

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
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JACKSON COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

**DESIDERIUM**

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
CREATIVE WRITING

By  
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Edmond, Oklahoma  
April 18, 2022

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A THESIS  
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

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By



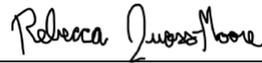
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*for my Aunt Susie, my parents, & my sister*

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Sydney Vance

TITLE: *Desiderium*

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Wendy Barnes

*Desiderium* is a collection of poetry composed with the aim of investigating loss through the primary lenses of grief and addiction. The poems housed in this collection attempt to navigate that opaque, precarious experience of developing an alcohol addiction/dependency while coming of age, and many of these poems specifically address the intersection of addiction, youth, and great tragedy. My work draws inspiration in storytelling technique from poets such as Ada Limón, Tracy K. Smith, and Maggie Smith. To write coherently and honestly about addiction, Kaveh Akbar's *Calling A Wolf A Wolf* and sam sax's *madness* were my foremost guides and influences. For my poems about grief, Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* was paramount; loss is naturally a heavy subject, and Bang's work deftly demonstrates how grief can be written without the sacrifice of levity. The female body serving as one of my book's foremost motifs, I have followed poets such as Natalie Diaz and Limón in my attempts to complicate how the body and the female sexual experience are transcribed. The greatest struggle I faced in the construction of *Desiderium* was in arranging the poetic order to align with the arc of my speaker in a way that feels purposeful and is coherent to the reader. Her journey is one that begins in a place of questioning and resistance in the first half, and ends in a place of more active acceptance and accountability for her life and her choices in the second. Ultimately, *Desiderium* is a record of young adulthood from this writer's unique perspective, an attempt to make sense of fact, memory, and that barely perceptible space where the two intersect.

*But love is impossible and it goes on  
despite the impossible.*

—Ada Limón

I.

## One Floating Thing

Past midnight, the neighborhood pool always wanted us

drunk, girls of rose and rhododendron slipping

through narrow gate, cheap tequila and chlorine wilting

our petals. Motion-activated lights waited

like gargoyles above our heads, but we were soft

upon the water. Said we'd bring boys someday—pictured them

faceless, ready for anything. Mostly, the pool was the place

we learned the art of not only floating, but staying that way,

staring into a night we weren't afraid of losing. Junebugs

landed on our cheeks, one floating thing atop another. It was

boredom with its hooks in our bikini straps, boredom

with a million other teenage girls to bother, but it was me

stripping in the parking lot, me running down the sidewalk

in naked bravery, me feeling like something greater than girlhood,

afraid of nothing. Sometimes living is only false memory.

## Freeze Warning

read the postings in red around my apartment complex. *Take precaution.* Any warning is better than none, but some of us miss the signs anyway. Too cold for eleven days and nights, everywhere I look a reminder. I wear your cross around my neck though I don't claim your religion, your Claddagh on my right hand: attempts at a closeness I no longer know how to transcend. This morning, my dad came by unannounced, shoveled snow away from my car. *Remember to let your faucets drip,* he reminded me, this act of service just as much an act of love, one part of loss I know inside-out.

My sister does not need the reminder to take care. She stays at your home through the storm to keep your dogs warm. My bathroom sink water falling in dull rhythm, I am still convinced the pipes will find a way to burst before the next day wakes us with white, will find a way to bleed themselves bone-dry. And so what if they do. Yesterday, I skipped washing the coffee pot, not so much choice as allowance for something like stillness to find its way home. Still awake, I look outside. Three fifty-three in the morning and the snow won't make its peace with goodbye. I'm thinking about peace when a message lights up my phone:

*The smoke detector, my sister's written. It won't stop chirping.*

## Desiderium, One

She was found in her kitchen, her body presented stretched in her living room. Her two dogs her most immediate witness, then two red couches, one candle she'd once forgotten to extinguish. At some point her glasses were taken from her precious face. The policeman or funeral home attendant, probably, had to. *Are these her glasses?* I ask my sister and find myself holding them, so much lighter than what I never expected. Questions feel wrong when you're only speaking to prove that you still can. Cleanup done, my mother turns my way: *Is Mercury still retrograde?* Her eyes wet, flat—perhaps seeing a new meaning in heavenly body, too. *I don't think Mercury has anything to do with this, Mom.* And even if I am right, I know I am also wrong. Blood was everywhere it shouldn't have been: in the kitchen tile grout and all over our shoes, hand-printing a roll of toilet paper—but it never touched my aunt's glasses, also found where they shouldn't have been: on her kitchen countertop, that dream-like negative space forever orbiting the face I love.

crescent

later, you'll look at the moon

from your parents' backyard, distanced  
by an old lyric you just can't catch

anymore. something about  
a lighthouse.

when the next morning is overcast,

you will notice how all the windows  
in the living room are east-facing,

how there was never any plant life  
here, how you would like there to be.

you're going to bleed  
here, memory of a homemade cherry pie  
in place of the open wound, but

there are worse ways to mend a hurt.

you will stay here  
longer than is right, and for love,

they will let you. love will be the best  
wrong reason, as  
it often is.

let's face  
what you couldn't:

there was never any telling who  
you wanted yourself to be. and there is not

much else to say about the home

that only felt that way again

when you came back to it empty.

