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SPUR: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

by

Caitlin Scarano

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English

at

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ABSTRACT

SPUR: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

by

Caitlin Scarano

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Under the Supervision of Professor Brenda Cárdenas

This dissertation, titled *Spur*, is structured in three major sections: a set of poems; a lyric essay in the form of an open letter; and a second set of poems. The work explores questions of shame, agency, and inheritance in the realm of the family. *Spur's* post-confessional poems and lyric essay use the approaches of surrealism and the uncanny; a multigenerational, feminist lens; an unstable, first-person speaker; and the technique of looking inward to look outward in order to achieve self-examination, vulnerability, ambiguity, and, ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of abuse, addiction, trauma, and what comes after.

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“A Poem to Multiple Men,” *The Thought Erotic*, Fall 2016.

I. The Bear I Danced With

Calf

I am driving by a field. Mountains crusted with a gold decay surround me. My mother called yesterday; they finally have a diagnosis. In the field, I notice a cow lying on her side, a trembling mass. Sick paternal aunts and cousins I've never met. I get out of the car and move toward the wire fence. Inherited autosomal recessive mutation. Watch fluids rush from her body, blood and matter I cannot name. Slit-lamp exam of the eyes. Blood draws. Liver function tests. The black calf beside her. One of my father's sisters crawling across the living-room floor. The mother's low groans, her obvious distress. All those symptoms finally under a name, a key turning in my brainstem. The calf a silent creature. Lesions on my father's face. His twitching legs. Likely stillborn. I did not attend his funeral. Closer to dirt than beast. *You might not have it*, my mother says. I watch the slipping sun. *Or may just be a carrier*. I return to your car, decide to do nothing. *Thus, symptomless*. Note how the herd has already moved on.

Song Dogs

When I was eleven, my mother wrote a letter to her father requesting he stop molesting her daughters. In a valley I know, all the lines run downhill and meet in the center. I've never thought much about faith. His father taught him not to drill deeper than two inches when tapping sugar maples for fear of reaching the heartwood. How such a small distinction can do so much damage. But then again, wasn't it the years that I thought would destroy me that barely left a mark? Anyway, the letter worked. He became a skin-eating ghost of his own house. Died grasping for his aortic root like the unspared rod. Spring goes on and on here. Rain falls. Buds swell. Robins flood the yard. The river has no time for laughter. Fog tangles in the tops of the mountain's ciders like an unwanted crown. Little hurts. Like the time I closed my fingers in the truck door and could only say her name. Blame between women is tricky like that—promises a sturdy architecture, but only gives you a paper floor. Two nights in the past month I've heard a pack of yipping coyotes surround the house before their own voices spurred them on. I've drowned and dredged up so many chapters of myself just for the sake of the retelling. It's a joke, though. I've never been on either end of a snake whip. Never had to save the thing that devoured what I loved. Never had to plead the way the women before me had to plead.

Not the ending (that came much later) but when we knew it was over

It must have been the time the yard flooded and all the baby shoes
came floating back up.

For him, it might have been
the rabbit's head he found, still singing, beneath my pillow.

When I got drunk beneath a harvest moon and shot
a pistol into the river, aiming at nothing and everything.

Maybe it was decided before us—the night my father slept in the cemetery
before finally skipping town, the day he married my mother
in a windowless courtroom, or that bar in Key West where they met and danced
by the night-still water.

It might have been the midnight sun, the alpenglow wrung
out, that squatter cabin held together by ghosts, or the night
the ice gave up the Susitna while we camped on its banks.

His blood in this snow. How I named him sick until it was true.

Mornings I felt like a nag
or a mother or a monster.

Mornings I felt nothing but rotting light already in my bones.

Or that he never brought up my father's death after it happened. That we seemed bored
by each other's greatest moments of need.

How I became an ecologist of sorrow.

Maybe it was simple—when I started sleeping on the couch,
when the house
became a series of divvied
rooms and slamming doors,
when the thing lost its wonder.

Or the day his little brother got married
and we danced close beneath mason jar lights, laughing,
knowing it would never be us.

Unvigil

No to the wood-warping grief. No to this hollow
gown of a bedroom. In a dream, my father says to me,

I have eight months to live. Then he is the size of a beetle
and dies in my hands. This happens

over and over. When I wake up, the bed is almost always
on the ceiling. I cling to it. Not kept by gravity

but the idea of gravity, the way a cat opens her mouth
and makes no sound. I can go

north now or nowhere at all. Learn the names of roving
-eyed constellations. Mistake their stillness

for turning. Mistake our turning for stillness. Lover,
don't you remember? We had a few sons,

but I buried them in snow before their gills disappeared.
You were too busy flooding our house with water

that tasted of bruise. When your shame became uninteresting
to me, I left. No to vigils. No to the endless, sucking hole

of human need. I don't want a beacon,
won't be a beacon. You open a window to let in some air

and a few years fly out like birds or smoke or sheets of paper.
Just like that—they're gone. Your hardwood floor

left soaked in daylight.

Arm Candy

You can be my arm candy, he laughs when he says it but looks at me in a way that indicates he's testing my feminism. I visualize a large green gummy bear arm in arm with a man walking down a small-town street, maybe somewhere in rural Ohio. Arm piece, eye candy. See also: trophy. Saccharine. Corn syrup. Red Dye 40, which may accelerate the appearance of tumors in mice. How many words for women have to do with consumption? To be licked or lusted. Candy you can blame for the gutrot. The way your teeth ache from love. The way I want you, but I've had enough. I don't like candy, never have. What I want is meat—red, rare, dripping. Really the word isn't about eating or sugar, but about me as a decoration for him—an accent, afterthought, feather in the cap. I could tell he did not believe me when I said wedding rings were originally used to indicate possession of the woman. The amethyst ring I inherited from my great-grandmother is too small to fit anyone in my family. Who were these bird-women that came before me with their tiny fingers and waists that fit between a man's encircled hands? His hands hardly fit around my thigh. He thinks he likes them thin, so thin, but he can't stop touching and bouncing my ass. See, he's laughing. It's a joke. I mean, a compliment. I am proud to have you. I mean, to have found you. You are mine. You are free to go at any time. Talking bird, why are you unhappy? I taught you so many words.

Pecans

At a wide kitchen table, my grandmother would split open pecans with a metal, v-shaped shell cracker. I remember the way it gleamed. Her mouth open with laughter, little bits of nut between her teeth. She told us stories as her mind deteriorated like land eaten away by a bleak ocean. Her husband haunted the halls of her, the house—now, my memory. His fingers cold, sliding under. A story I can't get out of my head. Body-archived. The table littered with shell shavings. He had a green parrot that he trained to bite the hand of anyone who reached for it. His mangy orange tomcat used to piss off the back of the blue velvet couch. My grandmother scrubbed the acidic streaks from those walls over and over. My mother told us over and over, *Nothing stays nice when you're this kind of poor*. I can still picture the angle of my grandmother's right palm as she cracks the pecans, the angle of her head as if she's listening to a sound my sisters and I cannot hear, perhaps my mother's voice, decades before, pleading for help through a radiator vent. And in a dream, I find my mother, an armless doll I give voice and plot to. He's there too, his body parallel to mine in a child's twin bed. Every hair on me raises as the skin, muscles, tendons—all of it—melt from his face and his skull turns toward me. I can hear it click and pivot, click and pivot on the atlas vertebrae. My childhood was clotted with Virginia trees—maple, magnolia, and crepe myrtle, which we peeled the bark off of like strips of skin. One large pecan tree straddled the line between our yard and our neighbor's. They had a son who beat a copperhead to death with a dog chain. I still see him walking toward me, a disappointing christ on water, with what is left of the snake in one loose hand, the chain in the other. I never got that story out of my head. Every spring, yellow, oblivious daffodils sprung beneath that particular tree. My mother's collie used to dig up the pecans and crunch them between her teeth and eat the meat inside. My grandfather died. My mother cleared her parents' house. Insider her, a whole hillside gave out. Two years later my grandmother's hip cracked in two against the slate pavers at my aunt's place. It was Thanksgiving Day. She was wandering away from the house, still looking for her husband even though he'd grounded her down to a mumbling, an afterthought, flightless bird. They moved her to an Alzheimer's ward and had a welder saw the wedding

