

IF LIGHTNING STRUCK THE SUN

by
E. A. McCarthy

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Master of Arts
In English
Creative Writing

University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, OK

Dr. Tobias Wray
Emily Maloney
Dr. Rebecca Quoss-Moore

If Lightning Struck the Sun

Thesis Title

E. A. McCarthy

Author's Name

April 20, 2026

Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

A THESIS APPROVED FOR

Master of Arts in English - Creative Writing

By


Committee Chairperson


Committee Member


Committee Member

Committee Member

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Preface	4
 I.	
While Watching a Solar Eclipse	20
Night Rolled In	21
the almost-lost sister poem	22
Bear Cave	23
When I Can't Fix the World for Her	25
Obituary, Two Years Later	26
Wearing Colors to a Funeral	27
When Darkness Follows	28
Litany of Breaking Points	29
On Calling Home	30
Their divorce was finalized on a Tuesday	31
August, Three Months Later	32
Secrets I can't confess to myself	33
CREATURE	34
The Violent Truth	35
self-portrait in a lake's reflection	36
 II.	
The Girl Who Hated the Rain	38
Oklahoma, 2009	39
Sisyphus is like a sister to me	40
Sleep Talking	41
in the melting snow	42
the first hello after goodbye	43
Without _ _ _	44

Phantom Pains	45
Middlesbrough Lane	46
Over Capacity	47
The Party Continued Without Me	48
Work Poem	49
i close my eyes and become skinless	50
Ode to Breakup Sex	51
I cradle her face in my palm	53
Love Letters to the End of the World	54

III.

Bloom	56
Stormcloud Blue	57
Provincetown	58
Destin	59
Cocooned	60
Burning Haibun of a Burning Father	61
Litany of Why	62
Did you know sharks have infinite teeth?	63
One morning I woke up loving my body	64
When Mia-Jo says “you are such a tender soul”	65
Death of a Nameless Girl	66
Glass Girl	67

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the publications who provided the first homes for the following poems:

The New Plains Review: “Bear Cave,” “I cradle her face in my palm,” and “Cocooned”

Beyond Queer Words: “Did you know sharks have infinite teeth?”

La Piccioletta Barca: “in the melting snow”

Preface

If Lightning Struck the Sun is a collection of poems about struggling to overcome shame in search of identity. The speaker describes both an internal conflict and a strained relationship with the world around them. They are searching for an answer to one major question: who am I?

To find the answer, the speaker must reach into the darkness and move through the sense of shame that prevents them from finding their true self. This collection was heavily influenced by the Confessional poets of the 1950s, particularly Sylvia Plath. The Confessional poets wrote about personal topics that were widely considered shameful in society such as mental illness, alcoholism, etc. By publicly writing about subjects that generally would have been kept secret, the Confessional poets formed a miniature rebellion against strict societal expectations.

One of the great accomplishments of this rebellion is that it places more importance on the individual than on their place in society. Confessional poetry focuses largely on the poet's self as an individual, not just a piece of the world. It does not just disregard societal expectations; it actively speaks against them. Confessional poetry opens doors for the poet to think outside of the box and fight past shame to reach the truth.

However, by the end of the first section, the speaker establishes themselves as an unreliable narrator in "The Violent Truth," which starts with the line "I've always been a liar." This is itself a confession, a moment of shameful truth from a self-proclaimed liar. This creates ambiguity in the speaker's confessions in that their being an unreliable narrator inherently contradicts with the idea of confession. From this point on, the string of confessions that take place throughout the book are muddled: if the confessor is also a liar, how many of their confessions are true?

Plath, in particular, served as a major point of inspiration for this collection. Her use of ominous imagery creates a sense of tension that does not attempt to sugar-coat the darkness her poems contain. For example, one excerpt from “Sheep in Fog” reads:

All morning the
Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.
My bones hold a stillness, the far
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

These images demonstrate an intersection between peace and despair. The effect is an unsettling feeling of unanswered questions. My work attempts to evoke similar feelings, layering comfort and familiarity together with apprehension for the road ahead. Take, for example, this stanza from “Litany of Breaking Points:”

I wake up in a field.
The sky is red and the crickets
are silent for the first time.
I can’t bear to see the smoke,
so I close my eyes and let the wheat
bury me. Absorb me.
There is howling in the distance.
It is not a wolf.

Here, the speaker is not expressing distress; they simply close their eyes and lie down in the field. They accept the reality of the world around them without a fight, despite the grim situation. They have given up. Meanwhile, there is a mysterious howling; the speaker does not identify the source except by saying it is not a wolf. So, if not a wolf, what is it? This stanza creates an

ominous sense of fear of the unknown. It is not just a moment post-disaster; it is a moment between disasters.

While our society has generally become more open and honest than the society the Confessional poets wrote about, speaking too frankly about certain subjects can still be considered taboo. Throughout these poems, themes such as depression, body dysmorphia, disordered eating, gender identity, and sex are prevalent. This collection tells a direct, revealing story about a speaker who does not know who to be or how to be “normal.” Its candor is reminiscent of the Confessional poets in how it does not shy away from so-called “private” matters. Take, for instance, “Glass Girl,” which is about my gender identity as a nonbinary person:

Girl isn't wrong,
just not the whole truth.
Not a lie, just an omission.

In poems, every omission has intention.
If I write a poem about being a girl,
is it still just omission?
When does it become a lie?

Sometimes I think I'm only a woman out of convenience
and because when the moon writes sonnets,
they all begin with *she*.

This passage is itself a confession. My gender identity is deeply personal to me and not something I often share with people; however, by writing so honestly about it, I am opening myself up to my readers, allowing them to see my inner truths. In this poem, the line “Sometimes I think I'm only a woman out of convenience” acts as a turning point; this is the moment the whole poem has been building up to, the big confession that has been slowly oozing out since the first line. Up to this point, the poem is built on implications and muddiness. Here, it is stated

directly: the speaker believes they are only a woman because it's easy to accept the gender identity the world already perceives in them. In today's fractured culture, gender identity is perhaps one of the most divisive topics we have. It is an extremely nuanced conversation, one that cannot be broken down or explained in a single poem.

This collection contains several gender-based poems, and girlhood is a prominent theme throughout. The previously mentioned poem "Glass Girl" begins to break down the nuances of a nonbinary gender identity, but it also begins to break down girlhood itself, investigating the fragility of what "girl" actually means. An earlier stanza in the same poem reads:

Why can I love *girl* but not *body*?
 Why does body fall apart
 in my hands like ocean,
 but girl sticks to me like sand?

When the speaker says that girl sticks to them like sand, they are saying that the label of "girl" does not easily wash away, even when it is not fully correct. The speaker has grown up as a girl, and while the label itself is not entirely accurate, they still love girlhood and see it as a piece of their identity. They love girlhood, and part of them will always identify as a girl, even if it is not the whole truth.