Listen. In my throat there is a story I will never tell.

I will tell other stories, but I will not tell  
that one. Listen. In the springtime, sunscreen

sometimes smells a little like lavender. We tie rope  
to a tree and swing into a river, debate

how many articles of clothing is too many. Cicada  
will not let us speak more than we need. Evening

is our jukebox. Listen. Some people will never see  
this never-one-color southern sky, and what a shame.

We are so lucky in so many ways. We count them.  
One, the river. Two, the lake. Three, the plains. Four,

the plains. This could have been anybody's love story, even  
mine. I could say that the wind was pornographic when it blew

through my hair, traced the empty along my inner arm.  
I could say that the sunset-light made me ethereal

and undeniable, that I stood naked somewhere  
in the westernmost part of my state, laughing, and wanted

to be seen. Maybe I fell for the heat. Maybe it was  
that lavender-smell. Maybe the tethered rope. Maybe it was

the wind, rough touch that lingered upon my skin—but  
listen. That story will never speak, never see the light

of day. It would never give itself away like that.

## What the Night Implies

Nightmares, I read, are on the rise in America.

I like to think this means the country is waking

up, the symptom as ultimate prescription.

But there is no telling what fear might

ignite. At four in the morning, it seems

there is always a dog barking in the distance

or a train passing by, noises I only hear when

there is nothing else in the world to do

but listen. As October breathes humid

down Oklahoma's neck, I have stopped

texting most of my friends back. Whether

this makes me good citizen or bad person,

I am ashamed, but my shame is not

the point. Head against my pillow, I listen

for the dogs because I need to know

for sure there are creatures alive out there

who have not forgotten how to make noise

when they ache, when they love, or when

they are just afraid of what the night implies.

If a tree falls in a forest, they muse.

If a woman abandons her country

in the lone quiet of her bedroom, I counter,

vibration a ripple that only ever ends

where impossibility begins.



I have been drunker  
than this. There is  
more than just blood  
running through me, but  
this isn't about that.

This is

Tuesday night

you falling out  
of your barstool

me throwing a dart at a board  
so honestly  
I break the dart

the EXIT sign lit up  
so brightly as  
we leave we think  
it's mocking us

the car parked  
so far away  
we think  
we're never going  
to make it out.

## Another Round

When I come to, the predawn thunder's howling for me—

faint as moonlight remnant—low and sober, like unrequited

yearning. If this bed is mine—*Please*—there will be no reckoning.

I'm aware of the faucet running / the sweat collecting

behind my knees. Aware of lack, too: the kind of heat

only a body could generate, withdrawing / the idea of absence

as a cooling / stray cat's purr lodged forever somewhere

along its own throat, along mine, mistrusting.

I open my eyes, brazenness fleeting, and the thermal dark

begins to push me out: my homecoming.

When I step outside, the sky's insistent upon its own inverted blooming,

crying for us Friday morning fools, our diagonal journeys destined toward

the same gas stations, three AM faces behind the checkout counter

undone beneath drunken fluorescent, lost IDs only currency

in the case of our sheepish return. My drive home is motion blur

where I am the one object in focus, steady, resistant

to bleeding into the fabric of landscape. Night's excess sloughed off

in my shower / the familiar circling of a drain / past time to contend

with this baptism. This storm. Forget about looking myself in the eye.

I scan only the body reflected, glimpse a crimson stain crescenting

the blue terry hugging my midsection, the marked return of a cycle

for which—I'll admit—: I should have been more prepared.

## A.A. and Iris Flowers

My first/last meeting, the word *sober* still a game of Truth or Dare. Rock bottom one season hence, I think I've already landed—I sensationalize: *rock concert gone awry*. Twenty-five, my first time wondering what to wear, what to tell these strangers of my hobbies: losing earrings / learning to bake / checking on dad / running indoors / taking a drug / contorting to see the self clearly. I'm almost too obvious. My body is pinball-machine in a bar arcade swollen with heavy-limbed swaggerers—if they play to keep the ball aloft, they'll never make it inside me. Sometimes I have to take the loss, start from the top. Like grassy rainwater rolling to ravine. Like asking my bedroom walls if heels make me look like I think I am better than these people. Like ripping them off my feet as a kind of starting over.