ring from her finger where the flesh had grown around it. By then
my own father's face was nothing but a set of pickup tail lights. Tracing
the lines between here and Florida
like blue veins. The body holds more
secrets than any other vessel. Except maybe a house.
My sisters and I rarely spoke of any of it, even now. Standing in a Seattle
parking lot, splitting a Marlboro (I quit a year ago), my older sister asks,
Did you see him before he died? Yes, ten days before. It was Christmas
Eve. I drove to Tennessee to see my father for the first time
in ten years. I was with a man I'd been working myself up to leave for three,
because he was still saving the best of himself from me
for some future girl he imagined. (That was the year I realized
the pattern like a window-stunned bird: how the men
I tried to live with often saw me as tenderless.) Our father—hollowed
that name for any of them—in his illness had transformed, unearthly
creature. In a way, it is beautiful, how we can undo
the body and her processes, accelerate toward the light
that snaps like an electric horse fence. When all this rage fills me,
I'm reminded of how lucky I am, right? My lover massages the tops
of my thigh from behind as we watch a movie. The way I was touched before
is only story now, vague as smoke the wind licks up. At least, this
is what I want to believe. How far do we walk
until we are past the wreckage of those who came before us? How
about our past selves? (I see myself, drunk, yelling, bleeding from the chin,
in a dive bar parking lot. Or fucking the husband of a friend in a Minneapolis
hotel room I couldn't afford.) How many years have to drip
and beg? My little sister's daughter touches her throat, muscle
memory perhaps of when her father pinned her mother
to a mattress by the throat
when she was still inside her. But they got out
from beneath him and now he beats a new woman
from a different family. When my grandmother died they sealed
her in a wall with her husband. In a way, it is as base as prayer, laying this all out,
cataloging it. Still we pass blame around this
table of women like a delicate charcuterie board. I eat from it
eagerly. Rub the fat on my fingers
on my jeans. Crack my knuckles for a familiar sound.

Lake Superior, Fall 2015

If it wasn't for my hunger,
why did you want me? Water
we mistook for salt. Bitter
rendering. By the end
of that summer, you'd flown back north
to live with your family. By then,
it was clear that you and I would not be a family.
For a while after, you wrote me long emails until you
did not. How quickly the snow fell there,
by early October, and stayed. I could imagine
the smell of the cold
air in your coat, the gold birch
leaves against the snow, the dry
squeak of it beneath boots.
Part of being together
was that we loved the same
landscape. After you left, how quickly I was fucking
someone else, as if momentum can propel one away
from the grief created between two overwhelmed
bodies. In September, I shivered
on the shore of Lake Superior. I knew so little
of that corner of the country, so little
of that corner of myself, like a reptile
emerging from an egg. I read about how the water
in Superior is replaced every 191 years.
When someone leaves,
they create a space. Something must fill it.
Does that comfort you? Does comfort interest you?
Think of a time when the world never
felt more open. Who was with you?
What did the shadows taste like? Was it the same
as every other absence? And the light—
how far were you from bending, becoming
guiltless? When you balanced
those years we spent
together on a scale, what did you
weigh them against?
And then there was the shore, slate
stones cutting into my bare

feet. The spot where I dove under
and was rolled and for a moment
I did not know what was up or down,
what was past or present, you
or him. That winter, the lake froze.
The trace lines of cracks
in the ice colliding, the fractures
in my body all met. In a human dream,
electric blue hydrozoan creatures
blossom in the deepest water.

A poem to multiple men

Who made and mended my wrists
of wire. Copper conductors of heat
and electricity. Think of the synaptic
dance, your jaw-loose daze as you bend
me over and peer inside. I keep you
around to witness the holes in me
I can never see. In the morning we part—
wordless, mouths mired, semen on my chest,
the sun rapping against my window
like a chipper neighbor in need of sugar.
I learned the price of loving
a place more than a person: that's how
I lost one. *Were we ever happy?* I wrote
and then stomped through each creek bed
between our bodies with knee-high
galoshes. Most days I take a girl
for a mask. I hide my teeth behind
my hair and pretend to love snow. Give me
the boy with the belly of an ox, give me
one like a child's tower of blocks
that I can knock down and rebuild
until the game tires of us. I hope you find
someone who loves you. I was never the girl
next door, I was the one cackling beneath
the radiator, bruising herself behind
the eyes. Chasing the moonsure,
the white dog, the man who left me
with a tongue of coal dust.
He's really no different than the boy
I made into jigsaw and kissed in the rain
until one of us bled.

Ember

He says when we're fucking he can almost feel us
becoming one person. I forgot what it meant to love this way—teeth

against the back of thigh, his voice like a snake around my spine, to see his death
every time he leaves the house—I forgot so much.

Last night, I could not stop eating his hair. I held it like cake
between my fingers, and wasn't a self-nourished in the dreaming?

Healing, like everything else, was not what we expected.
But I knew to follow a river, to turn away

from every baby-filled basket in the rushes, every lover promising me
their best rib. There is no good

or evil here. But touch me gently. If there is a god, I'd have found him
by now squatting beneath a stone like a dumbstruck

toad. Though I believe in ghosts. I've seen them holding their splayed
throats up to my mother's mirror. The flood in our valley

was not punishment; it meant nothing. How it kissed
our doorstep and moved on meant nothing.

I have no god but this—the year of downpour, the way he wants
to become me, an orange ember I'll swallow

for its glow. Moon so free of a human face, I will be unable
to look away.

God's Country

Summer here is pastoral. Verdant valleys against gunmetal mountains. *Entrance to the American Alps*. The sign on the edge of town creaks on its hinge in front of abandoned houses. My paranoia ebbs and flows. The hillsides—scraped of their trees and topsoil like skin by human industry—wait to give out. Does violence sleep? While we dream, the river erodes the earth beneath the two-lane highway that snakes from here to the Salish Sea. Last January, three miles away, a man chained a woman to the toilet in his motorhome and tortured her, shot heroin into her ankle. *This is God's country*, my mother says when she visits. I drive her up Washington Pass where snow still shines back at the sun in linen white patches. *Human remains found of man missing since 2014*, I read in the local paper. His friend, suspected of murder but never charged, died in 2015, though there are no details or obituary online. Our garden pushes up more kale and collards than we can eat. A cluster of squatters live near the trail I jog—white men with tangled beards, dressed in open, oily coats too thick for this hot weather. They watch with precision as I pass. Rumor spreads of one of the local restaurant owners trafficking in women through Canada but his business thrives as the town bloats with tourists. The hens we raised chatter just outside the screen door. In a gorge, hanging from a tree, a park ranger finds the body of a man who went missing near Thunder Creek a month ago. Outside our window, a barred owl's cry pries open the night like a tin can. I swear I hear a woman screaming. In morning light, he tends the land we just bought—turns soil, rips out root wads, claws down rotten planks of scabbed fencing, fights back invasive blackberry patches with a machete—comes out covered in nicks and nettle stings. I read that when the woman finally escaped, still handcuffed, she fell to her knees in front of a passing car. *This place*, he says, *I think we can heal it.*

In this one there is a house, a screen door, a father, a field

this bloodied knowledge opens
 your mother's
hands hidden beneath
 the kitchen sink
a moan sinking back
 down your coward
of a throat seven knives
 you put in the pig's
belly who is this
 man at the screen door
the last time he came
 home he bloodied the field
in you and now nothing
 grows a house abstracted
the moans he stole
 from her hide your
hands from your
 mauling mouth
silence that filled
 each stain of a room
the children that followed
 his every move

The Bear I Danced With

Inside me, a woman puts out fires
in a row of cribs. This is hardwired. A crow cackles as I vomit
in the snow. In the bile, I find the roofing nails
my father asked me to hide for him. *Your body is magic*, my lover says,
as if the holes were made to please. I will not make a house
of weapon handles, even if they are all I get
to inherit. I will not wake up covered in my grandfather's skin like scales,
his face an ill-fitting mask, laughing as a girl falls down a set of stairs.
I will not be the only one to love
the words that fork the tongue like a scalpel. I won't coat loss in maple sap
and swallow it. I will not perform unless I seek to perform. I can't speak
for someone else's skull. Just what I know of reverberation.

