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### **Robot Girl**

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

ROBOT GIRL

submitted by

MADISON KANE 2020

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Science

2020

Advisor: Clare Rossini

Reader: Ciaran Berry

Reader: Hilary Wyss

Dedicated to the men who have pushed me down,  
and the women who helped me get back up.

### ***Robot Girl: Making Art Out of Battle Scars***

During the writing process for *Robot Girl*, I underwent a fair amount of self-evaluation. I reflected back on the aspects of my life that I find to be most essential to my identity. To begin, I am a Psychology and English double major at Trinity College, and I firmly believe that poetry and creative prose are just as important as scientific writing. For me, poetry is a powerful creative and emotional outlet where I am free to explore different facets of myself and how they developed. Over the course of writing these poems, I have learned to capture the realities behind my language. The expressive urge to get my emotions onto paper became a healing process for me. I can now step outside myself, look around, and come at each situation with a creative lens that is also colored with my psychological understanding.

When writing these poems, I was most inspired to draw from experiences that I believe were formative. Reading the works of Sharon Olds and Sylvia Plath were especially helpful, helping me gain the courage to write freely about traumatic moments in my life. To see Olds candidly talk about her broken marriage and Plath, in her mythic characters, address her battles with mental illness and abuse, I was able to write more sincerely about my own struggles. These women bared their wounds, and kept a blade on them by writing about their painful memories. By doing so, they showed me that I could do the same: to create art as well as to heal.

My prologue, *Robot Girl*, which is also the main title of my poetry thesis, rose from a prolonged battle of my childhood. This name is special to me, but it was not always a name I adored. When I was young, kids would call me “robot girl” because of my medical issues; “surgeons blades have ravaged my body— / my ears, down my back, / creating a catalog of stories / and battle scars.” I needed multiple pacemaker and spine surgeries that left me with scars and metal body parts, which were not appealing to my classmates; as I state in the poem,

their “curious faces go pale” as I became “a sideshow.” I will always understand the phrase, “kids can be cruel,” because I still hold those unkind memories close to my heart— can still be shaken by the insults and laughter I heard. However, years of self-doubt and evaluating my self worth have all led me to embrace my medical ailments as victories, to see the scars are my trophies. In this manuscript, I can now celebrate my past struggles as art. Moreover, I believe that my physical and emotional challenges in “Robot Girl” are representative of the speaker of many of these poems— not only those that rise from my life, but those based on the lives of other girls and women. Therefore, “Robot Girl” seemed to me a perfect title for this collection.

*Robot Girl* is separated into three sections each focusing one crucial aspects of my experience. The first section, “The Bog,” includes poems about the many relationships I have had with men in my life thus far. These poems describe the complexities of love and what it means to “get one's hopes up” only for love to be dismantled. “Your Black Heart” seem a crucial poem in the section. In it, I write that love does not “raise its arms and surrender”, instead, we trek on with the pain until we have nothing but a heart full of “shadows and memories.” After a heartbreak, there may be newfound love, described in the poem “What if our love is more than a spark?” when the speaker feels safe having the man “pulling [her] in tighter” towards his chest, knowing that she “never before would have allowed / [her] fingers to curl around [his] forearm.” The speakers of these poems also feel acutely the complexity of men’s motives. For example, in “Sleeping with a Friend” the speaker is daunted by rumors of how she “*spreads her legs for everyone*”; or in “India” the brunette speaker discovers her lover’s affair, based on the fact that he “loves girls with blonde hair more.” Each poem in this section creates a different tone and attitude toward the difficulties of women and love, the triumphs and struggles. Through the experiences documented in these poems, I’ve learned to feel compassion for others, while

maintaining my own emotional integrity. The narrative of the section makes clear, I hope, how I or any person, can come to terms with emotional intimacy.