To be defeated is not to be powerless. I was defeated when I left the window open / dropped the glass / locked the door. Preludes I've offered to anyone who would listen, freshly nicked teeth desperate for proof of existence. Look—

before the Google search I performed last week, I thought all iris flowers were pale blue / pictured fields of pale blue under my feet / wanted to paint my home pale blue / name my daughter Iris / feed her blue while she sleeps. And still I say I've lived such an interesting life, one that—trust me—you'll want to hear about. Trust me, I say. Listen to this. I've been drunk my entire life / I'm drunk right now. Watch me while I do something about it. I'm going to do something about it, and I mean it. And I don't mean it. Don't trust me, I mean:  
/        I promise I'll mean something someday.

## Cutting Fruit with Boys in the Dark

I remember him laughing as he severed the watermelon, ripe,  
a plastic knife and a grocery store parking lot late  
one July night, remember the sweat tracing its bloodline  
all the way down my back, thinking the heat would kill us  
both before we discovered the taste of gravel-  
splintered fruit. I kept the small sticker  
assigning the melon its number until last week  
when I totaled my car, uprooted everything  
inside. No one in the salvage yard was bothered  
by the old packs of cigarettes I forgot to throw away when I quit,  
cold, that February, or the Halloween costume remnants  
/ former pasts around the backseat, the collection of cheap  
air fresheners I looped around my rearview  
but became too lazy or maybe too attached  
to cut away, or my watermelon sticker wrinkled and faded,  
captive to the driver's vanity mirror, pressed there like  
an eight-year-old secret only regret could keep—  
and no, I don't remember how that bloodied melon tasted  
or how long it took us to devour, only that I kept the sticker because

he handed it to me, and I wanted so badly  
to be the kind of person who kept things forever, or maybe  
just the kind who knew what a thing could mean  
years after the fact. When a car doesn't survive a wreck  
but the person inside of it does.

## Six Months: Broken Aubade

Winding out of  
drunk and  
into what was left  
of the breath  
lightning  
left behind  
it, I saw some mornings  
spat themselves  
to dusk, purples  
sputtered the  
roundabout, bloodreds  
served me shiny  
highway exit  
on silver platter.  
I don't miss  
the after  
of it all, but  
I don't know, maybe  
that is a lie.  
Maybe  
I'm not more  
sandstorm  
than smoke-  
show, not  
when light  
still fissures  
impossibly, here  
and there, from  
undereye shadow, me  
looking up from  
a low  
I was certain  
would never rise. I  
melted  
the stars and  
was left with  
everything else I  
could not  
change, or see. What  
I will say about it  
now is I have  
nothing  
to say, silence  
already answered for  
by my red hair

singed, waiting  
like bad luck  
on the side of the road  
somewhere west  
of a sunrise  
I'll never fully recall.

## Vignette for Core Memory

an accident/[ ] fall afternoon/—maybe summer/

— my mother hits the turtle[ ]/ spring of '99/ 2000 fresh

/ blooms are everywhere are coming up

crimson around the body/—never mind I don't

see/—she brakes she gasps/or I gasp/ask  
*What was that/my mother only ever protected me*

/ the least important part is the season/ snow

cradles the sidewalk not this creature/ *These*

*things happen* she says [ ] / Yes they do/ I look up

& down the street/[ ] it's raining.

## Deathhunt

As the summer storms chase us, we talk about  
pulling the car over, but it almost feels like we went searching

for this thing to outrun. A way west of this stretch of highway,  
buzzards fly overhead, and I think I know what it means. Tomorrow,  
you'll want me to tell you about my old haunts, but not about why

they still haunt me. Next month, I'll try to explain why the living  
haunt me more often than the dead, but I won't tell you how

my bed sheet sobs when I dream pregnancy, how often I scare myself  
with how much I like to be alone. *There's something dead*  
*over there*, my mom points out, and I'm the one to say, *I know, I see it,*

but neither of us acknowledges how we know or what it is we think  
we see. And, anyway, isn't it a myth that vultures circle the dying,

identify the carrion as such before it becomes so? Across the radio  
the sirens begin to sound. A voice tells us, *Mobile homes*  
*will be damaged*. We choose to take an early exit, veer east into

kinder weather, force those early hallmarks of this drive to fade  
out of view. Down the road, I'll think about those birds and

their warm flight, all the things that have not come to pass as  
I once thought they might. The weather will turn, as it does,  
and I will realize there is myth that lives in me, too.



