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## i am still holding your hand

Sophie Glessner

*Western Washington University*

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i am still holding your hand

sophie glessner



*for taz  
even though you cannot read  
i love you so much*



## table of contents

flood waters	1
windmill song	2
memory of you who i used to like	3
the voices of the new world	4
from the moon,	5
tree we used to climb	6
451	7
creature-of-habit	8
later hero	9
lucky	10
beach song (for me)	11
mad	12
spaghetti on the wall	13
enforcer	14
kid with fur coat –	15
strawberry soda	16
in this moment, we are climbing	17
mated pair	18
one-hour commute	19
letter to the solemn	20
marriage is the recognized union of two people in a personal relationship	21
575	22
how i felt when i saw your instagram post:	23
six feet	24
tender i	25
pie'd pears	26
tender ii	27
again:	28
tender iii	29
you, left	30
tender iv	31
could've been you	32
tender v	33
before i forget, the cat	34
tender vi	35
408	36
acknowledgements	37



## **flood waters**

i was born into this world squalling.  
summer storm, what's left of blizzard.

the flood waters subside with my existence,  
the flood waters claim me first with their filth,  
the flood waters like eyes.

do you hear me? the flood cries.

numb to an inherited burden,  
i mumbled and bubbled and lanced to new, precarious heights.

watering eyes of storm infant,  
she who pulls the river over its banks.  
she who pours the water back.

illustrious epithets – i drown them  
with my wet snotty squawking.

i have catfish in my smile 'cause i wanted a taste and they waited for teeth.  
i have foundation in my chest 'cause they built an elementary school on me.  
i have water in my knees 'cause my reminder is one to pray.  
i have silt in my eyes –

where the flood hooked its liquid fingers.



## windmill song

if the sun knows you – as entity, as space-holder, as star-grasper – if the sun knows you  
and you, you're listening, it may shine bright enough summon a sound wave into  
crust earth light forcible enough, light brute strength enough to kick the solar-powered  
windmills into full attention so stretch out your arms, palms up and needing like sundays  
taught you, the loveliest gospel, and yell *i'm listening sun! fucking hit me!* continue  
to listen quietly for at least twenty-four hours – it may take a slight rotation of the  
planet for your plea to reach the fringes of the corona

if the sun knows you – and it does know you, back to front and from the days  
when it still had arms, to hold you and to hold the baby and to hold the tools for the  
garden the sun had hands to wash dirt from dwarf carrots and potatoes if the sun  
knows you, and that you're listening he will fill in the gaps of what he remembers  
in the windmill song, in slipping rise and fall, in glissando continue to listen quietly

when the sun knows you – as crackled kitchen radio and socked feet on linoleum as the  
whole solar system mobile – when the flared light catches your palms calling for  
someone should've been long forgotten when the sun knows you are listening he will  
send down his chicken pot pie recipe from first marriage year to the windmill song –  
carrots and peas and chicken cold butter cut into flour for crust rolled out on the same  
studded table.

**memory of you who i used to like**

after school position,  
butts half on grass half on side  
walk

*mama had a baby and its head popped off!*

flick. flick. flick.  
yellow smeared thick into thumbnail

*you can eat the heads, you know.*

dripping color  
saturated sunshine going

*no you can't.*

chlorine green  
when i look to your eyes

*yes, you can. check for bugs.*

i check for bugs and pop  
that blonde head in  
my mouth

### **the voices of the new world**

i sat on the bathroom counter, nose to nose with myself,  
pressed to the mirror,  
going cross-eyed. with the angels  
and demons resting on my spread knees,  
i contemplated the universe growing  
in the whirring  
fan above my head and  
how it would end as soon as i unstuck  
myself from the granite,  
hit the switch, went to bed. the voices  
of the new world are passed behind my hair.  
they sound like crumpled tissue paper,  
suede in reverse,  
hymns pressed between sheets  
of stained glass. in the imprint of my breath  
i could almost see the colors.

**from the moon,**

she is a diagonal line across a folding white rectangle. from a lean against the french doors, she's a body on wrinkling sheets. carefully held, pressed into the bed like a flower. she dragged herself here, through the rooted dirt, and let her spotted limbs crumble into the mess left from a drunk fuck ten months ago.

my husband gave birth to a tree with his hands tied behind his back. in the weeks leading up to the labor we built a wall out of broken stones. when his hands were finally tied, i was trapped in our brickwork. the lines on my palms bled rivers as our daughter let out her first wails. she was gone when the wall came down.

once a year, whenever we are still missing, she says *hello. i am your daughter and i am so happy to meet you.* but we are never there to listen. and she never stays.

