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Drag Me Down

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MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

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Drag Me Down

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Abstract

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This thesis is a creative project titled *Drag Me Down*. Though labeled a poetry collection, the project is a hybrid of multiple genres. The bulk of the collection consists of prose poetry that follows a narrative of two romantic relationships beginning and ending, as well as a protagonist attempting to reclaim her self-esteem and confidence both internally as a woman and externally within a relationship. The rise and fall actions of these power struggles lead to the collection being divided into a three-arc narrative akin to a novel. Each arc is set off with microfictions and short stories that harken to the tradition of memoir writing. Along with each arc, a theme follows the protagonist's struggles, echoing the poetic heritage found within the prose poetry. Through the undefined quality of the collection's structure as well as the power struggles, *Drag Me Down* displays a familiarity in its subject matter that immerses the reader in something they nearly could have experienced themselves.

Drag Me Down

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Dedication

For you.

Introduction

Drag Me Down is a creative project exploring power struggles. The project at large reflects an external struggle of power by not keeping to one genre. While technically labeled a poetry collection, the collection is divided into three themes that progress in a rise and fall tradition, akin to a standard three-arc novel structure. Each of these themes is precluded by a micro-story that harkens to the confessional tradition of memoir as well as a microfiction—a story of less than six words—that sets the tones of the individual prose poems that create the bulk of the collection. These varying genres lead to a structural tension that is echoed in the narrative. In the narrative, the heterosexual romantic relationships between the protagonist and her romantic partners highlight the ways in which power struggles happen as they relate to gender roles and gender expectations of each partner. Struggles within relationships are nothing unusual as “the ability to influence a partner (or resist a partner’s influence) to meet one’s own needs/objects is a central component of an intimate relationship” (Hall and Knox 386). The common expectation of natural power struggles in romantic relationships has been dubbed the “power within relationships theory” about the way certain characteristics and environmental factors influence how and why power differences happen between couples (Larzelere and Huston 171). Yet external power struggles are not all that couples undergo; there are also internal issues of self-esteem.

The protagonist in *Drag Me Down* struggles with issues of failing self-esteem and, through that, a loss of power over herself. The interconnection of the protagonist’s struggle within a romantic relationship, as well as power over herself through her self-esteem, reflect how “power dynamics have been shown to be intimately connected with how individuals perceive their romantic relationship” and, by extension, their own well-being (Traeder and Zeigler-Hill

67). As the protagonist gains power over herself through improving her self-esteem, she begins to feel actively dissatisfied within her relationship and that, ultimately, leads to its end as she seeks to stop the power imbalance the relationship allowed.

There is an innate link between gender roles and romantic relationships due to how much of the world functions as a patriarchal society. In these patriarchal societies, women are assigned worth by their usefulness as it relates to the men in their lives. The men, in turn, keep the power due to status quo and expectations. This type of expectation leads to, not a blatant sexism, but a more “ambivalent sexism” in which both partners fall into gender roles and stereotypes, equally believing the opposing gender has a fixed place within the relationship and society at large (Lee et al. 583). Ambivalent sexism leads to the expectations that women will have more subservient caregiver roles while men have more dominating protective roles. This creates problems within romantic relationships as partners vie for power and/or respect to meet those expectations as well as their own personal needs. This vying for personal power around ambivalent sexism is present within *Drag Me Down* through both romantic partners making assumptions about how the other will provide and/or serve the relationship in their respective gender roles.

Within the collection, each main theme/arc is divided into *Part I*, *Part II*, and *Part III*. The microfiction of *Part I*, setting up the theme of the narrative arc, is “Convent wanted. Religion flexible.” This religious theme holds strong connections to relationships, marriage, and sacrifice, all of which are touched on throughout the collection. The structure of a convent lends to the implication that there is a need for a structured relationship within the protagonist’s life. This is highlighted as the first few pieces display the struggle the protagonist has with her low self-esteem. The short story “I told myself” shows the inner struggle the protagonist has in trying to control her self-perception and manifests in her yearning for something better. In many ways,

she still struggles to take the right action despite her intentions. The first movement out of the emotional gloom is “Blank Slate,” where she falls in love. Rather than conquering her lack of self-esteem and agency, the protagonist chooses to enter a romantic relationship, thus surrendering even more power. This lack of self-esteem within a relationship creates a problematic foundation for the protagonist as “female self-esteem is significantly associated with caregiving responsiveness” (Knapp et al. 113). With a lowered caregiving response, she is thus unable to meet the ambivalent sexism present within relationships and continues to lose power internally and externally in both her own and her partner’s expectations. The relationship proves rocky with the following poems expressing a desperation and an unhappiness as aspects of the relationship begin to fall apart. The relationship ends in “Heart Attack,” when her lover does not return her affection. Though the protagonist does not end the relationship, there is an exchange of power as the male partner gives her back total agency in her singlehood by establishing he no longer wants her. This contradicting notion of being given power is significant as “power, once it is achieved [rather than taken or pursued] is actually an important ingredient in enabling authentic self-fulfillment” (Kifer et al. 286). This is shown as the ending poems in *Part I* are her musing regrets of all the red flags she had missed in the relationship, an unconscious reminder to herself that she does have power and agency within a romantic relationship.

Part II opens with the microfiction “Wanted: the truth. Lie if you must.” This signals the protagonist has come to the point of knowing she deserves better in a relationship, yet the desperation for a connection is still present and she will compromise to gain that connection. This continued lack of “true” power—namely, a confident woman in control of her agency with or without a partner—shows that the protagonist is still suffering from the effects of lower self-esteem. Though she has gained power through becoming single and, as such, not beholden to

another, it is her personal perception of herself that is the true hindrance. The protagonist's own expectations—her ambivalent sexism—leads to the idea that a male counterpart will save her or create a protective environment for her as a way to prove the romance is viable (Lee et al. 585). Though the protagonist feels lost and grief-stricken by the relationship that ends in *Part I*, the piece “Murder in the Nth Degree” and its title alludes to a rage building from the power imbalance she experiences. In the poem “Memories of me,” the protagonist meets a “ghost” who becomes her second romantic partner. The use of a “ghost”—symbolizing someone already gone, or a relationship already dead—begins innocently but gains significance in retrospect as the collection progresses. In many ways, the use of “ghost” and its melancholic and depressive intonations foreshadow the depression that envelops the protagonist as the second relationship progresses. Particularly due to her young age and her gender, it has been observed that it is more likely that she will suffer from “depressive symptomatology” within her dating life as opposed to males (Olson and Crosnoe 112). This is particularly poignant as there is no showing how her former partner reacts to the relationship ending since the audience is only given the woman's reaction to the relationship ending; the assumption is that she is the only one affected.