The manuscript's second section, "Cocaine Daddy," was the one I found most challenging to write because society has taught people to keep mental illness private. However, I now know that if I were to follow this social dictum, I would be complicit in perpetuating the stigma behind mental illness, specifically addiction. My father has long struggled with substance abuse, including cocaine, as described in the poem "(Cocaine) Daddy." The form here is a letter-rant, an outpouring from the speaker, saying, "you stain our couch cushions / and bed pillows with the sickly colors of your / white powered delusions." This poem was difficult to write because it is in the voice of my mother, who wants to protect her children by asking my father to "clear out" when her children ask, "why daddy / slept on the couch, again." But of course, my father's realities were always close at hand. As I write in "Meddlesome Thursday," his addiction shadowed my coming of age: "my blood / the red of fertility / yours / of dissipation." In writing these poems, I came to see how talking about one's mental health, and one's family, is crucial to understanding the illness. I know firsthand the severity, shame, and pain that each member of the family endures when someone is suffering from substance abuse, and I wanted the poems to make those realities vivid in such details. This is a dark road and one that I'm still traveling. I do not want to bare all of my family's secrets to the world, but I hope that, shaped by poetic form, the stories get into the light and air— and that is saving.

The third and final section, "Girls and Women," focuses on a range of females— both real and imagined. Women can hurt one another as seen in the poem "Your Cruel Words," whose speaker is "nodding yes, / as [her] paranoia and panic fills up [her] eyes." In other poems, I wanted to explore the struggles women face on a regular basis, whether that be living up to social

expectations about our intelligence (“The Interview”), or dealing with crippling body standards (“Still Sick”). The anti-abortion counselor in “Proposed Abortion Ban” also shows the ability of women to face those who want to destroy our reproductive rights. Other poems here focus on specific women, including a close friend whose feelings of inadequacy led to her early death. “Mourning My Only Daughter,” is written from the voice of my friend Katherine’s mother; I wanted it to clarify who Katherine was, to bring alive her rebellious nature towards her mother and the world. As the poem states, Katherine’s mother now longs for what she once derided—“to nag her / about the six new piercings in one ear” and “the new tattoo on her lip that reads *cocks*, / just in time for Thanksgiving.” Women strive and dream of being more than who they are right now; the message underlying my poems is that we women are good enough as we are.

The manuscript includes one photograph for each of the three sections. The first, of a whale that beached on Martha’s Vineyard, accompanies the poem “The Fourth of July.” Torn apart by a shark, the image seems to me to resonate with the ways women can be abused by men and in the legal system. The second photograph is linked to “For Sale: Door Jamb with Child’s Heights” in the “Cocaine Daddy” section. Found in my childhood house, the door jamb refers both to the children whose lives were disrupted by my father’s substance abuse, as well as his repeated exits and returns throughout my childhood. The final photograph is of my late best friend Katherine, whose mother speaks in “Mourning My Only Daughter.” I will be honest: I included the photograph for sentimental reasons as I wanted to share the light and love that radiated off of Katherine to my readers.

I am grateful for the opportunity to write *Robot Girl* as I feel that I have found a deeper part of myself through the process. I am more understanding of who I am, and I feel that I have found the words to express that self. Knowing who I am and how to tell my story is a great

power that I have cultivated, one that not only supports my mental health but will hopefully touch individuals who are struggling with their own emotional challenges.



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## **Prologue**

## Robot Girl

With my premature fingers  
and a heart that ticked slow,  
I held onto my mother's breast tighter,  
my four pounds teasing out,  
my family's smiles.

Since then,  
surgeons' blades have ravaged my body—  
my ears, down my back,  
creating a catalog of stories  
and battle scars.

In school, I pull up my shirt  
at show and tell.  
Curious faces go pale.  
With metal heart and titanium spine,  
I'm a sideshow.

When my dad tells the deli cashier  
what my last surgery cost him,  
I know my worth, my burden.

I wear a cover up on the beach,  
work three jobs one summer,  
to pay for my car insurance,  
double major. I go on a date with a boy  
just to prove that I am justifiable. I have my value  
other than what doctors, rubberneckers,  
and insurance companies devalue.

In time I refuse  
to curtail my expense.  
I live lavishly with my language,  
make life out of poetry.  
I am a luxury, splurging words,  
spending poems.

## **The Bog**

## Sleeping with a Friend

I push the blankets down to my waist,  
exposing the sundress that, last night,  
I never took off.

I wonder what you're thinking  
as you sit in the spare twin bed across from mine,  
smiling at my tousled braids.

We didn't fuck.  
I stick my hand out to shield my eyes—  
warm sunlight gleams through the curtains.