Gender identity is a complex subject, especially for those of us who do not have a solid place on the traditional gender binary. The late Andrea Gibson, a fellow nonbinary poet, helped build a framework through which we can discuss gender in poetry, opening the doors for my own work on gender identity. Gibson, with their complex and intensely personal descriptions of their gender identity, is a major part of my poetic lineage.

As a nonbinary person, gender identity is an important facet of who I am at my core, and Gibson's work begins to apply poetic language to a deep internal feeling. One example is their

poem “My Gender is the Undoing of Gender,” in which they write, “If someday I have a mustache, / I know I’ll be comfortable wearing a dress. / And if I ever have a beard, I’m certain / I’ll be the prettiest girl I’ve ever been.”

“Glass Girl” tackles gender identity in a similar way, drawing inspiration from complex discussions and depictions of gender such as Gibson’s. The speaker is conflicted about their identity because, while they love the label of “girl,” it does not feel like the whole truth for them; it feels like the “girl” identity only exists for them in poems, not in real life (notably, many of these poems refer to the speaker in the third person as “she,” furthering the idea that “she” is a poetic figure). Essentially, *Glass Girl* depicts a speaker who is torn between their love of girlhood and the rest of what is possible for them.

In fact, despite my being nonbinary, the theme of girlhood acts as a throughline connecting many of these poems. One example, “Death of a Nameless Girl,” chronicles the speaker’s growth from a young girl into an adult through the metaphors of death and loss of identity. This poem is structured in three sections: the first tells the story of the speaker as a young girl “scratching her name into the stars,” knowing who she is and showing it. The second section describes the speaker as she grew older falling into depression and “destroying the letters that made her name / so their sour taste could never touch another tongue.” In other words, she loses her sense of self, retreats into herself, and stops sharing her truth with the world. The final section shifts into the speaker’s present as an adult and transitions from third person to first person to show the disconnect between the speaker’s current self and the different versions that used to exist. In the present, the speaker is “packed into moving boxes,” indicating a transitional stage of life.

my name lived in her chest
but hers echoes between my ribs

as I water the saplings growing
from the body she left behind.

Here, the speaker writes of hope. The past versions of her do not exist anymore, but she is doing her best to honor them. Her name—her identity—lived in the hearts of the previous girls she was, representing hope for who they could be in the future. Now they are gone, but their names are still in her heart, echoing, resonating. She tends to saplings growing from the metaphorical dead body—in other words, she takes the remnants of the young, innocent girl she used to be and uses what she has learned to cultivate a happier, more hopeful future for herself, even in times when that feels impossible. This opens up new possibilities for the speaker as she learns to find hope even in the darkness.

Operating alongside girlhood, the theme of sisterhood is prevalent throughout this collection. Many of these poems are about a shared sisterly bond, whether that sisterhood is biological or not. This theme draws from a lineage of women and nonbinary poets expressing similar sisterhood and unity with one another.

One major example is Franny Choi's poem "Prayer for the Untranslated Testimony."

Let their names rattle the night air with their
incessant lungs. Let the sounds of their names burn
blue in the night, let even their ugliest memories
be named after the daughters of prophets, please,
if there is a god named for the humble undersides
of these leaves somehow not yet dead, let
the names of my sisters make all the doors on my street
fly open. Let every tree sleeping in our chests
claw awake. And rush out to answer that call.

Here, Choi portrays a magic, even supernatural sense of sisterhood between women, including women who do not necessarily know each other. This poem calls for unity among women to help each other as sisters and to protect one another.

This sense of girlhood and sisterhood springs from a poetic feminism found in the likes of Franny Choi, Natalie Diaz, Layli Long Soldier, Leila Chatti, etc. Chatti's book *Deluge* particularly speaks to me through its insights into the nuances found between religion and womanhood. Chatti's work on the pitfalls of womanhood fascinates me and has, over the years, helped inspire and shape my own work on womanhood. Lines such as "to be a mother was to be the only / permissible form of a woman, the begrudging / exception to the rule of our worth- / lessness" helped inspire my own writing on girlhood and what it really means to be a "girl."

As an identity-driven collection, the poems in this thesis place a lot of focus on the intersections of the positives and negatives of the self. As a result, one recurring motif throughout this collection is the intermingling of sweetness and morbidity. When talking about this thesis, I often describe it as "body horror with a sweetness to it," or a combination of horror and softness. These poems show the cracks in the foundation of *self* and argue for softness in a hard world. In these, the body acts as a physical representation of the self; meanwhile, the body horror and nature imagery represents the emotional journey behind the speaker's confessions.

Take, for example, "Bloom," which depicts the speaker as a human-plant hybrid:

I know what it's like
when flowers bloom in tear ducts.

I know what it's like
to peel bark off my corpse like bandages.

I know what it's like
to bleed mud and rainwater.

In this poem, the speaker is reflecting on pain she has experienced in her lifetime before going on to explain that she wants more than just pain. This poem is about growing from pain as the speaker learns to live for herself instead of for other people. She is learning to bloom, learning to

focus on her own wants and needs, but to do that, she must also reflect on what she does not want. To do this, the poem uses impossible nature imagery depicting the speaker as a human who grows bark, bleeds mud and rainwater, has roots under her skin, and grows flowers from her eyes. This imagery creates a sense of pain and discomfort as a foundation for what the speaker wants to escape. The poem builds onto this with hope for the future as the speaker reflects on what she wants instead and how she will “bloom.”

Nature is a major motif throughout this thesis, especially in combination with the human body. This combination of images asks a new question: is the world infiltrating the body, or is the body learning to exist in combination with the world, rather than separately from it? Where is the boundary between the self and the outside world?

Another poem that uses similar imagery is “Bear Cave,” which depicts the speaker’s quiet desperation and healing following a traumatic incident. This poem uses images such as draining all the water from the body, squeezing poppy seeds through the speaker’s pores, flowers growing out through every orifice, and splintered floors “tilling my flowerbed skin.”

This thesis is highly interested in the impossible. The title itself, *If Lightning Struck the Sun*, is an impossibility. It comes from a line in “The Girl Who Hated the Rain,” which is about two people with irreconcilable differences. In the aftermath of their falling apart, the speaker reflects on the relationship and their fundamental incompatibilities.

You’ve always loved the rain.
 I’ve always loved the sun.
 If lightning struck the sun,
 which of us would fall apart in ashes?
 The sun might not notice being struck.
 I notice everything.

The day I lost you I sat by my window
 and watched the sky move for hours.
 The world moved on without us.

We chase it, dripping with cloud.
We won't catch up to it.
We won't find an *us* again.

I want to be the one that got away.
Instead, I'm just the girl who hated the rain.

Here, the speaker reflects on the impossibility of the relationship in the form of metaphor through imagery of lightning striking the sun. In the impossible scenario of the pair staying together, one of them still falls apart in ashes. By naming herself “just the girl who hated the rain,” the speaker ties her identity to the failed relationship and therefore to the impossibility of the relationship’s success. In other words, her sense of self becomes based on her failures and what is impossible for her, rather than on what *is* possible.

