

Strawberries, Milkweed, Stone

Research Thesis

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## **Blistered in light,**

I send letters to prairie grass asking if my feet have been missed. To coneflowers, *are my hands now unwelcome? Sun-scorched corn, will you cut me with your leaves if I return?* Skin regrown in shadows always aches for home, even for the home that pierces.

Embrace me with my original melodies: gravel beating rust, rain drumming midnight trains, cracked ashes and elms. Ohio, I'm still your aching daughter.

Trace me like crayons over hymnal pages—stained red glass, a pulpit and pews, dust. Find me in the cedar grove by the field of horses where I once played mother. Kiss me with wild bergamot inside my cypress home.

*What will nourish my children?* Strawberries, milkweed, stone.

## to Orrville, Ohio (with love)

The high school rival flaps in effigy from a noose on downtown's time and temperature clock. Across the street, The Faithful Little Cupcake sells treats

gussied with silver made by Christian women. Here we breed both cruel and sweet: Bobby Knight and Smucker's jam. On Apple Blossom Lane,

my best friend lost her virginity to a boy who now plants soybeans and corn and doesn't think of her. This town knows how to give an education.

Gary said my ass looked *real good* as we scraped dumpling crumbs from metal trays third shift. No one had told me before. That summer, a razor

surfaced from a packaged pumpkin roll, nestled in cake and cream. We got a few days off. The year before, I learned calc in an asbestos-filled room.

Mr. Knight wrote a check for us: one hundred thousand for new bleachers in the gym. I tell myself *I am not my town*,

but still crave yellow paint chips in my palms—aware of rust, even as a child, climbing my playground's rocket ship to space.

## **In big prairie**

do you remember the pulsing fuzzy  
aphids, the “snow-covered”  
beech branches—gusting air to watch  
the seesaw sway of tail-ends

wiggling  
or standing in the triangle of light (that hits  
the center of your parents’ kitchen floor  
at 5:42 in July) where we returned  
to the business  
of disco?

I admit it. I rummaged through your childhood

collection of arrowheads, animal-skulls and quartz.  
That afternoon you returned

to your teenage-era punk-rock Christian love songs  
while bats snaked and swooped, sketching wrinkles

in the pond  
we dipped into after we settled on that rectangular  
rock where you held my mulberry-stained feet  
and remarked about my little  
toe.

## Finding a Gazelle

In first grade, freckled Adam Butzer and I  
were the only two wriggling like plump earth  
worms on a hook, never ascending  
even half an inch up the chin-up bar.  
Then high school: sweaty from my excessive lack  
of hand-eye coordination, mid-volley  
praying the ball away, and Shanklin's whistle—  
severe like her pageboy cut—stopping the game for me.  
*Williams, why aren't you trying?* she roared.  
*My arthritic grandmother moves faster than you!*  
By my early twenties, after my shift  
at the donut shop, I tried to make peace  
with exercise. Exercise promised a perky ass  
and a flat stomach. It promised  
a cool-down cocktail of endorphins. It delivered  
three months wheezing and panic  
that I'd forever be unfit. It delivered two inhalers  
and a diagnosis of exercise-induced asthma.  
Today I saw a jogger in patterned pink leggings  
through April air, and I understood  
my failure wasn't my inability to climb  
the rope past the third notch as peers watched  
my purple high-tops clunk like awkward hooves.  
No, my failure was something less visible:  
paralyzing self-doubt, first learned in first grade.  
But as the runner began to struggle,  
I also realized (with a bit of satisfaction)  
that invisible forces like gusts of spring wind  
will slow even the most graceful gazelles.

## Drought Years

This year I've killed two succulents,  
English ivy, and a tufted cactus  
reminiscent of an old man with wispy hair.  
My brother says I'm more  
destructive than the Sahara—  
but he forgets laundry, forgets meals  
just like I do. *Forget your feelings,*  
my brother advised the summer I discovered  
panic attacks. *They aren't reality.*  
Believing him seemed to reduce  
us to family echoes, seemed inescapable.  
Grandpa smiles only when working  
in his garden, pulling weeds between clusters  
of poppies and nubs of asparagus.  
In my family, we tend only what is concrete.  
When Grandma was a teenager, her father's barn  
burnt down. *He was never the same after that,*  
she said, quieting when Grandpa pattered  
into our kitchen, feet thudding linoleum  
in faded socks. In drumbeats and silences,  
I keep finding my mother alone  
in her study, surrounded by piles  
of books, clicking keys to prune pages  
and pages of words she won't let me read.  
A fern hangs in her bright windowsill,  
withered but not yet dead.