In “Day One,” she confesses that she feels guilty for moving on from her first love, showing he still has a power over her. Her loss of power continues as her new relationship is solidified in the piece “The day I said no was the day we got married.” The “no” within the title is purposely vague in the sense that this is a relationship where, yet again, things are not going smoothly for the woman and her position. This power imbalance shows how the male counterpart largely controls the relationship through his power. Even though the female participant has said “no,” the male has made the decision to begin the relationship in earnest. Though not hostile, the defaulting to the man having the decision-making power shows that the

relationship may be started on the view of “characterizing men as aggressive and dominant,” which would create a less welcoming environment for a woman to seek power (Lee et al. 584). In this ideology, it makes sense that the following poems highlight the protagonist’s discontent. She spends most of *Part II* musing on whether she is unhappy in the relationship or is simply an unhappy person. She shows her true beliefs at the end of the arc in “Crown me in the flesh” by asking if she could have gotten more out of the relationship.

Part III begins with the microfiction “Estate sale: everything but me.” The protagonist has reached a higher level of self-empowerment and self-esteem, gaining the strength to want better for herself. By getting rid of anything—be it her partner or their expectations for one another—within the relationship that has dragged her down, she would improve her situation, be it with her lover or without. The short story that begins the arc, “What I Believe,” serves as a pep talk to herself but also a confession that she wants to see her first lover, to see if things would be different now. This tie to her past, much like her self-esteem, is part of her hindrance in moving forward. The first poem “Carousel Rides” highlights the protagonist’s anxiety with the poor state of her relationship and realizing that, much like her former relationship, her current relationship is ending. Yet, underneath that desperation, a sadness and a rage is brewing at the state of the relationship and the way the boyfriend is not fulfilling her emotional needs. She alludes that he is absent frequently—both physically and emotionally—and she does not see how they can work out. *Part III* shows how the protagonist is starting to actively take power back for her autonomy and how the relationship is progressing. In “Spaced Apart,” she takes the step to visit her first love but realizes that nothing has truly changed; he finds her more fascinating now, but she realizes it is only because she is no longer interested in him. This realization forces her into acknowledging that her current relationship also lacks in how her partner does not respect her.

With the realization, she finds herself in the dominate position of power. This exchanging of power between the expected gender roles in the protagonist's eyes is vital as "relationship power is largely subjective and a matter of perception" (Hall and Knox 386). Though there seems to be an acknowledgement that the relationship is over as she calls herself her partner's "ghost" in "Awakening," the following poems display her attempts to maintain the relationship. This decision to keep trying shows that, as her self-esteem has increased, her corresponding caregiving response to the relationship and her partner naturally increased (Knapp et al. 120). But still, it is not enough. Her rage at the state of the relationship boils over in "Take the Safety Measures," and she ends the relationship in "Cursory." Rather than drowning in her sorrows as in her first relationship, the protagonist finds herself relieved the relationship is over. Again, power has shifted as this time she is the one who ends her relationship and this time she welcomes her singlehood. Her act of regaining self-esteem aids her confidence in her decision-making process.

Relationship power struggles are also a large part of the works that influenced *Drag Me Down*. One such collection is *The Most of It* (2008) by Mary Ruefle, which offers snapshots of life moments as well as large emotions. In "The Bench," a couple argues over the size of a bench to place in their backyard, but the subtext of their argument relays their true argument over their life choices (29-31). Much as with *Drag Me Down*'s pieces, this is a display of the couple struggling with who holds the most power. When a couple can compromise, as "The Bench" shows with the ending compromise, the couple becomes happier as "decision-making ... is a key manifestation of relationship power" and by dividing the decision-making process, the relationship is able to be more harmonious (Hall and Knox 386). In a similar way to the self-esteem struggles of *Drag Me Down*'s protagonist, Ruefle offers a similar idea in "A Certain

Swirl.” In a metaphor of a person wondering if they are good enough for others, a sentence wonders if it is good enough when it is often left alone as “It was beautiful to look at, but no one read it” (55). These subtexts or in-between moments of power struggles in relationships and self-perception are highlighted continuously in *Drag Me Down* in a way that *The Most of It* does not fully embrace. In *Drag Me Down*’s poem “Whiteout,” the protagonist talks about driving under a bridge, not realizing it has been damaged, during a whiteout as a reflection of being completely powerless in a relationship that is falling apart. She tries to exert power by holding the relationship together, but it is fruitless. In the same way, in the poem “November, November, we burn to remember,” the male partner reflects on their relationship breaking down. At this same time, he alludes to the fact they will marry, showing how gender and patriarchal expectations lurk between the couple. Simply because they expect to marry, they will do so, even in the face of their unhappiness.

Though *The Most of It* lacks the narrative of relationships actively failing, there is no denying the emotions which lurks within the poems are of someone struggling to find their place within their own power and patriarchal society. Ruefle dwells on the uncertainty of life and the accompanying loss of power that uncertainty brings. Whether that is “Beautiful Day” and the unexpectedness of discovering someone with the same last name and not knowing how to react, or the worry of imposter syndrome as in “A Minor Personal Matter,” power struggles are at the core of the emotions presented (35-37; 68-69). Both poems display an uncertainty in how to carry on, or how to pretend their lives have not changed in these small musing moments that make them realize they may not have as much power in life as they had assumed they possessed. These musing, emotional moments are one of the cornerstones of *Drag Me Down*; yet, where Ruefle focuses on the benign power struggles that happen daily, the narrators of *Drag Me Down*

take their musings to darker places of grief and heartbreak, anchored in its tale of the demise of two relationships.

