

RAWLINS, WYOMING:
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

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SECTION I

Rawlins, Wyoming

This is the land of whiskey-bound babies,
thought-impotent, prison-daddies,
give-a-shit, bottle-draining mommas.
The wind beats us into bar-hop carelessness
crystallized shag carpet, sends kids out alone
to kitchens for peanut-butter sandwiches,
and a blanket-tuck around mom's knees.
We freezer-burn at bus stops,
never make it to school on time,
or get breakfast without Bud Light.

Our teachers open arms and doors
to wind advisories, cracked lips, chapped hands.
We scour hallways in search of lost anti-depressants,
guessing which of us fourth-grade-nothings
race for recess liquor cabinets
pass out on basement floors
before the last bell.

Most of us see daddy
on government time,
taken from study hall for visiting hours
and dollar menu-binges with rough change
from cluttered couches and counters.
Thanksgiving microwaves Hot Pockets,
toasts the *real* Pop-Tart dinners,
snows us in with *The Simpsons* and *Rugrats*.

How did we become wanna-be's
roaming frozen sagebrush in Wranglers,
bandannas, creeping over cactus
and rubber-rabbit brush
with seven miles to the gallon, .22's,
a good shot at anything moving
against the wind?

Our joints ache at seventeen
gripping steering wheels
across frozen lakes, empty dirt highways
and away from Pigs when their lights scream.
We've got razorblades, four-wheel-drive,
pocket knives, cracked compact mirrors
and hunting gear;
buying more than we're worth

with mom's child support
stashed in a lingerie drawer with needles;
cash used better for our Texico nachos
smothered in plastic-bag cheese,
dollar discount crayons-melted to the box,
Kit-Kats, Caramello, Snickers-
half white from an extended shelf life.

We hide at each other's houses
on bad-dad-probation-days.
Mom leaves us hostages
of fists and threats,
weeks of cold showers, no heat,
and the only SWAT Team rescue on record
in the whole damn state. This place is
borrowed clothes and gunshot wounds,
knife-throwing at the front door
for practice and fun:
we are the mother-kill-me-fucker-pro-choicers

with broken bottles, open condoms
fiery mouths and arms, in short-shorts
and tank-tops on January freezing nights.
This clap family-friendly circle,
sleeps through wind-howl silence,
looks down on days to come
as the half-fetus, part adult,
cluster-fucked breed of nothing.

Grave Rubbing

It didn't rain the summer
I gathered loose print
paper, crayons, and Mo
stole two Marlboro reds
from her mom's purse.
We lied our way past the park
beyond swings and sand
to the southeast corner,
the oldest part of the cemetery.

We lay on the earliest graves,
let our heads rest
on the cold stone
before crayons brought out names,
dates and ages
etched into sunken shades of gray.
Kneeling in stiff grass,
purple, gold and green let us see:

*Baby Girl Johnston,
March 23, 1902.*

Mo tried the lighter
head-bent-inside-jacket trick
while we imagined *Baby*
growing up a lot like us
aside from a century,
rheumatic fever, boxed cigarettes,
the subtle difference
between child proof and flint.

Talking of boys,
we tried to blow
smoke rings and screamed
back at our mothers
from a distance
with our heads resting
below the names of dead young girls
who would never be wrinkled.

Astria: Body Builder

At every bar
she broke
records,
bare-armed,
flexed bicep
against bicep,
slammed shots,
and white knuckles
to the table top
of her pile
of bills and boys
who wouldn't believe
they'd been beat
by a girl,
wearing
little pretties
in her hair,
glancing, prancing
around the room
and back
to the weights,
bar bells
each morning,
that made her
famous
with trainers.

Hiking

Becky and I spent our seventh grade summer hiking.
Every morning we got up before our mothers,
gathered apples, grapes, peanut butter sandwiches
with honey on crustless bread, the latest R.L. Stein
and left our homes behind for rocks and sand.

We stepped from stone to stone
to avoid cactus and sliding into snake holes,
a foot-at-a-time-climb up the side of mixed granite
and loose rock. Becky took lead; I took the canteen
and we switched the backpack between us.
We moved up the side of shifting stone,
pointing to our cave at times,
nodding at the shrinking city below,
checking our pulse as our elevation rose

away from mother-shrieks and sibling-peeks
hiking for forty-five minutes in silence
broken only by thirty-mile hour gusts.
We said nothing until we reached our cave
where we sunbathed and journaled: one doe,
two fawns, one horny toad, five lizards, maybe a snake-
quick scales, no rattle.

We choked down warm fruit and dry honeyed bread
with cool metallic water and almost tried to start
a campfire but gave up for too much wind
and visions of fire trucks and black skeleton sage.
We took turns carving our initials in a dried-up cedar,
sitting with its trunk caught between rocks, bent, smooth
from years of heavy winds and blowing snow.

We watched the clouds and leaned into gusts
from the edge, looking down at the best way to fall
in case the wind stopped relenting
us back to cold stone and the hike down, home,
as the sun hit our shoulders at an angle,
just in time for our mothers to tinge on the worry-hinge
until we appeared for the first time, each day, just before dinner.

Paul's Dad

did time
for what he dubbed
the at-home-abortion:
if she can do it, why can't I?

five months in,
few proper kicks,
in a room without
the other kids
daddy sent mommy
away with baby
to the bathroom.

Flush it.
She did
what she was told
always.
He wasn't charged

until her fellow servers
noticed her fading belly.
One called about bruises,
another mentioned bleeding
through her uniform slacks,
then her black-outs.
DHS found her
in a hospital bed
worthy of rebuttal.