My bra is tucked under a pillow—  
I took it off myself.  
You joke, "Did you dream of me?"

I know about the whispers of our "love affair."  
*She spreads her legs for everyone,*  
they say.

But you're a friend.  
It's midday, the noon sun blazes,  
and you let me sleep.

Just sleep.

## The Bog

I jump—  
 back and forth between men.  
 One on top of the other.  
     like leapfrog  
 with humping in the proud morning light.

A prince with a crown of gold  
 held my heart during the long disposable days,  
 nervous nights.  
 I wrap my webbed palm around his  
 creating a gel that sticks.  
     Then, we croak,  
     together.

I pull away toward a squire.  
 I taught him how our tongues can catch flies  
 and to bathe in the muck-filled marshes.  
     *Why do we need to stick?*  
 I splash away, barely hanging on to  
 a nearby lily pad,  
 my soft mattress caging my mercurial desire.

On a nearby summering lily pad lives a joker.  
     His laugh is full, hearty-  
     no croaks.  
 He doesn't suffocate the bog,  
 with a quivering croak or  
     narcissistic thigh.

The prince's pledge-day is coming.  
     The squire's family is here.  
 But the joker is playing me now,  
     as, like leapfrog, I keep jumping  
     in circles.

**Back to You**

As I lie my head on his shoulder  
and we share simple kisses,  
pecking with an occasional  
slip of the tongue,

I think back to you.  
How you could never hold me  
as he does.  
How you never kissed me but  
that one night  
on my forehead,  
as I pretended to sleep  
on your parents' old, blue couch.

At the movies  
I'd cross my legs and flatten my skirt  
hoping you'd  
want to touch my pale thighs  
with your shaken, rough fingers,  
because you had the same dirty thoughts as I did.  
But we couldn't speak about them,  
couldn't act on them.

Now, I am with someone who makes me whole.  
But still, a missing sliver of me  
hopes for  
your dark words,  
your adventurous hands.



**What if our love is more than a spark?**

We're tangled together.  
As I shiver,  
you yank the comforter up,

giggle,  
pulling me in tighter,

as no one else would.

As we spoon together,  
your smile presses the back of my head.  
I feel a spark, a current  
leaping across synapses  
all the way to the ends  
of our toes.

Never before would I have allowed  
my fingers to curl around your forearm. Now  
I brace you against my chest,

so that we can fall together.

## Your Black Heart

When your heart pumps blood so fast, it seems to be running a marathon  
and your chest feels as if it might cave in,  
that's love.

As if your heart hasn't been through enough trauma,  
love makes sure that tough blooded cannot do  
the one simple task it is given.  
Love is not just an abyss of happiness, the sun burning so bright  
you feel the blush heating your cheeks,

Love is the boxer that never gives up,  
bashing your body and head until you writhe on the floor in pain.  
You rise time and time again,  
only for love to remind you that your place is on the earth beneath your feet.

Love is the winter chill that even the warmest of hearts cannot sustain.  
It circles through,  
leaving glaciers where happiness once thrived.

Love, the darkness spreading through your bones,  
blinding your orb sockets.

One does not have to be in company to bathe in love.  
And love does not just evaporate once the two-ness has decayed.  
Love doesn't just raise its arms and surrender—  
it's the lone soldier in the war,  
the warship that refused to sink.

And this is why "love is cruel"— why you feel as if it has left  
deep magenta bruises adorning your fragile skin.  
On the brink of utter emptiness, you  
nonetheless enjoy it.

Because you think you have no choice.  
You are weak, manipulated, yes. So captivated by the pretty glow  
and warmth that seems to rise from the hands of the lover,  
you cannot help yourself.

You are a fool.

And will continue to taste  
the bitterness that stains your mouth, chokes its way down your throat,  
poisoning your lungs and heart as it settles in your gut.

And still, you savor every minute of it.  
The destruction will be as beautiful as the way the sun paints the sky  
when the dark of night creeps in.  
You will bask in pain as if it were the only thing you have ever  
wanted and known.

But you will crumble,  
your petals will wither away, one by one. Piling up around your feet,  
light and pink--  
you will see them there, floaty and torn.