Other influences in *Drag Me Down* include the memoir-hybrid poetry collection *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson (2009) and verse poetry novel *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson (1998). These two works are intertwined in the ways they influenced the writing of *Drag Me Down* in similar ways. Though unintentional, all three works deal with romantic relationships and the fallout of their ending. *Autobiography of Red* follows a first relationship while *Bluets* follows the aftermath of a serious relationship. *Drag Me Down* straddles a middle space, touching an early relationship that ends as quickly as it begins and a more serious second relationship that drags to its end. *Bluets* comes across as both a deliberate, almost obsessive, look at the narrator's breakdown while she misses her former significant other, and an accidental look at the trauma that happens when a relationship ends. The entire collection serves as a way for the narrator to attempt to reclaim her power outside of a relationship. Even after the breakup, it is evident that the former romantic partner holds all the power as the narrator struggles to come to terms with the relationship ending. She begins the collection with "2. ... a spell I found to stay under and get out from under, in turns" as she demonstrates her self-awareness of her own struggle against her obsession with the color blue and, by extension, her struggle to escape from the shadow of her former relationship (1). No topic is off-limits in the poems, such as "184," when the narrator talks about writing as an equalizer of emotion and experience (39). In a similar way, *Drag Me Down*'s "Take the Safety Measures" shows the narrator angry, thinking about being a wasted genius and telling her significant other that her writing is a sign that she knows the relationship is over. The writing of both pieces act as a way that the protagonists are able to exert one of their strongest powers: their voice. The musings in *Bluets* are more purposeful than those in *Drag Me*

Down, but the similarity remains, particularly as the relationship crawls toward its end in *Drag Me Down* and the narrator realizes how angry she is with the state of her life and reclaims her power to make decisions about the direction of her life.

Autobiography of Red explores a homosexual relationship, yet the power struggles remain the same with the protagonist in the more subservient role and his partner being more domineering. Adding to this is the age of the protagonist and his lover—one young and inexperienced, the other older and more jaded—that add to the power imbalance. The narrator Geryon falls in love with an older teenager/young man named Herakles. When Geryon is besotted and deep in love, Herakles unexpectedly ends the relationship. Geryon is devastated and in the aftermath “[his]/whole body formed one arch of a cry—upcast to that custom, the/ human custom/of wrong love” (75). The idea of “wrong love” is the closest that Geryon comes to admitting that the relationship was structured around power imbalance that did little to serve him as a person. Rather than allowing himself to dwell in grief, he struggles to hold onto his individual power by using his passion for photography, much as the protagonists in *Drag Me Down* and *Bluets* use writing. This focusing on individual power for all protagonists is appropriate for their later reclaiming of autonomy and self-confidence. As with any relationship that ends, the development of both individuals and how those individuals function in later relationships, is part of the initial grief recovery that is likely to happen when “focusing on other developmental tasks and life goals ...” (Olson and Crosnoe 112). Much as the protagonist of *Drag Me Down* seeks out her initial romantic partner, Geryon is able to experience Herakles’s presence after they have broken up and, from there, learn that the power his partner has held over him has left and he has more agency in how he will direct his life.

The ability to have agency in directing life is something each protagonist gains through their struggles; it's not unlike what any individual goes through in their own relationship journeys. Women, in particular, struggle with how relationships may bring power imbalances to their lives due to patriarchal expectations. If they also struggle with their own individual power issues through lack of confidence or lower self-esteem, these relationship struggles are even more pronounced. Anyone who is placed in the more subservient role within a relationship knows the struggles to regain power once it has been taken. Due to that and through *Drag Me Down*'s use of atmosphere and emotions rather than specifics, the reader is able to immerse themselves into an experience that feels familiar, even if it is not directly personal. The project in general, that of two relationships failing, is something that most have struggled with in some form—romantic or otherwise—at one point or another. Be it one relationship, two, or dozens more, most everyone knows what it is like to love and lose someone. All these familiarities—be it an emotion or a sentiment—lend comfort to a work that is as commonplace as the experiences held within. It does not matter if the exacts are known, or if they have yet to be experienced, everyone has dealt with the overall message *Drag Me Down* aims to share: reclaiming self-esteem and individual power outside of relationships.

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Part I

Convent wanted. Religion flexible.

I told myself

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Eyes the color of a hazy winter morning stared straight ahead. They blinked and looked away. The gaze couldn’t be locked again, despite repeated attempts.

“I know,” came the response at last. It had that tone that said it really did know.

“Really,” the voice said, so earnest it pained both of them. “You’re intelligent. You always get such great grades.”

“Yep.”

The flatness of the response didn’t hinder any of the words flowing. There was no pause. With a pause, the doubt might start leaking in. They couldn’t afford for this ship to sink that way.

Not again.

“And you’re so kind. You know what it’s like to be the one left behind. You’re great at making sure others feel included.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And just because people don’t stick around, or invite you back, doesn’t mean anything. That’s a reflection of them, not you.”

“Naturally.”

A hopeful tone crept in. Perhaps. Perhaps just this once something positive was going to come out of this. “So, you hear me? You’re beautiful, kind, and smart.”

The eyes flashed up. That hazy winter morning became a storm-filled Midwestern spring day. It had been so long since it had been a joyous summer day.

“You’re so stupid. You know none of it is true, so why do you lie like that?”

“Okay, okay. I think you need to—”

“Yeah, you do need to listen to me.” They pointed angry fingers at one another. “You’re ugly. When you frown, but especially when you smile. Your teeth. The way your eyes disappear. It’s gross. You need to learn to do better. You need to learn to look better.”

“Now stop that. You know that kind of talk isn’t going to do any good.”

“Why? Because it’s not going to be possible?”

A sob caught both of them off-guard, though it really shouldn’t have. Both girls straightened and rubbed their eyes. They sniffed and looked up, looked away, looked anywhere but at each other. One coughed.

“I have to go to school now.”

The girls turned and walked out. Their eyes didn’t meet through the mirror again.

I give up on life

She was born on this day
in the year of her tears.
The moon hung low on her astrological sign.
It's a Gemini.
Fitting because she felt like a cancer in the afternoon
and woke up like a bull in the morning.
She weighed with sloped shoulders and narrow squints.
Roughly a million books. Some were digital but she wasn't
a modern kind of gal. She was more ageless than that.
Her parents were Mercury and Salt, sister to numbness
and rage. Proud family, they were.
She completed multiple orbits that didn't leave
the ground. Except one—to her grandmother's house.
For fun she sewed her lips shut and prayed
with her eyes wide open. Proceeded in death by her will to care.
Survived by her aptitude to say fuck you.
In lieu of flowers, pet the wind.