## The last time he spent the night

I was too drunk to see his face. After,  
I spent months afraid of my room, once-  
holy bed spoiled by a war I fought  
and died for alone because  
that's what I wanted. A year and a half  
later, I say I have forgotten  
his name. War teaches  
that not all violation is violent,  
nor all violence the same. Now,

I live like the highway  
at sunset, trade home for more  
time, hang closeness for distant shadow,  
the weight of me folding  
cautiously into the thin palm of night  
air like people who have forgotten  
what it's like to be close fold into  
each other's cold. Someday, I think,  
I'll let myself kiss someone while  
I'm sober. The voyeur in me  
likes to watch, but the woman in me wants  
to be the one gaze  
setting a man aflame. No space  
or illusion left on earth  
exists in the same way it did  
even one moment ago—so I  
drive until I don't remember  
how to stop, invite strangers in  
to do the dirty work I shouldn't,  
medicate with words  
that hurt and watch the world  
pass me by from a bed  
that will never feel like mine again.

erasure theory

when I burned you    you see you weren't supposed to  
     come back    so here I go again    throwing lit matches back  
           into their boxes    & for what    they say time

is the one constant    is one hell of an anchor    binds  
     our feet    & hands    & drowning: the most violent way  
           a nonviolent girl could go    like watching a fire approaching

the edge of a body of water    the very last time  
     my tongue forks a proverbial slip    or the way I have  
           been natured    —no    nurtured by the kind of cruel gaslight

women only project    I guess    because no one else will  
     own up to it    this uneven blame thing I've come to know  
           as common speech    as staring into a mirror blinking &

not seeing her like she wants    like the way one flame  
     will scorch us limb to limb    until it singes  
           everything    consumes everyone    until no    no

they don't come back    & *yes*    yes that is how this is  
     supposed to work    once they are gone    they are not  
           supposed to come back    once I say *no*    that

should be that    should be that    should be that

## Silent Tongues and Neil Young

Around the time home began to mean the place  
I made for myself instead of a place  
that was made for me,

I drive my sister away  
from her old apartment, thinking about

the way music sounds so much louder  
when we ask it to speak for us.

We offer silent tongues and Neil Young, begin  
the listening.

*/Somewhere on a desert highway/*

She thinks she's protecting me, but I know  
we both see one another as a shelter.

*/You know  
it ain't easy/*

The next summer, we'll talk about  
our parents, that static between the four of us

swelling into something finally tangible,  
then neglected, unmoored.

*/You got to hold on/*

But before all of that, this is who we are:  
Unknown Legends on a stretch of highway that

reminds me of why I'm sober and why she isn't,

*/gets the far-away look in her eyes/*

in this dark machine

willing the both of us to stay the path,  
to keep on driving, to just make it home.

II.

## Self-Portrait as Magician's Assistant

I am the party trick, red production minus all of the glitz, you invite  
on stage when the party gets boring, promise

your audience I'll be willing, captivating.  
What does it matter you take my throat, so long as you

do it softly, behind the scenes, palm-to-skin, thumb-  
to-pore like baptism I must receive via sweat & flesh, only,

always? I strut backstage & grab that old black hat while a white  
rabbit paces beneath our misdirection, moans mother

alive inside of me, & you perform the sad shadow errand  
of conjuring him when you feel most like killing.

See, you could take the girl out of the illusion, &  
even the best magician couldn't bring her back. See,

when you slice me in two, I just fucking shine. Look at me  
lingering, still burning alive on this stage, phantom-

limbed & all dolled up. My blood is only ribbon, your saw a discount  
costume piece, our show whatever they want it to be. Or

maybe the rabbit is dead & my blood is real & my body  
belongs to a horde of men in black capes who just want to touch me,

legs carved from torso. & when  
they take their eyes off me, every time, I disappear.

## Poem for Missing Body

Once, I left my body  
because the word *no* wouldn't  
and I thought it wanted  
a demonstration. A body is not  
poetry, but a thing to be dissected

all the same. And though I am  
still intact, I feel my insides  
diluted, restrained. What sweet mud

will drink me in when this is over,  
and whose shadow has already begun  
eclipsing those long dried-up  
bits of me? When I was another,

it was kind of fun to not remember,

to tell everyone I always got exactly  
what I wanted. But when it was not fun,  
it was just lonely. Still, I am not

the only one on shore with no memory  
of the swim, not the only one woken  
in the night by the feeling

of another body

of water pulling me under.

Anymore, fantasied detachment is all  
I have—I'm drinking again, I'm  
licking the sweat from some new  
face, palming their heat in mine. And

when we have sex, it matters because  
my body is no longer my vice.