Even in my dreams, my father's corpse won't talk to me, no matter
how I prop it up, fill it with the moonshine he taught me to make. *Where
are your sons?* I ask. His head slumps to the right. *What are they building? How do they
love? What hunger runs like a vein of ore from voicebox
to groin? Can they keep up*

with me? Why weren't you satisfied? Among the tendons
and the sinew separated like strands of sobs, I remember
that bear I danced with, the shattered dress
I wore to confuse my mother's father who followed me through days
of church pews. I wonder if I know anything
of effort or just how to catch light
with my grandmother's costume jewels. I stole them
from her body right after she died. No one can find *her*
mother's grave. So three generations
of daughter's daughters carry the box of ashes from state to
state. I'm not saying there will ever be a time I know everything.
Or that I wasn't built to take it. I'm not saying I hate the field
that comes after grief or the bones I chew on there. I'm not saying
they didn't each have their own love story. But if I marry a man, he won't
be the kind who fires a gun into every river he crosses.
Nor will he trade a spine for tenderness.

That woman is in a peach-hued dress, she's actually setting
fire to the cribs. The crow opens its mouth to take back the sound.
This nursery in reverse. Every disaster branches out from another. Once, I threw

my grandfather's favorite tabby cat off the back porch. She landed low, trembling
on the bricks my grandmother had laid
in a herringbone pattern a decade before. I can still remember
how slick those mossy bricks were in the rain, the oak
tree choked with ornamental ivy, still feel my skin
snag on the holly bushes where I tried to hide,
still smell the birdbath's fetid water. For years, I thought
what he did to us was simply what was owed
for trying to break the legs of that cat. He caught me
that day, twisted my arm behind my back
and whispered into my ear: *I give you this
fear—a lifetime of a throat full of bees.* He had no idea
the gift I would make of it.

Nights like these I think of my sisters

Girls that live
like flashes in me—flashes of crimson,
rage, and eyeteeth. Metal coils
ready to spring.

Photographic flash of the snapshots
my father took of us
before his leaving. Dazed
by the light in his wake.

Girl, be the flame

that leaps the highest. The one that catches the heavy
velvet curtains on fire and brings down the house.

Never know a mild winter. Never be bell
jar bent. Don't be the rosewood
they take for carving. Don't swoon, don't
apologize, don't polish.

We are the animals between us, not the men,
not the little deaths.

Don't be the silence in the cellar,
the secret buried behind the white barn.

All those years we spent in the forest,
all those latchkey days—don't let

that pinprick hole in your chest
grow to swallow you.

Don't be the horse licking sugar
from anyone's hand. Be the mare that
bolts.

Be the land beyond the gate
that compels her.

During the Wildfires

My body cavernquiet as he kisses my hip. *This taste.*
Salt of a childhood still on me.

Sitting on the bench seat of my father's pickup. The world
always passing by through cracked glass. Watching

my mother's father slit the throat of a deer. Wildfire
runs from sternum to cervix. My skin stills

beneath him. Rain starts to fall in the skull.
The socket-dry earth screams for it. Who did you last

cross a body of water with? Whose name do you say
even with a throatful of dirt? Until he came, tenderness

hid in me like a cat that went beneath a shed to die.
Save bruises in jars. We are what we collect.

Inside his mouth I find a love letter his mother wrote
to his father years ago. I unfold the letter and find a series

of her sobs no one ever heard. What can I offer you
but this dream of a burning house? Even now my crow

eats his mantle of wasps at the window. Even now,
we hang maps like tapestries. We are where we'll never be

again. Love: the beetle I bit in half. It took me so long to realize
there are people who start fires, not to tend them,

but to see how things burn, and it took me even longer
to realize some places need fire simply to survive,

start again.

II. Holding a Hive Full of Bees: An Open Letter to My Niece

I swear I heard that owl again last night, the one that sounds like a woman in distress I can never reach.

Issy, no version of this story is true.

*

You haven't been here so many years. What is your first memory? In my first memory, I'm in the backseat of my mother's car in the same Virginia town where you were born. I feel dollsmall, not childsmall, and everything is sky. So, for a moment of years, all I'll think is *blue blue blue*. My mother is driving and talking to me over her shoulder. In the memory, I see her mouth moving but there is no sound. I crawl up to look out the car window and discover a world of white and black dairy cows knee-deep in grass, kudzu smothering a hillside, and abandoned silos like watchtowers.

It is a place that seems to give so much—fertile countryside dense with history and generations of old families like taproots. But really, it takes more than it provides. This deceptively bucolic landscape hides households brimming with desperation, prejudice, and violence.

You already know this, even if you can't articulate it yet.

*

I always liked the idea of speaking to someone in the future. So, I'm writing to you because I don't have any children. I didn't want to be responsible in such an intense way for someone besides myself. I don't have the temperament for it. A man I loved once pointed out that I have *a clear lack of tenderness*. Even though he's long gone, that stayed with me.

*

Might I say something of grief? Ribbons of it in a girl's hair. She's laughing as her father tosses her in the air. As she flies and falls—dreams, photographs, and memories all become confused in her mind. He is a different age each time he catches her.

I try to recall my father in my childhood home, what it was like when we all lived there, before he kicked in the backdoor for the last time. But I have hardly anything except a handful of these maybe-moments. In one, I've just had a nightmare. I am four years old. I approach my parents' bedroom door, which is ajar. I peer in and see their half-naked bodies entwined with each other, tangled in sleep. Their raw togetherness is so strange. Even now, I feel awkward recalling it. I turn away.

Such a queer thing to realize that my sisters and I sprang from their connection but never knew it. Besides children, if one has them, we so rarely meet anyone at the beginning of their story. I couldn't handle it, thinking of my mother existing *before* her daughters, with lovers and desires of her own. Issy, remember this about your own mother, Jesse. She lived a life before you. She is a person with you and without you.

I meant to say something of grief. But there was my father, arms wrapped around my mother in sleep. Some mornings, I don't want Ethan, my partner, to touch me. Everything in our cabin feels close and I am cornered, so cornered, by the needs of others. Imagine how I'd resent a child.

Part of what I am trying to tell you about is the anxiety that comes with living, as women, in our bodies and in our culture.

I've had days when I thought about dying and days when I thought about killing myself. (Issy, these can be two different beasts.) I won't lie to you about that. But mostly, it isn't so dramatic. I often just feel *tired*, sometimes before I even begin the tasks of a day like I'm on the edge of some unnamable, unspecific crisis. Anxiety making my bones uncomfortable in me. I've learned to share my house-body with a constant, low-grade dread.

You probably see by now that this letter isn't much in the way of solutions.

I hope you can keep living until more of your days are like moonlight on water than a hand around your wrist or a hand around your neck. (Did you feel your father's hands around your mother's neck? You were still inside of her then. I believe you remember. I believe you will see him for who he really is when the time comes.)

It was in those worst moments when I found whole new rooms in myself, what I was capable of.

*

Being related to a child is uncanny because she both reminds you of yourself and resists similarity. In early photos of you, I mistake you for myself at three. Sometimes I feel suspended from time, and I have to pause and remember who is who, which body I exist within and when.

"Strange," I said to my little sister, Jesse, "that she'd look more like me than you." But, like anything, it depends on the context—day, the angle, the light.

In a few photos of me, I am the one who looks like you—I see your round face, the same gritted-teeth smile that we all got from my father. In others of me, I mistake myself for my mother in her twenties; the image flickers and I can see how I will age toward her. These little linkages, how the story snags, expands, and unravels.

*

Your great-grandmother, my mother's mother, used to carry balled up tissues in her pockets. They were so soft and inoffensive, used to tatters by the end of the day. Her name was Sally. I imagine her hiding her right hand in her trouser pocket and clenching and unclenching the tissues as her husband berated her in the hallways of their house. She is another woman I didn't know and didn't think to try to know until it was too late. She died two Februarys ago, the same day Trump was inaugurated.

My mother, your grandmother (her name is Elaine), told me the story of how her parents met. At a roller rink, Sally, no more than a girl, offered a boy—her future husband—a stick of gum, which he

accepted. How could she have known this one gesture would set off a chain of fires, a legacy of trauma?

And here you and I both are.

