm just scribbling down equations.

her·o·ic

- a sin so cruel and dark the fae forbade
attracts investing hordes to play charades—
- concealed guitars harpoon champagne refrains
above unlocked, unwashed exhaust machines—
- survive/sustain/apply sunscreen/with thought
rewrite the truth frontiered façades forgot—
- the smell of rotting hope exhumed repels
mistrust undressed beside decayed motels—
- the moon cocooned her wings unformed won't bloom
until their growing strength destroys her second womb—

Dust Never Settles

My dad told me this story that some old timer told him. He was a kid during the Dustbowl. It was all he ever knew. One day he went outside and looked up at the sky. He ran back in terrified. Yelling for his daddy. He thought the world was gonna end. Thought they were all gonna die. His dad ran out. Came back in. Poor kid didn't know the sky was supposed to be blue.

Song of My Colder Self

I walk in the First-month cold with my comrades,
We sing hundred-year-old songs of ourselves,
Of every self inseparate from us,

We walk shivering, clinging to each other,
Clinging to our rising banner battered by the wind,
Clinging to the word Democracy,
Clinging to Democracy itself.
O may it be manifest on the plains.
Could you imagine it?
A democracy that *is* Democracy.

A Democracy for you and I,
For your plumber, your mother,
For the construction worker you almost hit with your car,
For the secretaries and the window washers,
For the family getting kicked out of their home,
For the waitress who spilled my orange juice,
For the migrant farmers never tasting their fruits,
For the pizza delivery girl,
For the man who cleans your sweat off the mat at the gym,
For the man trying to buy diapers with food stamps,
For the coal miners and the ex-auto workers,
For the lady cleaning up puke at my old elementary school,
For the sex worker who just wants to do her fucking job,
For the man who lost his leg in a factory,
For the guy that puts your favorite cereal on the shelf at two in the morning,
For the woman still bathing her children in leaded water.

As we walk back to our cars, a man asks us for money,
The hotel kicked him out of the lobby, the library's closed.
I have two dollars a pocket full of candy.

Our shaking hands drop the pieces.
I'm too cold to kneel down and pick them up.

I wonder why I shouldn't bring him home, make him dinner, we could watch a movie on the couch, talk like old friends into the night,
hold each other like lovers till the morning.

I don't have a map of the city's shelters, and they wouldn't have room, not tonight.

I tell him to stay warm, knowing that he can't,

Knowing that soon I'll be warm without him,

Knowing he knows the same, and he thanks me,

When it's this cold, I can't escape it,

no matter the layers I wear, no matter the numbers on the thermostat, no matter the burning steam of my showerhead.

I am the man burned alive by the fire he built with numb hands in an abandoned living room,

I am the child, dead in her bedroom, frozen in her mother's arm,

I am the panhandler sitting warm in his truck buying booze on the way to his house,

I am every one of them, each one as much as the other.

I am the women counting my change,

I watch her chapped fingers struggle with the coins, as I watch I can feel the grime coating her hands, the sticky weight of a day spent
carrying other people's money, while having none of her own.

I watch, and I know that no man, no woman, will even be greater than the one in front of me.