## Love Stricken in Anger Management

Dreaming, I killed twelve carolers in a mall atrium  
by stabbing each soft stomach with a switchblade.  
In Anger Management I dreamed  
of Dean's arms coated with switchgrass, smashing  
his brand new weed whacker with the hokey finesse  
of a professional wrestler. Lawn equipment can't withstand  
Dean's diving double axe handle. In a classroom  
of hot pink bird paintings seemingly curated by moms  
who Pinterest, Nicholas confessed his yelling sprees.  
Michael admitted, *I punch holes in walls.*  
*I'm court mandated*, Charlie said with a smirk. I fell  
for each story, replayed them, replaced their fists with mine.  
When I was small, I gathered chokeberries and mint  
to make stew for imaginary companions in cracked  
terracotta pots. Mom was inside, manic, molested—  
a family member. Outside I found blood red centers  
of Queen Anne's Lace. I shook the birdhouse to greet  
the inevitable finch. Hornets lived inside my home.  
In the black cloud in my backyard, I learned  
to stop screaming when no one comes to help.

## **Bright and Dangerous**

I birthed a stillborn in the dream. In the morning, I named her Blaise, meaning *lisp* or *stutter*. You're not a sad person, my lover said to get me out of bed, just like he said, rivers can't be motionless. But the Olentangy is stagnant. At the pebbled edge, flies circle a deer. A tattered body is bloated.

*What should a person do when something dies in them? I ask a daylily that burns behind the carcass. Should I pluck you? Should I preserve you before you die on your own? Should I press you, dead and vibrant, between album pages?*

The Delaware tribe named this river *stone for your knife stream*, and every day I walk along the bank until my neck and back hurt from bending, collecting sandstone, quartzite, granite, and shale. What I really want is a knife for the lilies, bright and dangerous, stammering in wind.



## **Ignoring the War**

He met a sweet  
Mennonite girl  
in 1945. She taught  
English in Japan,  
and he, an Allied officer,  
married her to ignore  
the war. Sometimes  
mistakes are passed  
generationally:  
his granddaughter  
kisses a man, hoping  
affection is enough  
to avoid sadness—  
that stone barrier  
where she holds  
a rifle, where silence  
keeps her safe.

## Sundrenched

She asked me to scoop away the ants on her table. I did and did. Swept undetectable ants off hospital trays until I couldn't. Brooks was with me when Grandma pulled off her clothes and needed me. Diaper sagging off a naked body. Warm skin warped. Brooks had his hand in mine, resting his thumb on my knuckle. I put all my faith in solipsism the day I caught him cheating. I've been sleeping it off since. Floral juice glasses, morning clanking, small cereal boxes. Grandma and her books erasing. She can't recognize my name. Sheets block sunlight from my face. Later, I see Brooks, his disgust. I hate my body, too, the way it collects pain. Grandma dreamed before she died. A small girl running in green and white and blue with friends. Repeating rows. Corn and always sky and those three white dresses, blinding anyone who looked. I've buried memories under goldenrod in list-form. I pray my hidden paper has disintegrated by now. Weed is running low in the cabinet over Brooks' sink. He hates the yellow cigarette box resting in my purse. *No, thank you. I'm not hungry. I'll harm you, too.* My friend dreamed that doll-like hands lined my arms and back. I'm all knuckles, a prophetic fact. *Brooks, don't touch my neck. I'm a corpse when you do that.* Rotten bananas in morning light. When Grandma died she looked small and frightened. *Why are you smiling, Brooks?* The sundrenched tulips are numb with snow. Six years old and unmitigated terror forced courage as I looked in two mirrors at my line of reflections. *How can a person repeat without end?*

## **Brown's Lake Bog**

Last night you slid your fingers into me,  
saying you liked my limp body, how  
I pretended to be asleep. I wasn't  
pretending, but you didn't believe me.  
Maybe morning light is too soft  
to argue in. Maybe I don't try hard  
enough to be heard. Up late for an exam,  
looking for notecards, I burst  
into my mother's study to find  
my father watching a woman on screen.  
He jumped, jerking his hand  
to kill the power. I walked out  
and went to bed. Grinding my teeth,  
I search for articles about Brown's Lake  
Bog—our place near home to find sundews  
and pitcher plants filled with insects,  
where we once confused poison  
sumac for holly, where we scratched  
our skin raw. Ever since you cheated,  
something in me is desperate for news  
of a body, hundreds of years old,  
surfacing from our glacial spot, perfect  
in oxygen deficient water. Let's go back.  
I'll heal your wounds with sphagnum  
moss. I'll dig up the surface—enough to mend  
our fathers and ourselves. I'll press  
and press acidic peat into our sores  
until you see how very alive I am.

## Eclipse

Children chirp to stars  
And stripes, palms on hearts,  
As their teacher surveys  
The class. One refuses—remains  
On her carpet square, fraying  
The coarse edge, loosening threads  
Beneath her pinky.

After lunch, moonmade night  
Overtakes day: a shadow falls  
In rippled lines across the schoolyard,  
Birds quiet, the temperature drops,  
And the large, agitated maples  
Untie their leaves.

The obstinate girl  
Feels she must open  
The classroom window.  
When her teacher  
Isn't looking, she pushes  
On hinged glass and feels  
The changed air—feels  
Evidence that terror lives  
Both inside and outside  
The body. In the corner,  
Girls become mothers  
By the miniature kitchen.  
Someone shushes another,  
Then turns to soothe her  
Daughter back to sleep.