Too late  
you realize that you do not even know who you are. Too late, you will be  
lost in your labyrinth.

And your heart--  
your poor bruised heart, will be nothing but  
a blackened muscle, paralyzed. A haunted room of shadows and memories.

**India**

I only know you from the lake in Canada  
where our families had  
a cold summer stay at a cottage.  
But we are  
such different people now.  
Your name makes me sick.

My black hair doesn't match with your sun stained yellow.  
You love the wet smell of fish.  
I prefer spotted dogs, and you, sultry kittens,  
and you taught me how to drive the boat  
too close to the buoy. I almost gagged with fear.  
You grinned.

As I walk with him, you watch  
with caution.  
I understand why your smile doesn't reach  
your rounded ears and pointed nose.

I tuck myself on a couch,  
and overhear you tell your friends  
how you will always love girls with blonde hair more.

**Morning Thoughts for My Future Ex**

I won't forget you.  
The sheets still warm,  
The pillow, stained with your deep-sleep drool.  
My arms ache holding you.

The sheets, warm  
After you've left the bed.  
My arms ache, holding you.  
You are too much to bear.

After you've left the bed,  
I will lie there thinking.  
You are too much to bear.  
But this truth is too cruel to say aloud.

I will lie there thinking  
How I don't want you anymore.  
But I am too cruel to tell you.  
No one will replace you.

I don't want you anymore.  
My heart is overwhelmed, my brain jitters.  
No one will replace you.  
I will be better off alone.

My heart is overwhelmed. My brain jitters.  
I can't bear the weight of your love.  
I would be better off sad and alone.  
I'll say goodbye someday soon.

I can't handle the weight of you being my partner.  
I won't forget you.  
We'll say goodbye someday soon.  
The pillow is stained with your deep-sleep drool.

## Fourth of July

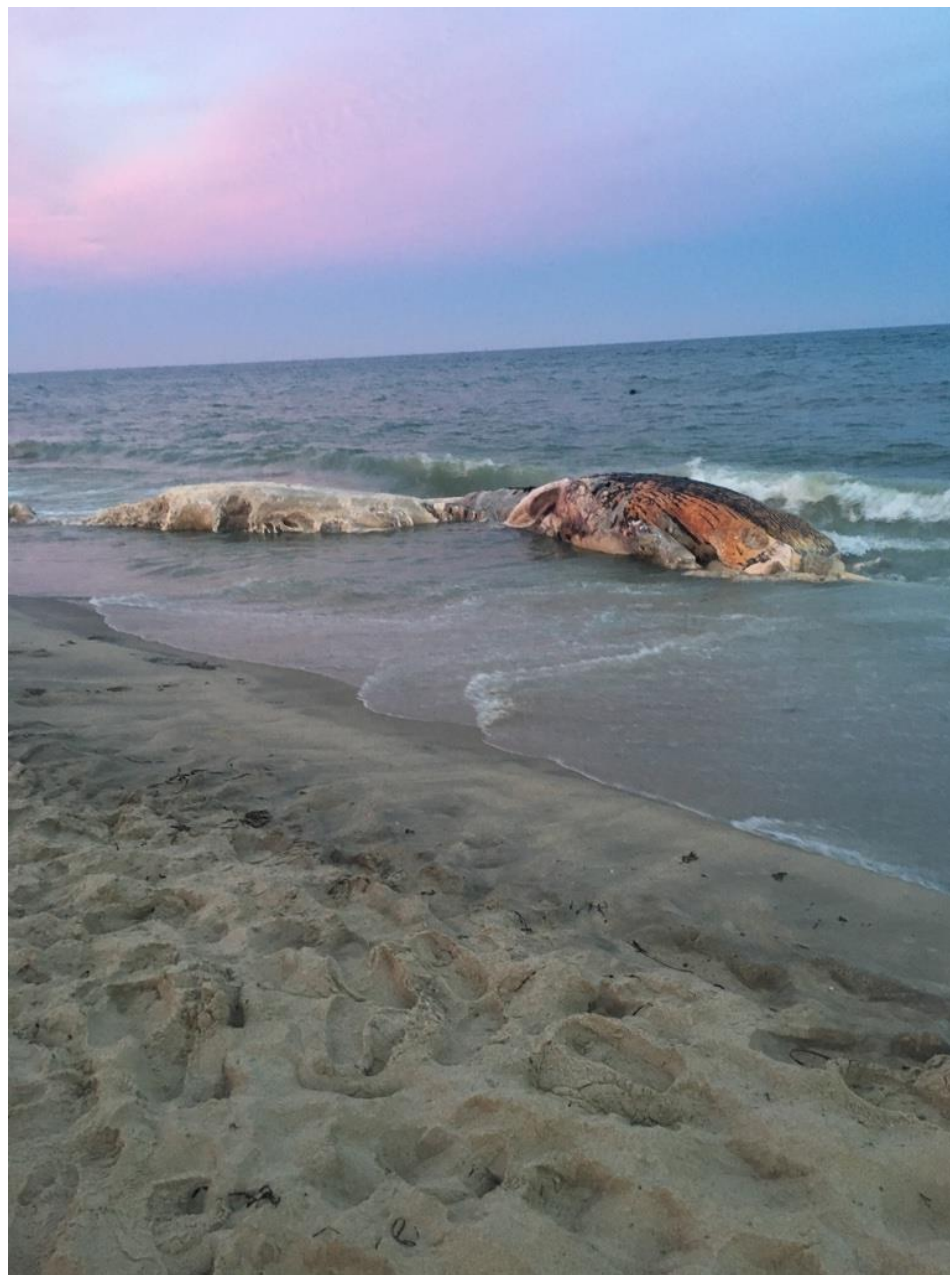
I walk up the shoreline.  
The sour smell of the dead whale wafts through the dusk air.  
People say sharks tore her apart.  
My nose clenches,  
I hold in my breath.

