

BROWNING, ABIGAIL PERKINS, M.F.A. *New Beings*. (2012)

Directed by Ms. Rebecca Black. 40 pp.

The poems in this manuscript explore the adaptations one makes to sustain life after loss. Through concision and directness, this collection offers a study of the transformative quality of grief. The southern landscape provides a means for introspection and excavation of the speaker's fears, which compound and intervene throughout relationships with others and particularly in regard to the evolution of the self.

NEW BEINGS

by

Abigail Perkins Browning

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2012

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PROLOGUE	1
I. THE ELEPHANT'S CHILD	2
The Same, Different.	3
November.	4
My Father	5
The Elephant's Child	6
Feminine.	7
My Grandmother's Guts	8
The Unlimited Deal	9
Suspension	10
II. DIRECTLY	11
As a Guest	12
Tea	13
Forecast	14
The Week After You Left	15
At The National Zoo	16
As.	17
Postmarked	18
Nashville,	19
The Cancan Dancers	20
Late Twenties	21
III. CLOSER TO THE SUN	22
When Summer Isn't Summer	23
A Brief Study of Flora at 530 Hedgewood Place	24
Interview with an Apparition	25
On Dying	26
Camp DeSoto for Girls, Mentone Alabama	27
Porch Chorus	28
To the Paleontologist	29
IV. NEW BEINGS	30
Inside Me	31

A Conservatory for Wolves	32
Fortune	33
Cemetery Walk	34
Chickasaw Lane.	35
What We Give.	36
On Poetry, After Reading Rukeyser	37
Cold Blooded.	38
Lyn	39
New Beings	40

PROLOGUE

*To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it—
Block it up
With Other—and 'twill yawn the more—
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air.*

—Emily Dickenson

I. THE ELEPHANT'S CHILD

The Same, Different

Tomorrow is today always.

The sharks I never feared
now patrol the shores.

I once hoped somehow
I would know all of the world—
the ideas beyond

the blue fence of Atlantic,
but I find I am as moderate

as I said I wouldn't be,

staring at the coast
thinking tomorrow
will be different.

November

The pumpkin faces sag
like a chemo patient's,

spots down the temples,
weighted, sloping cheeks.

Pockets in long black coats
fill with elegies. Everything

that was is entropied and organized;
Mother is dead and the world

travels its tethered arc.
The farmers carve new rectangles

in the soil, each plot
a blank face in the earth's geometry.

My Father

My father is the pediatrician,
my father is the psychologist,
my father is the professor,
my father is the podiatrist.
My father is that seedy musician
who lives across the hall,
my father is the woman telling secrets
at the local mall.
My father is a novel. My father is a play.
My father is Good Morning. My father is Good Day.
My father is a stone dropped like a knife,
he's a desert full of glass.
My father is a fear I do not have,
a fear I cannot buy.

The Elephant's Child

My grandmother blamed my mother
for my father's death.

Come hither, little one, said Kipling's Crocodile,
as he shed his crocodile tears.

If only they had gone to church, if
her son hadn't taken the job in North Carolina.

Let me show you what I have for dinner.

Feminine

I.

Edged still in the purple lines of a surgeon's pen,
my mother's breast was a nippleless moon—
one long seam rode its diameter. I didn't think
of what it would be like to lose a breast, then,
mine, only an echo of womanhood,
adolescent fat on the top of pectorals.

II.

My grandmother became guardian.
On laundry day, flimsy bras hung like ghosts
on the drying rack. We wore them
to support something beyond supporting.

III.

I hated training bras. I hunched down
and took one off in the middle
of earth science class. No one saw.
I stuffed it past books and pencils
into the smooth corner of my desk
where it stayed until the year was over.

IV.

When my body became a planet
for young male astronauts,
and love was a matrix
pressed into a TI-83 calculator,
the bra became a thin separator
between a handsome high school boy,
my curiosity, and our own clumsiness.

V.

Each month in the shower, I study
a self-exam card like my mother's.
I can't tell if I am more afraid to find
something or to not.

My Grandmother's Guts

were Kansas cream of tuna
on toast, and *because I said so*.

Her smile, a signature on a test.

She loved with a sense of déjà vu
for the family she'd already raised, husband,

daughter and son-in-law now ghosts in the mirror

of my face. We held so tightly to the skeletons
of before, vertebraed towers we tried to climb

back into: before winter, before cancer.
The house became still as a room after

an experiment, where both of us, like dogs

playing dead—daughterless, motherless—
waited to see which one would get up first.