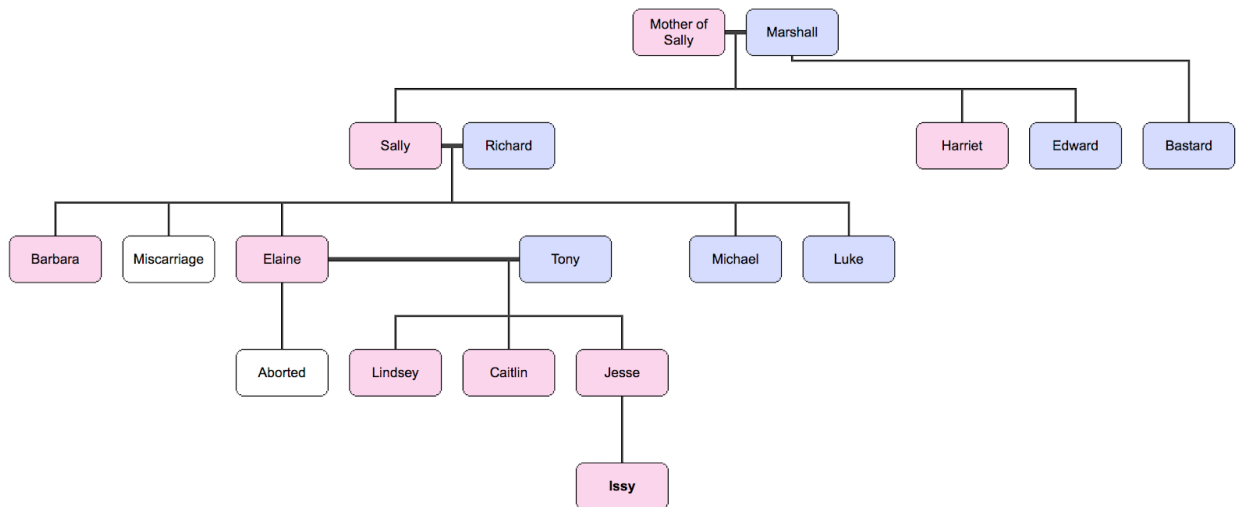
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But it isn't that simple, not really. I think we're neither masters of our fates nor victims of a hereditary line. I've spent my life trying to navigate the channels between what we inherit and what we create. Which shames comprise us and which we can untangle ourselves from. What has been done to me and what I've done. Maybe this is one of the reasons for writing this, that you may face similar, bewildering lifework. That I'll inevitably leave something unfinished and you may be the only one to pick it up.

Sometimes I think you may be the only child any of my sisters or I have, that you might be the last one of us.

Sometimes I have this feeling as I age, this slipping feeling, that if I don't have children or if I don't do something incredible or if I'm not remembered, I won't ever have *been*.

*



Partial family tree. Made on FamilyEcho.com, 2018

Once, Sally took me with her to Dollar General to get milk and cat food. She used to feed all the alley strays, so they gathered—mangy, inbred, yowling—around her house. Another kind of need that only multiplied. At first, it feels rewarding to meet something else's needs. Then it becomes a regimen, and the things that are just you and for just you wear thinner and thinner. I don't think all women feel this way about caring for others. Maybe you won't.

In the store that day, when I asked her to buy me a baby doll, Sally told me about the twins she lost in a miscarriage before her four children that lived. As if the sight of the doll, its heavy eyelids and clicking fake lashes, took her back to a loss she'd buried.

Recently, when I asked Sally's younger brother, Edward, about it, he said she didn't lose twins, just one baby, between my mother and aunt. Edward might have it wrong. Or it might have been Sally's memory starting to go. That day in Dollar General, neurons in Sally's mind were already dying. I still picture Alzheimer's as tangled worms in her brain.

Her younger brother also revealed to me that he and Sally's father (my great-grandfather, Marshall) had a son with another woman while he was married. The bastard son and his mother lived only a few blocks away from their family, but they never visited or acknowledged him.

When I asked Barbara, my mother's older sister, about Marshall (her grandfather) in an email, she wrote back: *When they [Sally and her sister Harriet] got older, Marshall became very controlling and did not want them to date or trust them—always checking up on them. When she was here recently, Aunt Harriet talked a little about this and seemed to indicate that he was distancing himself from his daughters so that he would not molest them. I don't know what the backstory is.*

Issy, I know all this is confusing, but that is why it is worth remembering as accurately as possible. See, all this started long before that stick of gum. The more layers you peel back in any history, the more secrets you'll find, like worms deep in piece of fruit.

I'll be honest—I can't always be sure which story is true and what is real or invented memory, like a photograph held under moving water. It all comes and goes.

Like the time my mother drove me home from college for summer break after my freshman year, and she told me about the night her parents, Sally and Richard, drove her to Brooklyn and forced her to have an abortion because it wasn't legal in Pennsylvania and she was sixteen and her boyfriend was black and my grandmother always needed someone to fear and it was 1973 and my mother was still a few months shy of running away from that house for good and her father was angrier than any man she or I ever knew.

I've found that blame can be the smoothest wheel to turn.

I've been thinking a lot about it lately, how easy it would be for a child to blame or dislike me, if Ethan and I ever have one. It is so easy to be hard on those who made us. But spring is forceful here. Ants march paths into the wilderness between our mouths.

You must be grateful for what light you have. This is what I've been told. You must be grateful for the dead in their yellow dresses, smelling of some distant, delicate machine. For the lessons they leave behind. When Sally finally passed that winter, I dreamt my sisters and I put a green finch in her mouth.

You might wonder why I'm telling you all this. Why prod that particular pit of snakes. Marshall is long dead, Sally is dead, and Richard is dead. My father died three years ago, twenty days short of his 57th birthday. (There is math to any death.)

Issy, I want to tell you what it is like to be a woman in our family, our hometown, and this world. But I also hope for a more genderless world for you.

I'm telling you this because if I can get it all down, I might be able to organize these losses and fears.

*

Issy, some of the hardest lessons I've learned have to do with how my actions affect others. How I impact other people matters to me, but I've also had to recognize the traits that I'll never possess. I am not a warm woman. I am not maternal. I am not pleasing or patient. I won't wake up one day and miraculously be a kinder person.

I chose to love a kind person and hope that I can follow his lead on days that are bleak. Really, choose carefully if you want to spend large chunks of your life with someone. Pick people whose agendas and core traits are not a trick or a mystery or ever-shifting.

Don't mistake it for proof of your specialness if you do find someone. Really, it's all arbitrary, circumstantial. We don't mean anything more or less than anyone else. I've never seen an omniscient plan or order in the trajectory of my human life other than the ones I've tried to enforce, and they usually went awry.

But marvel at the architecture of the natural world and its systems. Try not to forget that, despite how we convince ourselves otherwise, we are part of it. I've witnessed wood stove smoke hung low between spruce trees on still, snow-sealed nights. I've locked eyes with a lover and felt a whole world we were creating, however unreachable or brief. I learned a bit about desire. Release in just letting the body be, in not trying to change, or shape, or punish it.

*

Last night, I woke Ethan and myself up with a scream like a creature pried from the bottom of a well. The night terrors come and go for me over the years, like the recurring one I used to have of a bear crunching on my skull. That started when John, my last partner, had a psychotic break and hid our hatchet from himself. "Those were strange years," I tell people now. "Just have to laugh it off."

In an echo, I can hear my mother's father's voice like an oiled whip: *Just walk it off.*

The danger in feigning indifference to trauma is that you can grow indifferent.

When we were little, and I was angry, I once said to Jesse, "Go play in the street." Our mother's head snapped around as if she'd heard a fanged ghost—this was something her father, Richard, used to say to her when he was in a particularly cruel mood.

I remember the skin above his elbows used to peel off in little strips. When I was twenty-eight, pustules formed on my palms and I scratched them open. The relief was sweet. "Psoriasis on the hands and feet," the nurse practitioner explained. "Autoimmune disorder. Not contagious but hereditary." Just when I thought the last signs of my grandfather had surfaced, here was more of him in my body. It isn't the dead that come back but their stains in us.

The nurse told me heavy alcohol use could trigger a flare up. Internal and external factors. Again, the story won't stay simple, blame lurches out of the rifle's scope.

*

I have a dream of you holding a hive full of bees over me while I sleep. This is not a threat or a gesture of love. Simply suspension. These past and future selves. You are me and not me, unme.

*

On our camping trip this spring, Ethan and I fought from the Grand Canyon to Glen Canyon Dam and beyond. We fought about marrying and not marrying, having children and childlessness, red flags, a fear of commitment, a secret wish for abandonment, a better story, a more convincing grief. Fathers we can blame or not blame. Whether or not my aptitude for meanness (selective but precise) is justified by a line of men I've had to armor myself against. "You don't understand what it was like, what I had to become," I said to him. Fissure after fissure. Year after year.

The person I was before—does she still deserve to be punished?

Issy, even to love a kind man is unbearable at times.