A flash  
lights up the sky,  
and colors rain down into the dark sea.  
Waves crash over the whale's blubber and bones  
as I get closer.

Another spray of color bursts  
and flickers down.  
I think of the party last night,  
the dim corner  
where boys circled girls— their eyes sharp and assessing.

As I look at the whale's hull, her dark shape, shivering, I see  
the boys close in.  
Their unwelcome hands at my waist,  
their drunken breath at my ear,  
someone's lips on my cheek.

I sit on my knees before the whale,  
the sand grinding into my shins.  
Another sky-burst glitters.  
Far off, a frenzy of boys, laughing and joking.  
One stalks toward me.



**Summer of 2006**

August, one of our last nights together.  
We're driving away from the "bad part of town,"  
and I turn the radio up,

your drunken eyes full as you stare at me.

Our voices mix when you reach across the dash.  
    With the curse of curves,  
you attentively touch my thigh, then settle on holding my hand.

Under the blinking red light we are still, inside the car,  
  
yet moving (how can a moment be still,  
fleeting?) I can see your mouth  
    moving animatedly with mine, with the music,

I continue driving, refusing to let go of your hand,  
  
as we get closer to your house,  
    further from mine.

We pass trimmed hedges and bronze mailboxes,  
the boulevards stretch into shadows.

The air cools around us with the windows down.

We pull up to your white fence that needs a fresh coat  
beside the worn tree swing,  
and when I shut off the engine, the radio song comes to a close.

We sit in the dark car together,  
    moonlight casting shadows under your eyes,  
(or is it the purple circles that match mine?)—

still holding hands, though our moment has flown by.



**(Cocaine) Daddy**

## Side Garage

My car bottoms out at the entrance to the driveway,  
I pull up close to the low hanging oak tree,  
    but not too close, as Ryan will yell at me  
    again,  
as he always does.

Julia says it's because he likes me.  
    I beg to differ.  
    She begs to differ my difference.

I hear a booming followed by dick-ridden curses  
as I climb the creaking wood steps, sticking to the right side so they  
    won't wobble too much.  
    A drunk would know.

Hurdles of stoners and cocaine addicts  
crowd around a beer splattered table.  
    I sit on the edge of the couch, holding my car keys,  
    waiting for friends to ask for a ride.

Mingling and waiting, turning down drinks, hits, and rips.

The night winds down. Kids fill up my car,  
    blasting pop music, swatting each other with play insults.

I take my nightly drive slow.  
    The air of the car becomes less sweaty,  
    the chatter dies away as each figure staggers up her front stairs.