These poems use imagery that seems impossible as a tool to describe emotions too big to fully convey in plain terms. For instance, “self-portrait in a lake’s reflection” is about self-destruction and a fractured sense of self. It is told through an image of the speaker seeing their reflection as a girl “trapped” at the bottom of a lake:

her lungs are overflowing with lake water and tears but
no matter how hard she tries she just can't die

i unhinge my jaw drink the lake
but she can't stop crying
filling the lake faster than i can empty it

i'm choking now neither of us can breathe
but i want to help her
not because she is me
but because she reminds me of my sister

This poem is about depression, self-sabotage, and self worth (or lack thereof). The speaker wants to save the girl she sees—who is really just her own reflection—from drowning, but the girl keeps drowning herself further. She wants to save herself, mostly because the reflection reminds

her of her sister. Use of imagery such as drinking the lake creates a sense of desperation as the speaker faces insurmountable circumstances and tries, against all odds, to overcome them—only to fail in the end. As the ending of the first section, this failure at the end sets up the collection with a sense of hopelessness; then, the speaker spends the rest of the collection searching for hope in the darkness.

This poem creates a binary with the speaker at one end and the reflected self at the other end. The speaker's sense of self is fractured between the self she physically sees and the self she feels. The collection tells us that the speaker is nonbinary, while this poem only refers to their reflection as a "girl." Here, the speaker is reflecting on the disconnect between her external self—the version of her that the world sees, as she is perceived as a woman—and her internal, powerless self.

One recurring theme in the imagery throughout this collection is the image of becoming something inhuman. Take, for example, "Love Letters to the End of the World."

When I visit my parents, I grow new teeth
where a prettier girl would have flesh.
They cut through every pore until I can't move—
I can only chew,
and all I am is
the eating.

This stanza depicts the anxiety and self-loathing that the speaker experiences when speaking with her parents through the metaphor of becoming all teeth. It reveals her low self-esteem and self-destructive habits. If the teeth—sharp, biting—represent anxiety, it cuts through her until it is all she is. It is all-consuming, and *consume* is all a girl can do when she is all teeth. The poem ends with "I can only chew, / and all I am is / the eating." This image implies that she is not only destructive to herself; she can consume and destroy anything when she enters this all-teeth form.

She does not just see herself as *destructive*; she sees herself as *destruction*, as a curse, as a monster.

The image of becoming something inhuman is a recurring motif throughout this thesis that partially serves as a way of depicting desperation and extraordinary emotions, but it also serves as a way of depicting the speaker's consistent disconnect from humanity and from her own identity. The speaker—or perhaps the writer—has a fixation on being inhuman. The poem “CREATURE” tackles this inhuman obsession directly:

They call me a human
who is broken;
I call myself innominate,
a creature who does nothing but eat;
but you call me baby
and kiss me goodnight.

This poem is about obsession and desperation. The speaker lacks identity and belonging, and they do not feel understood by the world. However, they address a lover who sees them as them instead of as any specific label. They feel disconnected from the world, but with this lover, they feel safer, more comfortable, more seen. They are desperate for more of that feeling, desperate to feel like themselves, desperate to know how it feels to have an identity. This leads to another recurring image: the speaker connecting with someone else through their shared strangeness or inhumanness. In “Did you know sharks have infinite teeth?” the speaker professes love through the image of having infinite teeth.

If I had infinite teeth,
I'd be harder to kiss.
I'd pull them all out and swallow them
to eat the butterflies in my stomach,
use the blood as ink
to write you a poem—

The speaker dwells on inhuman impossibilities, but in the scenario she has created, her lover is with her, and they are safe, comfortable, and strange together.

Romantic love is another recurring theme that can be found throughout this collection, particularly queer love. I come from a line of queer poets whose writings create a space for queer voices such as my own. In this space, we do not always have to be activists making a statement: we can just exist as ourselves and let our queerness breathe. Poems from writers such as Natalie Diaz help create this space by normalizing queer love and treating it as simply part of life. Some of Diaz's poems (such as "I Watch Her Eat the Apple") demonstrate queer joy through small moments of domesticity.

The summer before completing this thesis, I went to Provincetown, Massachusetts for a week-long writing workshop led by Franny Choi. Choi has long been a point of inspiration for my work, but having the opportunity to learn from her directly opened me up to new possibilities in writing. The workshop was on writing with audacity, excess, and extravagance. In other words, it was on breaking conventions and norms and experimenting with extravagance in both language and form. One of the poems I wrote during this workshop was "Litany of Why," which uses heavy repetition of the word "because" to create an excessive explanation for the speaker's recent heartbreak, representing the speaker's obsession with the event and with explaining to themselves why the relationship ended. This poem sprang from a prompt Choi gave us in class which was to make a list of possible lists we could make, then to write out one of the lists, then to turn that list into a poem.

The extravagance the workshop covered can be seen throughout this thesis in the form of lush language and maximalist imagery. The following excerpt from "Ode to Breakup Sex" demonstrates this as well as my use of repetition to create a sense of overflowing emotions:

sunbeams through her window
 lighting her eyes so blue we must name a new shade just for her,
 lightning blue, angel blue,
 orgasm blue, blooming blue,
 love-of-a-past-life blue.

We've both been touched by others but not like this,
 not this shining and shattering,
 this falling apart again and again,
 this masochistic ache in blood and bones
 pulling us together like the moon pulls the tides.
 It's a soft sting,
 pain I want to go through,
 not around.

While most of these poems follow a traditional physical structure on the page, several of them experiment with form, line breaks, and spacing. By experimenting with forms outside of the traditional structure, these poems break outside of conventions to enter a new, queerer space. If the speaker cannot fit into tradition, they will build a self outside of it. One such poem is “I cradle her face in my palm,” which includes several words backed by a black highlight and in a white font. Take, for example, the first stanza:

She says, *no one else does this for me*
 and I understand the space she describes,
 the hole where I used to be,
 because I had **never** been held
 like stardust before her.

When I talk about this poem, I refer to these black-highlighted words as “void words,” representing the metaphorical void this poem describes. When the void words are read together, they create the underlying message: “I never had all of her.”

While writing this specific poem, I drew inspiration from erasure poetry such as Franny Choi’s “Native Language” and torrin a. greathouse’s “Burning Haibun.” I am interested in the ways these poets create through destruction, and I wanted to turn this idea on its head to create

something new. The primary difference between these void poems and erasure poems is that void poems do not erase anything; instead, they use a similar aesthetic technique to enhance certain words rather than hiding them. I take specific words and “void” them, creating a new line within the existing poem. The theory behind it is the same as an erasure poem: taking an existing poem and finding the words inside of it that create something new, then paring it down.

However, rather than remove the words surrounding it, this piece leaves them combined and intermingling, creating a sense of the void being inside of the poem itself. The significance of the line “I never had all of her” making up the void words in this poem is the speaker’s realization that the source of this void shaped like their former lover is not necessarily the loss of the lover, but the nature of the doomed relationship itself.

