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No Invented Mystery

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No Invented Mystery

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF FINE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Blake Love

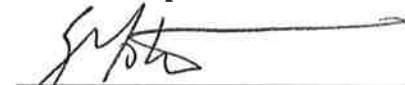
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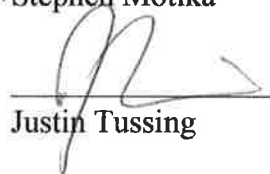
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2015

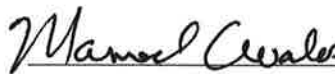
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Blake Love entitled *No Invented Mystery* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.


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Debra Marquart


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Stephen Motika


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Accepted

 Dean, College of Arts and Humanities, and Social Sciences
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Abstract

This collection of poems is comprised of many recollected experiences that are personally revealing about me, both as poet and person. I often explore the dynamics of domesticity between queer men and detail the dissolution of coming together with another. Laughter as a means of subverting or avoiding trauma is a theme that runs throughout my thesis. It is intended to be read like one might view a mosaic. The narrative threads tie together by its end to tell a story that speaks to a sense of abjection and otherness many of us carry. To temper the intensity of the personal pieces, there are poems that focus more simply on place, on the physical world around us and its function in human growth. These poems focus on natural processes, with an awe for systems that function outside the scope of human control. They are intended to add an element of balance to the autobiographical pieces and play an important role in providing a composite portrait of existence. Life can be both vexing and beautiful, sometimes simultaneously and I intended for these poems to speak to that paradox. Throughout my thesis there are stark places of memory and elegy and spaces for simpler poems that evince praise and joy. This mixture of both elements is a fair composite of how I see life now and where I am at in my development as a poet.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to so many people who have helped me in the process of completing this thesis. I would first like to thank my mentors in order: Alexandra Oliver, Theodore Deppe, Stephen Motika and Debra Marquart. Each of you have been instrumental in making me a stronger poet. Alex provided much needed concision, with her knowledge and knack for metrical poetry. Ted pushed me to continue writing the piece, “A History of Laughter,” which in so many ways became the touchstone for shaping the other poems in my thesis. He taught me much about how to inroads into my process. Stephen is a masterful and worthy critic. He encouraged me to continue finding new ways of telling the stories I want to tell. Working with Deb has been such a pleasure. Her insight and critique into my work are incomparable. She brought such a diligent knowledge of structure, motif and meaning to this last stage of graduate school.

I would also like thank my fellow Stonecoasters and the friends that I have made while here. You all know who you are. In particular, I would like to thank my fellow poets at Stonecoast. Lauren M. Davis and I have had every workshop together since we began and I think that I would be remiss if I didn’t state that it’s been inspiring to watch her work grow and evolve alongside my own. Heather and Troy have provided much needed critique and encouragement. To all the poets I have worked with or just enjoyed being around while at Stonecoast, I am grateful for you.

As always, I want to thank my supportive friends who listen to me talk far too much. One of my soulmates Sam told me the other day, “You talk more than anyone I have ever met.” I know this. I want to acknowledge all of you for listening to me. Lastly, I’d like to thank every errant lover for the writing material and inspiration.

Table of Contents

Preface	1
I: Searching Sepia Scrubland for an Escape	
Our Exodus	13
Some Survival Strategies in the Wild	15
The Rape Scarf	19
A Garden Party Past Midnight	22
Punk Rawk Rosa Lee	23
Portrait of Mother with Child	27
No Invented Mystery	30
II: A Hard Heat in My Hands	
Just Measures	32
A Sucker For It	33
Hanauma Bay	34
A Vow	36
The Math Boys	38
Return Me to the Water	40
It's Me of this Furniture	42
A History of Laughter	44
III: What We Have is Ours	
For a Friend Who Urges Me to Write	
Something Happy	49
Unearthing His Loss	50
Fresh Flowers and Fruit	52
Termplate Conversation with a Married Friend	53
Say a Prayer to the Stars	54
An Atheist's Christmas	56
Winter Hymnal	58
Those <i>Remember When</i> Years	60
For Men who Love Men	62

Preface

As I sit at my dining room table putting the last touches on my poetry thesis, I feel as if a world of time has passed—far greater, it seems, than the actual two years that have elapsed since I applied to the Stonecoast MFA Program. The transformation in my writing feels whole. I see that my work retains the same sensibilities in terms of subject matter and the types of narrative styles that I employ. I still love a good yarn as a poet and a reader. However, some essential shift has occurred regarding the ways in which I access the material for the poems I want to write. My process of poem generation has changed, and my methods of revision have been refined.

My critical eye is also sharper and more discerning. One thing I enjoy most is that I have learned to trust my own judgment. I can recall several points in the process of drafting and revising a poem for workshop, when I have read a line of my work and had the thought that a mentor or colleague will probably say to excise it. In some cases, I have left the line in, just to see if my internal editing compass is true. Most of the time it is. I feel the poems in this thesis reflect a sensibility, an aesthetic confidence, and a sense of voice that is uniquely my own.