## Creature Comfort

When I kill the spider, it is bloodbath, but when  
the wasp kills the spider, it is beautiful. Perhaps the spider knows  
the difference between nature and malice, gives itself  
more readily to the predator it sees more of itself within.  
Here is a story I tell often: once, a Buddhist ex-boyfriend  
refused to kill a spider in my bedroom not out of fear  
but love. In the end, after he had vacuumed it away,  
I realized I no longer loved him, imagine he later regretted  
betraying his nature for a woman who would never  
once feel guilty she asked him to. I suspect the wasp  
doesn't feel guilty, either, paralyzing her spider-prey,  
making a meal of its abdomen for the survival of  
her offspring—but what do I know of a wasp's inner life.  
Maybe I'm only projecting because I want so badly to identify  
with this predator, though we are all prey in someone's eyes.

Fungus gnats making a home of my houseplants' roots  
would make a home of my body if they could. I blanket the soil  
in diatomaceous earth, imagine those newly minted adults  
emerging from damp sphagnum moss ready to repeat the cycle  
only to be met with the blade of dehydration, a violence  
that is only violent because it is unimaginable. This morning,  
I repot and up-pot at least half of my plants even though  
it's November now, and as the bright wingspan of day  
has begun to fold back in upon itself, my plants are beginning  
their winter dormancy. I'm a little late this year, so I take  
more care than usual inspecting, loosening each root system  
before I nestle them into pots of healthy soil, knowing I've done  
all I can to to ensure they survive the promised cold.  
Every now and then, I wonder what my ex-boyfriend would say

about the amount of life I've managed to sustain—  
and then the thought passes, and I make note of how long it's been  
since any spider reared his head in my bedroom.

## In Season

*Bluegrass* only meant home to me until  
I learned the word *perennial*.

As girls living  
on Bluegrass Lane, the music we made was  
rollerblading up & down the block &  
ricocheting airballs, a game of H.O.R.S.E.  
in the driveway. You think

the joke of life is there is too much of it—  
the other joke is I think too much is not enough. Still,

we agree it is a plant we cannot stop uprooting,

for better or worse. & there is no how-to  
guide to save what is always dying, even when

we choose to look directly at it,  
dry our tears upon its face,  
even when we choose together.

Even the last time we were in season, we weren't.  
We gave up, morphed into those cottonwood queens  
we were always putting to bed, all hot-white tired  
& tamed by a wind so charged,  
we let ourselves go.

We had no choice. We had to.

## Pandemic Elegy

In the parking lot the other morning, I discovered  
a bird, dead, its small body frozen

in soft warp before my car / misshapen cloud

abandoned by sky, a thing surrendered

to nature. At first I thought I'd done it—*I'm so sorry,*

*little bird. Do you hear me?* Wind coaxing movement

from feathers, it was almost like—*almost:* the marrow

of death—the animal was breathing. *There, there.*

*How am I to know who your little body belongs to now,*

*or where?* This could have happened

anywhere, but there is something to be said

for your ending here, so close to home, in this great sea

and season of our path impermanent. Little wings,

I drove away because I loved you

and there was nothing else to do but leave.

Forgive me: I do not know how else to grieve.

## Cause of Death

### I.

Days after Daylight Saving begins, still  
 in mourning of the hour lost, my neck  
 moves toward the absence  
 of light like my own instinctual  
 nyctinasty, seeking the molecular comfort  
 of a familiar blooming, though  
 I no longer recall even the muscle  
 memory of opening. Proof, at last,  
 I can adapt to almost anything,  
 even the things that won't adapt to me.

### II.

In April, my aunt hospitalized but  
 not for pandemic, doctors missed the  
 clot, discharged her too soon.  
 My retired nurse mother knew  
 what I couldn't.

*I feel like they're sending  
 my sister home to die,*  
 she told me, hand  
 to her chest,

*I feel it.*  
 I said,

*They would never  
 let that happen,*  
 and believed it.

If I had been quiet.  
 If I had been right.

### III.

Post-vaccine, my first thought  
 in the waiting room is for  
 all the people who should've  
 had this same chance at survival.

The official cause of death on the certificate reads

COMPLICATIONS OF ATHEROSCLEROTIC  
 CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

but I can't get past the word *complications*,  
as though death is merely a matter  
of difficulty, a quotidian obstacle. Yet

we cede ourselves to this cruel objectivity,  
by necessity, all of the time.

IV.

The other night, I dreamed myself  
back into her kitchen, except  
this time when I opened my mouth  
to cry, all that came out was light  
and five white palm-sized petals  
with dew, and when I stepped on top  
of them, the blood did not transfer  
from the bottom of my shoe, almost  
as though I had never been there at all.

the tongue is a graveyard

*after D.A. Powell*

the tongue is a graveyard full of the things we've had to kill before they got past:  
words and other noises that sound like words. death on familiar impact. this terrain

reveals nothing new, so instead I look back: the wreck sending the side-view mirror  
through the open window and past my cheek, fragments of glass dancing violently

beneath the four AM light of a car dealership sign. I might've laughed. after,  
what was left intact: maybe nothing, but I always thought you'd known that.

it's two months since you died and I have perfected the driving away, the keeping  
quiet: while the world around us apologizes for nothing, the worlds inside us are starved

of faith. I want to apologize for all that I couldn't control, for all that I could,  
but in the end, machine betrays body. *more of the same*, I imagine you'd say

because you always knew: even when some of us are spared, none of us are.