## **tree we used to climb**

now it's bark eating my palms. gnawing and scratching and scarring moss into my knees. i climbed this tree to watch you drown yourself. followed your slumping footprints in the snow, drug out into parallel lines. deep channels like the furrow of your brow. watched you limp to the river, watched you mimic the rushing ice floes, dance with your fleeting hands.

you're stripping on the banks. down, down to something shriveled. i clutch the tree harder. pine bleeds new wounds into my hands. the thought crosses my mind, *oh finally my stigmata to match*. i am the shaking witness as you give yourself a second baptism

in a frozen fucking river. as my blood runs down the tree you are not swept away. you emerge but you are not reborn. shivering naked mess wavering hip-deep in river. i'll be falling from our tree. i must know if my red hands will warm you.

451

my brothers become  
my birds  
bones hollowed out  
meanwhile i hold wings hold  
suffering for them  
birds, swan-skin-stuck  
birds, precious pricking at time  
me / me / me  
sweetly mute with hands  
from a painting, fucking kings with cheeks  
like unbloomed roses, having babies  
doll-like and waxy. eating  
my children  
birds / birds / birds  
flying

## **creature-of-habit**

creature-of-habit wants  
to eat cornmeal mush  
every november.

miss snow on the ground,  
grown tall to reach naked trees,  
when are you getting married?  
again, miss snow –  
the trees in their glittering years  
fanged and looming.

creature-of-habit takes  
memory of morning's sizzle  
for a joyride.

snatching the sun from overplains and cracking  
him into the pan with eggs.  
knock kickstand from engine revving  
star-tipped fire into stove.  
let sun sit oiled-warm for a while. only  
the hardest yolks for baby brother.

creature-of-habit transubstantiates  
so every bite careening heavy to tongue  
is grandpa, actually.

dog snuffles back inside,  
miss snow all along her nose –  
unmarried and newly toothed –  
dog's sent upstairs for mama as  
we'd just yelp at fever to fevered pitch  
waiting for everyone to come to table  
miss snow melts.

creature-of-habit whistles  
tuneless to the left  
something like a hymnal.

## **later hero**

one who is not  
angel but wears the halo.

one who kissed the sailor goodbye. anchored  
intangible concept of love  
at base of skull.

curve visible only when electric  
blue bolts shoot around haloed head.

flashbang purity.



## **lucky**

my fingers,  
spindly as they are, can still rip  
to your eggshell blue eyes.  
they rumble and roll on my palm  
like clouded marbles until  
i tip them into the dirt like the lilies i left on your future grave. i am ill –  
*sick!* –  
with my need for you to die.  
so i am coming for your  
regrown eyes  
with my x-acto knife.

### **beach song (for me)**

reached out on a monday,  
met shelby at the beach  
house. something good and gorgeous  
grease-lined and pulling at guitar strings  
on the porch. *snap*  
conch i gathered  
shatters the wall. *snap*  
she tells me this song will sample  
a backfiring engine. *snap*  
neck twists until it breaks and i,  
too, welcomed it.

next monday shelby  
at the beach house.  
i hadn't moved dead  
on the blue-sanded porch. she  
sat next to me and slapped the guitar,  
something good and gorgeous,  
something like she missed me.

**mad**

doubled-down  
on the insides of my mired  
thoughts. ingrained twice  
by blood, the reveling  
of my offal  
and the burnt light of my  
single iris.

## spaghetti on the wall

i.

MY FATHER, 1997: / what's it like to be / what you lost? / madlibs it for me. / claw an ember of emotion to the surface. / let me share it with you / like we share our windburnt and rosy cheeks, / our broad shoulders, / and our loud fucking laughs.

ii.

where the tattoo gun goes, / the needle reach, / the part of you that never goes away / underskin even after the vicious breakup. / EARLIER: you thought / a tattoo would be okay / if it wasn't their name. / *flowers are safe, / right?* / NOW: white lilies / are for the dead, / dumbass.

iii.

take notes: / ... / i think the islands are drunk / kids who took naps. / filled their lungs with seawater. / the slope of their spines, / hills. / ... / beautiful awkward joy / ... / sad thoughts time!!! / ... / i am not a scientist, / i can't teach you / about metabolism.

iv.

MY FATHER, 2019: / i want to pull you aside and ask if i'm the bitch you thought i'd be.

v.

the soul emerges. / so, in your case, it's nothing but goop, / mold on its way down / to grey fluff / on communion wafers. / you think you are suffering incarnate, don't you? / jesus-wannabe. / stop eating your idols.

vi.

the dreams. / most involve tactical maneuvers and failing to save someone. / the fucked up part of healing magic is that you can't use it on yourself.

vii.