There's something extremely satisfying in the feeling of seeing one's own voice emerging on the page. If I think about the last two years, I can see several pivotal moments that brought me to this place in my growth as a writer. After applying to Stonecoast, I was immediately nervous after the reality of my acceptance had sunk in. I wanted to go to grad school. It wasn't my first try nor my second. However, when I was accepted, Stonecoast was my first choice. After my elation wore off, I realized I was actually going to have to get on a plane and travel 3,000 miles to Maine (a completely new landscape to me) and begin working on my goals. I know

nerves are to be expected when an abstract dream meets the possibility of reality. Preparing my first workshop submissions on the other side of the country, Portland, Oregon, I wondered what the people would be like and where we'd stay. Would I like my fellow poets? Seriously, what if everyone turned out to be cold or unaccepting or unfriendly? I imagine these thoughts run through everyone's mind, and then I wondered if because I am a queer man, if I don't think of it too much. I mean, there are people in the world that hate queer people. I have met them. Those people aren't a part of my daily life but they existed. They thankfully don't generally populate academic settings, but it crossed my mind.

More importantly, I was worried about my writing, my poetry, and why I was here. I was curious to hear what people had to say about the quality of my poems but also to see how they would react to its content. So, as a developing writer I was not only worried about what all emerging writers worry about—the quality of my work—but I also worried about how it would be received. If this naked confession hasn't revealed my candid nature, than I am not doing my job. If I were asked to describe the style of my poems I would say they reflect honest depictions of my life and the people I have known--not true or accurate historical representations of life, but unsparing portraits of people in my life. I don't call the work confessional, but it definitely shares a slice of my inner world. In the past, this unflinching directness has made others uncomfortable, especially with my poems about gay sex or relationships gone wrong or something equally personal. I won't say that it didn't please me a little to see people squirm when

reading my poems, but by coming to graduate school I was looking for honest responses and insights into how to make my work better.

So I began my MFA with this mixed cocktail of emotions: trepidations about how my work would be received and a determination to write the work that I felt (and still feel) is important to me as a poet. Thinking back on the work I have written, I feel so at ease about sending it out into the world—or, in this case, sending it into the hands of mentors and other people who will invariably ask to read it. I no longer feel hesitant about its content or what it might delineate or reveal about me as a poet or person. This is largely due to the environment that Stonecoast fosters.

During my first residency, I had to take an initial course that focused on metric poetry, the concise rhythms and patterns of poetry. I was terrible at it initially, struggling to name the stressed and unstressed syllables of words and suss out by ear whether a poem was trochaic or iambic. Both workshop facilitators, Cait Johnson and Alexandra Oliver, instilled time and again the idea that being “right” was not as important as developing an ear for rhythms and understanding the process by which we come to find our particular words.

In essence, the curriculum was designed to help the beginning poets understand more fully their own intentions as poets. This idea of exploration has pervaded the program, from residency to semester. Looking back, I was met with nothing but encouragement to fulfill my writerly intentions. In a huge house full of writers, oddly, I found Stonecoast wasn't a competitive environment, but rather a place that fostered my growth. I know the world is competitive enough, so it helped to have this time to hone my craft and really explore my inner ear and the choices that I was making as a poet

One of the utmost lessons I learned while a graduate student is that my commitment to fully exploring, realizing and exhibiting my poetic ideals is in the messy process of simply writing and rewriting and sharing. It seems simple and it's not a huge epiphany but I realized that much of the growth comes from simply doing the work. I know I will continue to discipline myself in this way. Being relieved of the concern about how the work will be perceived for its content has freed me up, just as I've been freed up from worrying too much about how expertly the work itself is rendered. Becoming a writer means learning to become comfortable with taking risks and making oneself vulnerable. Instead of questioning whether the personal nature of my work is too telling, I am concerned now with what I consider a more important endeavor—are the technical choices I'm making on the page adding up to the vision I have in my mind.

Several key events and happenings transpired while working on my thesis that culminated into a new understanding of my work and my visions. The first is most likely the simplest—the power of encountering the work of influential authors while learning to write one's own poems. The first poet who comes to mind is Adrienne Rich's work. I knew who Rich was before I began the Stonecoast program, but upon reencountering her while doing research for my 3rd semester project I discovered something different in Rich's work. I read *The Dream of a Common Language* and *Diving into the Wreck* and felt enlightened by the books in a way that I hadn't realized in the past. Perhaps I was too young to really absorb Rich's power as poet the first time around, but this time I was a believer.

Rich herself was an extremely polemic figure in late 20th century American poetry and even as a reader now, I don't necessarily agree with her strident philosophy of radical feminism. However, what struck me about Rich's work was that its beauty was in part due to Rich's fearless plunge into the content of her work which sometimes makes the rendering of the work inscrutable. It feels so technically taut and terse, her voice so insistent, that the power and logic of its urgings is difficult to deny. As a reader, I could feel that her essence as a human and as a writer were in her poetry. There is nothing left unexplored in her work. Far from confessional, Rich's deep honesty is a form of empowerment. Reading the poems, I felt empowered as a reader and poet. I was especially taken by a line from poem 19 from a cycle of love poems aptly titled "Twenty-One Love Poems" (except there are twenty two) from *The Dream of a Common Language*. Rich writes:

two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness,
the slow-picked, halting traverse of a pitch
where the fiercest attention becomes routine
—look at the faces of those who have chosen it (12-18)

This section is highlighted in my copy of the text for a reason. I think its expressive, openly defiant tone speaks to Rich's bravery as a writer. She will not hold back from discussing the realities of her inner life and world. Her unapologetic stance in stating "two women together is a work/ nothing in civilization has made simple" is a powerful statement to read as a queer writer, especially as I considered the intimate aspects of my own life for material for my poems. In a strange way, I felt honored that Rich was honest

enough to share with the world this close portrait of herself. This is the power of language and ultimately what we seek to do as creators and artists; we want to touch and assuage others with words that convey our ideas.