Several of the poems in this thesis also experiment with combining poetic and prose forms, such as “Middlesbrough Lane.” This poem follows a prose-like structure, almost essayistic, except for the moments when the line breaks fracture the prose form to draw emphasis to certain words, creating a more poetic structure. This whole poem is a very nostalgic piece, but the last portion is particularly nostalgic for a memory the speaker is mourning. The shift in form happens as the poem moves into the speaker’s memory of a loving mother before she grew distant, creating a more poetic form for that specific piece of the story.

This piece is a subtle example of the combination of poetic and prose structures, such as the structure in Andrea Gibson’s “Love Me to Life,” which features an abrupt shift from wall-of-text prose to more traditional lines of poetry, line breaks and all. This shift happens at a vital turning point in the story of the poem: the prose portion discusses the speaker’s experience with illness and their blackened blood, while the poetic structure comes in when their blood turns

bright red again. These experiments with form create a unique opportunity to listen to the language itself and what it wants in a way that feels different from traditional form.

So, if this collection is a confession, what comes after the confession? Confession is intrinsically tied to shame, and confessing this shame creates a sense of catharsis after its release. Confession, here, acts as a way to create a sense of self. The speaker's identity is buried under shame, and to dig it out, they must confess; in other words, they cannot find themselves without confession. The techniques—such as experimental forms, imagery that seems impossible, and identity-based themes—are the shovels they use to dig as they try to get to the bottom of the central question: who am I? Whether that question is answered by the end or not is debatable. If anything, I would argue that the point of this collection is not in finally finding the answer, but in the journey of searching for it.

I.

*I can't stop the happening. The rusting is in me,
like how a deep wound heals—glimmered, open.*

—Natalie Diaz

While Watching a Solar Eclipse

The sky goes dark and I remember
being nine years old and asking **why**
everyone at the sleepover screams
when someone turns the lights off.

Suddenly there are a thousand suns,
a thousand moons hiding them,
a thousand lives I **can't** see,
and none of them mean anything

because at twenty-two
we no longer scream in the dark
or giggle when our eyes adjust.

At twenty-two we only get minutes
to watch the world disappear
before we have to **be** cogs again
in the endless cycle of making
money we don't get to see.

At twenty-two we're more afraid
of the **sunlight** that ashes us
than the dark we've spent
years lying awake in.

I am the last one to return.
For one rare moment I am no one's
moneymaker. I am no one's
daughter. I am sister and shadow
and standing in a sliver of light
slowly becoming daylight **again**.
I am wide-eyed and dying
and overflowing with memories.
I take off my eclipse glasses
and look directly at the sun.

Night Rolled In

The night after it happened,
I was alone in my parents' house
when my grandma called
and finally, inevitably, asked,
 "Why is everyone at the hospital?"

It was dark outside,
the wall across from me made up
of sliding glass doors
letting the night inside
and finally, inevitably, I told her.
 "She took a bunch of pills last night."

The room was usually sunlit,
and I hadn't visited at night
in months. The lighting felt
wrong, artificial, like it wasn't
real. Like none of it was real.
 "Is she okay?"

It was cold, two weeks
before Christmas. I could see
the pool outside drifting, floating.
I wished
I could float.

the almost-lost sister poem

after Lucille Clifton

the time i heard you, trembling, realize
i knew what you had done
and you begged you begged
but how could i not save you
or betray you while trying

you would have been gone into winter
and i would have been emptied
of christmases and new years
for the rest of my sisterless years
if you had been there
that gray month i could have told you
we would be far away someday

there are secrets that were born
in the weeks you were away things
i've never told you things
i pray you'll never know
things you missed and
things that missed you

Bear Cave

My little sister's bedroom
has been vacant for six weeks
when I creep in on socked tiptoes
so my monsters under her bed
don't hear.

Weeds have burst through floorboards;
poppies grow in a ring around
where they found the empty pill bottle.
I want to drain my body of water,
replace it with lemonade
just so the pain will change.

Ivy creeps through the ancient window
my little Ophelia left open,
summer sun breaking
through January clouds;
but I'm still learning to swim
in the water over the bridge.

She's coming home tomorrow.

I take her crusty once-purple Care Bear
and prop her up against pillows
to keep watch.

Last month I swallowed poppy seeds,
squeezed them through my pores;
now they grow out through my skin,
eyes, ears, mouth, until
I can't breathe
and I'm leaking lemon tears.

I'm coming home tomorrow.

I lie in the shadow of her bed,
spread-eagle, dull star,
making Nothing angels
where we used to play with Barbies.

Teddy arms dig roots into me,
rake me across splintered floors,
tilling my flowerbed skin—
drag me under the bed, into their cave,
bury me under the floorboards

to hibernate.

She's coming home tomorrow.

When I Can't Fix the World for Her

My sister used to drink milk with every meal
and cry when we dropped her off at school.
Now, she drinks peach whiskey
and cries as I drive her home from frat parties at 2am.

There are cracks in her
I don't know how to fill.
I have never been able to save her
from the people who broke me first.

As years pass, I find weeds
growing in her, and I remember everything
about the night she broke
and the shards that fell from us.

The ash of grieving her still lives in me,
even now, with her alive beside me.

Obituary, Two Years Later

when Steven died i went home
crying halfway through my shift.
i had never had a dead friend before.

the last time i saw him
was in a cap and gown,
and i couldn't decide if i deserved
to call him a friend
when i hadn't felt his absence
until it grew into forever.

three months later, i saw his signature
in my junior yearbook and
i turned to dust on the street
swept away by rain.
i turned to mud on the bottom
of someone's shoe.
i turned to something to be scraped
off, something to be
washed away.

maybe i don't have the right to write poems
about mourning him, except
this isn't really about him,
it's about how i squeeze together into nothing
when the threat of grief
falls toward us like rain in slow motion,
how i only miss people
when i know i will never see them again.

i'm sorry i didn't go to his funeral.

Wearing Colors to a Funeral

When my mom's dad died,
she didn't tell me.
I don't know if she couldn't talk about it
or just had nothing to say.

At the memorial, everyone
wore jeans and red t-shirts
with his favorite team's logo.
I've never seen my mom cry,
not even then.
She sent us home
before the ash spreading.
Times like these,
I don't always feel like part of her
family. It's easy to forget
she didn't grow up with me.

On our way home, we listened
to a track meet through
a broken phone connection
as my sister's best friend
broke the school record in the 400.
The whole car cheered for her
even though she couldn't hear us.
That night, my mom forgave her dad
even though he couldn't hear her.

When Darkness Follows

I never let myself move past the shadows on the wall.
I think I have learned forgiveness
until I remember a moment, a word,
that breaks me in half
and I am a fresh wound again.
All I ever am is wounds.

If you pull the wound apart
you'll find a girl who is angry,
angry in love,
but can't convince herself to feel it.
Always hiding, lying to herself,
hunting for explanations for every gust of wind.
She suffocates inside,
drowns herself in my blood every night
when I try to sleep.