The Unlimited Deal

Sprint has the Plan. A *Plan for Work*.
Home. Everything. Cheaper, if you do
the math, than these weekly fifty-minute
sessions. A network that promises,
if you believe the pamphlet,
two years of blonde men with happy dogs.
who, like my therapist, want me to
get the most out of life's every moment.
Calm faces fill glossy pages. Concerns?
Unlike therapy, they've got support
with guarantees and online chat; no
tea mug, no Kleenex box, no prescriptions.

But I like to listen to Chopin here
in my clinic's waiting room, see
the people trying not to hint
they're there. The teenager
shrinks into a magazine, a man
tugs a paper cone from the water
dispenser. I scan the Sprint brochure
and decide to buy the unlimited deal;
perhaps it will be enough. Maybe my
full theoretical family will return
and smile as we walk through Reynolda
Gardens; our footsteps bending the green
grass, full with the smell of magnolia
blossoms. We'll walk a golden retriever
we never had. *Abigail*, they'll call. *Abigail*.

Suspension

At dusk, a fiddle spider moves up the wall
with thin graphite limbs. That night, her many-

eyed brothers and sisters inch
across the ceiling into my sleep,

in one ear, out the other. I watch Gene Kelly
sing and dance a dozen times

to keep me from a place where the fiddlebacks
are as lasting and as poisonous

as cities, friendships, fear. I don't belong here.
At the end of my week of nights on the couch

Kelly keeps pulling up the curtain
to save Debbie Reynolds while I sing

Good Morning to the brown recluses
and check glue traps. I worry a little more

and a little less. Kelly swings on the lamppost,
I drowse. Hollywood sprinklers drop cold rain

as morning shadows fill the corner of my room.
The policeman walks Kelly home.

II. DIRECTLY

As a Guest

I will tell you directly whether
I think your mushroom clam casserole
is edible or not. No southern *that's nice*
or *I'll have to get the recipe*. At dinner, I will
tell you directly because this table is only
the wood it is, the wood of some young
pine squared off into something
deemed more useful.

Don't ask, because I will tell you when
you have something in your teeth.

After cups of wine, I will tell
you directly if I am comfortable
in your inflatable guest bed, the one that sags
in the middle before I've fallen asleep.

I have dreamed of you. And on the plastic
mattress in your living room,
the sheets murmur always, *I will tell you*.

Tea

Sometimes I boil hot water,
fill the kettle from the tap,
set the stove to high
to have something pending,
something waiting on me.
I like feeling urgent, needed,
if only for a whistle and a hot eye.

I still haven't listened
to your message. It says either:
You can come or you can't,
there's turkey for lunch
in the refrigerator, or just call me
when you get this. I never do.
I take the teapot off the stove and leave,
empty mug on the counter.

Forecast

Puddles ice at their edges.
I avoid the cold,

an estranged lover
who still makes

my cheeks blush.
Maybe the weatherman

will be wrong tomorrow
and the last fires of fall and you

will return to green, not
disappear to winter.

Curled leaves collect
at my door and the furnace

breathes on. I imagine
the warmth of joining

to the arch of a limb,
exhaling oxygen

with no fear of falling away.

The Week after You Left

A ceiling fan waves four
unhappy hands

in a circle of penance.
Maybe they are your hands,

or the taxidermied
wings of a raven.

The resolution is as pale
as a drop of milk

on the floor, willingly
spilled. I leave

the bedroom door open. So
the dog can go out.

At The National Zoo

Over there, a small woman on a park bench
eats frozen yogurt. St. Anne's Catholic

School ropes its pupils in lines of red t-shirts.
A man tells a boy that the metal sculpture

of a gecko is the real thing. You and I follow
the asphalt past the pandas and elephants,

you say you'll move south in the fall;
I don't believe you. A peacock drags its tail.

Teens knock shoulders like ten-pins, scavenge
for freedom from chaperones.

We never see the fishing cat, and
at the next display, two otters dive and splash

in the artificial stream. They know each other
better than we do. A mother holds

her daughter above a railing. Below,
seven lion cubs flick their tails

and paw at the enclosure door.
The tiger sleeps through it all.

As

Mrs. Standerfer took me aside
in second grade to ask

if I would mind writing the words
death and *die* on a spelling test.

My father had been dead
for a year, as dead as

the paper, the pencil, the curve
of the letter d.

I passed the test and tried
to feel some great expected sadness

but *sad* was just another word
that I could spell, like *dad*,

dead, minus the letter e.

Postmarked

My letter will be late. It will not arrive
in the mail with the bills.