MY FATHER, 2027: / is this when you surpass him? i suppose / i will be catching up. / once your competitor / is in the ground it's only a. / only a matter of fucking time / until you pass them / too.

**enforcer**

he steps from corpse  
to corpse, smoothing  
his hands over their blue-filmed faces and holding closed  
eyes in his palms. footsteps  
strike in the hall.  
he quickens his pace, closing eyes and opening mouths. too slow!  
the family walks in, hand in hand in hand  
in blue-filmed hand.

**kid with fur coat –**

too much weight on his shoulders. by day,  
he wears a slapped backwards ballcap and mans  
the counter at the gas station. at night,

he shakes out his hair and pulls on  
a shimmer dress  
the fur coat  
an alter ego.

she performs at the quietest venue on party street, her skin  
dip-dyed rainbow under the lights.

## strawberry soda

stillframe only movement  
is the flakes. like. you're walking  
but the flakes are the stars and they know it.  
they don't touch you directly –  
you repelling the reach, you inherently furnace –  
but they are sucking lit matches from the air and pumping the space with blue cold. pops  
in the fat of your cheeks, juice drawn to  
surface of a greening cherry, enough for the implication of red.  
once you make it to school, the pink has settled itself in.

artificial and it feels! so! good! stopping  
at the valley dairy and spending two dollars on strawberry soda.  
something you drink on the way home to add to the snapping cold. cause  
you like the way the bubbles tumble up your nose –  
feels like a secret when you pass saint mary's, first  
playground then chapel –  
the way bubbles burst so bright they ache your sinuses, flash at your eyes enough  
sizzle to ensure they stay open. your depression  
is the blues. they tug this pink to purple.  
magenta. newborn and wrinkled.

snowmountains doze between you  
and the road. you're not supposed to touch them but still you make a grave. the body  
identified by the way its existence melted  
a pile. meted out an indication of life passed. head green  
and dark like fir branches; body plasticized; the pink remains three drops of itself:  
little acidic drillholes where eyes and mouth should be  
drips from this syurped ocean.

## **in this moment, we are climbing**

into a wine bottle, all but drained. different from our other bottled vices, this one has no sugared crust. lacks the sentience in the syrups by the coffee machine sealing themselves up. i curl my fingers over this sterility but when your hand lands next to mine i flinch. it ungrounds me, just for a minute. (do you remember when the apartment was new and the shag rug was a forest? do you remember getting lost in the blueness? do you remember the stalks that would break off with our movement, imprinting and clinging to my sweaty thighs for days? do you remember?) i stick my hand on top of yours, crush us both to glass so we know how the fruit flies feel. we go over the edge together, slide down the walls like yellow yolks, like flushed cheeks, like the heavy lunglost breaths that follow. we're in it now, the curve of the glass belling into a turtleshell island in an infant sea of sauvignon blanc. we wash each other by reaching out. scrub up to our ears, hear the wine rush in and out of our bodies, hear the wine saying grace. pour over ourselves until we are standing again, ankle-deep in spirits and reaching for worship. (i don't remember if we drank this wine before dunking ourselves in. you say *of course we didn't*. you have lied to me so many times before, remember? i am still holding your hand, fruit flies gasping hot between our palms.)



**mated pair**

chord pulses feel like wings –  
expanding  
in slow motion. she slaps out  
the bassline,  
her wife takes flight.

twenty minute migration  
to kitchen and back. tripping

into bedroom on the balls of her feet  
gold-trimmed feathers catching splinters on door frame, she drops  
plate to bedspread.

runs her palm over still  
plucking fingers of the musician.

she flies out the window.

## one-hour commute

window cracked before sleeping and now the chill creeps in. numbness pinches my hands so i stain the tips of my fingers red under the hot water spout. molten comfort in this water and these hands and this sink. hear his truck splitting the frosted gravel as he pulls up outside. early today. safety pin keeping my jeans cinched nicely around the waist pops open. still climb inside the cab, keep the needle in my red hand, wait. when he wants to hold my hand over the gearshift my needle pricks his palm. how to say: *not feeling it today*. still smears his blood on the steering wheel, cracks his neck to the echo. i apologize to empty space. how to say: *it's not you. my body goes back and forth*. my voice is too loud and fast in the tunneling cold of the cab. i miss the hot water in my sink.