I drive the streets, my car empty,  
    the pale moon scratching the sky.

I don't want to go home to my father.

**Meddlesome Thursday**

Every fourth Tuesday I  
would toss my white pants  
into the wash  
soaked down in bleach

hang the bright red  
dress with stars  
to glitter in the sun  
next to the pure white

I never thought  
about conceiving  
until sitting at the toilet  
folded tissue in my hand

Father, you too  
left blood in the toilet  
I would find it  
and blanch

my stomach  
shaking,  
the color  
like a glass of wine

my blood  
the red of fertility  
yours  
of dissipation

our mutual fear of change  
pushed revelations  
here—you tossed the pamphlets written for  
your liver's benefit

my youth in sickening descent  
like a bird  
careening to the ground  
a shot having torn its fractured wing

## **I Don't Apologize Enough**

Pin pricks cascade over me.

My fingers jump,  
then tremble for hours.  
My heart grows bigger  
as if it might burst with one more peck.  
But it won't stop expanding, taking on  
my whole weight,  
consuming.

Then it drops—

down, down.  
My head, nauseous  
from the craving.  
My body, teeming,  
willing me to speak,

but here's the problem:  
I've already told  
everyone nine times  
today how terribly  
sorry I am.

## Homewrecker

The kiss came out of nowhere. One minute she was on the other side of the coffee table engrossed in some gossip magazine. The next, she was kissing him, her hand clasped gently into the back of his hair, pressing softly in. She broke away from his lips: "I just had to do that." Fifteen years old, watching from the hall, I looked at his face. There wasn't outrage where it should have been. If anything, he had the same pompous grin he put on for expensive golf clubs and liqueurs. To her, the kiss was inconsequential, she would even laugh about it later with the girls, like his wife. They sat on the couch. I saw her straddling his lap with her gaudy yoga legs.

I closed my eyes and walked up the stairs quietly. My hand was pressed against my mouth to hold back my sobs. My little sister's faint snores echoed along the hallway walls as I tiptoed passed her bedroom. I crawled back into bed, I flipped off my bedside light, and stared up at the ceiling-- *Do I tell mom?*

## **You're Sad Sometimes**

One day, waking up  
your hands will be trembling  
as you look in the mirror and see bloodshot eyes.

Now you remember how it feels to cry so hard that you can't breathe.

When you finish— your face soaked, burning—  
you place your hand on your chest.  
When you feel the familiar thump-thump-thump,

you're not sure if you're relieved.

Later, your eyes seem burnt out stars.  
When your sister asks if you're okay,  
you don't say anything, afraid you'll breathe in too much air.

Your silence, enough answer.

You imagine your parents' nervous faces  
as they hear your sad songs through the paper thin walls.  
You want to call up your best friend

because her laughter was always funnier than the punchline.

You plead with yourself  
fingers pressed together in a church prayer  
and wonder whether He will respond this time. The weight hurts so bad,

but outside, the flowers are beginning to bloom  
and your best friend is ringing the phone across the room.

**(Cocaine) Daddy***For my mother*

## I.

The loud whispers of your strung-out goodnights haunt the air  
 when you crawl into bed beside me. A bit of drool  
 leaks from your lips. Your gums hold  
 rotting teeth. You kiss our children goodnight like this, me.  
 Maddie painted a box for Christmas, filled with tissues for all your  
 nose bleeds after a burn-out day at the office. You stain our couch cushions  
 and bed pillows with the sickly colors of your  
 white powdered delusions.  
 High, you exude energy with a fever dream mania,  
 then crash on the basement couch with  
 our daughter tucked under your heavy arms.  
 Your fingers tick faster on the keyboard, your words  
 flow away from you like a river surging toward  
 a dam. The water's immense weight pushes  
 against it. Damn me! Do not come back  
 with your dime bags left in the seams of your suits where  
 I'll find them come laundry day. Cut your pinky nails  
 and clear out the green lockbox in the bathroom.  
 I do not want to sleep with you, (Cocaine) Daddy, anymore.