I was also very much fascinated by Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" which deconstructs and then reconstructs identity through the lens of personal-mythology versus that of those myths handed down through antiquity. Rich imagines in her poem that the quest for a female identity outside of western constructs is like a diver searching for a shipwreck. Rich states "I came to explore the wreck./ The words are purposes./ The words are maps." (52-54). These lines find Rich's speaker as the sole means to discovering the origins of herself through language and the written word. She emancipates herself from history and declares that language is the elemental path back to recreating our identities outside of patriarchal structures, or "the wreck." She ends the poem with the telling lines:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear (87-94)

Rich essentially asserts the idea that for those of us whom have been effectively left out of the history books (women and sexual, racial, ethnic and religious minorities) in western civilization, have the necessary task of reinventing our collective mythology (and personae). This idea influenced how far I was willing to go to explore my own interior scape. If I am going to get anywhere with my work, it has to be through demonstrating

the kind of bravery Rich does in hers. If I can learn to demonstrate my craft and technique as deftly and cleanly as her, I'll have it made.

There are two important occasions while at Stonecoast that come to my mind when I think now of my creative process. The first seems rather simple, but was still a powerful moment. My third semester mentor, Stephen Motika, made the following comment on one of my poems: "This seems to point to abjection but does not explore it. I want to know where the sense of the abject stems from." I had honestly never thought of or seen my work in this light. I had to look up the word "abjection," not because I didn't know the word, but to be exactly clear what my mentor meant. I found myself turning the word and its definition over and over in my brain. What was it about my work that spoke of being cast off? I came to understand that my work was linked by a theme that I hadn't consciously explored. I knew I was writing personal poems, poems from memory, from darkly comic places in my mind but never realized that what threaded the through-narrative of my poems was the presence of otherness, the outsider's P.O.V. This informed the way in which I thought about how to tell my story and share that perspective that I think has cultural and poetic value. To share an inner reality is what motivates me to write. This concept might not be completely original in its scope but this personal revelation certainly opened up new compartments in my consciousness.

The other concept that worked its way into my writing practice is liminality or interstitial works of writing. I first encountered the word "liminal" when a graduating student presented on the subject in summer of 2013, my first residency. She was heavily citing the work of Anne Carson's *Portrait in Red*, as an example of a liminal text. For her

it straddled or defied classification as poetry or prose. I read the book, coincidentally some months before as a friend had recommended me to it, so I took a special interest in this presentation and began to think about what it meant to be neither or both of a thing at one time.

I thought about it even more after Deb Marquart presented a seminar on interstitial writing, forms of micro-fiction, non-traditional poetry. She spoke of the idea of a literary DMZ or demilitarized zone, one where much like global DMZ's allow for flora and fauna to grow wild—perhaps creativity rebounds in the in-between spaces in our consciousness. I began to wonder if a new inroad into my work may be accessed through leaving behind labels of genre. This caused me to think about the forms of my poems and whether anything in my work represented liminal spaces. Were these personal poems in-between any other more established structures?

Upon rumination, I have come to understand a new facet of my creativity. That is, I believe that the appearance of “abjection” in my work is a necessary reminder of the interstitial space and place that I occupy as a person and as a writer. I would like to state here, that my work as of now is still very much “poetry” with regard to its form. It is free-verse and fairly narrative with strong lyrical leanings. I wouldn't categorize it as occupying a writing DMZ. However, what I want to represent in my work is intersectionality of human lives, of the ones I have known from first and secondhand experience. I believe the composite “I” in this threaded narrative of poems presented, is often speaking from transitory spaces of existence. Part of my mission as a poet is to occupy the role of deviant historian. These poems speak to the strange and interloping

spaces we find ourselves in as humans. If there is a sense of the abject in my work it is most certainly present because of this concept of not belonging here, or there, but somewhere undefined between either delineated side. My wish is that I have brought a space for these concepts to exist in my poetry.

Lastly, I would like to discuss a dichotomy that is strong in the poems I present in this thesis. There are the aforementioned personal poems, poems of love gone wrong, or rough-lived lives. Poems that hurt a little bit for me to have written and especially to think of reading, but I will. Those comprise a large portion of the pages here. Then there are poems that I feel occupy a more meditative space. I am hesitant to call them “nature” poems, but I feel they exist as a means to exult in the natural world. “Winter Hymnal” is meant to act as a foil to the more personal pieces that recall psychic pain, with its final lines stating:

Let nubs of moss sprout
again in window sills:

promising the bloom
of a nascent world

These lines speak symbolically to life’s continual renewal whether we stop to observe it or not. My intentional tone is to suggest that we are in better stead if we do. Despite time’s destruction of our vision of life, there is still promise of gradual evolution towards new realizations as we age. The concept of continual rebirth links to the poems in this thesis that focus on our natural environment. The passages that imagine the heavens, that detail flora, examine animal behavior, and glimpse the underwater world of coral reefs propose that through awe and observation of the natural world, the individual is released from the entrapments of personal strife.