My letter will be late, but no later
than the evenings you tapped on my door

after a half-dozen tumblers of gin,
silented away over the cigarettes

only you smoked. I don't know why I let
you in. My cursor is blinking and blinking,

a pulsing line both here and gone.

Nashville,

you could never be my Music City.
You are aluminum rain, tin-toned mandolins,
Christian fundamentalists circling the Parthenon
in Centennial Park wearing blue blindfolds.
You are the Cumberland, your slippery
tail cutting through downtown. I could
catch a catfish from your skyscrapers,
sail with the weekend tourists to a table
at Robert's Western Bar and dance two step
with a Vandy frat boy. But now you are only
a weekend friend, a once-lover, a July
spiking tobacco in Springfield, an afternoon
in the imitation gardens of Opryland. My
cool nights are set away from your drawl, away
from the airy fortune of the Vanderbilts. But
my sleep still floods with your spiders,
Johnny Cash songs and the Schermerhorn's bubbling
chandeliers. You wouldn't know how to break
those glass hearts, and I wouldn't pray for you if I could.

The Cancan Dancers

They look so happy their vaginas
probably smile; heads cocked,
sprouting feather bouquet
hats elaborate as orgasms,
lifting, kicking, grasping
their skirts, each fold
and ruffle a moving target
for fishing eyes. Their battlements
lop off top hats of the shiniest-
faced men; cartwheels turn
worlds into white petticoats
and black stockings, where
the stage is both too far
and too near to see what you
want to see. Their full breasts
hardly matter even to artists;
only the curved heel, the leg split
upward suspending the each
clitoral secret, each ruffled
private room, the fancy,
the treble, the tenor of a woman
who knows herself best,
a woman who can flying split the air
and land breathless on the stage.

Late Twenties

Young enough to use contraception,
and still chase the body of my teenage years
through miracle diets and workouts.
If I were 45, I'd have a blonde-tipped Mohawk,
drive a truck and skate for the local roller
derby. I'd be established. But now is the time
for sophisticated hair cuts, a few grays, soft lips
and IKEA furniture, things that can be
built up or taken down and sold
on Craig's List for less than \$100.
Now is the time for friends who drink
too much wine on weekdays, work
jobs that will lead to better jobs.
Student loans are due. It's the time
eat Paleo or vegan, watch the news,
and shop at Trader Joes. We'll celebrate
this New Year's without a babysitter.
I learn a sturdy pair of pantyhose will cover
all manner of new evils, like my mother's unavoidable
cellulite. My friends live in Tokyo or Buenos Aires,
because this is the end of the time marked
for unexpected exotica, speaking French or living out
of a backpack as you travel across South America,
dance at milongas or drink ouzo in a Greek
discotheque. Our bones are still smooth
with the calcium of our youth, and so we
ride the bus, join adult soccer leagues
and do our taxes, hoping for a refund. Each
morning, backlit in the breakfast room
listening to NPR and eating half a grapefruit,
we wait for the break; or break waiting.

III. CLOSER TO THE SUN

When Summer Isn't Summer

it's April. That
wildcat month
so damned hot
you could kill

yourself. No
one talks aloud.
Summer growls
beneath a thundercloud,

*Don't tell Me
what to do.
I'm pretty
just as I am.*

A Brief Study of Flora at 530 Hedgewood Place

Rhododendron. Pine trees. Marigolds
Papa and I planted in the red clay next
to the front door. Persimmons, rosy and round

in the summer. Dogwoods. The cherry
my mother planted when my father
died, weeping pink blossoms. Bearded purple iris,

her favorite. Stunted magnolia, the tree
in which I pretended to know how to read;
Bradford pear, the tree I climbed to kiss

a neighborhood boy. A row of eight
holly bushes Papa planted for Mama, torn
out when we moved.

It's been twenty years.

A century of daffodils lift their golden hoods
and I can almost feel the same warmth I felt
when I was a few inches farther from the sun.

Interview with an Apparition

for LVB.

Whatever grabs your socks, Lloyd
might have said, upon hearing
I would marry you. Or: *Does he*
keep his ears clean? Do you?
I've never checked. Lloyd might have.
He might have driven his motorcycle
across the flat and discounted lands
of our center-country to look into
your ears, look through the dark
opening into the matter of your
mind, to see if (and only if)
on the prairie, if alone, you
could build a flint-sparked fire
to sustain the emptiness of love
once it has gone past the human
experience. *Don't call me*
Shirley, surely, he'd say, and you'd
shake his hand before he revved up
and rode home to California,
your palm warm from the climbing flames.