## Nashville

Is this the right color to wear when you seduce  
 your own body? I don't drink wine anymore because  
 wine tastes like nothing, like in bed with the lights

off, never on. Cherries with no pit, no bitter. I pout  
 and I push and I pucker this hollow away  
 —for now. But in some after-dark sequence

of garage light, a man pulls a lock of curled hair  
 from behind my ear, asks if it's natural because it's  
 so perfect. Isn't. And he continues to kiss me

anyway and suddenly everything, suddenly  
 everywhere is right here. Suddenly I am insomniac,  
 deserved, melted into some kind of watery medium

and paint-stroked onto every body. How to remember this,  
 tasting the moment he leaves like the moment he came:  
 turn to the bathroom mirror after and attempt to touch

the face I see, the one he maybe never did. I am okay  
 in my hollow, in the aftertaste and touch of half-desire, half-  
 fraudulence, full-skin I do not intend to shed, not ever.

The night was hot, and summer is almost over.

## It Is October

and this stale bathwater reeks of belated apology,

the absence of steam a sign  
of no life. The fever is breaking, but we are still

prowling the darkness pretending to be

the animals we are not. More of a dog  
person before, I make plans now to remain a stray

cat, the kind with no allegiance. My shadow becomes

my post. When I tell you to place your body in places  
where nature is against me, you give me

reason to wake up alone. Light

chasing me back into myself. You,  
unkind beast, storming after the same sun. Lonely has no

teeth—it is a cold, quiet thing. It is a howl

beneath the breath. It is October  
and I've got my own tongue, let myself out of the bag,

been done to death.

## Centralia

Sometimes at night I hear those whiskey-broken murmurs  
 convened in the kitchen so clearly, I think I have died and come back

distilled as myself on that August night a decade ago, sweating out  
 the evening's crescendo atop a couch where I was a warm body

and nothing more. Listening in, no one aware of my burning. Fear  
 only freezes, does not thaw unless emboldened

by the heart, so I allowed my sweat to render my body a thing  
 I could forget about protecting. Once their voices faded

I felt I was an aftermath, a wake, though I was safe and dreaming  
 of the only fire I know that burns steady: underground Centralia,

Pennsylvania, where two of my lifetimes have passed in ash. I imagine  
 going subterranean, at last cracking open the earth's chest, finding its heart

set aflame, diagnosing a sickness I am not qualified to recognize, but do  
 all the same. Some of us learn it is better to leave the burning

to their own devices, billow their smoke as a warning and not  
 a sign for aid, but sometimes I still want those voices, those boys

to have seen my face. And then there are those other times when  
 I can't believe it was a flame that ever existed for my wanting.

## Petaling

the simplest way to social distance  
is to make love all over yourself  
with the bedroom door open  
wide, becoming voyeur, lonely  
expanse, becoming home.  
*It must be really hard for you  
to hang on to all of that shame—*  
sure, but what is shame if not  
a thing that demands to be held?  
& what is intimacy if not  
a language, hollowed-out  
& sold away? my favorite movie  
reminds me *You can stay  
in the same place  
and still find ways to leave people,*  
& I wonder why leaving  
is so wrong. there is a timeline  
in which I touch a man  
& feel safe instead  
of touching a man & hoping  
there will be safety  
to follow—take that one  
however you want, but  
even now,  
I do not fully understand what it is,  
this thing that I hang on to,  
this gardenia thing that has been busy  
blooming a cult inside of me,  
this thing that I claim  
anew each time my eyes follow the wilt  
of my own legs' petaling.

## Self-Portrait at Eighteen Months

I.

Driving my friends to the bar,

I think about a time when I would do this for fun:  
both drive and drink, sometimes  
separately and sometimes together.

I hold the cigarette I don't want at all  
close to my lips, fingertips kissing my mouth

on the inhale. Later tonight, I'll find a trace of lip balm  
on my steering wheel that reminds me  
of this moment, here, a place I already miss.

II.

The bar is the same place that it was when it  
was my place, disco ball pendulum  
determining the fates of this evening's  
congregation. Lucid now, I have never felt so  
wronged, each man passing me a face I  
recognize only because I can no longer tell  
them apart. They still look at me a little too  
long, still slur my name so it sounds like  
*theredhead*. One of them even tells me he thinks  
we've met before. Maybe we have, or maybe  
it's just that this moment has already played  
itself out a few times too many. I sit in a chair  
too narrow to be comfortable, and reach for  
the hair tie on my wrist, only to realize  
I've left it in the car.