The concept of “playing dead” as a means of surviving sexual assault is present in both “The Rape Scarf” and “A History of Laughter.” This is not accidental. These pieces are intended to highlight this specific trauma. When contrasted with the poem, “Some Survival Strategies in the Wild,” wherein three different species of Animalia that feign death for different purposes are described, there is a correlation to the human state of abjection. In my thesis, the speaker’s reason for apparent death is meant to be compared to similar behaviors of animals that feign death for their own means. Linking human action to the instinctual world of animals complements a reality present in the poems of a personal nature here; we do what we do sometimes merely to get by.

The picture of domesticity presented in “A History of Laughter” or “The Math Boys” is an unsparing look at queer relationship dynamics and domestic discord. The lines, “Love is blow and booze/ fucking atop cages/ at the San Francisco Zoo,” from, “A History of Laughter,” are most certainly among the most dysfunctional, yet personally revealing that I have written. I set out to write a version of events in my life that offered an unflinching snapshot. I needed the catharsis. I would say that I achieved this.

More importantly, I set up a space in my thesis that needed to be filled by the piece, “For Men Who Love Men.” It speaks to the inchoate world that love creates between two men when first discovering the other, that fragile time when each word exchanged feels ripe with what could be. The last three lines of the poem state, “we vow/ to no longer live/ for violence.” These lines occur to me as among the most hopeful of my thesis. They operate in contrast to the starker elements of violence present in “A History of Laughter.” I needed to ensure that my thesis focused on the human

capacity to rejoin and to exalt in the world, especially love between men because I think it can be too rare.

It is extremely important for me to present the complexity of life. It certainly has its hardship and its pain, but we also exist in a world which has great beauty and joy. Having several laconic praise poems interspersed throughout a collection of close-hitting pieces has a thematic and practical purpose. These poems operate to provide an antithesis to some of the harder truths that other pieces in my thesis present.

These collected pages are my poetic offerings of extremes: poems that recall trauma and poems that speak to its release. The natural world, which has been unnecessarily disabused from the psyche's quest for personal truth, can offer a means of liberation from the entrapments of the past. The natural world's abjection from the individual's quest for meaning is mirrored in the thematic otherness that threads through this narrative. It is my hope that I am on my way to finding the voice that allows me to illuminate these interconnections in a poetic and salient way.

I:

Searching the Sepia Scrubland for an Escape

Our Exodus

We were dirty

raised drinking
copper aqueduct
water daily

We learned to survive

desert searching
sepia scrubland
for an escape

We loved atomic sunsets

Juniper burnt
for tinder backlit
Joshua trees

We needed to see past

San Andreas
water towers
rusting in sun

We wanted Los Angeles

its gridded lights
blooming beyond
blight

We knew in predawn

light a purpling
bruise's ache
at sunrise

We vowed to forget

gravel laughter
trucking by
as we fell

We were tender

to scraped
fleshy hills
one hand
on wheel

We left the desert

sudden rains
flooding dried
valley washes
We knew we'd never
be here again
Mojave wind
howling within
We have forgotten
our way back
long roads lined
by expiring poppies

Some Survival Strategies in the Wild

1.
the unsung
talents
of the Virginia
possum
cannot go
unconsidered

its gray
and ratty
body wouldn't win
any beauty
contests

but in talent
this mammal
excels by
drawing back
lips revealing

yellow tusk-
teeth emerging
from a maw
made of tricupsid
molars
warning

the agitated
possum foams
frothy ribbons
from swollen
gums
decay wafting
from its rear
fills the air

a practiced
actor
able to fool
onlookers
into believing
its death

receives no
laughter
nor applause
wards off
a would-be
predator
reward enough

2.
a male
Nursery Web
spider feigns death
during sex games
first offering
his arachnid
queen candy
trinkets

her eyes
on the prize
his pedipalps
seeking the tender
nethers of her
sinking in
he begins
to mate

she is about
to eat his head
off
fed up
with his bad
bedside moves

when his back
legs slide
her present away
expectations
extended
after
providing

dinner

mid-hump
he's holding
onto her
as she walks away
exhausted
he continues
to mount her
he's doubled
chances
of getting off

3.

lounging
in eelgrass
in Lake Malawi
the Sleeper cichlid
doesn't swim
with popular
fish until
dinner time

crashing the party
and passing out
its mottled body
slowly
sifting to a muddy
bottom
appears dead

but an open throat
coated
with spiny teeth
patiently wait
for a nosy dinner
guest
a Rock fish

flitting into
open jaws
unsuspecting

Sleeper
snaps awake
swallows
his guest
whole
dinner is
served cold

The Rape Scarf

He leaves
a black scarf
entangled in
upturned blue chairs
you find it
in bruised
morning light

cycling through
slivers of night
his hands
on your throat
a throttle-rhythm
unstopping part
of him

a world
without oxygen
ethers out
and it's easy
to play dead
until he's done

you don't
call police
you won't
answer questions
you make a call
to a friend
laughing after
you say
I got raped
She stops listening
says *you're sick*

you keep
the knitted thing
bundled in a closet
name it
rape scarf
chuckling over
an inside joke
no one
could know