He was charged:
murder, first-ish degree
depending on the fetus
-v-baby debate
and he was sentenced
to a decade or so,

fewer with good behavior.
She went on expecting
nothing from her soon-to-arrive
endometriosis, loss of uterus,
ovaries, fallopian tubes.

He sat in a room,
twelve by nine, watching TV,

thinking for six years
before his early release
due to good behavior
and overcrowding.

She heard and ran
miles away by sundown
via polite truckers
and pawn shop cash.

Glass Mother

Mother cared dearly
for her crystal wine glasses,
remained stout,
a strict prohibitionist,
who filled her glass
to the top every morning
with skim milk.

She had her blueberry bagel.
I watched from the floor,
hovered over the heater vent,
body curled to my chest,
nightie pulled under my toes-dozed,
head resting on little knob-knees.

Straight-backed and upright,
Mother swirled her glass
by the stem, read all 26 pages
of the Daily Times,
slow, sunning herself
beneath dining room windows,
gazing as milk legs danced
inside her glass.
She glanced and smirked
at round shadows
as they fell on comic faces
who always smiled back
with just pupils for eyes.

North winds raged
through ice-flakes and dark clouds
at window panes.
I made sack lunches,
snuck a Diet Coke
into my plastic pale,
waited for the bus, alone.

Mother spent winters
between grays and sunlight,
sipped, stared, commanding
through her glasses,
determined she could glare
the flakes back into the sky
one sip at a time,

sing sunlight to her side
with her right index finger
drifting along in crystal C-minor.

Prisoners

We, too,
are forefathers,
daddies,
husbands:
the cons,
lifers,
Death-Row bound,
rapists,
murderers,
pedophiles,
embezzlers.

We, too,
make babies,
make mommies,
and it's not all
that bad,
not really,
if you're one
to like numbers,
specified
dinner times
and don't mind
a resume reading:
Felon—
enjoys bland food
and showers well
with others.

Blue Ribbon Babies

The Southern Baptist nursery
taught proper care
for foster babies
to girls who wanted
out of Sunday School
or choir practice.

We rocked, swayed, pointed
out windows at birds and bushes
listened to little speakers muffling
a chorus in C flat, then sharp,
with too many verses.

Blue ribbon babies never
cried unless we held them
too long or rocked too hard
or if they had the hic-coughs.
We had to lay them down
in a crib or on the floor
and wait for the screams
to stop while we sat, silenced,
before moving the blanket,
pacifier, pillows, tighten
the blue ribbon around
their ribs the way
foster mommies did, showing
us the straight-line bruise
of a wooden staircase
the rounded swelling
from a fist, a belt or boot.

We hummed *Jesus Loves Me*
yes I know to bruised babies,
blue ribbons wrapped
around their waists,
a reminder not to pick them up,
to burp them from the diaper up
and always set them down
on stacked pillows.

Fainting Buzz

We lost the ball
in the snow again.
I can't feel my toes.
Huddled with the other kids,
first recess is coldest;
I blink flake-stings away
in the doorway.

We used to beat our fists
into the metal frames
and doors with gloved hands,
yelling, but know
better now.

The playground shivers
silence shattered
by chains wind-whipped
to their end by leather
swing-set seats.

Steve's shoes
poke above snow
on the ground around him.

Always the first to land,
arms crossing his chest,
blank-faced
he begins to wheeze
until Paul nudges
him for a turn.

It's been more than thirty seconds.

Steve, on his feet,
shaking, Paul closes his eyes,
breath held, squeeze-ready
goes limp in Steve's arms
that take him to the ground.

I count backwards;
Steve pats Paul's shoulder,
rises to stand behind me.
My back to his chest,
I suck air through my throat, hold

my breath against his neck.

His rear-back lets me let go
and the wind doesn't sting
anymore. My toes don't exist.
I hear laughing.

Awake toes-tingling,
body trembles
overtaking me
under flakes racing
for my face.

Drug Test for Astria

I was eleven,
and left pee in a cup
at the right top corner
of my old toy box,
covered it
with plastic wrap
and ice, hid it
beneath poor spelling tests.

She knew where to look,
had to get a job,
even at a chicken plant;
told me Visine droppers,
filled with Clorox bleach,
didn't carry the same assurance
as Tupperware *double ounce o'pee*.

Big pockets were perfect
unless the boss went in
or had a thermometer.
Astria and I got off the phone
just before I kneeled,
wondering the times
my parents washed that cup
by hand. I bore both knees
against basement concrete
knowing Astria was grateful,
passed the UA like she said.

The bus dropped me off
after school;
I emptied the cup
in the toilet and scrubbed
until all the bubbles were gone.

Independence Rock

Trails beckoned us
until the snow set in,
echoed poor-travel
to our everlasting
Mormon shovels
ripping into frozen dirt,
rocks and root
for the love of barely-covered
bodies, buried foot-deep.

We waited
for the next thaw,
melted snow,
any chance to forsake
the barren hills
of Wyoming's harshest
winter in decades.

Wolves peered
hunger-shivered,
hovering around mounds
of snow, growing close
to camp as months wore
into late May.

Then we gathered
what was left of us,
our blankets and skirts,
put the wheels back on
the wagon,
headed southwest
to Salt Lake City,
through the sage
into ebony sky,
a horizon with no end,
shielding our ears
from the wolf-crunching,
ripping apart the remains
of shallow graves.

Gravel Pile

Mo parked her Prelude
next to the pile of silver
and white rocks
just off old highway 86,
where we used to talk.