Maybe I'm in the wrong story

Desperation is sticky. It's like being twenty at a cardiologist's office. Half the room looks at you with pity and the other half is angry because you can't know all the things wrong with you yet. It's as if your life isn't tragic enough unless you're holding your bleeding heart out to someone, ready for them to squeeze.

Eight years is the longest day of your life. It's like looking in your rearview, watching a girl texting at the wheel and wondering how many people she's going to kill over her lifetime. The next time she breaks up with her significant other, she should just walk herself down to the police station and confess.

The wrong story is the one where you wake up and you're ready for the next eight years because they have to be happier than the ones you've been reliving. It's an empty movie theater full of cobwebs and the dusty relics of dreams.

Maybe God is just squeezing my heart too hard.

Diseased

Swinging wildly back and forth
faces changes with each heave.
Waiting for the garbage to
pick it up.
Sometimes there's a push
and the sky is blue and upside down
like a childhood afternoon.
But when the earth spins, my guts
empty. My different versions of
myself are so ashamed. I
wish so hard for perfectionism
but my body constantly lets me down.

Ghosts

I don't believe in ghosts but I have conversations with them every day. It's because I'm in love with the past, you see. The *wispy-wish-whoosh* of a time gone by. The late-night movies. The fingers threaded tight in my own. The radio that plays too quietly in a house that's always too loud. It's that haze of smoky tendrils which curl themselves around my cheeks and under my eyes, obscuring life.

The future can be (is, always) suffocating. What to do. How to do. What are you made of? There's a comfort in the deep-seated pain of a time gone by. The stolen moments. The lost memories. The dreams that disappeared down the drain because sometimes tears aren't made for the living.

In the night we lose little pieces of ourselves. The smoke clears away. We dream of the things that we haven't let go of. The selves who died that past day with the crushing daylight or the suffocating no-s. Sometimes we need—yes.

Dependency

The light casts my face
jaundice-like in the evening.
I want to call it something
beautiful but I don't know how.
The hate smolders
always for the mirror.
I tell myself the dawn is better.
The creeping fingers of light
across my cheeks
where a smile sometimes sleeps.

You'll bury your feelings in the backyard the way Fluffy died ten years ago

There's a gray haze in the sky. You pull the covers over your head and reach for your phone.

It assaults you.

The brightness. The babies. The engaged, the married, the people who are happy.

Unlike you.

One of your friends had a baby. Another friend is on vacation in Mexico.

"Friends" is a loose definition. Yet, somehow, you know more about them than the woman who stares back at you in the mirror. You don't know when she got those bags, but she forgot her one-way ticket.

Your alarm goes off and you snooze it again.

No one has ever told you the tenth circle of hell is the one where your job is decent but you hate working there all the same. You love your coworkers; you hate when they open their mouths.

Eventually you get up. Eventually you eat. Eventually you put on a face that smiles.

Today is the day! Today!

You go to work and you handle it. You deal. You dole. You answer, you fluff, you smile.

Everyone smiles back and they appreciate you. They love you! They're happy to see you!

You smile and repeat, repeat, rinse.

The mirror catches the pink hue of your lips and it reminds you of the color of the marks on the inside of your arms from when you hugged yourself so tight last night you almost felt better.

Almost.

Blank Slate

The future whorls.
Fate dances with death in
a way that cannot be
described. Too many
whirls bend and twist together.
Can it be?
Why shouldn't it be?
Never mind the time-traveling.
Let me interfere with your
space.

Love like the firecrackers that explode in your fingers

Night crawled in with the fireflies on the gate. It reminds me of the stars that sparkled on your ears. That cheap plastic with glitter slipping away.

You'd turn your head away, but it is you pulling me in. I can feel myself sinking.

I'll always blame you.

The icebergs freeze our lungs and the words fall out of the air around us.

Saving grace to it all but still—

We'll grab the vests, throw ourselves into the boats. We'll try not to sink—
maybe for a few minutes.

We know we already have the white flags.

We bobble and yell like we're children. Just children playing at life, in the end.

So we will play ring-around-the-rosie and we will all fall down. Over and over, until—
capsized. Call the morgue. We're too sure to bother with the doctor.

She's turning blue so grab the scissors. We'll break her ribs to free her from her cage.

We think she will be happy.

We promise.

Beat. Beat. Beaten.

A bright red star
muffles a singular blue hue.
Blue is the color of silence
in a world so loud.
Make me believe you care.
No roses, no fanfare.
Pluck me out of a piece of
your heart and serve it to me whole.
Blue and red make purple
like the bruises you've left behind
so deep inside.
With this, I know the color
of my own heart.

When the sun falls so will our hopes

The fields are empty. The dying sunlight casts the ground golden. Imagine that each shadow cast was a trail. Something for us to make our fortune on. But we know the darkness will bring shadows and demons. The way our feet trample each other tells us everything we know. We don't know how to dance.

The beauty startles in the end. The way the bleakness of your smile meets the love in my eyes. I'm never sure what to say. How do I escape what I so desperately want? But I turn over the hollowness of our togetherness. The loose fingertips that never offered love. We don't know how to be.

Tilted

My sweat is a smoky gray,
tendrils of positive toxicity and anger.
I think I'm going to hell.
Not for anything exciting or wild,
but the idea that I'm a normal person in a world
rotten to its leaden core.
Watching us burn ourselves to death
like stars on arrival.
Knowing we won't realize until it's too late in this
world of make believe and too reality.

Crashing Through Daydreams

I watched knowing we were going to fail. A car accident I was victim to. Passenger, driver, cop surveying the destruction saying, "Damn, didn't they realize how fast they were going?" I loved you until you said yes.

Heart Attack

The marrow in the bones
leeching out
spilling into the tub.
We say good day while
the moon settles over
my skin. Listen to me—
Say it. Say it.
Say—
The water splashes. Hello—
oh. How we don't know
how the heart
goes down the drain.

Spaceman Untethered

You were so high,
more than me,
more than anyone
above me.
I would watch the ceiling tiles, counting specks
like stars.
I told myself it was my best function.
After all, you were so limitless.
The potential was there for so much
but I was a hopeless romantic
too often
I'll kiss some faceless guy against those
skyscraper windows I said were for you
instead
years later I said I was less of a disaster but you
felt like more of one.
The limitless had been trampled down in a
mockery of success.
Last thing I had wanted for you.
Put on the suit and celebrate adultery with your albatross.
Your liver will be pecked but I'll replenish it anew
with all the stars I plucked out of my eyes
for you.
After all, it's my best attribute.