You pack
it in a box
with other odds
and ends
move it
up California coast
stuffed away
forgotten
until a lover
who loves
going through drawers
pulls it from a pile
drapes it around
his neck
asking *how*
do I look?

you giggle
suggest a drink
walk seven blocks
for a beer
arm in arm
stop him
saying *my rapist*
wore that

his eyes
flash violent
black-green below
furrowed brow
rips it from his body
a poison snake
throws your hand

screams
you're sick

the rape scarf
floats lonely
lands in broken
limbs of acacia trees
for all the world
to see

A Garden Party Past Midnight

Steady when pressed chest
to chest against men thinned
in the backlight of the day's
last hurrah. Tonight I
could be anyone, hidden
by limbs of Judas
trees. Jacaranda
and the smell
of manufactured
violets

on my skin
worn by nearness
by hands grating
like thorns

as each honey-sweet piece
is given over. All stars
above are spilt
brilliance
but I know the void
of light. No constellations

to name.
July's heat smears
the night's face. The men
grind in the garden.
I imagine heaven,
calculate distance.

Punk Rawk Rosa Lee

I want to ask
you now
if your days
are spent
looking out the dirty window

as tumbleweeds collect
in bunches against
the chain link fence

I remember

not the truth
but your spine
seeking escape
as it ridged
through taut skin

bird-boned
a mother
might say
if she
were there

your coarse black hair
shining blue in the sun
and you
tinged gray at the temples
from sweat and dye

eyes floating
above sinuous shoulders
and the flat chest of a young girl

even after birthing the baby
that you rarely spoke of
 given
 or taken away
to a wide-smiling white couple
who owned their stucco house
 behind gates
that shut your world
of sparse apartments out

Later you fell
in love
with a wheelchair-bound
 redheaded man

He hit you
even before that night
his broken body flew
 through air
escaping
the burning wreck
 that matched the moon

You'd smile
through cracked lips
Not an easy beauty

 lined
 inside with pride
 to shield the bone
in bruising times
You'd show up with swollen eyes
 cash and his car keys
 a minor victory

We'd score a fifth and roll some weed
get high and dream
of who we would be
somewhere someday
beyond the unpeopled suburban streets

You were an older
mama bird
twisting joints
before driving us drunk
to K's liquor store
to score one more
bottle
and later we'd end up
lying on your scrubby carpet
staring at something cliché
like a Sid and Nancy poster
or those tacked-on
glow-in-the-dark stars

I asked you once
how many times he had to hit you
before you realized
you lived in a split-level
could walk up
three steps
away from a man bound
to his seat

You pulled from the closet
a blue shoebox
hidden from view
by a stained chenille spread

inside
a fetal part of you

cradled glimpses
of the girl who drew
encephalitic Tweety Birds
and scavenged a photo of her mother at prom
 a brown woman
with a scrap
 of pink blossom
at a throat

the sheet
of yellowed notebook paper
 proclaiming
 your self-
Punk Rawk Rosa Lee!

Something in your wide
eyes the look
 of an expectant
 child

I bit my lips
said you misspelled
rock laughing

Portrait of Mother with Child

My mother never owned
the inside space in me
where I was formed

I am a product of her
twenty one and overwhelmed
with my sister and I

She learned quickly
while looking for a man
how to call us at home

We put ourselves to bed
by the time I am ten
I am newborn grownup

We grow up lonely
learning to lie for each other
mouths sewn shut

I take up chain smoking
shooting whiskey as a teen
mother fingered her rosary beads

a kid the neighbors run from
scattering away from where
I am gay in cars and alleyways

Just a boy bleating
for his mama
knowing she won't come

I wore a red stain of desire

around my neck
drunk in empty fields

Years later I flee
she doesn't blink when I run off
with a new buck

Her taut mouth says
she's already dead
I climb into his white car leaving

Free from the sticky-
handed trap of family
that left my mother sad

Years have silvered window sills
I'm old enough now
to be a father

Holding onto solitude
like a stone in my mouth
made harder year after year

In summer's gloaming
neighbor kids scrawl hearts
pink chalk on heated pavement

I cradle my lit cigarette
shielding their innocence
as I pass them

From the words I use
to decorate my kin
I've made a life of silence

Easier to write this

pointing to our stucco house
but not naming it

I have no map back
marking the spot where
the dishes she threw landed

All I wanted was release
from the last cotton candy light
fading in those desert days

No Invented Mystery

I want to be
the slow engine
that kneads skin,
the book that turns
its own pages,
sweet as a stretching
field of lily petals.

Instead, I lisp vodka-words
through a clenched jaw,
truth slicing through
my lips. Loud mouth
open, laughing at
people softly sipping
at life's cup.

No invented
mystery, unknowable
to myself, I am the dis-
believer who wants
into heaven. I cut
my knees when
kneeling to pray.