## letter to the solemn

i have grown / to miss you. / silk-soft hands / spiderwebbing my / skin. me, and you used  
/ to lilac me / with the best intentions. / you drew me, / my laden stars and their waste, / to the  
surface. / algae on lake galaxy on body. / that was you. or / i have seen clearly / your second  
coming. //

when you were here you would not / stop stoppering my airflow //

face to sky / i will see eyes. / watered-down wishes from primary school. they / they  
waver at me, / on the brink of / their night-hewn blackness. / in their murk i / can't see you or /  
your rhododendron eyes. / this / this is the second coming.

**marriage is the recognized union of two people in a personal relationship**

the claws of your gauntlets are sharp enough to slit throat – i saw it happen, you capable murderer. you are my protector but when i strip off your gloves to kiss your wrists – lips around bone, pulling violets with tongue – your hands are just as clawed. knuckles as burst capillaries, nails as grasping needles. you intend to protect me by slicing me open and consuming my heart. meal not to digest but to have and to hold in your chest, to strap to your own beating, to forge soulmates. slit throat, my white lilies pour out.

fine. you can have me.            here, i'll offer it up.

575

oh i heard  
he bought them from an angel  
who was settling down  
    wife and kids  
    no more wings and ink spill gloss  
selling part of himself.

the prince received them with the blood still on,  
with the rave glitter and melted gold ribbon.  
he doesn't clean them –  
    maybe he doesn't know how –  
or maybe he likes  
being pulled down  
in the still  
air.

**how i felt when i saw your instagram post:**

*for my bitchass little brother*

pushing you off  
the couch was easy –  
we were lions wild  
and kicking  
at afternoon suns.

we all dug claws  
into corduroy lining all  
worked up in our greasy  
disgust for human sandwiches.

we attacked pillow  
rabbits and their whisper-fur –  
a meal shared between  
three starving cubs.

our sister despaired  
at the slop of your jaw,  
at your mess, at your red  
and ravenous pride.

does the blocked-up grocery  
sell afternoon suns ‘cause  
we don’t sit  
on the same couch anymore.

i am a modern lion,  
teeth stuck in my lips with  
grief weeping from wound.

i am a statued lion,  
begging you to land on  
your sister’s back

one last time land  
solid –  
rock in your chest,  
hat on your head.

## **six feet**

when you finally get to bury  
    your best friend,  
do you know how much his coffin suit cost?  
haven't seen him in person in years.  
would he shell out now  
so you remember him beautifully?

there are fields beyond these stones  
where you ran together  
and made sure the tall grass rashed your knees.  
he used to imagine white horses.  
serene in how he'd lift you  
wanted to be good for you –  
the very best of friends to you.

he died never having kissed you but  
he's wearing this nice suit.  
so pucker up for the wax, baby.

he will cling to your lips for days and climb over to new lovers  
and after you think  
the suit wasn't expensive  
and it wasn't for you  
    not you, you rotten thing, no  
the suit was for the worms.

## **tender i**

i let you cook in the same kitchen to make you trust me. this – an instance of peeling potatoes, or when you offered to crush the garlic and i said “no i’ll do it”, or that time you set an apple slice against my mouth and just waited (waited for me to part my lips so my breath could drop onto your fingers just once, “just once” you told me) – this is me showing you my belly. this is my trust. a sign that says: STAB HERE. TENDER MEAT FOR DINNER. but you, gutless and still holding the knife, you lack courage. you’ll never stab.



## **pie pears**

pie in glass stein  
pear smashed down / heel of palm pressed  
worn-soft lil sugars put up no resistance  
to this insistence  
near existent is starch-crust  
laced with cinnamon spice  
spice staccatoing on edges  
spice of your tongue  
full body experience / sliced crushed  
pear pie      pear pie      pear pie  
full mouth experience / sugar and spice waltzed  
cinnamon in here  
makes you miss /  
miss makes of you  
too young – you eat pie  
you wait up for pie  
you clamber counters for pie  
and yet  
glass cold by beer  
refreshing infinites / dilute to boot  
almost want the sickled cream  
to melt into pied pears

## tender ii

oh, dumplings? i've helped make those, *remember*. me rolling out wrappers into lopsided shapes, little wannabe circles, 2D dented moons. you scooping filling with your sliced fingers. your nails were devilred that time, a holdover from halloween. still dancing around and between each other after *that night*, still waiting to finish boiling, to reach proper temperature. putting down newspaper to catch our coming mistakes while the woman we're both in love with watches the stove.