Swisher Sweet cigar fumes
folded around our heads,
peach, banana-berry baby-food
dripped down spoon handles
as we passed a cigar,
cherry tip fading behind long ashes.

Our hair tucked in ball caps,
throats aching; we dared
each other to inhale
through our teeth
and when we couldn't see
a car for miles, climbed
the pile of rocks, nestled
our butts side by side
in the shifting stones,

watched trains compete
with headlights and rehearsed
an excuse in case the cops showed up.
Heaping goopy spoonfuls
into our mouths, we puffed
at a plastic tip, wondering
why everything cool always
turned out to be a phallic symbol.

Rattled

The wind outside

my bedroom window echoes
the force of Mother.
It shrieks
screams
freezing breezes
into bedrooms
where I don't sleep,
a kitchen
where no one eats.

Glass rattles

between broken words
and closed pains.
Cold lingers,
clings to curtains,
keeps frozen
what needs warmth:
quilts, curtains,
untouchable vents
remain worthless
to gusts
such as these;
gusts drag my appetite
to crumbs
hidden in table cracks.

Outside warms

lilacs open to bees,
buds separate
dead leaves.
The sun is back
but indoor winter
never ends.
Mother's words whip
through cloth,
rip at hair strands,
tangle thoughts
of me being:
spoiled, someday
too-thick for love.

The cupboards stick
closed, empty,

trapped-shut by wind
ever-whipping
this house around
and won't stop
telling, reminding
me of the cold
inside out.

X Marks Me

the spot
 below my belly button,
 two lines cross
 under the serrated
 edge, drifting
 toward each hip bone.
 The red beads come
 mingle, like hot coals
 left over from a campfire
 at dawn, with snow
 on the ground.
 They're red
 hot against pale skin.

 I can't help but dip
a finger in, pull back
 to watch the beads
 form again
 as I drape another shade
 burgundy from one hip
 to the next
 and think of flames
 licking an evening
 while the fire gets too close
 to cold fingertips
 just as the sting sets in.

 Everything tingles
like needles pushing through
 sand into bare skin.
 The string closes,
 dries faster than I expect
 like all the rest,
 another cherry thread
 joins the curtain.
 I don't think of the shock,
 while my body
 tries to shake away
 the heat and beads
 dripping over me.

Out South with Eric

past Rim Lake
after school lets out
for the four-day
weekend.
Eric's dad
shot his mom,
then himself,
on Thanksgiving
twelve years ago,
or so he says,
which is why I'm here,
standing where pavement
meets gravel road.

Eric's gloves drown
my frostbitten fingertips,
his Carharts surround me,
keep out blowing snow
while he reloads.
I pour what's left
of the .22 pellets
into my mouth, careful
to turn up the edges
of my tongue, keep them
from a clink-sting against
my fillings.

It's tempting to swallow
copper and gunpowder
just to see what happens.
I might explode inside
coveralls covering school clothes.

My turn to cock, load,
lower the bead
into the iron U, take aim
at the cattle guard sign
bent, twisted, groaning
against blowing snow and ice.

Eric's cheeks sag
with rounded tips
denting through skin
from lack of dental aid;

his fated foster-housing
smile disappears
as he sucks spit and swallows
half a pack of Lucky Strikes
non-filtered.

I can't stop thinking
how well metal, gun-
powder digests:
do bullets come out whole
or would I piss
my insides out?

Bird's-Eye

Cloud shadows fall
over mountains
between crevices and cracks
of granite and stone,
sage and rubber-rabbit brush.

They never stop,
only glide above us
and away, sifting through
hills and holes,
without pause, shift
over dips and bends.

We remind travelers-by:
there's no such thing as jackalope,
and those are called "snow fences":
they keep ice from highways
and semis on the road,
especially if the sun doesn't show.

I climb through summers,
above my home
where clouds reach down,
almost lick my fingertips.
Perched atop a planted-tree city,
surrounded by nothing
but dirt
held together with brush
cactus and granite.

Smooth slats stand guard
as I overlook acres
of empty, balanced on gravity,
snow and wind, plain stone
soft and flat beneath my feet.

SECTION II

The Ferris Motel

Here all day again
 camera focused on us
 breaking and entering
 all four floors of the condemned,
 hurling ourselves
from rail-less to square landing
after landing where we cried on cue,
 beat fists into walls
 to hide laugh-shrieks
 over shattered shot glasses,
 shred sticky paper from mortared walls
in strips so big we danced beneath them,
 ribbons embracing our twirls.

Waves of glued paper
 drowned us in decades of ghosts
 and their people, pacing,
whispering through doorways,
 where they invited us,
 hoped for us to rip it all apart
 in spite of their dresses and suits,
unexpected babies and gunshot wounds.

We dodged bare windows,
 closed broken blinds,
 hung tattered bed sheets
to keep the shadows from showing
 us in and out of doorways,
 up and down stairs without rails,
 ready with fragments of neon bulbs
we aimed a little away from each other's knees,
 running, shrieking,
 down halls and back,
 crunching shattered glass into the soles of our feet,
 watching it glitter, shimmer,
 trapped in flip-flops and Nikes.

We kept every key we found, tried all the locks,
 doors and cupboards in the bar
 where we sailed shot glasses across the top,
 watched them explode against the mirror,
 roamed empty hallways,
 past sunlight-poured floorboards
away from open doors,

covered in dust and dirt,
broken glass and rot-wood stairways,
stripped walls of their pretty paper,
echoed jokes back to the blank,
dank grays that followed us.

David

was almost my first kiss
in fourth grade,
but I missed his bus
just before the summer
he moved to Gillette.
He came back
sophomore year,
still short, stocky,
and forgetful.