Business Hours

A day of willpower gone and I'm drinking
into the void. Swallowing everything wrong
with me and letting it burn through my esophagus.
It settles like a weight in my stomach and
I try to cough it up.
The only thing that comes out is a promise
I'm fine.

Whiteout

Raining so hard,
sobs bursting out of my throat.
I wanted to erase everything about you.
Smear it across the paperwork of our lives.
But the problem is those damn gum erasers
leaving imprints behind.
We're going under the bridge
about to collapse.
There's a storm brewing
and we can't see anymore.
Blinded by all the things we haven't noticed
and the ones we pretend we haven't.
I'll try to sneak one in
like some EpiPen
to save me from it all.
But you turn your face away from me
because the bridge is already down.
I just was blind to it.

The walls look jaundiced

Ghosts roam the house.

They say they don't want anything
but the cold has settled into my
bones.

They say they want to love me
but the words stick in my
throat.

They say the wind howls for me
but it does not know my
heart.

They say they want me to know them
but the mirrors don't know my
eyes.

They say the house creaks because
it is trying to bow to me.

The ghosts know everything but
the flesh peels away
and I am raw.

They say they want to love me.

Part II

Wanted: the truth. Lie if you must.

He told me

“You just don’t have much of a personality.”

“What?”

I wanted to say the words were a surprise but I couldn’t deny what was true. I was more upset that he had spoken them aloud. He was supposed to be my champion, my protector, my defender. He’d pushed me to do great things even as I knew he’d pushed me closer to the dregs of my self-esteem more often than not.

“Yeah, you don’t... You don’t suggest anywhere to go. What to eat.”

“Why is that a problem? I really don’t care what we do as long as we’re together.”

He deflated a bit. I was always the relationship-focused one between us. Sometimes I wonder if he remembered we were dating. Had been dating. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. It’s ... Come on, you know what I mean.”

“No, tell me.” I crossed my arms. I would be stubborn out of my hurt rather than genuine misunderstanding. He might not have loved me, but I loved him more than I loved myself most days.

“You...” He sputtered and stuttered to himself before he finally exploded. “You don’t say anything! You have no opinions. You go along with whatever I say. You don’t argue. You don’t disagree. How can you live like that?”

“I don’t like conflict.”

“I like having conversations!” He threw his hands up. “You don’t contribute anything! It’s all me, me, me. I don’t know a thing about you!”

I thought of all the times I laid awake next to him throughout the night. I could never sleep because I never felt comfortable. Yet there was something so intimate about sleeping next to someone. I had thought he would understand that.

“Why is it my fault you don’t know anything about me?” I asked.

“Because you don’t have a personality! I already told you that.” He stopped but seemed to have realized that, since he already broke up with me, he didn’t have to be nice anymore.

“There’s something wrong with you.”

“Oh.”

“You’re, like, broken or something.”

“Oh.”

It was when he hugged me that I realized I had been crying all along.

Murder in the Nth Degree

Obsessive thought that shapes the mind. Life is easier when you pretend to live it. You walk through the motions. You breathe through the lies. *Flash, flash, bang*. The bombs go off, but we've all had the warning a long time coming. Maybe next time I'll finally explode into the stardust all those lines say I am. I sewed an arrow into my wrist, looking for those red threads leading to my fate. Untethered, looking for an anchor but knowing finding one means sinking.

Memories of me

The ghost walks through me with not a shiver but a sigh. It rattles my lungs. A faraway country song tugs somewhere under an arm. Like that heart attack that threatened to take me away. Promised to take me. Failed, again and again. The surgeons had never seen anything like it—not that I believed them.

They were just trying to flatter me. A lifelong big spender, me. Especially in hospitals.

The ghost waves hello—maybe goodbye. I'm always waiting for a goodbye it feels like. Like the other foot that will drop onto my head, surprising me but not really. The past and present collide in the mirror. My past self sees the current and wishes for the future. Better, maybe. The ghost doesn't know which is better and I don't care.

The ghost kisses me. Shadows linger on my lips. It tastes of flowers and happiness. We make love and that's when the ashes come. Dancing on my tongue and falling from the ceiling. The room is coated in a haze.

Time fades like the dying light of my breath

Walking long dead conversations
through forums.

Resurrection swims in front
of us through these pages. I exist
on one side and you the other.

The world shrinks into pen
strokes tattooed onto pages of
a soul. The significance of
now has disappeared into nostalgia.

Time repeats in cyclical
ways that demand we stay
on the wheel.

Weather

I tell myself it's the rain. The way I smell the ozone and feel electrified. My skin is ready to spark but I need something to set off the fire. The clouds gather an ominous gray and I go to him because he knows what I want. His fingers feel like lightning against my sides. His mouth is always like touching an exploding star. It's a celestial event, captured in the backs of knees and corner of my neck. It reminds me of being alive. Thunder rumbles and I gasp because I can feel it deep in my chest, that echo of a time gone past. It's a moment that slips through my fingers again and again. I recapture it briefly and the electricity shoots up my spine until I think I'm broken. Outside the rain falls. Sometimes it is a gentle *tap tap tap* of rain gutters and other times the hail damages the earth and I wonder if it is giving me a warning. The world becomes saturated and I am back standing on top of ruins, battered by the storm. The other calls me back. Finds me cowering inside myself and demands to know why. His fingers thread in my own and my heart beats inside his hands. Outside the earth rumbles.

Day One

Burn the witch, burn the witch.
It pulses inside me in time with my heartbeat.
I couldn't tell you who the witch was,
but I wanted to smother her out with smoke
trailing from my own lazy lips.
I wanted to be the dragon howling into the night.
I wanted to be the flint striking against stone
because I wanted to be the one who was special.
I wanted to burn out like a million stars
dead on arrival.
The sluggish pulse more alive than the funeral
pyre you put me on.
Let them talk about the blood dripping but never
tell them the truth.
I'm so guilty.

The day I said no was the day we got married

The house went up step-by-step. The way we built our hearts into it, the arguments, the ways you got what you wanted and I sometimes did. I console myself with the idea that I got you, but I'm never sure what prize that is. Is it the hugs, the kisses, the way you poke fun or drive me insane?