She is angry at what she has lost,
at what she never had,
at what she is afraid to grieve.
She is angry at me
for drowning her
and angry at the shadows
for bringing her back.

Litany of Breaking Points

I.

I wake up in a field.
The sky is red and the crickets
are silent for the first time.
I can't bear to see the smoke,
so I close my eyes and let the wheat
bury me. Absorb me.
There is howling in the distance.
It is not a wolf.

II.

Every street is bloodstained,
every gun barrel hot and held
by crimson hands.
We don't want to scream anymore.
There was no gun.
And yet

III.

Too many too-young bodies
have felt bullets and a flooding
they couldn't stop.
Light-up shoes are hard to hide.

IV.

No one wants to say
what it is. No one wants
to admit they were wrong.
When blood doesn't want to stop coming,
when even the blood
is broken and dying,
we must find another way.

On Calling Home

Wasps keep hitting my window.
They never learn,
never plan for the glass.

I have a habit of saying the wrong thing.
Habit is sometimes a polite way of saying
addiction.
The wrong thing is sometimes a self-critical way of saying
things that make my mother hate me.

In our house, words had ways of
creating *mess* where there was once nothing
like maggots born from kitchen trash
and angry mothers born from silence stretched thin.
Visits end in tears.
Phone calls end in minutes.

But I keep answering anyways.
I never learn;
always expect the glass,
always aim for my reflection.

Their divorce was finalized on a Tuesday

and I wanted to feel new,
clean, or at least broken
into. I wanted something
to change.

Instead I felt caged
and messed and split.
I've never known how to forgive
my parents. I've never known
how to feel irresponsible.

It feels like my mess to fix,
like I should be building bridges
over the oceans between them.
But the fish are falling
into the sky and it is all too blue,
the whole world like a flame too hot,
and the sharks are circling,
and the water is white-hot
and reaches for me,
and there is nothing to see
but sparkling waves and sand bars—

then, in the distance,
smoke signals,
and I know someone else
is out there.

August, Three Months Later

Sitting cross-legged on my mom's couch, she tells me
the best thing about being a freshly divorced empty-nester
is making whatever she wants for dinner.

I haven't yet told her
about my dad's new fiancée.
I can't see her heart, but I can see her guts
struggling to stay inside her as she paints a picture
of water under the bridge.

Pride is a family trait, and I, too,
can't admit when I'm hurting.
I never told anyone about
the time I didn't want to be touched.
She never told me about
the people who died in the other car.
I will never tell her about
the girls whose names I never knew.
She will never tell me about
missing him.

I remember being eight years old
and fearing divorce more than anything,
then being eighteen years old
and begging for it.
I remember being twenty-two
and thinking I would never take her side,
then being twenty-three
and realizing I was wrong.

I need to leave this room.
I need to be soft again,
in a dimly-lit room with a candle
in my mouth, wax dripping down my throat
into places no one has ever touched.

I will never be clean of secrets.

Secrets I can't confess to myself

I don't know how to love
with anything less than all of me,
anything less than obsession,
less than addiction.

My nightself is only happy
when she's too high to remember she's awake
and my dayself is only happy
when she's too busy to remember she's alive.

I never learned to love
or be loved like I deserve it.
Sometimes I only cry
so someone will kiss away the tears.

Every shadow, every piece of night
reminds me of the girl who couldn't love me forever.
I've never known how to hide from her.
Even now, I suffocate
in her absence, heavy like
the heat under her blankets.

I've always been a secret-keeper,
never learned how to love a secret-maker.
Does it count as a secret
if everyone seems to know?
If I am so broken
that the world can peek inside
and see everything wrong in me?

Does it count as a secret
if it's really a parasite that refuses to die?

Do I count as a girl
if I'm really a parasite who is too scared to live?

CREATURE

I need to be closer to you,
to get inside your bones.
I want to live in your stomach
so you can vomit me up and eat me again.
I want to bottle your blood to wear as perfume
and always have you with me,
sleep in your veins like desperation,
live on your scalp like lice.

Instead, I live in your vents
on a diet of fingernails and flesh,
bloody stumps for hands,
screaming because *I love you*
cannot be whispered.

They call me a human
who is broken;
I call myself innominate,
a creature who does nothing but eat;
but you call me baby
and kiss me goodnight.

You tell me you do but
how could you ever love
me, this whimpering pile of shredded flesh
bleeding on your bed?

I didn't know how to speak
before you taught me to scream—
but we can't scream forever.
One day, we will learn to let go,
and I will claw out my vocal cords
to give us both peace.

The Violent Truth

I've always been a liar.
Lies crawl from my throat
like worms escaping from rot,
like they were meant to be there.

How can we count
every lie that passed between us?
I lied when I told you
I wasn't mad
and it wasn't your fault
and you didn't do anything wrong.
I kissed you, then screamed
into darkness, slammed
my bitten hands against my steering wheel,
my flesh pink and raw and picked
clean off the bone
and drove until I was embedded
in the car where I first held your hand.

When people ask about you,
I don't answer honestly.
I want us both blameless and clean,
not this mess of mistakes we became.

When you left me,
I wanted to spend months dying
so we could love again
with no future to worry about.
Jack called this morbidly romantic.
I called it my first truth.

You told me you loved me
one thousand five hundred and twelve times,
and I've never been able to decipher it.
Even now, I still search for answers
in every lightning strike,
as if I will find your face in the storm,
as if I will hear her name in the thunder.
As if you will leave me singed again,
heart unbeating, your final truth
stretched in pink ferns across my silent body.

self-portrait in a lake's reflection

the girl at the bottom of the lake is crying
 again she lights herself on fire
 the lake drowns it every time
 only after she feels the sting

her lungs are overflowing with lake water and tears but

no matter how hard she tries she just can't die

i unhinge my jaw drink the lake

but she can't stop crying

filling the lake faster than i can empty it

i'm choking now neither of us can breathe
 but i want to help her

not because she is me

but because she reminds me of my sister

i am drinking this world she shimmers inside
 knowing she is me, or a wavering, reflecting version
 of a girl who looks like me

this drowning girl meant for something
 other than being a drowning girl

fish beg her to surface, but she never does
 too afraid to remember the taste
 of fresh air and unfractured sunlight

i have always been more riptide than girl
 something to escape, not to float in

there are tears on my face
 i don't know which of us cried them

the sun goes down
 the girl in the lake disappears
 i can't see my reflection anymore

i'm alone again

not a girl but a pair of hands reaching
 fruitlessly through worldless water
 rippling the only thing that ever saw me

no more reflection
 no lake
 no sister

just me and a black sky.

II.

*I dug for worms and the bowls of writhing things but found
only seeds, half-sprouted and too holy between my fingers.*

—Franny Choi

The Girl Who Hated the Rain

I never learned the difference
between skin and scales.
You never learned the difference
between loving and being loved.

I watch you climb
through skylights into the rain
like I used to climb your stairs,
and I know your rain always brings lightning,
know I always follow.