He didn't smile,
made clear
I had wasted effort
running after him
all those years ago
pining over his little love notes
folded and labeled
football letters
with *Your eyes only*
on the outside
and *School Sucks*
so Study Safe Sex
in big letters,
note at the bottom
don't tell.
My lover boy
with his love-notes,
mommies' stolen jewelry,
brought me recess gifts,
goofy-smiled,
holding maybe-gold
telling me
how much he adored me
with necklaces, bracelets,
a gold-plated horse-head pin
without a clasp.

Sophomore year
David didn't remember me
or the pretty stolen things
I still had at the bottom
of my secret coffee can
with all the loving letters.
He didn't speak to me,

until I reached up
to wave his Lucky Strike
smoke from my face:
*Anyone touches my neck,
I deck em' he smiled.
Except you,
then raised his chin.
I'd just shake you.
One punch,
your skinny ass'd be dead.*

Julia's Flesh

She is drawn to him
like maggots to rot-flesh
diving in
sucking, breathing
pus and blood
covering her body
with his stench
wrapping him
around herself
to hide to dive
away. From what?
I wonder
wandering the walls
of her home:
children's shoes
stained clothes
a comforter
so old
the moose's antlers
fade to grays
between fuzz and fur.
How does she live
eating disease
in her decade attempt
to digest
what consumes
him?

My Own

Nathan and Steve taught me
to hold my own Kershaw,
.45, JD, since I was *primed*
light-weight, polite,
for the taking,
every predator's wet dream

with my downward eyes,
hip twists and great tits
asking for it
until I learned screams,
sharpening and magazines,
every Thursday I didn't work,
but handled sprung blades,
diaphragm-command and loaded boys
with loaded pistols.

It's all in the wrist Steve told me
smoothing a dot into his pinkie
with a red thumb.
I practiced putting on lids,
moving the safety button,
closing a blade

with my right hand,
left hand, faster
with two, tried all three
bottle, pistol, blade in each.

Playing for Life

*Hooray for their pride and each day they survive
To make up for their crimes and not yield
With might hits and throws the All Star players go
To make right their wicked plight on the field.*

*Redemption on the Diamond
(The All Stars of Rawlins,
Wyoming's Frontier Prison 1911-12.)*

Strike one, strike two,
hit three, I run like the gas
chamber's chasing me,
past first base, round second,
land third, ready for home
to take me back:
another off-season
day of chain gangs,
crowded cells, bread and grits.

If we're lucky, and it's cold,
we get soup and have fans
just not enough for Warden
to let us beyond the walls
surrounding us for life,
away from life,
and who's to blame but us?

Two ways to get on this team:
rape and murder-one.
Some of us got both.
And I s'pose you could say
we all got our hang-ups,
every person I ever known did,
mine just lead down
a hell of a road. Like we'd need
an attorney if we'd stayed
in the right. 'Cause 'round here
once you're out, you're out
and inside, that means the chair.

Still, I say if you'd known
him, seen her, you'd wanna know,
too, what the fuck were they thinking?

Many times as I've mulled it over:
her asking me in with her husband
in the field. That's not thinking
at all, and him slinging out a rifle
after seeing mine, was about so dumb
a thing a man might do—
like I ain't gonna shoot back.

I don't see any need to be sorry.
Not this time. I done some bad
things in my day, no joke, I did;
but ask anyone and I done
what any man would do, really.

But they don't believe me;
not that I blame a man
for not trusting another man,
'cause I sure don't.

On the inside, all we got
is baseball: the All Stars,
where every American
boy plays in his dreams,
no mistake. This team's
got more passion than any:
unshackled on the field,
guns in the towers,
gas in the chamber,
waiting for a strike-out.

Course, some got this game
down, others got nothing
but strikes, don't run
like they ought.
Some hit like a wildfire
over a wall, a flame
that won't touch ground,
'cause 'round here,
there ain't much other
than sagebrush and dust.

Dress-Up with Astria

The mirror is too small
for both of us,
so you stand behind,
sway hips; my mock-move
a half-beat behind.

This wig doesn't fit
me right,
green velvet plunge
from neckline to belly
button doesn't work
with these hips
curved
above crossed legs.

This dress is too tight.

I never thought
I'd be bigger
than you,
never thought
you'd make trace marks
public

far as needles,
far as eyes
can see

you back to
my moves,
all wrong
in these shoes:
your plastic-grabby,
knee-clingy, six-inch
or-nothingers

laced, zipped, tied
four sizes too big,
my feet slipped
into the toe,
no opening.

Overpass

We came here as kids,
little girls: Becky and I;
crowded beneath the underpass
with stolen Doritos and Jolt
every Thursday afternoon
before Friday sleepovers with
the other girls.
We screamed, echoed
cries into solid iron,
concrete, steel and the rumble
of 18 wheels roaring past our heads
on either side, giggling
the guilt of theft and lies,
scanning for flashing lights.

As teens Strawberry Boones,
plastic champagne cups
brought us to the wall,
shirts raised we waved
at semis in the dark
lights glaring past,
drowned out
by our giggles in a panic
back to the car
where we cackled and got out again
to throw the bottle, three times,
at the concrete before it broke,
speeding back to our studies
and nothing else to do.

After Becky's baby was born
we drove through snow
packed gravel, to our spot
above dirt road, below the interstate,
spoke into our breath,
watched it float and took long drags,
legally, from a pint of Jack,
pack of Camel Silvers.