**again:**

you came to the halloween party i held inside my head.  
kicked back with me on grandma's floral couch  
– the one we burned after she died.

no one wants to buy a dead grandma couch.

are you dressed as my whiplash? you have the same  
spontaneity, the potential energy of a loom strung too tight.  
are you my whiplash?

pumpkin lit from within offers a jacked smile.  
a little askew, just like me. we swoop a comforter up over our knees  
– must be the one my mom threw out.

touching a motel in every state across the continental u.s.  
i can't imagine.

pumpkin light sneaks through the threadbare quilt.  
you are lit from within. i see your floral skeleton.  
you are not my whiplash. you are my guest.

thank you for coming to my party.

**tender iii**

do we even talk when we get high at three am? or three pm for that matter. all i know is we make coffee every time. (and maybe there's a discussion there.) run caffeine machines, hospital cafeterias, corridors of endless blinking lights in our skulls. stand still, trees rooted in the hardwood of our grandparents, headaches building, as we wait for the beep across the house. the test you left on the bathroom counter complicates things – switching to decaf will really do a number on you, buddy.

**you, left**

we're still connected by our old  
tin cans. tried living on  
opposite sides of the country  
but the shoestring stretched.

you're in california  
and i don't know where you keep your washed-out  
can of peaches.  
only that i feel every time you roll  
over in your sleep. you

restless dreamer

always tugging me to the left in search of more warmth. two years  
after you left i got tired of my can rattling  
against the sugar bin  
and asked a surgeon to bury it in my  
spine.

let me know if it still rattles. i can't hear it anymore. just know  
it tilts me on my axis  
as i try to stop revolving around you.

**tender iv**

the hot chocolate lives in us. she makes it when i'm crying and you're working late. back to the lowlit stove, she wanders and works. i start my shaky orbit, bang my hip against the peninsula of counter and the fridge and the silverware drawer. watch her stir some magic in a pot as big as my head, watch her take the salt from my cheeks and swirl it in the mess. when she ladles it into our mugs, the cat winds between her legs, trips her up so muddy love drips down to the handle. my hands a little sweet as we wait for you.

**could've been you**

sews looping sequins  
to hem of the skirt

someone knocks on the back door

stomps down the stairs in corset, boxers, stilettos  
not much else

leans against the frame  
winks their half-face of makeup. neighbor boy  
stumbles back on the welcome mat

bristles folding under pressure  
staring, gaze stripping between  
makeup and lemon-yellow heels

neighbor boy stutters

back door slams in his face

**tender v**

it's me, you, and her. she goes out with her boyfriend of the month and we spend our time together on the couch. curled in our lonely corners – i'm trying to land these dried cranberries on your tongue but they keep sticking to my fingers. you say the ones that hit are the right kind of sour. i take this to mean a tempered note that twists but doesn't wrinkle. when the bag empties, your mouth and my hands match in their residual stick. their pale red stain. their ghosts of cranberries past.



## **before i forget, the cat**

coffee crawled into my mouth and left its ashy footprints all along.

right now it fetal curls on my tongue leaning  
on the dawn-wet trunk of car rain  
water resting in the moss traps      on the rocks.

it's calculating how to rip through the back of my skull and bite  
at my loose snakes  
scare them up into my gathered-bun-mess  
hiss them into sleeping with their siblings again.

coffee is doing its best as i  
press my thumbs into my cheekbones, press  
for bruises, wonder what explanation that

requires. we got rid of all the boxes from the move so i have no 'where' to put my hurt feelings.  
i just keep throwing them up      and eating them again.  
i am never hungry for anything else.

and, before i forget, the cat is acting strange.

he watches the rolling ladder in the library every night  
some haunting has itself at home, tendrilled in  
the wheels.

in addition: i am hosting the ghost.  
you know the where.

because i am always writing poems about holding  
a 'something' in my chest but,      really,      believe me  
there's always something      in that eaten expanse.

right now coffee, my snakes, and the cat's bug-eyed fear.

**tender vi**

the one time you were gone, so obviously you can't *remember*, she and i lived on the balcony.  
the one that holds itself up with peeling paint. the one older than any of us, and stronger too.  
(first confession: i did let her push me around a little. and kiss me near to the edge. and then she  
got chatty.) the more things she smokes but doesn't say the more i scrape green from the railing.  
flick it off my nails and into the grave of your old tomato plant – never quite gave us red. only a  
yellow that got sicker every week you stayed away. (second confession: i only tell you this  
because i saw the cat watching from the other side of the glass door. i was afraid he'd tell you  
first.)

**408**

maybe it's me, curled  
in the same ridges for eighteen-odd years  
or something to the effect of sisters held  
in bitter pith and flesh that yields to teeth  
and what he calls a grapefruit spoon.  
me, as ripe and unbearable  
me, as pulped and gorged

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