On Dying

Slip into those summers.
Nightgown soft. Thin. Bright
colors and cartoon houses,

blue doorframes and honeysuckle.
Mother cut peaches poolside, found
a quarter for a Coke

during the lifeguard's break.
We dangled scraped legs
over concrete edges, breathed chlorine,

sank into blue. We dove
along black tiles, clammed earthward,
pretended to die; and in the sun,

we floated skyward like in our
sleep, where we could fly.

Camp DeSoto for Girls, Mentone Alabama

Banned bikinis, morning prayer,
no boys or air-conditioning
made even me an Honor Camper
for a few weeks. Atop Lookout
Mountain, we wore whites on Sundays,
sang *Create in me a clean heart* at vespers
and *As the deer*. Each week of letters home,
evening devotions, the pressure grew,
a pressure to make the perfect mosaic box
topped with a heart and cross, or stitch
verses in maroon thread onto a pillow case,
pray for others to believe in a god, one
God, and be saved. Afternoons, I hid
in the infirmary and skimmed *Ecclesiastes*;
a rotating fan peeling up the edges
of each page. *What do people gain
from all their labors at which they toil
under the sun?* The sheets were white
and curt. Even the nurse who
let me stay knew it might be too much
to ask me to believe that there was more
than the grit of sweat, the red pinch
of a yellow-jacket sting, and the failure
of shade in the height of a southern noon.

Porch Chorus

You pluck your mother's guitar
as evening curves along the rim

of our wine glasses. The mosquitoes,
a caesura in each song, the punctuation

on our necks and ankles. You say
the cicadas are coming, the cicadas

that spend seventeen years waiting,
mating at birth then dying and falling

to the ground, a long anticipation
of first and last minutes:

the pushing up of earth—the sound
sharp and alive. They may come to sing

and die on our steps, their wings
glittering in our candles.

To the Paleontologist

Why do we worry about
underwater love songs
of prehistoric fish, their
sound waves cemented—
a delicious pattern
that means less, now,
than their bones?
What if I could net the water
from the ocean in my gut—
all the slippery, crawling
creatures of the earth? And if
I held it in, the swimming
salty shape, maybe someone could
read the ripples of the earth
left behind. Maybe you,
maybe not you. Someone
might chart their songs
before I burst and the sea
rushed home to caves
and volcanic trenches
in a billow of steam and air,
pulling hot, pulling
deep, tiding ancient,
soundless pressure.

IV. NEW BEINGS

Hence, both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact—that mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth.

– *Charles Darwin*, Journal of Researches

Inside Me

Timber from the Mayflower,
ribbed barrels of hard tack and salt meat.

Hungry waves against the gray-green
Appalachians. Love, I never

wanted to drop you to the bottom
of Little River, tie your tusk to the

list of what you were not. But inside me,
hundreds of worker bees zoom their infinite

wings, and music welds my bones together,
a pack of desert wolves.

A Conservatory for Wolves

Hélène Grimaud transforms Chopin into wild
percussive hammers, the piano her anvil,

my feminine Hephaestus. When not playing,
she maintains a conservatory for wolves.

With Alawa and Zephyr in my pack, I'm sure
I'd feel the same as Hélène playing *Polonaise in A*,

pushing each chord into a bright military
howl. I see eyes spark within the sound,

a stain of red and yellow. She tracks
the final diminuendo: the world's

end. The night's end. She and I know
at best, self can only be self

and wolves are never tame.
I've played those same notes alone

wishing I could play them for you,
my ring finger stretching to fill

the alpha male of Chopin's work. He
wrote for bigger hands, and mine ache.

We are a pack of two, Grimaud and I,
scavenging these grand staff fences

for what is classical, what is evolving;
the polished whorls and loops of our

fingertips marking the keys with our final
coda: *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here, like you.*

Fortune

Gender, that odd combination
of letters and numbers—
the spiral of a sequence
humping up and down
in tandem saying
in a godlike voice, *you're
this* and *you're that*. What
of that power? The decision
to squash clay into shapes
that will later need either
Viagra or Midol. Thank god
for microsurgical vasectomy
procedures and tube tying, and all
the sorts of hopscotch and hoops
we jump to avoid progeny,
to forgo the summersault into
more mutations of what was
never perfect; it was only
what was. But what if all this
was what it was supposed
to be? Every cleft palate,
male pattern baldness, dimple,
each disposition to cancer
or MS or chronic snoring something
beautiful, like light. That broken
code is a white slip in a fortune genome
cookie where my lucky numbers read
one, infinity, and nil, and
the word on the back is either
eggplant or *space shuttle*.