Once, we stood up,
solid, toes curled over the ledge,
showing every trucker for 37 miles
what we had to offer,
then tucked our breasts into soft bras,

squatted above the ledge,
cheek-cold, bladder heavy
pissing another contest
to the bottom of the incline.

Paul Said

Since sixth grade I knew
you could kill a man, easily,
if he deserved it.
You're a skinny little bitch
but damn strong.

I see power in your eyes.
You've got what it takes
to put down some fuck-nut
bastard who can't keep his dick
to himself, and that makes you
responsible for keeping him
from doing it again.

Save them, the girls who don't know
what you do about men.
The truth about how and why we lie
in wait of dumb drunk bitches
and roofie nights.

You know any man turned
animal is best treated as beast
and you have what it takes
to draw blades, see raw muscle,
bone, flesh in sixty seconds or less,
dead.

Otherwise he'll bash your face in
starting with the nose and cheeks,
then leave a hand print on your neck
for the cops to analyze
after they drag your black/blue corpse
from a dumpster.

You'll be lucky if they can ID your body
past teeth grafts and DNA.
Then he'll do it to girl after girl after you.
When you could have saved her,
them, by killing him,
with the knife I gave you.

Robo-Trip

Paul and Nathan tweaked
for days at a time,
took Jack shots, chopped
stolen cold meds to powder
snorted, decided:

Little Man Posse
needed a mark,
something to bind them
all, past boot camp, Boy Scouts,
Car Kraft and the Skoal
they cheered to each other
into since grade school.

Paul's Cheyenne Skinner
began the trend,
TOOL got them through
after a couple more grams,
hit head-on with six to eight
shots of what the buyer
found for thirty-eight bucks,
slammed against hard liquor
store sales and street poppers.

Drips and dry tips later,
both boys collapsed
on the kitchen floor
counted tile squares,
compared them
to the diameter of the room.

In the 6X8 floor space-
insert cabinets, number of tiles
by square inch, mirror the ceiling,
with all its dots and divots,
cover remaining dust
particles float floor-to-ceiling
for Paul and Nathan,
dripping into the mini-pools
red on the kitchen floor
flat, between God and linoleum.

Party

Randi's cry
echoes
into linoleum,
about the last
boy who hasn't
loved her
since the last time
they fucked.
Nathan takes two
cigarettes each
time he asks
to bum one,
piles into the kitchen
with Paul, Robert,
Steve, to serve
each other
beer-bonged
"High Life"
watching girls
deep-throat
a long tube
filled with gas
station Coors
and foam.

No Apology to Pedophiles

We told you
your first day,
made sure it echoed
in your head
all sixty days
of solitary.

Do you remember
what we said?
Yes, we are guards;
yes, we are inmates.
Yes, we said
the same things.
We counted you down
day, after day,
to today and it's like
you never heard.

Didn't believe us?

We said: *ninety days*.
While you stood
behind sheet metal,
knowing, or not,
what it meant
for the rest of us:
it's a pick-your-own
date-death:
ninety from day one
of your sentence-time.

Once it happened
on Thanksgiving,
twice, on a birthday.
We're all here
for a long time,
either way.

No one's sorry

you won't make it
out of this place
of steel bars,
what we call

a little justice for all
or at least our babies.

Ode to Astria

I've searched fifty-eight
racks without you now,
trying to replace my
all-natural-skinny jeans
you slimmed into,
shimmied out of
once you ripped them
up just right.

We used to shop
together, clamor
into family dressing rooms
elbow-achy, shoulder-heavy
two sizes of everything
except panties.

Big sisters are good
for: Margarita Wednesdays,
bar-boy bashing,
Red Bulling it 'til morning
helped me overlook the black
work slacks I missed last fall,
now hung in your closet,
without permission,
next to my sub-zero coat
(pocket-full-of-needles).
I've been searching
replacements alone, since.

My account rings
full, shopping without
your input; cash piles up.

Twice we talked
about my slacks
dangled on your hanger,
next to my skirt you ripped off
and up to each hip bone,
You handed me a twenty once:
*take it, it'll make me
feel better* you pushed
into my pant pocket.

I waited: both went missing.

Your pole job required
quite a wardrobe,
money and meth ran
deep through your brain, blood,
out your fingertips and hips,
shaking pretty-little-titties
all over stage, hoping for boys
with a good tip.
And I hope your wholesale
dreams serve you
well beyond six-inch heels
and sister-drawer panty-rants
while Mr. Rich doles out
smothered hundred dollar bills
to fill his round lap, bar stools,
gentlemen for whom you go
round the pole so many times
you don't realize the holes
burned through your head.

Bags Road

Alone
in my '87 Ford
Mercury
65 MPH
isn't fast enough
to outrun a maroon
Jeep Cherokee
behind me
one man inside.

He's backed off;
I've slowed down
eight times
since his headlights
triple-flashed
six songs ago.

I try to think.
He has brown hair.
Eyes? Chin?
Plate number?
I can't read backwards
in the rear view mirror.

He's never far behind
or too close unless
in the oncoming lane
next to me,
tongue dipped
between index and middle
fingers, then he points,
smiling.

My Kershaw
is all I've got
with my phone
out of range
and I wish God
granted prayers
when I needed them.

Wish I owned a jet
to carry me over
the highway. I

wouldn't need
an open blade
in my lap
eyes on a phone.

No bars for 53 miles
and he's passing me
again, swerves ahead,
slows, hits
the brakes
twelve times
in three minutes.

He speeds
ahead, gone
for three hills
where I see him
parked, standing outside
the drivers' door
with a phone to his ear,
arms crossed,
watching the road.