\*

We enter the girl's brain through her ear canal. (Don't worry; the girl often uses cotton swabs because the slight pressure on the base of her eardrum makes her feel a rare and almost eerie calm—the calm she will feel again during adolescence only

while singing “Come Thou Fount” at church; a calm she will revisit during the good parts of multiple abusive relationships, and again, later, when she smokes out her apartment’s small bathroom window and watches a cardinal sitting on a snowy branch. Years after, she will question if she should ever have kids while her overworked and slightly obese husband snores beside her. She is worried that she will always love isolation and the calm void it provides more than being present with her children.) From the ear canal, we’ll first encounter the girl’s temporal lobe, an impressive and rapidly firing realm, developed primarily because of her need for attention. In childhood, the girl’s favorite book was Cinderella. When knocked on the knee with the light pink book, her mother would cease tapping her typewriter. Atop her mother’s lap, the girl would listen to the evil stepmother’s voice: bitter and deceptive, like the baker’s chocolate her brother once gave to her. Shame, of course, we find smack dab in the middle of the girl’s brain, in her almond-shaped amygdalae. And if we travel near her optic nerve and enter her eye, we can see her staring at a girl we will learn she stares at often: Mary Leigh Paraskos, the one she hates and admires, the one who stole her eraser and won’t share her crayons, even though she has a sixty-four pack and the girl’s eight are all broken. Mary Leigh has one dark freckle above her lip, just like the girl’s.

\*

In Kindergarten the girl is obsessed  
With the man in flannel

Who sleeps by the schoolyard fence  
Everyday at recess. She sits across from him,

Stares through metal,  
Sometimes misses jump rope.

She wonders what he feels  
Beneath dark sky, if he is

Large or small  
Under the unreachable

Starlight.

## **Bastion**

I walk tar-chipped roads past rotting logs  
and thick, chokecherry groves to the field  
by Miller's Pond.

                    Within the green and blue  
echoing world of cornstalks and sky, I'm lost.  
Lost, but certain that corn will end—sure  
of stirring switchgrass, wild bergamot,  
milkweed and prairie dock next to stone stairs  
that lead to tarnished steel.

                                    My childhood  
train-bridge stands, and once again I'm small,  
looking skyward towards graffiti and rust.

I want the view to be the same: brick homes  
missing shingles, sun-scorched corn, tracks  
edged in brush, paint-peeled factories  
and windswept oaks.

                                    Last time, I climbed this bridge  
to say goodbye. But now, planting my feet  
on crumbled steel, I need both black and white—  
both tar and Queen Anne's Lace, timeworn brick  
and cloudless sky, the rust beside new blooms.

## How to Recycle

Start basic, get chummy with the blue bin: toss JIF jars, cartons of expired Greek yogurt, Time Warner Cable offers, and bottom-shelf bottles of Malbec. Soon you'll convert V-necks into macramé hanging planters and piles of 5K-tees into mini-headbands with nautical knots for friends' baby showers. Alone at night, you'll Netflix and latch hook rugs from strips of ill-fitting dresses. By February, your closet will be pristine, and your homespun mat will greet snowy boots. When your litter-scoop breaks, eat three bowls of Cheerios and cut a shovel from the empty milk jug. Bottle caps can be candles for your Buddhist friend's morning meditations. The busted ukulele you neglected to learn can be tacked on an elm for robins, cardinals, and small yellow finches. Exchange morning sadness for more—for bluebells placed on strangers' windshields or Dad's bright laughter on the phone. Let in back-road wind past unfamiliar cornfields to some podunk town with surprisingly good coffee and strawberry french toast. Find the giant sycamore by the roadside, shedding at daybreak to grow even more.





## September 2016

My grandmother roamed the psych ward  
in a white skirt, white hat, white shoes,  
checking patients. Even when promoted  
to head surgical nurse, she never said a word  
about finding her superior, a doctor, photographing  
stripped schizophrenic women. All of fifth grade  
my mother secretly feared she was pregnant.  
After her son turned three and I turned one—  
at age thirty—she remembered her uncle  
molesting her when she was five, neighborhood boys  
touching her throughout childhood:  
understood, finally, why she was afraid.  
The afternoon I discovered her school pictures  
tucked in the bottom drawer with Christmas  
tablecloths, I found years of an unsmiling girl  
so much like me. At the local pizza shop,  
a stranger in the booth behind me spun around  
to ask if tonight I'd be *putting out* for my *man*.  
This is where I'd like to stop, before I remember  
being silent when a customer wanted *a quickie*  
in my workplace bathroom, before I remember  
stiffening behind the counter when instructed  
to take *just one little twirl* to show off my *little dress*,  
before I remember that my body isn't safe,  
even in public. I got up, sat beside the stranger, asked,  
*Why do you think you can talk to me that way?*  
kept asking, searching his face, demanding an answer.  
On my walk home, I finally didn't tug at my skirt  
when catcalled. My teachers said, *You can be anything  
you want when you grow up*. If I have a daughter,  
I pray she won't realize in grade school, like I did,  
that all her presidents are men. But if she does,  
I'll go hoarse praising her voice: stubborn,  
piercing, beautiful—she'll fucking sing.