At night we lay side-by-side. Fingers locked with no key. Your grip is so tight that it bruises in desperation. It's hard to be anything else sometimes and I've known that since I met you, but I'm never sure why you chose me. Is it the loneliness, the sadness, the way we're scared to be alone?

We want things piece-by-piece. We huddle in your safe room, nestled deep inside, where no one will find us. It suits us to be alone because that's the kind of together we thrive in. But I'm sure that's the answer to my prize. It's the devotion, the love, the way you'll never leave me.

Penitence

The days blend together like shrouds on faces.
I'm being called back home. The trees are
sweet and the wind is harsh. I'm dying of
thirst in my kingdom. I claim the seas as my
own but there's no reprieve. The world will
demand sacrifices and I will step into the altar.
It's too easy not to fight. Your fingers walk
up my spine along with the rest of you. I
am so desperate to show kindness to anyone
but myself. The rosary wears me down but
the confession box is empty of sinners. Freedom
is a joke when I don't know what to do.

Love corrodes like that wedding ring lost in the backyard

Water drips. I watch it run down the windows like a lover's cold fingers against my spine. The sun is peeking out but I'm not ready to do the same. I watch it rise higher. The sun-glazes are a startling purple. They remind me of the smudges under my eyes. The fingertips pressed into my inner arms. That moment of beauty becoming violent. A fire brushes the backs of my bare thighs while the fire pit licks the edges of my feet. I let it. Affection comes in all forms. You sit across from me, legs automatically thrown in my lap. I don't remember sitting down but I remember every moment of you walking over to me. I think about returning the gesture, the flippant expectation of it. But I don't. I'm tired. I don't have that security in not driving you away. I'll stay forever but no one else is like me. I learn that more each day, each way I breathe out the fog that clouds my lungs. So I stay to watch the sun rise. Maybe one day I will rise with it.

Blood Donation

Marrow dripping from the bones.
Donations welcome, always. Tell me
hello and I will give you a
way to say goodbye. A gender
wound buried in a thousand smiles
and fake yeses. The way we
ignore ourselves to help others
survive.

Stuck in the lonely violence of feeling

The house creaks.

My eyes skirt to the corners before I look at you. You're absorbed in whatever movie we're watching. You haven't even flinched. I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you don't feel betrayed by this house.

Where it should have cradled you, comforted you, it had let you down. I can't imagine what you felt when you jumped off the bus to the roof torn off everything you had ever known.

I hated my home, each incarnation of it, each way the world let me down. Maybe it's because your tornado was once and done and mine has been never ending.

The song goes "The wind comes sweeping down the plains..." and that's only ever part of the story. Oklahoma is the tornadoes. The bombs hitting concrete and hearts across state lines.

My family was driven out by the Dust Bowl but here I am back, shivering in the wind that never ends. It should be easier. We've evolved. We've grown.

The problem is that living is never easy. The truth is the hardest tornadoes are the ones inside people like you and me. So I watch you from the corner of my eye. I watch that storm quietly simmering, and I admire that. Mine bubbles up out of my mouth and fingers and eyes. There's no self-protection left when the storm hits. Everyone needs to batten down the hatches and hold on tight. I beg it so often that I don't know how to do anything else.

Please hold on tight.

Everything I Learned in 20/20 Vision

The skies are cold but never as cold
as the vice grip on the heart at 2am.
The loneliness that prickles the skin
like the fingertips of years past.
Turning over where you never are,
looking for my tomb.
I'll find it cradled in the hands
of the people who pass me by.
Enslaved by my own thoughts
more than I ever want to admit.

You're never more exhausting than when you're exhausted

The house is quiet. You wanted a quiet night in, like the thousand nights behind us and the endless ones ahead. I say okay, but it's not what I want. Not this house, hidden deep in the trees, locked behind gates, and sequestered behind lies.

But I want you, so that's okay.

"What do you want to watch?" is a refrain throughout our nights. Earlier you insisted we had to eat pizza. I don't know if this is your way of making sure I have a turn, or if you just don't care. The lamplight falls on your hair, making it glow silver. Nothing I want to say has anything to do with television or movies.

"Something funny," you say in the silence. "You're always too dark and depressed."

You're not wearing your glasses, so there's no light glinting to let me know you're watching me. It's the smallest ways you can hide that make me worry. I pretend to look for something to watch, scrolling and clicking. I can't help but feel the screens are running away from us.

I settle on something I'd watched a handful of times and you've watched dozens more. But the comfortable makes you smile and pat my knee. "There you go, happy!" Maybe if we say it enough, it will finally be true. Maybe if my eyes are exposed to it enough, I'll know what it is. Maybe I'll know your version so I can catch up, at least.

Artificial Intelligence

I'm obsessed with not being average.
My world is crashing like daffodils in a storm.
How high functioning can you get?
you whisper
I just want to take care of someone
and I have a feeling it isn't you.
Well I'm here now, aren't I?
you say.
Average obsession yet
more problems than the devil has sinners.
We're onto the used and abused portion of the evening.
Lying awake,
wresting with rain clouds.
I swallowed fire like my answers
were burning at the stake.

Why don't you two have children?

The american dream is dead
but too tired to care.
Working 9 to 5 with no rest in-between.
Breastfeeding \$50k in debt.
You mock us
that obsessive
love of everything but reality.
Plant mom, dog mom, feed the children,
feed me.
Generation of anxiety
struggling to get by.
Make it until you fake it.
Slinking in corners
faces lifted by flashes
pulling us down in the hole faster.
Tripping up stairs, blinded by our own misery.
I'll leave a kiss on the mirror
so you know I've been around
My ring keeps sliding down the drain
like my hope of he and I.
Maybe I'll find it in the laundry mat
playing in the dirt.
We gotta know
america is dead

The statistic down below

Dot your i's and cross your t's. The wind is blowing in tonight.
Grab your shotgun and batten down your hatches.
The witch is cackling tonight.
The siren pierces the sky and we're not sure why.
She's just next door, singing her praises.
She'll grab the headboard, grab the skin, and
she'll never give in.
Outside Mercury is rising like a lover.
Don't bother telling your mother.
She'll bury the bones, cast your fate.
You should have run before it was too late.
So cross your heart and pray you don't die.
There was too much hope in that sigh, sugar-pie.
The trees are blowing over and it's never gonna be enough.
Don't try to call that bluff. Forget your shoes, there's a knock on the door.
The witch is blowing you a kiss tonight.
She doesn't want hostages. She's not playing fair.
Better close your eyes because she's got you in her sights and
she'll never give in.