You've always loved the rain.
I've always loved the sun.
If lightning struck the sun,
which of us would fall apart in ashes?
The sun might not notice being struck.
I notice everything.

The day I lost you, I sat by my window
and watched the sky move for hours.
The world moved on without us.
We chase it, dripping with cloud.
We won't catch up to it.
We won't find an *us* again.

I want to be the one that got away.
Instead, I'm just the girl who hated the rain.

Oklahoma, 2009

Once, I scraped my knee
and red dirt spilled out.
The early aughts were ending
and we were losing track
of what it meant to grow up.

We used to cut through the woods
and hop over the little creek
to reach the playground and pretend
wood chips were fairy dust.

We used to touch sticky hands
to the street for the novelty of it
and jump into pools to see
how loud we could scream underwater.

We used to pretend to be sisters,
mermaids, feral cats, grownups.
We dreamed of being writers,
never marrying, growing old together.
It all felt so forever then,
like our handprints in the mud
wouldn't wash away in the rain,
like the rain would never come
at all.

Years later, I would break myself open
to let the red dirt pour out
and try to rid myself of every speck.
Even now I am still spilling.

Sisyphus is like a sister to me

but her boulder has nothing on my
eating every day—
just once.

The impossibility of reaching the top:
a lifetime
of three meals per day,
picked, purchased, prepared by me,
without tears, without screaming,
without checking the scale
again and again, once again.

My boulder rolls back down into my heart,
weighs me down with each step;
it grows every day,
the weight of the empty sky.

It grows from the inside out,
pushing bones and guts aside,
stalactites breaking through skin
until there is nothing left
but boulder.

I crumble into dust.
The wind carries me away,
and I feel heavier than ever.

Sleep Talking

I dreamt we were the only two
dinosaurs to survive.
I woke up and saw you,
hair flattened in sleep,
hands reaching for me in dreaming.

You said *let me pour*
from my body,
and I pictured you
bodiless, empty, mine.

I dreamt you left me
and woke to see your fluttering eyelashes.
I reached for you.
We were always reaching.

You said *I can't do this*
anymore and when I woke you,
you couldn't remember why.
I pulled you closer,
real, tangible, mine.

I dreamt you loved me
and woke up to an empty bed.

in the melting snow

there was ice on the ground
when i kissed you
for the last time.
i wanted to
bury myself in it
& let myself
become the freeze
& the frostbite.
i wanted you
to mourn me.
instead, i walked home
wrapped in a jacket
i used to call yours,
trapped in a body
you used to call yours.

now the snow
is melting
& everywhere i look
is wet and dying.
now the sun
can return
& the coming back to life
can begin.
now, when asked
for a secret,
the only word i know
is your name.
now you are in
every poem i write.
now i start
the thawing,
the trying not to drown
in the melting.

the first hello after goodbye

i saw the face that i used to press
into the palm of my hand,
christen with kisses in the shape of a cross
and i felt cracks form in the frozen lake beneath me.
she came out to say hi as if
there are any words for this fissure we're living in.
and i wasn't ready
for this distance between us,
two feet apart like new friends,
not like lovers,
not like two who have touched every inch of each other's bodies,
not like two who spend more time touching than not.
she hugged me the same way she has
hundreds of times before
and i wished desperately to return to one of those
instead of this wet breaking,
this *friends*,
this *alone*.
we said goodbye for the first time since goodbye
and i fell through the ice
into the cold *without*.

Without _ _ _

There is no one left to forgive
the way I pull
myself apart and scatter
in the lake for the ducks
who can only thank me
with grateful beaks
and wings that could fly anywhere,
anywhere, but they choose
me, here, scattered across this endless lake.

I have no one left to hurt
but myself and Forgiveness
is not in my family's genes.
When I feel the urge to forgive,
I kill it by giving away quarters like candy
for children to buy duck food at the zoo
and spread it like
me, like some dead thing,
some dying thing,
some severely Earthen thing.

Phantom Pains

Every morning

my father hops
down the hallway and sits
on a bench in the closet
while he puts his left leg on.
Once he can, he walks
to the kitchen for his

I oversleep until I'm late, crawl
out of bed to sit
in front of the mirror, and talk
to my reflection while I tie
my shoelaces.
I take my

medicine,
a few pills to keep phantoms away.

We don't speak often
for fear of the broken
haunting that escapes our throats
when we do.

He is

I am

the phantom.
What does it mean to be a phantom
who is afraid of ghosts?

We never learned to be corporeal.
The ghost of the body

he lost still haunts
every step he takes.

I was born without still haunts
every breath I take.

There is a line of salt dividing us
into two souls that can never coexist.
I don't know who spilled the first grain
but we each keep making it longer
as we face the sun and walk into eternity as

a father without a daughter.

a daughter without a father.

Middlesbrough Lane

The first address I memorized was the last one we walked away from with our family still intact. Second house from the corner, sunset scarlet bricks, and tear-stained walls in two corners of the living room. I didn't know, back then, what it meant to fall apart. It's hard to picture how small I was when I learned to write my name at that kitchen table, or when I sat awestruck on the carpet as we named our first puppy — Zoe, no y. She's now older than I was when we got her, but I can still see her as a tiny ball of fluff in that backyard, stretched out in a sunny spot in the grass while my little sister and I climbed the fence and watched the cows graze in the meadow behind us. My sister was the smallest girl in her class, so little it's hard to understand how someone could look in her eyes and hurt her. She once took a crayon and drew a single line on the wall, all the way around the perimeter of the room. Our mother spent hours scrubbing it away to make it look like we hadn't been there, to make the room look properly un-lived in again.

Despite her, we altered the house in all the little ways we could, forcing it to know we were there. My bedroom wall had a patch of white where I had peeled away the pink paint in a fit of need driven by insomnia and some unnamed hunger inside me that hadn't yet started to rot. I moved my bed to hide it so no one could ask why. I didn't know how to explain the itch in my gut when I saw the chipped paint just waiting for me to destroy it. I didn't know how to explain who I was to parents who only ever asked for normal children.

//

That was the house where I learned not to trust my mother. When I think of her now, I remember being unseen and unreachable. But when I can't stop laughing, I always think I sound like her — in those early years when she was just

my mom, cross-legged on the couch with a deck of cards, playing music through the whole house, laughing until she cried. This version of her is who I become when I'm lucky. It's my favorite phantom: my mom and me, both young and loud, both forgetting to be

broken.

Over Capacity

I can't keep trying
to catch the rain in my hands,
sky spilling between fingers
like sunlight between branches.

The sky is not big enough
to hold all the light,
so it spills into
earth, ocean, skin.

I am not big enough
to hold this pain
for both of us.
It spills into you
and when you can't hold it either,
it spills back into me.

I'm sick of the spilling.
I can't keep pouring,
can't keep getting washed away
in the flood.
I can't keep holding hurt
tight in my fists.

I am the only soft ache
I can hold.