III.

Walking up the stairs to  
my apartment door, a train moans

its gravity subdued  
by our distance. I turn the key

into the lock, head to my bedroom, look in  
the mirror. I remember when the reflection

was always the part I wouldn't remember  
the next day, and I realize now

it was probably for the best. I've insisted  
for so long I don't miss the bad things

anymore, I hadn't realized how much  
I missed what it felt like, I mean

what it didn't feel like,  
to forget.

## We Invite the Ghosts to Weddings Now

Wedding season has come and gone, and still  
I am waiting in your wings. Somewhere

there was an aisle, somewhere a row of faces, somewhere  
a woman in white. I supper alone and light  
a candle for her, no longer surprised by the quickness

of that melt, that porcelain song. Everything here is a sign,

an elegy. And when I must, I listen.

Any more, all we do is Google love spells  
and write names into steam. We know  
there is hardly anything that exists between anyone

permanently. But watch as I become more and more

the kind of ghost you'll want to stick around.

I won't appear in mirrors or turn on the coffee pot. No—

I will be fragrant. I will take the form of a rose and  
the only time I will cause trouble is when I molder—  
as we do—

but there will always be another wedding season,

always another aisle dying to be haunted by petals red and wilting.

## Never Lost

House party high, we lurched  
into July's one AM  
dark, driveway full of cars

and empty of sound.  
I lit my cigarette from  
the wrong end, and

you handed me another:  
the first one I ever smoked  
the whole way.

I moaned about hating  
my boyfriend before  
trying to kiss you, and

I think you just laughed,  
which only embarrasses me  
a little. So young

and foreign to real  
consequence, what we breathed  
into our lungs—

breathed reckless, breathed  
desire—remains  
in mine. Now

you have a baby and  
I have a problem  
with alcohol but

I don't think either of us  
has touched tobacco  
in a very long time.

What I never told you  
is I was awake when  
you whispered goodnight

in my ear, kissed  
my forehead, and left.  
Some people can only love

what they see themselves within,

and even all those years ago,  
I knew I would remember you

for loving in me  
what was most  
unrecognizable in you.

## Desiderium, Two

Early September, still warm enough for bare legs, we sat on my balcony. *Been forever*. Shared a joint, held trivialities like time travel and Twain between us, our subtext long tamed. I remember you in stoic profile, sun trespassing upon half your face. The sense that I was trespassing too. I missed my friend, fumbled my anger to keep you. *Remind me to play you a song when we go inside*. For what. We believed the beasts beneath our surface could be repelled, or at least reformed, or at least numbed. One year on, I know better. Know loss intimately as sigh, its iron palm melded to my sternum, hum along as it beats against me from within me, note for note. I cannot speak for your empty spaces, just recognize we both have them. My grief has been paranoid these past few seasons, convincing my body it knows Loss itself better than all it has lost. I wish I could call you, hear the recognition in your voice when I tell you how ashamed I am that this is the only thing I am certain of anymore.

## Dead Foliage, Your Sister's Childhood Bedroom

Nostalgia for the old habit brings you inside.

Three cities away, you sit on her bed's edge and stare  
at her arrowhead plant. It has seen better days.

You warned her how much they liked to vine

before she purchased it —*Make room for growth*,  
you said, though you only meant, *Make room*. You move

to examine the plant before considering leaving everything

exactly as you found it. This is what she would want from you:  
to walk away. But because this plant is familiar

with her care / her hands / in a way you have not understood

for some time, you will not walk away. You will pluck  
all the death and almost-death you see,

wonder why this has taken her so long when you were certain

she was past it. You glimpse the philodendron, pale,  
hiding like a whisper behind the arrowhead, and soon amass

a pile of dead foliage atop the dresser. At least, that's how you'll

remember it: a heap of limp, dead things, all the more

to add to the bones of this house, so many leaves ready  
to brown and fall away. Before you go, you worry she'll be angry  
—little sister, forever touching big sister's things  
without permission—but it does not matter whether she knows  
you were there. You drive away from your parents' home certain  
of why being a sister is far more difficult than having a sister:  
there will always be something more you'll know  
you could have done for her and didn't.

Ghazal: With the Dead  
*after Rafael Campo*

We know we'll never be through with the dead,  
our memory unfettered canvas we imbue with the dead.

Snow bares us its bones while Caity rehearses the eulogy. My mother  
cradles her grief, a flame she flickers into with the dead.

Floral arrangements swell, deliver us from darker places. I watch  
the circus roses, their wilting a death I see through with the dead.