I wrote her another ten years like she cared

You're not obsessively in love with me anymore. You thought the world would end if you weren't. You never knew what I thought or cared. Even I know "Thanks," only goes so far when you're putting your heart out, stuttering and limp like all the cardiologists in the world can't fix. It's why I don't go with you to your appointments. I don't see the point in seeing the thing I've damaged over and over.

We don't talk for days.

I lay with my ear against your heart all the same. I fret over how it skips a beat and I tell you mine does too. You warn me against trying to match my breathing to yours. "It's like a disease," you tell me, but you haven't seen all the things I've seen. The disease is humanity and you're not more human than the rest of us. Despite what you think.

The first time I stayed over, I just did it. It was almost three years in. You fretted over parking your car far enough away from mine so I could get out easy. "Don't worry," I told you and pulled a bag from my car.

But you still didn't get it until I was pulling out a toothbrush hours later.

"You're staying," you said, like you were waiting for a punchline. I don't say anything.

We laid in bed and you apologized for the coughing next door and the furniture being moved upstairs. You say they're not always like this. You promise.

We smell like the same mint shampoo. "Try to sleep; you have work in the morning."

In the morning you straddled me and kissed me and left me your keys. You told me what was in the fridge and what wasn't. I didn't touch anything. I stayed in your new bed longer than you've been able to. Then I locked up and went home.

I returned your keys hours later.

I left and you followed me out the door, talking. Someone watching thought it was a lover's spat.

The security cam hovered over us like an invader.

"What's wrong?"

I left without saying anything.

"What's wrong?" you text hours later.

"You were busy."

Crown me in the flesh

The silent creeping thief,
stealing voices in the night.
The way hopes die in curled
fingers. Bridges burning every
day. I go to you because you
have a louder voice than mine.
Yours has never been as ripped
away as mine has. Society tells
me I am enough in all the
thousand ways I am not.
The hoarse cries climbing
like vines. Memory the great
tormentor of a thousand moments
of bent knees and hollow
cheekbones.
Can we have more?
Can we have acknowledgement?

Part III

Estate sale: everything but me.

What I Believe

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

One girl squinted a bit. It obscured her eyes in ways that they had accepted as mysterious. Everyone loved a good bit of mystery. “But everyone leaves.”

“Their loss.” There was a careless shrug that said the acceptance was finally deeper than skin. At least in this one moment. “I’d rather be alone than with people who are draining. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“The thing about self-worth...”

The voice trailed off as they looked at one another. Two sets of blue eyes stared at one another in a face-off. An exhaustion dragged them down but there was a spark that hadn’t been seen since childhood.

That’s what they wanted to believe, in any case.

“You have to face yourself first, before you can find it. You know, confidence.”

There was a wry smile the two of them passed like a secret. “Oh yeah, completely. Confidence central, me.”

“Hey, it’s like a twelve-step program. We have to start somewhere, right?”

“Building that personality step by step, huh?”

They shared a laugh but it barely lasted before it was swept away in a sigh.

“I kind of want to see him again.”

“For another tear-down?”

There was silence as they looked at one another. Closure was sometimes a petty thing, but that didn’t mean the ache of it disappeared into the ether.

“I’m not crying,” one said to the other.

“That’s great. But you sure look angry. You know what’s with me, though?”

“It’ll be different,” one assured the other. “It’s already different.”

“Then why are we still so sad?”

They stared at one another before one dropped her eyes and walked away. She glanced back once to see her reflection glancing back at her, too. One had the answers that the other refused to acknowledge.

Carousel Rides

The world is small. A thousand cuts
hidden in blades of grass. I lay awake,
watching the lightning cast shadows
against you. My breath is drowned out
by thunder. I'm waiting for it to take you
away from me. The thing about uncertainty
is that it is everywhere. The shadows that
hide your smile, the light that lies about
your eyes. We think too much in a world
that does too little. I hold my breath waiting.
Lightning strikes twice, always.

November, November, we burn to remember

You spent our day in class. One of those places I didn't want you to be because it drives a wedge further in.

I don't tell you this. I don't even think of this.

You talk of all the things that aren't my thing, and I remember us singing Garth Brooks in the shower. The words echoed off the tiles and it's the only time my words are syrupy-sweet. I didn't know the words to "Bye, Bye, Bye" like you did, but I could "da-da-da" all the best with The Proclaimers.

We don't talk much on our day. We haven't in a while. I asked if you were still in class, but didn't answer when you were out. Silence stretched, punctuated with worries about how we were silent. Later you told me something appropriately sweet and I told you something X-rated. You laughed like I wanted you to.

You say everything is fine. The lights are on, the Wi-Fi is sound, the cats are sleeping in a heated bed. Our boxers are plaid and the sheets are ice cold. Your pajamas were forgotten half on purpose, like always. I don't mind.

I love you.

That's sweet.

Our children purr while you're sobbing in the bathroom. You don't hide the sound with water anymore. My flashlight clicks on and off in the dark and it might be an SOS.

I think when we get married, we'll keep our own names.

until I felt the rattle in my lungs

Stay—

The car speeds along the bones
of the graveyard shift. Tomorrow
light will reveal the broken hearts
along the way.

The evening after—
repeat.

Fluffy's been gone twenty years
now but the rot is still fresh.
Entombing themselves like lover's
kisses to the eyes. The
desperation inside is so
sad. How do we beat it away
like a game of Battleship?
Sink, sink, sink me.

Wishes don't mean much to the living

I'm closing my eyes
and waiting until morning.
The death of me tonight is
the heartbreak of you being around.
Death transcends this holy week
but I've never felt more gone.
The disaster manifests in the ways I can't
talk to you anymore.
Someone blessed me
earlier but it spilled over
onto the rug.
Just another thing
I need to clean up.