Eyeing me
up the highway, he nods.
My toes ache
to accelerate
and the gauges
have me worried.
He tails me
while my knuckles
cling white to the wheel
into the 40 miles
between me and home.

Held Down by Nathan

He said stop laughing.
This is what it's like
to be helpless.
You need to think.

You can't get up-
can't move,
neither will I.
If you try I'll catch you
again. We're going to stay
like this until you stop.

Don't wiggle your ass,
think. What can you do
with me on top?
Weren't you expecting it?
Don't scream.
Think and look at me.

What color are my eyes?
Look at my face. Think.
Will you know this face?
What shape do you see?
Stop. Focus on my forehead,
my eyes, then nose, jaw.
Close your eyes.
Tell me what I look like.
You've known me for years.

If you didn't, what now?
Stay still. My grip will break,
then you can freak out.
Break, cut, kill me. Whatever.
Just never let me out
of your head.

Ride Home

I tug my dress
below my knees,
known Astria long?
His car leans, slows;
I've never seen
this parking lot before.
I peel off my heels
during his beer run,
unlock my side
in time for his
sorry it took so long
and start to pray.

Dear God-
don't let me be
another body-bag,
dumb-bitch story
used to scare little girls
from pretty clothes
and nighttime fun
with friends
or a sister
who left me
with a stranger.

Know-better
parts of me
scream
leaving my blade
on the bathroom sink,
between all five shades
of mortal pink
I smeared,
expecting
Astria to drive.

His eyes fix
on the Keystone
or my knees.

I think he missed the turn.

Dear God, why me?
Instead of another

Channel twelve
whore/victim,
alive and forsaken,
without her blade
or the hymen
I thought might save me.

Ode to Friday Nights

A certain giggle surfaces
when we're so buzzed
we think we need another
and bound away
to the kitchen!

(if we can make it)
the whiskey never freezes
and Hamlet sits patiently on the table,
surrounded by shot glasses,

one from every road trip:
Cheyenne, Chicago, South Dakota,
now topped off since the days
when liquor was mysterious
and called our names,

while we waited impatiently for
Uncle Jack, cousin Ardi,
Sister Vodi and the Great Green Pucker;
the camera lens and albums

teetering above linoleum,
books flat on fingertips
clutching Ophelia and her crazy love.
"Get thee to a nunnery, Go!"
index-finger and head held high,

all the Shakespearian prowess
we could muster,
before falling into the sink.
We all wanted to be the girl

in the middle at the movies, in the car,
between boys who loved us
for little chipmunk smiles,
voices small, tender and taunting;

the graveyard
after ice cream cone fights
left us sticky, snickering,
ready for the sprinklers
only turned on after midnight
until the cops circled back

to let us know we were trespassing.

SECTION III

Chevy Recall

I knew I should have gone
to the bathroom.
Good thing I feel at home
with brake pads, a new
starter kit and the man
across from me won't stop
glancing and asking questions.

My purse on closed legs,
I cock my head, try for his sake.
He's convincing me how much
he knows, why he brought 'er in:
lack of time and tools.

I'm surrounded by Prestone, Penzoil,
thick-threaded rubber-steel,
blue-striped coveralls, heavy
with time and hard work.
Twelve-hour workdays
blanket fingerprints spent
knuckle-deep in grease,
oil and gasoline; mechanics rear
shoulders against cold cement,
fixing problems they didn't create.

I hate peeing in these places.

Doors don't shut and I never learned
the proper squat-above-the-seat.
It's impossible to stand above
black smeared porcelain,
sticky tiles trying to sparkle.
Three bottles in a basket next to the sink:
Caress, Jergens, White Rain hairspray.

Women think they've invaded
this space of thick hands,
calluses, blood-brutal words,
crude looks over their paperwork,
an invasion of testosterone realms,
insisting feminist input on *Auto-erotica*.

Coveralls know solid muscle, biting stubble,
get-my-piece back-from-you glares

while they stare at black high heels.
I wish the man across from me could see
my shirt is not part of the head light display.

I wish he'd bought a Ford.

Could have saved us both
forty-seven minutes
of his excuses, the grimace
I hide from his half-rotted teeth,
last night's Keystone Light
I smell this far away.

He winks and I check for my Kershaw.
Women in bubble-butt slacks smile by,
busy, caught between the sleek
and grunge professionalism
they read on computer screens,
fighting grease they can't help but see.

Can I get you anything, sweetie?
a nice lady smiles. I too show my teeth.

Breaking Julia

Ben splits brains
with words,
he piles into her.

Julia's mind crawls out,
away from Ben-sounds
by looking down, counting
crumbs on the floor,
letting her brain go
out from behind her eyes,
creep down walls,
crouch the corner.

There it waits;
her body hovering
below blows
of Ben's breath
he stops
long enough for Julia
to get up, drag her mass
of not-thoughts
around the kitchen.

She scrubs, by hand,
Ben's plate
before lying down,
again, faking him
into the small
of her waist.

Lifer

One frozen January morning,
a Corvette screamed past Mike's patrol car,
copy, copy, copy on the radio,
the driver—hand out, finger up—
waving at the deputy on his last mile
before the Wy/Co border.
That drunk-driving, line-crossing
son-of-a-bitch didn't make it.

Mike hauled his last smashed jack-ass
back to town, howling from the back
“Slow down!” pounding Plexiglas
well over an hour until Mike clocked out,
went home to at least a pint; maybe more,
with the TV all the way up.

He ignored his landlady's knocking
until he swore he heard *fucking assholes*
and their enforcement. Mike got up,
turned off the TV, grabbed a shovel
from the back of the coat closet.