I was passenger seat silent, shielding my face from the sun, trying to decide if I should stay with him. I daydream about living alone. Not to get away from him but to get at the deep time in me. Crawling into the canyon of self. This solitary work. But then I remember, Issy, what it was like before him, the ache of hours. After I got sober, I was very lonely and unsure if I could be a good partner. I remember waiting to simply cross a street in midday and feeling like I might splinter. There is a lot to be said for being wanted, for having someone there to say, "No, you're more than the worst that you've done."

But try not to mistake wanting someone for needing them.

What do I want from this life with him? I've carved my body out and open. I've waited out the orbiting dark and years of winter towns. I can't be anywhere but here—this drive, this desert, this white, coral, and blue landscape. Sometimes I float in dreams and live entire lives without him.

This is what I want to say to him: Ask me about the bad in me. Ask me what I fear in you. We weaved through a canyon. The walls grew taller. The secrets more enticing. (If I can just make it around this bend, if I could just see beyond where I cannot see.) Ask me to wait. Ask me to change. Ask me to let go of the roundest stone that I thought I would never find. Ask me to be a different person, a gentler kind of woman. Ask me about the stars and the alder forest and the fist. Ask me about my little sister's throat or the hatchet or the hammer. Ask me for animal. Days I'll spend on a kitchen floor looking for a keyhole back to this moment. To this drive. This knowledge I'll give to you and it will nourish you. I may never be a mother, but I am a person, an understory. Believe you can choose. Pretend you know the worst you might do. Fucking between canyon walls under a shrinking sky. It was a trick of the light. It wasn't my intention. This voice weaving between my ears, these emerald pools of want—shallow, chained, leading. What could mean more than this? I've been swallowed whole by my anger but look—here I stand in front of you. I've drunk and drunk from that destructive well. Come up only gasping with a bleeding mouth. Ask me about the coyotes that

ran through my body last night, how you woke up when you thought you heard a crack in the earth. How it split open between us.

*

I want to tell you that I've done awful things to myself and other people, and I number your mother among them.

Issy, you will do awful things. So, pay attention to the details of aftermath, to what it offers up.

I know you'll always be at odds with your mother in some way. I can already see it. When we are so close to something, so intertwined with it, we often come to resent it. I think back on all that happened when we were little and think, *Didn't Jesse bear the brunt of it?*

Whatever practice you can do to become reflexively reflective, build space for it as early as possible.

*

In a hotel bathroom in Seattle, Ethan's sister rolls up her pant leg and shows me the constellation of small scabs and scars from where she picks at herself. Her need is thick as syrup. "They have a name for it," she says. I know the name but don't say anything. I've done it my whole life—strips of skin around my fingernails, acne on my jawline or shoulders, the skin on my lips, my eyelashes and eyebrows. As I write this, I'm touching my face, looking for some loose thread. "My mother does this too," she says and adds, "you should see her hands." Ethan's already seen me biting the sides of my thumbs and mentioned the correlation to his mother. I don't tell his sister any of this. But I wonder at this habit and why it is so often women who seem to be struggling with it.

*

Once, when you were not even four, I watched you walk into a swarm of honeybees (they'd returned to my mother's yard after two decades of unexplained absence) just so you could get closer to the hive glistening like gold in the crevice of the maple tree. You did not hesitate. Nothing touched you. You trusted the rules of the natural world.

Or you hadn't learned the option of distrust.

*

Issy, I know something of blame. How many years I blamed my mother for what her father did to us.

I once read that repulsion at its core is recognition.

I have always been drawn to these intense, often competitive and mean, friendships with women. The kind that are doomed and deep with need. I don't know that they are meaningful or toxic. They just are.

But I also know something of what women, by which I mean whoever identifies that way, can be for each other. I was mostly made by a handful of women I met in my early twenties—friends and lovers and those in between. I can list half a dozen women who kept me alive, and they didn't even realize it.

I remember my best friend and I in high school biting each other's upper arms until they bruised deep and pure and how our bodies were bonded.

*

There is liberation in the decision not to have my own children, though I feel a peach pit of dread in my sternum for the day Ethan finally realizes that I'm serious about this, that I am probably not going to change my mind. I guess this is a lesson I want to share with you—that so much of your life will be weighing your needs and wants against the needs and wants of others, especially those you love. There are no instructions for this and there are consequences no matter which way you go.

The other morning, he was scrolling through Instagram on his phone when I asked him a question and he didn't answer. I felt a knee jerk dread at this, something familiar, a road I'd been down and forgotten. I'm pretty sure he was just distracted, but this withholding of acknowledgement reminds me of an intentional powerplay that I've experienced before. As if a man can grant a woman her existence, her humanity, by choosing when to acknowledge her. John's father constantly ignored his wife, often in front of us. He would talk over her or pretend not to hear or hum loudly when she spoke. John dismissed or downplayed it when I pointed it out to him. It was in these moments that the crevice between us widened and widened until I woke up one morning and had lost sight of who I thought we'd be.

After an argument, Ethan said, "I'm afraid you're going to leave me." Funny, I could have said the same to him.

I can't know how long we'll be together. But I have an intuition about the good in him and the worthwhileness of our bond that outstrips everyone who came before him. I don't know when my intuition is true or a trick. I just have to follow it and constantly check in with myself and him.

Issy, I'm trying to tell you about this life of tension, mitigations, and monotony, punctuated by moments of searing bliss, seething loss.

*

I lived through different forms of abuse. But I sometimes believe that no one did more damage to myself than me, and I don't know if this is truth or poison. Issy, try not to be your own enemy. Life will provide enough of them.

My father made moonshine up to the day he died. Clear liquor, bloody sheets, yellow skin. On the nights my body refuses to sleep, I imagine having a son, but it's often just my father as a boy. Somewhere, a house consumes itself. In a dream, a voice asks me, *How much reckoning do you need?* Your mother and I walk the lines of her new property. Near a body of water that is not quite lake, not quite swamp, a grey heron rises between us. Her three dogs break for the tree line after it. Funny

what we can never catch but must follow. I don't know what this is about. Maybe the type of person she is or I am. The type of person you'll be after all this.

What is legacy?

Why did you make a child? I wish I could ask them—your father, my father, my mother's father, or her mother's father. Were you that afraid of being forgotten? Why have a daughter, when all she'll do is remind you of violence?

Issy, one time you made me play ghost with you for hours in my mother's house of ghosts. I realize now that ghosts are always made up, and the ghosts we see and feel are really just extensions of ourselves.

*

I know certain landscapes—at least, corners of them. What it is like to leave one for another. To know where you cannot thrive and do what needs to be done by starting over, which can also mean abandoning something else.

I know the way, if one is lucky, the first snow may fall in late September or early October in Alaska, when the birches are still gold. Light on light on light before an endless dark. I know how campfire smoke smells at the end of fall. And you stand on the edge of a spruce grove and hear the place ask you a question you've been waiting your whole life for someone to ask.

*

Before Ethan, I lived four years with someone, John, who never seemed fully present, as if he'd been assigned to our relationship and kept looking out the window, sighing audibly, hoping for a better option.

But, for that time, I was dedicated to understanding one person deeply—one of the hardest tasks we can take on. I've learned the body of someone else, been a student to another's being. Subtle difference in the smell of skin washed yesterday versus today. The vertebrae that most troubled him. The angle of his head when his attention was divided. I know, also, that he had to witness the worst in me. My demands on him and my silent, clenched anger must have worn him out.

But it counts for something. In the very least, I know that I knew, or tried to know, one person. That I tried to show myself to him (laid bare, skin peeled back, bones twitching, yellowing in the light). No one can take that—that we knew each other intimately—from us. In a way, it is proof that we were here. We will never not have been because we witnessed each other's lives.

*

I've grown tired of the redemption narrative, the human need for an upward arc. I often find that people want to hear my sobriety spun this way. But just because a thing needs to be done and you do it does not make it noble. Just hard won.

I'm thinking of this because I want to say something about knowing when to walk away. But I am still the most basic of students in this. What I can say: in almost every situation where someone came to hurt me in some deep way (intentionally or unintentionally), I can look back and pinpoint an obvious uneasiness I felt in the beginning.

I can also recall situations when I had the potential to hurt someone else. When my body warned me about myself.

I am suspicious of how wise the self grows in retrospect. But, the point is to listen to your body around certain people. If you find yourself doing or saying things you don't really mean, check your company. And then check yourself. For so long, I just stuck around situations because I felt obligated, or lonely, or didn't believe my own discomfort (my mother would call this instinct, your gut). I'm not sure why it took me so long to trust myself. I'm sure that it has something to do with things that happened when I was your age. I am afraid to imagine what might be currently happening to you that will have this ripple effect on your life. I can't stop it. But I believe you will find what you need inside when the time comes.