We wouldn't even be together if I had better self-esteem

Violent skies. You said you loved me once. I clung to that memory for years. I weathered the storms while you were the pail pouring water down my throat. You thought to quench my thirst but it still wasn't enough. I was always so desperately parched. I showed you the deep pieces of myself and you said *that's nice*. I gave you the scars on lined paper and you looked away. *Not my thing, babe*. Memory is the great tormentor but sometimes it's the future that holds the worse monster. The one that looks in the mirror with hollowed out eyes and a million-watt smile. So I'll hold your hand and pray for better whether you know it or not. After all, it's the voice inside that says you're who I deserve but I hate being dragged so low.

Spaced Apart

I visited something old, something new. All I got was blue.

I know I'm not in love with the past anymore. A decade of feeling and all I can think: your hair flops now.

We talk and talk and you comment that I'm actually participating this time. I'm reminded of staring up at water-stained ceiling tiles for hours, waiting for the other foot to drop because you were a special type of insomnia-inducing plague on my heart.

I don't say anything and it feels like a punishment. Nothing changes as much as everything did. "I'm an idiot," falls from your lips, a refrain when I laugh, or say something you deem intelligent, or I just don't listen to what you say.

The truth is you like this personality better because I realized I don't give a shit about you anymore.

Awakening

There's a generation of rage inside me.
The world is so murky and gray but
I went to a funeral and had never seen such
brightness.
I wondered if it was some angel smiling down or
just the thought someone had escaped for a
better life finally.
I had wanted you to come but the living are never
as important as whatever it is you want to do
instead.
The selfishness has become laughable.
I used to imagine I was some cure but you've
been the poison infecting me all along.
I can already see the headlines:
Man looks back on his life to realize
he's been dead.
I hate being tied to such a cliché
but I also wonder why it is I love you so much
when there's just a flatness to our landscape.
I've never been an outdoors type of gal but I
thought there would be more hills we'd climb
together in some adventure for the ages.
Instead it's just you, and you, and you.
I pray there will be room for me but it's so
pathetically selfish of both of us.
I want you to change and you don't even think of
me in the end, do you?
I'm already the ghost walking through your window.

Griever's Creek

So
take me to church,
fix that solid emptiness inside me,
the worry festering about being alone.
Making it about
God help us all, right?

Yet
wide-awake at 2am
listening to the colorful prayers
reverberating in my head.
I'm always quietly devastated.

But
I'm so sorry I'm such a disaster
and I'll shove it all down.
After all,
why am I pushing you away in a world
that I'm suffocating in anyway?

Call the Void

You hold my hand so tight. The whites of your knuckles show against the blue of my veins. I'll leave little crescents in your skin and you dare to make your attempt even deeper than mine. It's as if you don't know you're already so deep inside you've left nowhere for me to go.

I told you about being held hostage. You tried to pry open my insides. The guts slid down your fingers and I know the feeling so well. Your mouth is like the Sahara. You don't drink enough water and I know this better than I know myself. I force cups at you morning, day, and night.

I just didn't know that it was the wrong thing.

Burnout

The clouds are gathering
and the heat in the room is rising
and not just from the spittle you fling.
My temper has always been staggering —
it's time for that uprising.
Even then, I don't know how to make it zing.

That skin glow in the moonlight,
you act like it's a radioactive fright.
You tell me I have some defect in the wiring,
I must be misfiring.
No, I'm just Juliet in the morning,
mounting her mourning
because she knows it's over.

There's such an undercurrent of rage
in everything that I do.
There's a scream building in my ribcage
and the volcano is about to blow.

The static in my veins

Opening
my mouth to hear
a needle screech on
an old record. Something
ancient, untold.
Knowing that isn't
enough
to continue like this.

Take the Safety Measures

I'm a wasted genius
rotting away for other people
driving a knife into my own back.
Howling in a voiceless rage when I get exactly
what I expected.
The truth is I'm furious with self-fulfilling
prophecies and Icarus was the only one who
knew right.
Fuck Delphi.
Fuck Nostradamus.
Fuck you.

Angry at men, angrier at myself for waiting.
Crush the veil and let me go.
I have better things to do
with all this lost time.

Don't you see?
Isn't that the sign of the truth?
It's when I'm so desperately disappointed
in you that I write.
Doesn't that mean this is all about you
and I coming to an end?

Bioluminescent

The drunken green pools
against the heart. Steam rises
to get out the eyes and hide
the tears.

But no tears will survive a Friday
evening where you are.

The house will creak with the
wind that doesn't bow.

There's sci-fi teeming down the walls
in blacklight sensors.

What will they see that we've
missed?

The splatters of dreams
and shattered chivalry. The hope
that's soaked into the carpet.

Cursory

The light snuffs out and
bleak horizons never-ending.
The screen stares back at me and
I don't know what to say.
Heartbreak shouldn't be delivered
this way.
I said I didn't want you to leave
but you've been gone for years.
The late nights lying alone were
always preparation.
I called them my tomb knowing
I was burying myself further in
not allowing myself to escape
for much too long.

Let its weight be my anchor

The view from the ocean was small. I thought about swimming farther out, but the tide was never going to take me where I needed to go. The lull of the water wasn't enough. I wanted to fill my mouth with stones. I wanted to feel the ocean salt burning down my throat like the whiskey we drank that night I said I do and you didn't. Like everything that I took seriously and you didn't. The way you breathed and I held my breath. How I actively looked for ways to make myself better for you while you were cutting all the red strings. The sticks you had and the stones I used against myself. I will swallow everything—the love as much as the apathy. I will become the dragon who swallows her own tail and I'll be stronger for it.

Self-Sufficient

Today the dream sizzles like
a flare in the chest.
The knowing of what will come.
Not the brightness of hope
but the creeping dawn of
joy like a whisper from a
lover in the dark—
finally.

The sun peeks out beneath the gray

It's that stride of one heeled boot in front of another.
That flash of gold around your wrists. The stateliness
in the angles of the face and the curve of the shoulders.
The vibrant red of a lip curled just enough others stop
and glance.
Boots are made for conquering and you've done that
all your life. You'll put out fires in heels because
you've got your own fire that burns brighter
than the stars above.
You'll outlast it all because you know better than most.
The sun will peek out brighter tomorrow. It'll be the light
capturing the steam rising off your mug and the glint
of your nails as you strum them against desks.
You're always going to be more, more, more.
You know the depth that rises up in life. That ghostly
gray which will settle over bones. But you're not made
of anything brittle.
The world tries and tests, but the truth is it doesn't stand
a chance against you.
The sun rises to meet you and you will see how you always win.