Cemetery Walk

The boy's Zippo lighter clicks twice,
open and closed. The girl cracks
a beer, and the two walk down
the tended streets in a humid darkness.

"I want to be cremated," says the girl,
"Me too," says the boy.
"It's funny, don't you think?" the girl
laughs and looks away.

The light pollution from the suburbs
recedes from the top of black hills, glints
off headstones.

They walk and puff on cigarettes,
trailing smoke like capes.

Chickasaw Lane

You wash turnip greens by our kitchen window,

the rhododendrons curl from the cold;
I've gone out to get my oil changed.

On our graded road, the edges are so sharp
I could split a tire in the gutter between mountain

and pavement. And that's what marriage is,
a comfortable fear in exchange for the home

we always wanted when we were small,
a snowy school day, an Oreo milkshake

at the Soda Shop, a 50th anniversary photo
in the local newspaper. My car door closes

over your rivulet of thoughts. It's dark and
your hands are cold.

What We Give

It's been months since we last had sex.
Your feet push into the mattress

as finch-like sounds escape my open mouth.
With each generation in nature, Darwin found

that an offspring's beak would curve more
to break their shell, that the skull elongates

to develop olfactory sense, chromatophores
camouflage an octopus in the reef.

What would it mean for me to have a child
bear half my DNA? To claim

the thin fingers and long legs, my mother's
cancer, my chronic depression?

You draw your head to my chest
and I rub the width of your back. The other

silent sequences lie beneath the sheets,
the warm depression of our bodies

in the mattress. The fears
of all the things we wish

we couldn't give, given to each other.
Could our daughter one day forgive me

for wanting to be a mother?

On Poetry, After Reading Rukeyser

“There has been a great deal of political talk about security in this century. Growth is the security of organic life. The security of the imagination lies in calling, all our lives, for more liberty, more rebellion, more belief.” – Muriel Rukeyser from The Life of Poetry

More liberty, more rebellion, more belief,
more rhythm, more form, more control
over the culture where we are asked to sing

and not sing, to dance only as a child,
and to grow ugly and old and feeble.

Muriel Rukeyser wrote after a war
when living poetry was atom bombs and genocide,
the poetry of a new kind of death,

no more years of long, blissful extinguishing,
but short bright bursts ending with shrapnel
and gunfire.

How could poetry sustain this warfare?
A gash of something inside American
culture reminds each mother that

rebellion is liberty and belief is a story
we tell ourselves to cover the grief
of the people we've lost.

Cold Blooded

The nurse asks if I've always had low blood pressure. I want to tell her that my blood is just tired of all its pumping, refreshing, moving from ventricle to toe and back, fighting the ever-thumping battle between gravity and time.

It's easy to forget the work one's body is always doing. Every second, our blood continues onward with an immunity from the thought that someday the work will be over, the war will be lost, and they will sleep in the trenches of their country's arms, for warfare ends the same in all histories.

I want to tell the nurse that I haven't always been like this. That skyscrapers weren't always on fire, that nuclear plants weren't always leaking. I want to say I have not always been so cold. But it's been so long. It's been so long I can't tell.

Lyn

Everything is her, even the neighbor's iris
you transplanted around your condo,
closed fists of purple and blue light

in the dark unfamiliar soil.
Each day I grow more into a dead
woman's body, the same face

and voice, a view of the night
sky from a higher latitude. I am not
what I am, the bulb of a pulled iris.

And you, guardian, gardener,
are the maker of sequenced
darkness. You raise the daughter

of your dead daughter while your bulbs
spread beneath the ground, silent
as the bats you watch fly at dusk.

New Beings

for WG

Who's to say evolution happens
only over generations? My grandmother
is a new being each year. The mean
of her life moves on a sliding bell
curve. *Not enough data.* Her study
recursive, undefined. Yesterday
she was a bar across my bedroom window,
the flaccid limbs of my dead mother.
Today she is my golf-playing confidante.
How did her cells reinvent themselves?
In the stretch marks of days, light and
curved, my body reminds me of my
own adaptations: even my skin is shaping
itself around me. We play cards and she
tells me to learn violin, that she
will still have something for me
when she's gone. I tell her not to waste
her money on a future where she will not be.
Outside, a clay-colored sparrow
builds a nest near to the ground. Each twig
finds its place, curved and brittle. No
adaptations prepare beings for loss. Inside,
I cave in her lap. We are a pile of bones.