II:

A Hard Heat In My Hands

Just Measures

He was

that first drag off a cigarette,
the swoon and dive of your gut.
You know you'll be back. Even if
the thirst
is slaked, it returns stronger.

The grin he gave
glimpsed a hatred
you held
for enemies. He was

that time-worn song
that makes you turn off the radio,
the tune in your goddamned
head for ten years already.

Like flossing and awkward first dates,
we take the torments we take in this life.
There's a reason you have to,
but nobody
really wants to know why?

A Sucker for It

You move
in close
Your jaw
in the nape
of my neck
as you say
You're beautiful
I shuffle breath
A sucker
for sweetness
A hard heat
in my hands
cool as I come

*Just how
many men
has it been?
you ask
with a tongue
touching lips
nipples and navel
I fumble through
my monologue:
You're different.
I'll love you better
than the million men
who came
before me.*

Hanauma Bay

The tide claims
a fingernail of shore,
the ocean seeking home.

Daylight breaks
into slivered minnows. Parrot fish
flit by with fins fanning
bubbles that burst
above us.

We become
the limbs of jellies,
the porous pumice,
floating through slick grapple
of sea kelp. Your hands
are white whale bone
against coral; a backdrop
of bunched stone blossoms
for your fingers
to slip through, as I
examine the emptiness
of the anemone, tentacles
folded in.

You are some saline
master. I am full of splash
and scrape, slicing
my knuckle
on Basalt. My blood
inks out in ribbons.

We surface.
You touch me,
the gash pulses with heat.
Millions of water
microbes bubble through
my split skin.

I pull away from you,
swimming to a black lip
of obsidian.

I point towards
a green sea turtle
that's tucked its claws
to its side, resting
on the shadowed floor.

The curve of its mottled
beak and speckled head
suggest it's imperious.

Blinking shrewd oil-drop
eyes, it swiftly swims away,
trusting neither of us.

A Vow

I promise him the itch of my ring
finger won't quit.

Despite what those other men
with pecs and abs and obvious
beauty have said.

I do want all of it:

His drugs and his money.

I'll give him my dulcet voice
which is better by candlelight
than under fluorescents, though
we found ourselves here.

I vow to not become
his father, a ball-buster
or that dowdy old uncle,
the unshaken bachelor.

In return I want what makes him,
not the sex or the double dog
dare fuck you, but the breath
that brings him
on Sunday mornings
belting it out in the shower
while I cut the flesh from the fruit
in the kitchen.

I'll keep us safe
in this old suitcase, your leather
valise stowed behind
ornaments of years
and wrapping of the past.
My promise is to let us view
ourselves as we used to be,
at birthdays and Christmastime.

Believe me when I say
I do, I do, I do.

The Math Boys

Your guests are at the door, ringing
once. Joan owns the T.V. screen,
vamps her shop girl hauteur,
rolls heavy-lidded eyes
as the men I call *the Math Boys*
enter. They're linear thinkers,
and the one I've dubbed *Bones*
is the one you bedded years
before me. I call his husband
Turtle on the sly. He is all teeth
and beak. You've told me *be nice*
tonight. I can see that on the streets
they'd like to pass as only friends
as sure as Joan is draped in forties fur,
pouring herself a gin. I follow her lead,
cocktail in hand, ready for an evening
with well-behaved men.

Turtle offers up dip and sips softly
at a beer. He taps his gold band
against the bottle. They never hold
hands or kiss in front of us. This stays
with me through dinner, a meal served
between brittle cakes of conversation over
sports or must-see T.V. Joan angles
her skin so the light can love it. Her
smile doubles as sneer, while wincing
under a man with the squarest jaw.
Her broad shoulders make the scene,
as you ask me to join the conversation.
I press my lips when Turtle refers
to *Bones* as his husband, unable
to suppress the vision of his meekness
fumbling with buttons and buckles

on their wedding night.

Joan Ohs in anguish. You rove over
Bone's body. Turtle says to me *we've never
argued in five years*. I tell him that they
must be very bored. I expect you to laugh
but you don't. You used to cackle
at my best Mildred Pierce.

Now you slam down your hand,
flash me a warning
with technicolor-bright eyes, turning
off the T.V. Joan would slap
the strong-jawed man,
flee in her Packard, the heroine.
I am an unredeemable character.
Our audience dislikes me.

Turtle won't meet my eyes. Bones
says *we should go*. Somewhere Joan
is wrecking her car and bleeding
black as the camera pans a close-up
on her big beautiful mouth
that says *Seeya later fellas*.
I end this scene with smoke fuming
from my cigarette, exiting.

Return Me to the Water

The day breaks with one task:
he must wash last night away.
Last night's passion was a mask
and his true self arrived today.

The long plunge into each other
was an unexpected surprise.
The rinse of water provides him cover
for a need he wants to sterilize.

Swiftly jumping into the shower
the faucet proclaims a change:
last night's pleasure has now soured,
the imprint of my touch estranged.

Through the film of soap and glass,
he appears pink and lean.
As water turns from liquid to gas
he furiously scrubs his skin clean.