The Party Continued Without Me

The bathroom floor was cold and swimming, the cat's fur warm under my fuzzy fingertips. She only came out of hiding when I was the last one left. They left without saying goodbye & it felt like high school again. The whole night felt like high school, like being stuck in a shadow under bleachers I had never seen from above. I thought it would be different this time. I didn't see them again after that night, except for the boy who used to chase me on the playground. After they were gone, he brought me a loaf of bread. I didn't notice I was holding it so tightly my fingers put holes through it. *I don't like being drunk*, I told him. My voice sounded like I had been crying, but I couldn't remember any tears. He said, *I think you just don't like being THIS drunk*. He was right. He didn't invite the others back after that. He always invites me back, even though I threw up & his toilet wouldn't flush. Back when we were learning to spell our names, I couldn't have imagined this version of us, lying on the floor together at 3 a.m., warm despite the coldness seeping into our bones. I couldn't have imagined us. He didn't expect anything of me. He didn't want me to be his or to be theirs. He let me be a mess, let me be puddled. He sat with me all night.

Work Poem

I've tried many times to write a work poem, but nothing good ever comes out. I guess I have nothing poetic to say about the tag agency other than that solving paperwork puzzles feels like building sandcastles, shaping them in my hands, placing every grain in the exact right spot. But if one grain is out of place, it all falls apart. Customers are stupid by nature and love to smash my castles with their wet, grubby hands. But if I want to pay rent, I have to keep my fire burning in the dark and not let it out (except for when I sit in my car and scream). I can't set the place ablaze and watch it burn. I can't write poems in the rubble. And isn't that a shame? To be a poet spending every day in a poetic

void? A dark, damp grave
 where art is nonexistent
 and everyone is my enemy?
 Where air is gray like
 gravel in a boot's tread?

I am not meant for the ashen tundra
 of government work.

I am meant for fire,
 meant to emit my own light.
 I am meant to scream at the stars
 until I am emptied.

Give me fire,
 give me brimstone,
 give me an exit.
 Give me something I can hold in my hands

and let it be messy and imperfect.
 I'm sick of clean.
 Stars, give me something
 to destroy.

i close my eyes and become skinless

in all my dreams you live

in the valley where I peel my skin away

leaving a pink fang in its wake.

the white walls are so high, so far,

you cannot climb out,

cannot leave this throbbing village,

this valley whose heart beats with mine.

the valley grows & you fall

deeper & deeper until you hit bone

then go to the next finger.

the valleys never stop growing & being

born into me

& you never stop sinking

into my quicksand of raw flesh,

into the current of my heart,

into my rattling bones.

when i wake, i can never tell
dreams from nightmares.

Ode to Breakup Sex

Weeks after leaving me she's inside me again
and we fall together like raindrops
fall into paths eroded in stone.
I loved her once and my love is not disposable
but we were always better at building a moment
than building a forever.

There's more laughter than tears
and it feels like I know her again,
like I can hold her in the palm of my hand.
I'm not hers and she's not mine
but today we are us again,
the girl who used to be mine
shuddering beneath me,
sunbeams through her window
lighting her eyes so blue we must name a new shade just for her,
lightning blue, angel blue,
orgasm blue, blooming blue,
love-of-a-past-life blue.

We've both been touched by others but not like this,
not this shining and shattering,
this falling apart again and again,
this masochistic ache in blood and bones
pulling us together like the moon pulls the tides.
It's a soft sting,
pain I want to go through,
not around.

She's glowing and there's a light in my chest
as big as a star and as close as her lips,
and I could find constellations in her freckles
if I could think of anything past her skin against mine
when she kisses me in the shower steam.

We have dinner after
and we don't hold hands in the car
and we don't kiss goodnight.
We both know she's touched others in the weeks since me
but she never loved any of them
and they're missing out.
None of them get to pull her apart and put her back together like I did,
none of them get to know all of her like I did,
none of them have held her heart in their hands like I do.

We talk for hours like we used to,
laugh the way we did even before.
Not for the first time and not for the last,
we're friends again.
It feels like an ending and a beginning,
like when the sun sets
to make room for the moon.

I cradle her face in my palm

She says, *no one else does this for me*
and I understand the space she describes,
the hole where I used to be,
because I had never been held
like stardust before her.

I have had a void shaped like her
reaching through me
since the first time she lied to me.
Empty is a habit,
an old friend like she became
after all our leaves fell.

So, when I cradle her face in my palm,
when she describes loss melting into absence,
when she tells me I'm the only one
who lets her be soft,
I am too familiar with this ache
to tell her I can finally breathe
without void spilling out of me.
I let her hold me.

Love Letters to the End of the World

I've been picking holes in my skin again
to let the bugs and smoke out,
leaving piles of flesh in every corner
as food for shadows.

When I can't eat, I drink rust
and the blood that drips from the ceiling.
When I can eat, I eat bones.

The bones write love letters to the end of the world
and the girl who swallows all her teeth when she's in love
drinks the ink bleeding from the pages.

When I visit my parents, I grow new teeth
where a prettier girl would have flesh.
They cut through every pore until I can't move—
I can only chew,
and all I am is
the eating.

III.

*You will regard again
the flowers budding by the sidewalk and not resent them
their burgeoning life.*

—Leila Chatto

Bloom

I know what it's like
when flowers bloom in tear ducts.

I know what it's like
to peel bark off my corpse like bandages.

I know what it's like
to bleed mud and rainwater.

I don't want a moonlit girl
casting shadows through me.

I don't want her roots inside of me,
spreading like a lightning strike under my skin.

I don't want the seed-sized scars
in every place her lips have touched.

I want my own scars,
my own roots, my own shadows.

I want to plant a thousand flowers
and teach them how to live for themselves.

I want to lie bare and sunkissed in a bed of them
and I want to watch them bloom.

Stormcloud Blue

after Mark Bibbins

One day you made me
a candle on your stove
 unscented because you know me
 and blue you said
 to match my eyes

It was the week after
our second date
and I blushed because I didn't
 know how to be known
You smiled
a toothy lip-ringed smile and said
I'll see you in class

And then you were gone but you were
still there somehow
in hot magma coming
from my heart out through
my nose ears mouth
A year later, that magma tastes like
what the last drops of rain taste like
just before the sun returns

Provincetown

There were fireworks over the water
my last night at Cape Cod.
Seven nights in a row,
I watched a soft orange sunset

spread, bleed through the sky,
then burn out, soothed
by purple and gray and finally
night.

I remember it like this:
tiny, invisible, temporary me,
barefoot on the beach
pressing footprints into wet sand

knowing tomorrow's storm would wash them away
but I would already be gone.

Destin

In my ninth summer, I saw the ocean
spread out ahead of me for
the first time, a horizon full of future

raindrops. I had never noticed
how many raindrops were waiting
to fall. My father said there were
things out there that would
swallow us whole. I had never noticed
how much time he spent waiting
for us to fall. He never planned
for the growing pains. He sank us
into white, hot sand, miniscule
grains that once were

mountains. The once-mountains
piled into dunes, small imitations
of a past life. We could only practice
for the next one. We could only grow.
We were the biggest we had ever been

and the smallest we would ever be again.