I already know that you won't have a fear of water, even when you've swum past where you can touch bottom.

Which reminds me of the last story my father told me before he died. He said, "I knew this girl back then when I lived in Florida. This was before your mother. She was the tough type of girl. I remember we were hanging out by Buck Lake and she said, 'I can do anything a man can do.'"

Issy, I'll never know this woman. I didn't even ask her name. But I immediately identified with her and wanted her to be the victor in the story. In response to her claim, he dared her to swim the width of Buck Lake with him. So, they stripped down to their underwear and raced out into the warm, brackish water. I can imagine her smooth, overly confident strokes as he effortlessly treaded water, quietly allowing her to catch up with him every few minutes.

Halfway across the lake, he noticed that two full-grown alligators were following them, steadily gaining ground. He saw their armored backs like cracked asphalt in the drunk summer sun. They weren't necessarily acting aggressive but definitely seemed interested in these two unfamiliar creatures flailing about in the water. The girl had not yet noticed them.

He whispered to her (here, I can imagine his soothing voice, woodwind intonations I remember from childhood), "Don't panic, don't splash, and do not scream. Just stay with me and go slow." They tried to move without upsetting the water, the balance of the bayou around them.

"But I could see she was starting to freak out, and I didn't know how we were going to get across. We were too far to turn back."

"What happened? How did you keep her calm?" I asked. "How did you ever make it?"

He laughed as if it were the most obvious thing: "I started to sing to her."

*

This morning, Ethan asked me, “Why do you still seem surprised when I tell you I love you?”

Half-joking, I said to him, “Because it can always change. Isn’t that the nature of love, that its variable?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t think so.”

He’s learned to believe in himself quietly, and it causes me to feel inadequate. I know he and I feel differently about ourselves. I don’t think he ever struggled with this kind of worthlessness. But, then again, how can I speak for him in this regard?

*

Do you remember the baby rabbit you saw hiding in that patch of grass when you were only a few years old? She was right in the open, her stillness so inherent it seemed practiced. Remember how she saw you but did not startle? As if she knew how to wait out certain dangers. Do this—learn how to wait out the months when the air is full of teeth. When you can’t see past angry hands. There will be so much demanded of you and so many offers. You cannot answer every howl in the night, no matter how they tug on your spine.

Look at your body in more than one mirror. There are so many angles of light here, don’t claim the worst one.

Rise early. You can’t imagine all you’ll find in the quiet of yourself as you undo the slow threads of blue hours. I guess I want to tell you to save a part of yourself *from* yourself. Save another part of yourself *for* yourself. Learn to love your love of small things. Have an affinity for the kind of people who rarely raise their voice.

The part of you that longs to touch certain trees, to memorize the bark—cultivate her. You’ll need her when you least expect it. Keep a journal beside your bed. Don’t be afraid to record the best *and* worst things you imagine.

And if there are cords between you and the birds of your mother’s past and her mother’s past, you may cut them, though they may never give you permission. If you need to bleed, Issy, then bleed.

*

Now I dream of building a house over and over. Filling it with the furniture my grandmother left to my mother when her memory atrophied. I think of Sally’s yellow parakeet, decades ago, who only asked one question after his companion died: *Pretty bird? Pretty bird?* I wonder what he felt when light came in through the kitchen window and all those other birds returned in the spring—singing, shitting, and hunting outside, free. Whether or not he could suddenly see the cage for the wire.

This is where the light enters—the pain points we inherit. One on the inside of the wrist (where he grabbed her), one under the left ear (where he kissed her), one right behind the navel (where he emptied her). Never forget that you can lose what you know and love, but that doesn’t mean someone took it from you. Your future is not fixed. The gunshots you hear may actually be coming

from the direction you flee toward. So much of what you thought was natural will turn out to be forced. Some mornings he will hold you and you will feel nothing but the quiet after some other generation's octave of sobs.

*

I think, *There must be times when he can't stand me*, as if any interaction has to have a secret counterlife beneath it. That first day Ethan and I spent together, we went to a quarry pond and swam in our underwear. I told him I was headed back to Alaska soon. I was sure of it. Two months later I was living with him across the river from that quarry, in his house, his belongings cohorting with mine. The truth of my mistakes didn't make him pull away. He just listened. Kissed me in the shampoo aisle of Fred Meyer. It was July.

He brings me coffee while I read at his cluttered kitchen table, our table. What I'm doing now is trying to make space for a little disorder. To live with and around those who live differently than I do. To practice patience.

We're entering our last first season together, our first spring before our second summer. (How many years before you feel certain? How many years until we are safe?) Season of cherry tree petals falling like snow on the grass he can't keep up with mowing. But I like it like that—a little wild, a little thicker. A little closer to the old forest growth that covers the majority of our property. Season of trickling wood smoke, of jogging through rosehip and devil's club, of skunk cabbage leaves the size of a torso in the ditch that runs along Route 20. The road beside the river that empties into the Salish Sea. Everything is movement, Issy.

I want to ask him, *How do you conceive of yourself, lover? Or us?*

He braids my hair, jokes, "These sorts of skills will make me a great stay at home dad."

The question of progeny, again. What if our visions of the future are not similar enough? Does one of us give in? Do we meld these visions together or pack them up and go our separate ways?

Years, like roads, part; this is the nature of them. I held this thought as I plucked blackberries from thorny vines. They were bitter. Again, I tried to reap the reward too early.

*

I never told anyone about the time I got stuck in the neighbor's deer stand deep in the woods south of our yard. The stand was so high I couldn't see it from the ground when I looked up. Only the thin, 2x4 rungs nailed into the trunk over a decade earlier hinted at this space beyond. My sisters and I always dared each other to climb the rungs. But the only time I reached the top, I was alone. I don't remember how I got down. I just remember the sinking fear.

I never told anyone how that feeling—the paralyzed, gutrot dread—of those small days became familiar, that I carry it with me still. How I learned, early, that there isn't always someone to coax you out of the places where you trap yourself.

But I meant to say something of grief.

I never told anyone how I looked for her, the girl stuck in the tree, fifteen years later, when I was home from graduate school and walking that now clear-cut, ravaged land. Our family's two aging dogs warily nosing the brush and stumps: *Was I here before? Did I know this place once?*

Who did I think I was, that child daring herself to get stuck out of reach or that young woman flirting with loss as if it were a game? Why did I think a place could know me, would remember me?

Issy, find the hole in the fence in the back of our yard, beneath the tree where my mother buried the collie in the dark, in the rain. Crawl beneath it, follow the trail through the longleaf pine grove, go past the powerline, leave the easement, and head south toward the reservoir. Find the sycamore with the deer stand. Find the rotting ladder, the sinking sun, the girl convinced of fading like the light.

Tell her about the owl's cry for the human scream it is not.

III. Necessary Fires

Spur

The night your father left for good, he slept
in a cemetery then set out
at first light.

Your god did not come.
No beast

with a halo of antlers
to carry you on.
That obsidian stone you coughed up
and kept beneath your pillow

never staved off any loss.

The collie wore a halfmoon
into the cracked dirt

trying to get at the rooster when
it tore open your sister's back
along the spine with his spur.

But she never reached him.
She couldn't save anything

from her chain. Your mother
must have paused by the kitchen
sink one morning and sobbed
into a dish towel until
she could hardly breathe.

Then she collected herself

and raised three daughters,
while her husband razed his body
like a barn that had outlived
its use. She taught you

how to leave a man
when he decides to shape himself

into a cinder block and asks you
to hold the rope.