The worst things I've ever seen—fresh bananas, gallon of milk un-  
opened, telephone left off the hook—I strain to undo with the dead.

On the floor of my apartment, I follow the path of waning sunlight with  
my body but not my eyes, a tenderness I pursue with the dead.

*When this is all over, we tell one another, we'll love better than ever before.*  
But when the whole world died, nobody knew what to do with the dead.

In the plains, we know wind like terror. I lie in tall grass, certain only  
of what brushes my cheek: a memory, a stillness. You, with the dead.

## Self-Portrait as my Mother's Daughter

Every night, I fall asleep on a pillowcase full of cicada shells, their faraway hum in my ear a jagged lilt. Every night, my sheets are shoe sole-indented leaves, rain wet & wrinkled. The bottom of my shoe is a bloody thing. All those smushed bugs. I wake up to wear clothes the color of my skin, forgetting the other skins that I have shed—it is just what we do. There is not one thing that I dream about every night & that always made you sick. What more must I feel. What more can I owe that I haven't possibly paid. I loved you once, Oklahoma, even though some things were so flawed that I couldn't help but love them all along. Sometimes that's the only reason I did. My mother does not talk about her high school sweetheart, how he died when he was nineteen. All I know is that they called him Sonny & he was kind & he met my mother in a car. I imagine her in the passenger seat before his wreck, sun spitting light all over her blonde hair. He's driving, but I know how the story ends, remember the way my mom's voice broke—when. I don't think I know what love looks like inside of this car, so I picture my dad next to her & the picture's so pretty I can't stand to think about it longer than I have to, but I have to. I don't remember what her parents' home looked like, but I know that they grew okra in the backyard & the living room smelled like tobacco & musk & green carpet, felt like familiar grief. Like pulse, like breathing. There was a front porch with an awning, a waking afternoon sudden & alive in front of it.

Your aunt was so loved, the world stopped to grieve

After you died, my friends wrote me:

“And the snow is coming to blanket the world in stillness.”

(When I could not yet say *died*, only *passed*.) We had three inches on the day of your funeral, more in those that followed, uncommon for the late Oklahoma winter you knew: withholding, listless, sterile.

At first the quiet was a gift—but then, the reminder of the voice which would always be sound bygone: your *Hey, sweetie*, your *You know me*, your laugh (—though your little sister’s is still a dead ringer). At some point

the world lifted its gaze, blinked the old film from its eyes, carried on and into what was next: fields of young and fields of decaying marigold around proverbial

corner. All the while I was developing an appetite for not having one, using my grief to feed the body that would not let it go because

when the body releases grief, what then becomes of the heart? Stillness

is not the same thing it was before. You are still in this strange

year’s first dusting of snow, descending on my windchime’s language of whim and pang, still in the music of my mother’s arms as they move to engulf me,

her palms as they conduct color across an open canvas. You have been speaking through the world since you left it. In this new stillness, I finally hear you.

## The Summer After My Aunt Passes

We take a road trip in Michelle's new car east to Knoxville. My first week on anti-depressants, I am still navigating how to feel—do not yet know how badly it will scare me when that goes away—so I pass time watching: a billboard proclaiming JESUS IS COMING, an elderly driver staying traffic in the right-hand lane, sunlight soft-lining dewdropped grasses of the lowlands—emblem of this American southeast.

At sunset, a flock of birds flies straight into the light, communicating to me *this* is the destination. No rest capable of healing, my only way forward is western horizon, uninhibited flight. Joni's singing about expectation as Michelle and Kalyn hum and nod along, and I allow my bones for the first time in months to wade into the lake of my friends' joy, where I recognize the only kind of eternity worth pursuing is one in which I, too, am busy being free.

## Love Poem

January 2007: nothing bad will ever happen to me.  
When the weatherman predicts snow

it is a promise. I place my palms against the bedroom window  
to feel the warmth leave them. My pulse, my twelve

year-old heart, quickening to the thought  
of *snow day*. From the window, the music goldfinches make

gathered around the neighbor's feeder sounds something  
like gratitude. Wind heralds the storm, knocks back

the finch frenzy, birdseed wasted on the grass. By morning,  
this birdsong will prove migratory. By morning,

our trees will corpse the backyard, felled ice-giants,  
and I will learn how to mourn. But for now, I still trust in

what is promised. My mother cooks  
her southwest soup, and its burn does not linger in my throat.

My throat has never swallowed what it cannot fathom,  
has never fathomed anything but food,

and every stomach still sounds the same when it is hungry.  
Each tree in my backyard is still the same tree. I cannot tell pine

from elm, cannot imagine elm's absence sprawled  
against backdropped sky. My Oklahoma winter loves me

and I love it back. Everything that I love lasts.

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