He knocked, a soft, polite tap
below her peep-hole,
mustered up a smile,
her in a pink/orange muumuu,
dead of winter, fluffy slippers,
then struck her
three or fourteen times,
shovel face-down on the stomach,
back and legs.

The Sheriff let him see the photos:
body limp on pavement,
spots of orange clung to broken skin,
chopped bone, rib-cage,
curler dangling from a chunk of scalp,
mangled hair draped across blue brains.
The angle of the shovel head got him life.

She comes to him in dreams,
splatters up at lunchtime—
cold metal against intestines,
cartilage, marrow

follow him to bed,
the shower, down the hall,
his feet gnawing a concrete cell floor.
Took a long time
to remember her face, name,
when she was alive,
the color of her eyes.

Lament of Auntie Jo

I pace,
wearing thin
cheap apartment carpet
for hours on end
clinging
to a screaming baby
not my own.
He flails on.

This is not his home.

He shrieks
this time of night
always
and all I know
is to sing
hush little baby,
it's no good to cry.

Momma's gonna rush back
to your side
to apologize
hours after a run
to the store
for formula,
crackers,
the syringes
she'll tuck between
wrists and elbows,
diapers and bottle caps.

She'll dash back
by 3 a.m.,
crash the couch
long enough to sober up
by sunrise, finger high
on the new day
and way of life
she'll begin again,
tomorrow.

She sleeps
in my home, her
baby in my arms,

coating my world
in apologies,
while I mix bottles.

Poor baby.

Off to the store
for forgotten formula
and all I know
is *hush little baby*,
I won't say a word
and hate the saltine
warm-water mix
I shake in a bottle,
but don't know
what else to do.

Grand-mama's Wooden Spoon

Mother cried quite a bit
when her mother came through
her bedroom door, arm-up
wood-spoon-ready,
mother-rage outstretched
and down against her shrieks.

Mother said grand-mama hit
hard and one night left Mom
with a sting on her hips, thighs,
palms, before realizing
the noise wasn't from Mother
but a bedroom down the hall.

Grand-mama stood,
without a word,
left Mother on the floor
where she stayed until dawn.

Steve's Mom Gets Out of Prison

I

Newspapers expanded the labels:
mommy slayer; they called her
baby killer-traveling 98 in a 75,
swerving, running happy-little-family
off the interstate where her arm suffered.
Poor Steve couldn't remember
a night he didn't cover his mother,
her body limp over the couch.
He barely made it to middle school
before she was locked-up,
miles away for involuntary man-slaughter.
Steve stayed with his dad,
cigarette butts piled up around bottles.

II

Two years into my BA Steve called
almost every night. On-time for deadlines,
red-ink-ready, I'm nothing like his mother,
who lived behind bars
because she lived at them
and he counted down to the day
she got out *all planned*,
according to her best friend and parents:
Welcome Home banner,
cake ordered and she'd been clean
for a decade. Even Steve sobered up,
excited for the event and wanted to call
soon as he saw her.

III

I took to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*,
answered Normandy beach questions,
discovered inertia,
before a ring at three-something.
Steve was silent until finally,
"Mom just got here;
they went to the bar first. Didn't
recognize me, tried to get me
in the bed with her, actually.
At least I'm the good-looking

man she always wanted.”

X Marks

Vern
told Paul
and Nathan
no.

He thought
scars looked
horrible,
didn't want
posse marked.

They
told him
fine.

Then
Paul and Nathan
took turns
handling Vern

down
to the last drop
of a fifth—
fucked him
up

for his own good,

sent blood
drooling
forearm
to hand

after he woke
up, tried
to stumble home

dripping into
slush, snow
and brush.

Vern's X
freezer-burned
dry

in 20-below,
passed out
snow.

His forearm
burned
through layers
of Carheart jacket

but he never did
bite his nails
again.

Cold red
crept
over him,
dripped
beneath
fingernails
he nibbled
until he hated
his own
taste.

Swing

For Astria

on that pretty little set
while I gaze on,
pushing, shoving you
into the sky,
forward and back
into my arms and away
with your fingers wrapped
around my little links
I can't let end.

You get to fly
into safety nets,
locked around a rod
that never ends,
legs dangling
from a sunshine seat.
My clothes go missing,
absent earrings dangling
in your world now.
Mine filled with empty pegs,
a pile of sand,
always sinking

while you grab that burning ball
on the way back down,
grip the links of my chain
until they reach my clasp,
of the necklace you stole
and back I go, into the dune,
sand-burn, face plant, dirt.

Taking Julia Home

She packed light;
said three times
*I don't want to
go home.*

She dreads Ben

who splits her
between a motor home
with no water
and a promise
of under table pay
and possibility.

She ponders
against the pedal,
floorboard hot
with dread, eyes wet,

smokes her last pack

of freedom—to love
to the license plate
in front of us.

Says she's sorry
for letting a red butt
fly out the window,
grabs another pack
to tap against her
swollen belly.

Gutter

I knew better
than the six-by-nine foot
cinderblock box-boy
trapped beneath my car door,
his face leaned
against a worn winter
rubber front tire
his first week out,
with the usual
year-point-five probation.

In Paul's garage,
teddy-bear-ready
Eric wrapped around me—
Only one who wrote
to his trapped-ass
smothered by yellow walls,
the worst for bipolar
he once said.

His first letter,
sixteen pages,
was about pacing
hours beginning to end:
right to left and back,
around the walls,
fingers tracing divots
in the cinderblock;
he imagined his flip-flops
could ware floors to dirt
where he could dig
his way out.