## II.

little notes posted  
 scattered around the house  
 scolding me  
*do! go! drop off!*

around my computer—  
 pink, green, blue,  
 yellow stickies



on my whiteboard, printed  
in bold red marker  
in my daily planner, neatly inscribed  
in black pen

little notes posted  
organizing my thoughts

planning out my schedule  
and daily reminders

*garage sale!*  
*call the realtor*  
*need more coke*

imperatives, remonstrances posted  
constantly.

I keep  
checking off the bullets  
on my lists,  
my things to do,

distract, myself,  
avoiding

the haze of smoke  
and sweat seeping from the basement

the cold way  
we say *Hello*, you and I,  
the kids searching

for my arms, my touch  
asking why daddy  
slept on the couch, again

today I find  
another little note stuck  
on my bedside table  
in your clumsy

pencil—  
half-erased,

scratched out,  
begun again—

*I am going  
to leave for  
awhile—*

*stay tuned.*

## Bite My Tongue

Ever since we found your blood pooling in the toilet,  
a freshly poured glass of vodka on the tile floor, we knew  
this day was coming.

Around us,  
the tear-streaked faces,  
the whispers. *He died so young.*

We watched you spiral downward, watched your disease.  
drive the family away.

I stayed out past curfew to be away from the fighting.

When she heard you fall down the stairs another time,  
Sister cried.

Mother flushed a sullen crimson  
when you puked on a public sidewalk.

Now, we will take each piss memory  
and flush it away.  
Then be sure to scrub the bowl.

I rise from the front pew, move  
closer to your casket.

The white flowers, the soft words—  
*bullshit.*

I look at your photo. Then, because I am weak,  
close my eyes.

**For Sale: Door Jamb with Child's Heights**

Newly painted white walls,

clean white bedspreads— spread taut.

Decorative feather pillows fluffed and centered.

No deep impressions of where a father napped away his drunk afternoons.

A wooden desk covered in streaks of Wite-Out

where a child's crayons ran astray from the colored paper outline,

leaving a pale reminder of lost days.

White bathroom countertops, rubbed clean,

smelling faintly of lemon

No makeup marks or toothpaste spit strewn across a teenage girl's mirror.

Overhead, one sparkling white chandelier.

Vacuumed white carpets— footprints erased

the fibers leaning to the left like a yard freshly mowed.

No evidence of stains left by a puppy.

Flowers in a crystal vase

filled with white carnations and roses,

accented with a Grandma's favorite— lavender lilies and baby's breath.

No grey hairs stuck in the drains— clean pipes

in the fourth listed full bathroom.

No spare toothbrushes from visiting guests aligning the sink.

One white teddy bear squats on the couch.

No family photos

hanging on the newly painted white walls.



## **Girls and Women**

## The Good Girl

My anger is at a constant smolder.  
It's the four steps before a leap off a cliff  
a portrait hanging on a loose nail.

The fire never fully ignites.  
My feet stop short of the overhang  
while the nail fights the frame for another day.

The good girl keeps her hot poker  
resting in the fire's blue flames.  
But her hands hover, warm and ready.

When the night comes,  
she lifts it, the tip glowing,  
white hot.

## **We All Touch**

I once heard that everyone is six degrees of separation from each other  
and this unnerves me.

Woolf knew it as she unspooled her thread across London—  
the world truly is a small place.

We weave our string, watch as they overlap, tangle, and strain  
into a sticky web.

I'm stuck, my feet trapezing down each lattice, jumping around people  
because everyone is intertwined.

I want to paint the town white, wash out busy streets and dark alleyways.  
Make it blank.

Or stop my neighbors behind the fence or the clerk down the street  
and introduce myself innocently.

I don't want the burden of someone's tainted judgements pinning me to any bed  
but my own.

I want a fresh start, a glistening Monday morning, new people touching  
each other for the first time.