I am naked and unbathed,
harboring a sex that's poison.
He blooms rosy and unscathed
while I emit a lust that's brazen.

His body lifts a mesh of mist
clinging to the face of things.
In steam we are given this gift:
No sight. I see him as unseen.

I imagine him unlined and open
before the years brought him shame,
a man who wouldn't hide what's broken
beneath the soaked and shaggy frame.

I catch his eyes through the spray
as he watches me, a former lover.
His being in a body displayed
begging, *Return me to the water.*

It's Me or this Furniture

As he makes himself dinner,
the furniture
mocks me.

The silhouettes
that darken against cream walls
are like wounded men at war.

The mocha couch demands
sit, the snide
sides
of a future home.

He's baking chicken,
which I don't eat.

Says he hates
the Brussel sprouts
I've brought
in a brown bag.

I ask him if he's named
the straight-backed
beige chairs.

He says *They're chairs*.

I ask if taupe
is his favorite color, imagining
my own faux

Tiffany lamp, it's ladylike
colored glass implying
a fragility absent here.

I look for a way to make
music fill spaces
of uneven conversation,
matching the sparsely
covered walls.

He tells me
he writes
in a crawl space closet
where he keeps a desk.
I wrap myself in a red wool
blanket, suddenly cold
in his confined spaces.
There's a rug the shade
of his apple-green eyes.
It whispers
that it knows a secret
or two.

He pulls a no-bake
cheesecake from the fridge,
made to his taste,
slams the oven door
closed. The chicken
looks leathery and worn
on the faded Formica.
I tell the heater *It's hot as hell in here,*
open the door, inviting in
frigid October air.
He wants to know who
I am talking to.
Nobody.
Sitting down he sighs,
says *talk*
to me,
already.

A History of Laughter

I. I always do
what I'm told
not to

14 and smoking weed with Ryan.
He slips his lizard tongue in my mouth.
I know then I'll always want
men's attention. I let a closeted queen
feel me up at the movies, age 15.

I can't be shamed by the boys at school,
by fists or in name. They tell Principal Wheeler
that I suck cock in the parking lot of the Taco Hut
for cheese fries. His cross and chain stretch
against his red neck
when he tells me
he's a believer.

Nighttime, crawling into the drained
pools of abandoned houses,
I stare at stars. My friends get high
and fuck beside me. I laugh,
knowing how to cover up need.

II. He leaves bruises where
his lips have been

Michael is 23 when I'm 17. He waits
until I'm legal and takes me
home. He teaches me to wave
goodbye without saying it.
I leave for L.A without words,
knowing I'll never be back.

I'm 20 and wild to fuck myself
worthwhile. I find out I'm funny
when I make the men
I obsess over
laugh

asking *what kind of sex*
isn't casual? I get an answer,
smiling afterwards,
telling a friend how
to play dead
for violent men.
She doesn't think it's funny,
watching the stain of his fingerprints
spread across my skin.

III. Love is blow and booze
fucking atop cages
at the San Francisco Zoo

Always ready to twist life
into a joke
I meet a man who makes me laugh
with his Cheshire grin.
He is a keeper
of wild animals. He doesn't
want to keep me as much as tame
me. He cannot succeed,
so he leaves me
as I go from bar to bar in good shoes
with no money.

The next man
buys me a drink
at the sound of my laughter.
I take him home to play

and when we fuck, the gods stop to smile.
Otherwise, we fight.

He breaks two of my ribs, the day
he slams me to the ground. I beat the shit
out of him
and pack away a bottle of pills
with a fifth of vodka. In the ride to the hospital,
I charm the EMT's, cross-legged and joking
in the back of the ambulance.

The taste of charcoal
in my teeth for weeks.

IV. I told him
 don't leave
 a message.
 I'll never be
 home again.

We run away
to Portland.
Two more
years,
of ruined dinners,
laughed away,
while trashed.
My hands
are blood red
from wringing them.

It wasn't funny.

I leave him,
the last broom
broken over

my back.

V. My mother laughs
when I say
I'm a born-
again virgin

I chain smoke through
evening phone calls
with her. I don't eat
dinner. I wait

for the familiarity
of nighttime, weaving
my way through
dense fog

coalescing, alone in my
good shoes carrying
unspoken truths:

these footfalls in darkness,
a call to all comedians.

III:

What We Have is Ours

For a Friend Who Urges Me to Write Something Happy

My mouth was not made
to dot the world with lilac-
perfumed words.

Have I already failed?

I'm not literary-
male enough. I knew this early
when I couldn't be quiet
because I meant to be loud.

Tell me how to feel
what I am:

an angry, young
(but not that young)
gay man.

I want to disobey
your right-sided truth.

I'll waste no time rhyming
your recognized sensibilities.

If I were to write you
a lullaby

you'd like me better
at parties. I'd bleat
softer, owning less.

I'll be the closed fist
against your mortgage-
flat-screen-TV-life,

living mine in poverty
is an armament. You think

I ache endlessly,
demanding that I

Smile!

flashes popping off,
shouting

But you're so pretty

Unearthing His Loss

Remnants left behind
found here
in a closet:
grade school report cards,
the extra buttons for the green
sweater I gave him,
a birthday card with a Blue Jay
from years ago.