Second letter was light.
The no-lights-out
policy in 24 hour isolation,
sixth month-segregation
kept him awake days and/or nights.
He was never sure which
unless being fed,
walking the yard
smothered in June sun,
no shade, no cloud cover.

Letter three was under
constant surveillance.
Eric hadn't gotten used
to guards watching
his canary-cell fist-strikes,
toilette-time or leg hair-plucks
from the ankle-up.
He didn't want to imagine
what they thought,
then didn't care
about jack-off shower-time,
which ended up
his favorite, I think,
in time for his release.

Face up in a drainage ditch,
left dry for years,
Eric cooed over me,
the moon no one sees
from solitary. He sang
a chorus of vodka
and laughter to lug nuts,
tried to be my boyfriend
but couldn't stop laughing.

Astria's Heroin: The Attic

I didn't think I'd be here again,
heavy chemical gloves,
blackened silver spoons
and needles, a red bio-hazard bag.
How did you ever hide so much?

I refuse to replace smoked bulbs,
hollowed-out like eggs
we drained for Gram.
Must be how you learned
to handle brittle glass,
remove the inside wires,
slice a hole around the top.

I threw them just to hear them break.
They are all shattered, clinking,
stretching red plastic
like poisoned fingernails
of a body bagged alive
all over the insides
of this heavy plastic thing
behind me.

Laramie to Rawlins

The longest
 ninety-two miles
 of I-80 streak
 ever-yellow to the left,
 dot white to the right;
 the worst miles
 I spend trying to forget Nathan
his hundred-yard staring blue eyes,
 while I drive without him
 after years of never being
 alone.

He's ripped to a core
that haunts him,
 haunted me
 in his matchbox home,
 double-wides
 far as the eye can see
 where he searched me
 for the trigger of an M-60,
 sleep-trapped
 in his sand dune cocoon,
 trying to see past pink mist,
 the first brain cell
 he kissed goodbye.

If I'd stayed,
 I'd have died,
 in spite of his six weeks
 Iraq-back-to-US
 Rehab Pass.

He's trained to kill,
 forgets by the bottle,
 sucks away
 cold coffee mornings,
 cigarette butts
 while he weighs another sip
 against a memory
 of a mounting body count-
 the soldiers he shot:
 targets-'til-dead,
 with family photos, new babies,
 letters home promising money,
 safe nights, good sex, early mornings.

Miles swell
 over sage-tipped snow
 howling beneath the barren sky.
 Nothing beats home:
 the smell of dirt,
 tumbleweeds and brush.
 When I left,
 I took all my knives,
 Nathan's latest .45,
 my notebooks and pens.
Still-I need more time,
 more interstate, a different cigarette than his
 crazy ability to stop time
 in that kaleidoscope home
 with a dented helmet trophy.

Regret

For Aunt Lois

My backyard is filled with flowers
They remain year round
for no reason, alive
in bloom and I suspect
they stay suspended on their stems
for different reasons.

Some soak sunshine,
open brightest when birds
call them to life,
holding themselves
agape to rays,
enduring the wind,
the heat, hovering around them.

In winter, though,
my backyard fills solid
with frozen petals.
I'm surprised how well
the multiple colors
lap at snow and ice
as it drips down their spines.
They never grow,
each feeding on frozen earth
harnessing silence into energy,
smiling on early nights.

Nothing in the yard
ever blows away;
blossoms appear
as if out of nowhere,
never change,
as do stems, leaves and thorns,
each year, all year long.
They never move, never die,
only stand, all still,
all silent, staring at me
through closed windows,
and sealed drapes.

Against the backyard panes-
wind never rattles,

never leaks water
from the outside in,
nothing moves inside out
of those frames of glass.
Just my own reflection
stares back
while I watch
that nasty mess of tangled colors,
how they stare,
cold and lovely
wanting, desperate
to be pruned.

At 7,000 Feet

Rawlins,
Wyoming
is smothered
by mountain peaks
and here
our grief
petrifies
to stone.
We weep
granite-still
layers of brown,
burgundy,
black, stacked
and run together,
sheets of rock,
one buried by another
winter after winter
of frozen stone
raised, woven,
motionless,
granite peaks,
pillars, whispering
to shadow clouds.

NOTES

No Apology to Pedophiles

While it is not unheard of for pedophiles to become targets of assault and battery during their imprisonment, it was customary (at least for a time in Rawlins) for these men to be executed by fellow inmates, exactly ninety days after incarceration. “Killing off” pedophiles became so prevalent, those convicted of the crime were placed in solitary confinement for sixty days for their own safety. It is presumed prior to this, the guards and fellow inmates gave convicted pedophiles thirty days, and simply extended the time after the sixty day “cool off” period of isolation was passed by state officials.

VITA

Labecca Jo Jones

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Thesis: RAWLINS, WYOMING: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Major Field: English, Creative Writing

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Personal Data:

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Rawlins, Wyoming consists of poems written in a five year period (from 2005-2010) about the people residing in the location. They are a reflection of my fixation with confessional, regional and historical poetry. Many of these poems were written for graduate workshops conducted by Lisa Lewis and Ai at Oklahoma State University.

Rawlins, Wyoming—divided into three sections—focuses on the town itself, the population and land surrounding the area. This is a story of forgotten people and places where life hinges on the doors of a medium security prison, one of two major places of employment to its residents, where they can work as guards and teachers. The sections begin in childhood, transitioning into adulthood where we see the speakers reacting to addictions, the incarcerated, violence, sexism, regionalism and social class.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Lisa Lewis