Cocooned

Knives for fingers slice me open,
hands pouring across my wingless body,
burning in the catastrophic, world-ending sweetness
of her.

Silkworms flood from my weeping veins,
and she kisses each of them into moths.
She licks inside the wound,
drinks all my secrets from me.

Her teeth rip me apart
until I am blood and bones beneath her.
She pulls wings from the ice melting in my spine
and I am all moth,
all mouths,
all drowning and gasping for air,
all wet wings drying in sunlight.

Burning Haibun of a Burning Father

after torrin a. greathouse

My mother says she no longer wakes up nauseous since the divorce. My father just says good riddance. Maybe they both got pieces of it right. Maybe they are both wrong in every way there is to be wrong. My father doesn't scare me but he creates apocalypse inside of me. Once we shared a home and I held my pathetic breath with every thought of him. Now his crooked footsteps set me ablaze and birds fly screeching from my throat when he is near. Now his name splinters through me, splits the glass in my blood apart. Once he was my father and now he's just a man between wives. Now he cannot reach us. Now he only loves us when he can control us—but maybe it always worked that way. Maybe there is nothing else in him. He has never been willing to look at the things he breaks. He has never been willing to see me. I have spent so many years learning to read him, learning to be a person someone could love instead of a piece of a person, an unloveable shadow of a daughter. He once said no one would ever marry me. Now he is no one's husband and barely a father. Now we take every drop of blame we have suffered and let it evaporate into the sky, let it become clouds he will never search for shapes. Maybe in a century or two he will look up and realize the birds have gone and the clouds won't stop growing and he hasn't seen the sky in years. Maybe he will look up and realize he doesn't remember when he last spoke to his children. Maybe he will forget the color blue and the way the sun felt burning his scarred skin. Maybe he will become some shattered thing, some splintered thing, and we will not bear the burden of gluing him back together. We will learn to forget him. We will become pink from the sun and purple from the sky washing over us. The birds will come back singing and weeping for us—soft, loved, unburnable us.

//

Maybe they got it wrong in every way there is.
 apocalypse shared a held breath
 with me screeching when
 my blood was between
 us. he only loves control but maybe
 there is nothing else to see. I have spent
 years learning to be a daughter. He
 once said no father will search for shapes in
 the clouds. his children will forget the
 burning and we will become the birds
 singing and unburnable

//

Maybe there is shared
 blood between us but maybe
 I have no father

Litany of Why

Because we wanted to do the stupid mature thing,
because we loved each other too much.
Because she didn't love me enough,
or because I never believed her
when she told me she did
because I didn't love myself enough,
because I wasn't enough.
Because her house was always a mess
and so is mine but it is my mess
and I am my mess and her mess
is not mine to unmess.
Because I couldn't dream with her,
because she wouldn't dream with me.
Because being with her felt sometimes
like holding the moon in my hands and sometimes
like drowning in the sun.
Because there were other girls
who cut away pieces of her that should've been mine
to swallow so I could never see them again.
Because there is no forever with her.
Because when I asked her if she saw a forever with me,
she asked what kind of answer I wanted.
Because that was an answer on its own
but I still asked for an honest one
because I needed to hear the word.
Because she waited
until I was so far in love I could taste the stars
before she said no.
Because what I wanted, more than anything,
was to be loved completely,
to be chosen first,
to be wanted the way I wanted her.
Because she couldn't give me that.
Because I can.

Did you know sharks have infinite teeth?

If I had infinite teeth,
I'd be harder to kiss.
I'd pull them all out and swallow them
to eat the butterflies in my stomach,
use the blood as ink
to write you a poem—
and I wouldn't be afraid
to bite.

If you had infinite teeth,
I'd kiss you anyways.
I'd count them in your smile,
catch them when they fell out like
a breadcrumb trail leading me up your stairs.
I'd swallow them like words,
like fingernails, like pills,
like your hair between my fingers,
your blood under my nails,
your pulse in my neck—
and I wouldn't be afraid
to be bitten.

One morning I woke up loving my body

This body that flows
between fingertips,
so much of me to love.
I am skin made of light,
my belly so sweetly full of dawn.

This body that **was** an omen
made into a prayer spilling
into a river of soft knowing,
a wave cresting into learning
how it feels to put your own pieces
back together **for** the first time.

My body whose reflection
was suddenly made of
ripples, not shards,
whose shattered **self**
was **not** gone completely.

My body who needed
to search **for** herself
to realize that love is created,
not found, not a treasure
you hunt on a map.

My body whose mind
had forgotten to be gentle.

When Mia-Jo says “you are such a tender soul”

She means she has looked inside my fang-littered maw
and found a gentleness I could never
swallow. She understands poems
sometimes come from claws.

She has given such an angry thing
the gift of permission to be
soft. To be a sister, or some
form of sisterhood built from teeth.

She calls us *poetry sisters*
and doesn't know her words
plant themselves inside of me
and blossom into something
that only thrives in the sun.

She means a tender soul
is meant to be held gently, cherished,
not thrown into the wind to be
tumble-dried and shrunken and shattered.

She means she has seen into
the cracks of my foundation,
has seen the dirt-dwelling deities
that writhe through my veins,
and she didn't look away.

Death of a Nameless Girl

I was alive once.

she was a bubbly little bug,
flowers growing from muddied boots,
from between piano keys,
from piles of shredded crayon wrappers and bitten nails,
a shimmer of pinks and purples
scratching her name into the stars
so the people she loved would look at the constellations
and think of her.

then she was a bruise
a splatter of blue and purple rust
under fingernails, cobwebs for lungs,
hands-and-knees crawling
toward somewhere like a home,
following the petal trail
to the cliff's edge,
destroying the letters that made her name
so their sour taste could never touch another tongue.

now I am packed into moving boxes,
shallow breaths through cardboard holes until
the emergency exit at the end of the rainbow.
my name lived in her chest
but hers echoes between my ribs
as I water the saplings growing
from the body she left behind.

Glass Girl

What is a *girl*
and why does she only exist
in poems?

I was born into a body
sometimes wrong,
sometimes okay,
never quite right.

What is *girl* and what is *body*
and why does *girl* need to be *body*
and why does *body* insist on being *girl*?

I'm learning to love myself through other eyes,
never my own.
Too much body,
not enough self
to fill the empty spaces inside.

Why can I love *girl* but not *body*?
Why does *body* fall apart
in my hands like ocean,
but *girl* sticks to me like sand?

I hate mirrors but I can't look away.
If I could step inside the mirror,
become the reflection looking back at me,
would I still feel made of glass?
Maybe I'm already the reflection.

Girl isn't wrong,
just not the whole truth.
Not a lie, just an omission.

In poems, every omission has intention.
If I write a poem about being a girl,
is it still just omission?
When does it become a lie?

Sometimes I think I'm only a woman out of convenience
and because when the moon writes sonnets,
they all begin with *she*.