He may
remember to want
the letters from me,
expanding from then to here,
easy paper declarations,
the stills of his chilled
pale skin, startled eyes alive
beneath the canopy
of Californian redwood.
His age gauged
by a progression
of tattoos in photos.

I kept
his orange underwear
and a red shag rug.
The paltry losses
we leave to ex-lovers,
the breadcrumbs
of forest faery tales.
They offer
no entry back
into the former
selves we've been.

I believe in
the ritual return
of memory
into smoke.

Imagining a secret
seaside ceremony
full of fire,

I wrap these leftover
pieces into plastic,
hiding them again.

They are not mine to burn.

Fresh Flowers and Fruit

These purple
petaled flowers

brighten the kitchen
vased next to an empty

bowl molded
into a concave

hollowed shape
to hold the apple's flesh

I wonder what fruit wants
because I belong to myself

until my wooden skin
accepts your warmth

scented by blooming
edges of iris folding

like our pith
after we have eaten

nothing left but
a rind to be discarded

Template Phone Conversation with a Married Friend

*I get by
just fine.*

She mumbles
a used apology.
I ask about Baby,
who takes
more time than anyone

I've never met.
I am
a deviant historian.
She has
forgotten every
remember when
telling me *aging is different*
when you're gay.

I offer memories
of her shower-vibrato
in bathroom steam,
the summer gray
mornings when I shaved
in the nude light.
She goes
quiet then
promises to sing
for me
sometime.

Say a Prayer to the Stars

Kneel, first.

Feel distance,
how your limbs
numb in gravity's
press.

Solicit a star's
sympathy, asking
why anything?

Ancestral act:
tomes filled
with celestial light,
described as dead
or dying
or newly lit.

In this space
we escape
our dailies,
consumed
by a memory
both beautiful
and not.

Stargazing
lessens
the elemental
weight in being.
We are not
heavy when we
are nothing
to a star.

The constellation

are not fixed
but on loan
from a greater
unknown god.
Just lights
to cling to
on a clear night.

An Atheist's Christmas

Forget fusty
nativity scenes
and fruitcakes.

This year,
let's do it up
atheist style!

Leave your manger
in the attic,
bring
brandy,
play me Elvis's
Christmastime
blues repeatedly!

We'll be merry
and gay
and when you hear
your mother say
that Christ
was born on this day
you won't scoff
at that soft fact.

Forget the half-
baked grace
of years past.
Amen.

We'll bless
the misfit toys,
square-peg
girls and strange boys.

Let them fill

the stained windows
of churches
with His blood.
We have
already given
ours over
to the world.

No brimstone
or hearth burns
in our pagan
home, as we
brace our blackened
hearts for
glowing noel.

Winter Hymnal

Outside the wet windows,
a gray plaster cast

sky hangs while the wind
will not cease crying

through the sparse
branches of oak and alder.

January displays
its bite in breaths.

Nighttime is exhausted
by its long reach. Freezing

rain thrashes human
trash and scraps

into the sediment-rich
Willamette River. Cumulo-

nimbus gauzes over stars,
leaving light to the moon

and the alley tom
yowls out, not heard

but felt through walls,
demanding a return

to the infrared warmth
of summer's tender

tipped tulips. The lilac blush
of Oregon Iris waits

to ring plum-deep
leaves of Japanese maple.

Let nubs of moss sprout
again in window sills:

promising the bloom
of a nascent world.

Those *Remember When* Years

I.

The women that I loved
in those *remember when* years,
didn't labor over what it meant
to be feminine.

They wanted men.

So did I.

Days spent spinning
on *boys*

that we'd only known
them fully grown.

We counted on bitten
fingertips

the times we'd been called
crazy, finishing off a bottle
of whiskey or wine.

In rooms, rolled bills on misty
mirrors, tables littered with butts,
we were slovenly and lovely.

We lived to begin
under the plum veil of night,
holding hands as we rushed
the drunken bluster, hungry.

Made of slow smiles,
easily invited home, looking
for our kind; not the baby-makers
or breadwinners back home.

We wanted the artist-as-portrait-
of-an-addict-types. We found them
everywhere: lining the dark bars,
cable cars, clubs, bus stops.

We were educated in shotgun
apartments on nights that started
off sweet and ended

with calls to the police.

II.

In different

dark bars that look

the same, I see

these women

once

or twice a year now.

We fidget with

swizzle sticks in stiff drinks,

explaining what went wrong

with the last one,

laughing at how

we didn't know better,

didn't want the breadwinner

that we admit *might be nice*.

We're cagey naming new men now;

they're not boys

but people

whom we owe nothing

and do not know

when we go home

alone to our houses, wash our faces,

remembering to moisturize

under tired eyes. Rituals

of preservation replace

endless nights

made of red dresses

and purple cha cha heels.

We retire to our beds,

laying naked with a desire

that cannot be undressed.

For Men who Love Men

No labels
to name
this press
of lust

what we have
is ours
making
one another
new

your soft
shelled palm
cresting
my naked

body
leads back
to unknown

otherness
youth spent
barren
who we
once were
in their world

here I
slide my
tongue
through forever

we vow
to no longer live

for violence.

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