Somewhere His Hands

a man I once loved just died
but somewhere our bodies still lie
in the ceaseless Upper Peninsula dark
a blue raven between us
the same one that's followed me
through every skull-scraping grief
its multiplying chambers the human heart
at age 36 *aerobic capacity declines* the clanking
of locks between Huron and Superior
how much we can hate
what we want *our body's ability to extract
oxygen from blood*
diminishes but the howl reverberates
what I could not bring myself to do
will fill every future house
but somewhere it is summer
and we're swallowing light eating
ice cream with our teeth
watching children bury themselves
in gritty sand *I want to be a father*
the lake gives the sun back its offer
I hope you find what you're looking for
I should have said nothing
talk of my father's death
his father's approaching death
how the body folds in on itself like a popup
book house the years will bring nothing
but ridicule for my vanity I never responded
to his last email *I'm still lucky*
to be so close to the great lakes never dismantled
the question that always hung between us
like a neck snare *I just feel this good feeling about you*
but somewhere we're meeting for the first time
in a city of snow *I always have*
or beneath a lighthouse stitched in September
somewhere we're in a parked car as snow starts
to fall and I almost say it
somewhere he's running
down a trail he knows so well the circulatory

paths carved into earth what we chase
what we catch what we can and cannot
outrun the human
heart sputters and starts sputters and
somewhere we're going under
Superior as the fall sun burns out and stones
turn corpse-cold somewhere I'm writing
a letter to his mother addressing her sudden
loss or we live together in a red house
somewhere we have a son or we each have sons
or I am awake beside a different man listening
to a loon outside our window saying *somewhere*
somewhere I did not fail him

Vampire

Once, your father mistook
a pack of coyotes for the voice of his own
dead father. You didn't correct him. Now, you dream

of tongues covered in white moss. Years grow over your silence, his grave.
His friends could not afford a headstone, and you and your sisters
did not offer. You imagine they staked a small, plywood cross

into the Tennessee dirt as if it were a bloated vampire. As if glad to finally be done
with him, his sickness, which stretched in lesions, soiled sheets,
and lymph nodes. Grubs glisten like constellations in the loam around what is left.

He laughs and you turn but yes, you are alone in this room and you've learned
by now that ghosts make the poorest of mirrors. Dream his voice still
speaking through a crack beneath a door in you. Dream all

that he gave to you, gives to you still. Fascination with violence. The cat
in the cradle. So many polished stone pitchers but no water. Picture your mother,
grower of vines. Cultivator. Beefsteak tomatoes, cucumbers,

summer squash. When you asked why she married him, she never could name
a clear reason. You go over the trajectory, walk back through time
as if it is a forest of steelblue trees. You find yourself as an infant there

watched over by starved wolves. You can't discern what was survival
and what was chance. If he was an intricate lesson
or just a man.

In which our skin, our lives, our sins conflate

Your body goes under a clawhammer
cold river. When you come up
you're in *my* skin—the man who made
the man who made you. Every muscle
pulsing, tensed, every decade
between us wet-mouthed, parted,
reverent. Daughter of my son, my cross,
my tangled whip, listen: living is actually effortless
if you let the land flood and rot, flood
and rot. If you just let violence rise
to the surface like cream. Sometimes I crave
the lemon cake she fed me at my first
wedding. I still see the mason jar lights
strung up in a barn of white
pine blurring behind whiskey shots
and the long shadows of her family's
minister. I still see the boy in me (the holes
in him) hiding behind hay bales
from a vicious future—the first wife I left
reeking of copper in a sanatorium, the hammer
I used to try to see the secrets
in my second wife's wasp paper skull, the war
of broken ankles I went to but never
spoke of. The way my skin peeled from the steamheat
of Italian restaurant kitchens. The little girls I watched
playing in the mud on the pond's shore,
their lithe, summer bodies, their sticky
swimsuits. What could I be
but who I was made to be? The spiked shell
of the snapping turtle you found

on the side of that Virginia road
was picked clean by turkey vultures
long before you could pretend to love it.

He starts to daydream

Eat memories like red cake
with your fingers. Even the loneliest
ditchdigger gets a corner of sky. The frost
your last lover scraped from your eyes
all those mornings you were nothing

but a snarling dog caught in barbed wire—what could be
more honest than that? When you look back
at a picture he took of you, the girl is so unfamiliar.
Cheeks you don't recognize, equine neck,
hair in your eyes, arms outstretched
as if balancing on a tightrope.

Instead, you're on a ridgeline
trail, a braided river behind you, the threads
of which you'll soon lose as he starts to daydream
in visions of violence.

You have on a silk scarf your mother gave you.
You remember the way you learned
to knot it so it looked taut but wasn't so tight
around your throat.

In the picture, you're wearing the walrus bone
earrings he bought you (see their perfect
points?) one of which you'll lose not long after
he leaves you
in an airport clotted with strangers.

Yesterday, the cat you and the new man
got together caught a kangaroo mouse
and brought it to you, loose
in her jaws, still alive. She was noncommittal,
seeking help, suddenly uncertain
how to proceed.

When the bitter part is finally allowed her say

I wish for you days ripe with rot. You sick
from licking your own
wounds. Mouth rusted still with sadness.
Forty day of rain so sour you'll
finally know the marrow-deep drench
of this. Mildew I scrape from the walls
of a house we imagined
together and abandoned half-built.
The kitchen I scrubbed, swallowing
a crabapple knot of dread. The window
through which I watched you leave
and where I saw you return, hesitating
outside the door, as if willing
a different life behind it. For you to see a crown
fire, acres consumed, and finally understand
my anger, the range and potential of it,
your passivity its most effective fuel. I hope
you find your favorite river strangled. Guilt
like a doctor's cold hand always squeezing
your heart. And no one to believe you.
No one to believe you. Every bottled night-
mare you'll suckle like a bloated
babe. Remember when you left me
standing outside your truck in the rain,
throat-deep in a grief that didn't interest you?
I wish for you the same hollow
desertion, this feeling of wasted years.

A horse only I can see

These days when I cross water, I say your name.
This is not prayer
but memory. The forest keeps
its secrets: wood smoke and loam, a barred owl with black eyes,
that time we fought in the truck
right before the season's first snow.

I had a dream once of a gray horse
circling the first house we lived in together
until it starved.

Why did this particular parting feel like a death? You know,
I always did love a question without an answer.

The stones you left on my windowsill sing
but it is a pitch humans cannot hear. I believe in the smell of rain
on summer tarmac, the ruby-throated
hummingbirds my mother watches from her porch swing
beneath the feeder. I believe in my sister's daughter laughing
at ghosts or standing untouched among a swarm of bees. I still believe
in the good in you even if we don't know each other now.
I believe it will be there even when you distrust it.

Listen, I still believe in the first snowfall anywhere.

How pain is a layered thing, how it can clear
the decay and deadfall in the body like a necessary wildfire.
And I believe in my body,
in listening to its sighs and swells, in the flesh as ambiguous and whole.
I believe in recognizing the phases of the moon, learning
how to cut branches for better growth. That the best mercy
comes from oneself, a wellspring you can name
any shade of blue. I believe in letting go of the slamming
doors, letting go of my anger, letting go, even,
of its articulation.

The houses where they eat the lambs

Wishbone, forked bone
between the neck and breast of a bird

but we are not the bird. Nor the feather, nor
the stone that brought her warm

body down. I am the weak point, a snap,
furcular crack. You are the wish mouthed

against a wall of air. Worm between the ribs.
Smearred blood above a door. Dedication

takes many forms. We stand by these
bleached altars. Gather veins like soft

blue thread in a basket of skin. To not harm
each other is not enough. I want to love you

so much that you have no before. No mother,
no bower, no history of burning doors.

The sea with her rising wet ash. To be marrow
intimate. A crime committed

squatting among the reeds. Add grit
to the skin for texture. Crouch like a toad

beneath the bowl of your skull
and turn the skeleton key in your eye.

Lover, we will know no neighbors. No light
beyond the teeth of a laughing loon.

Dear city, I finally realized

all these poems to you were about alcoholism. The watch tower, the water. The man about to leap. I know a story or two about survival. City, you and I burn hours like animal fat. We fill our pillowcases with glass and laugh as if our teeth have more than one purpose. City, we needed each other—you were my rock bottom, I was your *now float on up darlin'*. Remember when the streetlamps decided they weren't having any more of this shit and staged a walkout? The only light left was that blue flame you keep spinning near your sternum. Remember when every stray dog was a love story and the snow that night cleared the crust that had gummed my eyes shut? No, me neither, but fuck it. Let's get lit one last time. Give me a reason, not a lover or a father or an unborn son. Give me the devil as he actually is—yawning, peddling patience. Glancing at me as if I were a rearview mirror during a desert drive. Expecting nothing, seeing nothing.

Daughter Knot

Detached from context, deer spine you find
engulfed in bodilessness. That night, a sky veined

with unresolved stars. They throb and a future
sickness nags at you, a honey locust

thorn in your side. Ulcers blossom in your intestine
like needy purple mouths. Abuse begets abuse, the unwell

begat the unwell. Grief like ribbons in a girl's hair, her teeth
catching the sun. You bend over his grave

as if it's a mixing bowl, as if he is a task you have
to complete. Another day of rain opens like a sinkhole.