I want to tell her that, to tell her I love her, that she's beautiful,

I want to take her hands covered in the filth of someone else's greed,

I want to kiss them, and to look into her eyes,

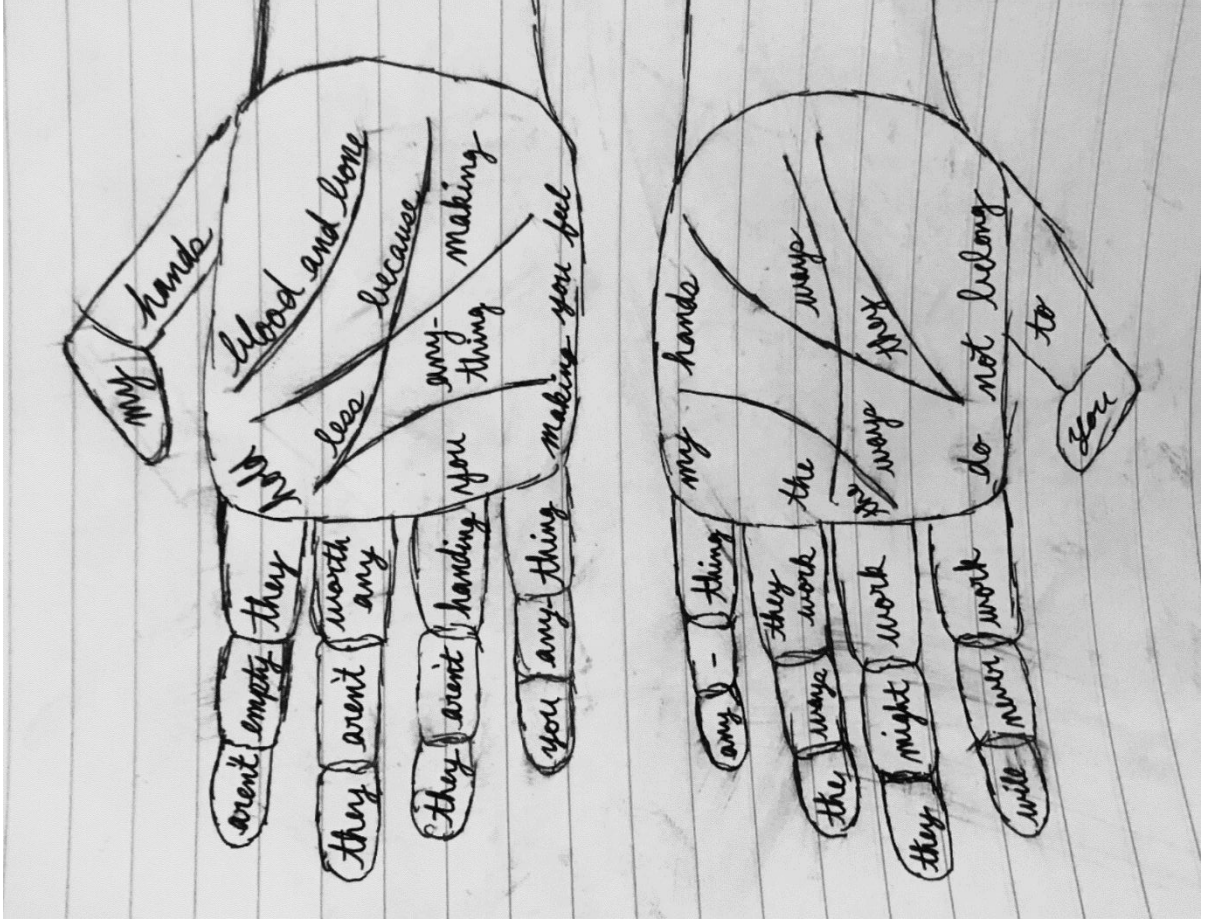
to sing her (without opening my mouth) a song, that's just for her to hear,

a song of all of us, of the two of us, of the one of us, inseparate,

But I take my change and go,

I take my change and wait for someone else to take my filthy hands and tell me I'm not alone.

my hands



The Wilderness

Wild turkeys call from just behind the trees.
I call back. The bark of a wrinkled old oak
crumbles off into my hand as I steady
myself. My eyes low and looking for bones. Smoke
on my skin, my hair, my clothes. My dirty
feet stuffed into socks stuffed into shoes. Brush pokes
my arm. I can't walk barefoot here. Jagged scraps
of metal fertilize the rusty ground. Maps

I've drawn in sandier dirt paint this place
as sacred. I feel that divinity now through
the soles of my unholy sandals. Leaves pray
silently. Their troubled lips move
but their voices cannot be heard. Their limbs sway
as I kneel down to collect ribs into
my chest, and, as breath surrounds me, they
rattle cold in my folded arms. I wait

for whatever's left—whatever the
coyotes haven't carried away—
whatever hasn't been buried too deep to
rise—to be knitted together like chimeras—awake
and bound bone to bone wrapped in flesh and enough
hair to keep them warm as the light fades
lined up two-by-two or two-by-one-
and-a-half waiting in vain for the rain to come.