You cut off your hair. It hisses when you toss it
into the wood stove; your lover watches

from a chosen distance. How much can his blood
dilute? You dream in organs. Egg lump on the breast,

copper in the brain, knot in your throat. All this talk
of children, you'd rather speak of snakes. You'd

rather spit it out and offend than choke
on the offer.

Luciferase

Father, we both have clichés
that fit us like young skin—me, following
like a dog. You, skunk hour drunk
in that scab of a town. Like many men

I've known, it wasn't my loyalty that interested you. (Picture
my mother combing her hair out
on the steps of the farmhouse she shares with the man
she actually wanted. It is July. She still has a decade
of daughterlessness to bask in.)

Every house I've lived in collapsed in on itself, you wrote in red
taillights on a Virginia dirt road. I took it
as an invitation, woke up years later in a Midwest city
with glass in my hair.

Look, I know how this story ends—your blood-flecked lips
as you speak to me about what you shouldn't have
done with your life. Organ rot. Closer
to where it started—your father beating you
with a leather belt until could not sit. You tell that story like a joke
until it is so small you can't remember
that it was real, how you cowered behind a couch
hoping he would find your brothers instead of you,
how it would be twenty years
before you remembered the details of him
trying to murder your mother with a hammer.

You laugh it off and then look out the nearest window. Imagine
every lightning
bug I caught and killed as a child
rising from an uncapped jar. Light leaping. Virginia
summer cooling beneath evening sycamores. Laughter
rippling through screen windows. We are both
still alive.

Parameters

My mother gave me a diary with two little keys
when I was a child. It held my rotten
gods behind its useless locks, secrets no one wants to hear.
Until you're an adult fucking
a man who wraps your hair around
his right hand like reins, says, *Tell me
what you were like as a little girl.* I'll tell you—
back then I kept this great scream
in my body, a controlled burn
that jumped the break. Stomach
in tatters. I wasn't the one killing
animals with chains and sticks. I was
the one watching the boy next door
do the killing. Summers I led my little sister
to this pond so still and foul. We swam
but somehow knew not to touch
bottom. *Tell me what you (were) like.* I memorized
exit, memorized matchbox, made myself
small enough to fit through a cat door.
There were days when we laughed,
days we grew teeth. Season to sow,
season to reap. Now I like my face hard
pressed into a surface, so all I see are ruptures
of technicolor.

You pull down a string of sky

and a hidden attic ladder unfolds. You climb it
and find a room inside
the person in the room. Like the dollhouse
within the dollhouse you dreamt
of as a child—porcelain lemons in a bone
china bowl, window valances
with rows of stitched shirring, rough
granite around the fireplace, a cream
cradle that rocks when no one is looking.
There is space here for so much more
than your hands. Believe
that they wrote each other letters,
that your mother tried to imagine
the ticking, dripping chambers
of your father's heart, that he neatly
pulled his hair back
with a rubber band, oiled his beard,
and put on a collared
linen shirt and jeans ripped
at the left knee. That laugh lines
ran deep and her hair grew longer
and longer. Believe they might
have held each other beneath
a screenless window, egrets
waking them in the morning. From
that attic room, you look out
and see her on a beach, digging
her fingers into sand, laughing
as he hops waves before they break,
a slim bottle in his right hand throwing
back the light. Salt on her lower lip, a strand
of hair caught in her teeth. She's daydreaming
of you to come.

When you first ask if we can have a child

I've seen you undress in the yard, watched rain
turn to steam and rise off your skin. I've learned not to tell you

too often how overwhelmed I am by my want
for you. While the dog sleeps, her tail knocks against the floor
and I think about how we cannot always have access
to the happiness of those we love.

If we have a child, who will raise her? Certainly not the ghost
of a father I hardly spoke to. Certainly not the wolves you swear
you see circling me when you happen to wake in the night.

Think of where I came from—think
of the anger I've only recently set down beside a river
seething with silt. There are rooms for this kind of grief.

Some people fill whole houses with it.

*

I leave strips of paper and fistfuls of hair from my brush
for the flock of Steller's Jays in our yard
but they won't take these offerings. They want me to resist
the impulse to intervene.

In the car one night—constellations turning, country road
turning—I say, *If we have a child,*
you will love it more than me.

You don't deny it. The ringing of bells passes through
the body and comes out as the sobs of a mother
behind a closed door. But what if nothing

is possession? Can I imagine a way out of myself then?

*

When I spot the wasp nest under the eaves
of our cabin, I wait for the sun to set

and then spray it with poison. I watch how the nest foams,
watch the wasps drop to the earth
one by one. Later, I cannot articulate my guilt to you

but I try. If we have a child, who will raise her? These trees
surround us on three sides. The river takes the fourth.

Tell me you believe our bodies together make a jar
that can hold light. Tell me you believe in love without leaving.
Winter without an underside of bruises.

The first snow of autumn falls and my heart crosses
the river in the black mouth of a crow. Praise the sorrow
-clogged throat. Praise this chain of howls
that rips across the mountainside.

I reach in the churning belly
of the oil drum stove and pull out the baby
you've been dreaming of.

Not how the silo stood but what it became after the fire

Mother, girl. No, mother. She's running through. Or is that you?
It's just before daybreak. You can hear men
crowing. No—roosters crowing in the rotted
coop by the barn that will burn down in less
than a year. Or was it a decade? The cement silo ring
will be the only thing left
standing. The fly is trapped between the storm
window and the outer glass. She has on a nightgown. No,
this must be a dream or a movie or lie. No one really wears nightgowns.
She's crowing, by which I mean crying. Or laughing. Who can really tell?
My grandparents are meeting for the first time. Grandma, a child, offers him a fly.
I mean a stick of gum. *I will have the marriage I imagined.* He locks a girl
in a bathroom with a clawfoot tub. The fly is caught between your skin
and fat. Between your tongue and your teeth. She's running. She's dressed in white
or rust or blame. You turn a corner in the alley, a man materializes. I mean really—
it feels like he was hiding between the panes of air. He says, *Don't run.*
They always run. You're running through. You're lying. *You better kill me*
before I kill you. You made it up. Her dress is muddied.
Her hands are muddied. Your eyes are clear. Your teeth are crowded
and ready and even though you don't say much now,
later you will be the woman who won't stop speaking and laughing and nagging
and fucking. I have a box of hands and dolls heads. He steps closer. She raises
the cast-iron skillet. No, she raises only daughters. She's crying. He's crying.
His head between his hands, he says to me, *I can't keep up.* She's a mother, a daughter,
a sister. Your niece. They always run. She's dragging a doll by its wrist. It is your doll
or your grandmother's doll or your grandmother. Its head knocks
against the baseboard and you're reminded of the cow pasture. The night he kicked in
the back door. The night she woke with your scream in her mouth
and reached for a baseball bat. The night her father drove her, you, no,
the daughter who wasn't born, to the abortion clinic in Brooklyn
because it was illegal where you lived then. You're in the cow pasture, barefoot
in the snow, where he threw all of your belongings. Years later, he laughs
at you, *Gender isn't a fucking construct.* And spits into a bucket. It runs, you
run. My mother was, I am seventeen; he says, *I will knock your teeth*
from your head. Like snow, they'll fall. My sister's belongings tossed into a winter
pasture. A knock on the door in the night. You know the sound
of a doll head, a woman's head, against his curled hands, against a floorboard,
against a hammer. Stop it. This isn't the story you're supposed to tell,
or it isn't your story to tell, or you've told it enough. Which is it, then? *Enough.*

Not enough. There is a fly between these words. A fly caught
in my eye socket. I can't seem to run fast enough. My teeth, my mouth,
are so muddied. All this fucking, by which I mean confessing. I have a box
of his spit. There is a pasture and a cement ring that was left
after a fire and I can't think
of a better way to tell you this. I have a box of her
hair. She's not dressed in white. She is not a gown or a bride
or a doll. She's not anything. He came out of the air. He reached for me.
He swung at her skull. He drove her in the night. He flung
the hatchet. He was just a boy. There are stories without monsters,
stories without morals. How do you know if I'm lying? How will you know
if it is a laugh or a howl that escapes her
mouth after she feasts on survival like a wolf over the bowels
of the stomach that opened readily beneath
this hunger? I have a box of flies. Some are dead,
but some are quite alive.

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