## Maryjane, Midge for Short

The eldest of 10, descendants of Newfoundland, Midge grew up in the 50's. An artist, she's pushed into the commercial field. Her greatest accomplishment— the Skittles logo. Now, she lives down the street from two of her sisters. They play scrabble. A dictionary ready to call out each other's fake words. She lives alone for fifty weeks of the year. The other two weeks are for family. Her husband, Ken, passed away 21 years ago. She was young then but never thought to remarry. Midge believes in one true love. She has covered her phone and iPad camera in fear of the government watching her. She has opened her arms to adoptive children and cousins who are queer. Her shouts and pounding feet can be heard from the neighbors' houses. They call her every so often to check in. "My damn men can't score!" she'll say, wearing a blue foam lightning bolt cutout on her face. She reads all day and lounges by her personal pool. At night, she eats miniature chocolates from a glass bowl and wears her soft, pink matching pajamas. This is what retirement is like. It's also what being alone is like. She used to feed her cats twice a day. Now she only has one, "Alley Cat." Her granddaughter named him. Every Christmas, she'll drive alone from Florida up to Connecticut by herself. She doesn't like airport security, with the government poking at her privacy. In the morning, her granddaughters will jump on her bed. They're in college now, but that doesn't stop them. She holds their hands in hers and learns how to do the Texas hoedown with strong hips. They record Wheel of Fortune for her, watch as Vanna White waltzes across the stage in her dazzling gowns. When she goes home, she writes emails to her granddaughters. They take two weeks to respond. All her life, Midge has lived the life of the creative power. Her sketches and paintings hang along her house walls, detailed landscapes of a stout English woman in a garden or a German lady wearing a fur coat walking down cobblestone streets. Her favorite, an Irish woman sitting alone on the stoops of a front porch. In the background, you can see the bright yellows and oranges of a setting sun.

**Your Cruel Words***For a girlfriend*

In a dark room,  
I see your silhouette standing by my door.  
Your hair, bleached blonde. Your nails  
tap the wall in a cascade. I shiver harder.

You lurk ten paces behind my quick steps.  
No matter where I go, you follow.  
You have molded me, chained my tongue, I hold  
arms around my chest, (em)bracing myself.

As I walk down school hallways  
talking to a lifelong friend.  
I can feel your eyes glistening. Your ragged voice  
telling me I'm unwanted, needy, clingy.

I scratch my forearm heavily,  
the itchiness growing around my belly.  
I imagine you nodding yes,  
as my paranoia and panic fills up my eyes.

I look at their warm smile,  
and you peer over their shoulders.  
I have run out my clock, I believe  
I am overstaying my friendship.

You, my puppeteer, you work me  
like a fiddle. If I could only play  
the melody of self confidence  
without the fear of messing up, of clammy hands.

## The Interview

The overstuffed couch cushions  
groan with my every move,  
so I remain completely still,

keep my eyes down.  
The scratchy green carpet  
makes my arms tingle.

The stale office air  
soaks in  
as my throat thins and narrows.

Now he coughs,  
waiting for my little-girl  
giggle, my toothy smile to lighten the mood.

Mom would tell me to  
*Speak up, louder.*  
I can't talk to him.

The clock is the only one speaking.  
My green nails dig  
into the soft furrows of my corduroys.

He goes silent. Looks up, nods,  
gives an empty smile as he  
opens the door, gestures.

I know what is expected.  
I stand,  
my blue sneakers

squeaking, as I move  
past him into the  
long deep empty hall.

## Proposed Abortion Ban

Hello, welcome to our Holy Sunshine Family Planning Clinic.  
Did the protesters get egg on you? Here, take a  
tissue and a bible to read while you wait.  
Oh, you were “assaulted,” you say.  
Well, I hope you weren’t wearing that short skirt  
or using those sassy lips to flirt with a kind man.  
Was he strong, did he overpower you? Was he white?  
You came to the right place.  
Or you would have, were it not for our bill.  
We have no options for you, no doctors.  
We have no need for them,  
they have gone into hiding.  
Now, how is your munchkin doing today?  
What do you mean, you *don’t want your little one*?  
It is a breathing unborn human inside of your belly.  
You must carry it for months regardless of how much pain,  
trauma, guilt, shame, worry, and panic-induced self hate you feel.  
As I did, as all good women must...it’s our duty.  
God always has a plan for his children,  
and that includes yours.  
Oh, you don’t need a gown or a checkup, you say.  
Here is your coat.  
Take a Bible. But why are you taking the hanger off the rack?  
Feeling the slippery black wire? What is that sick-sad smile on your face?  
Come back! We must talk! We must pray!  
I’ll see you and your little one in 9 months when you come back  
saved, a believer.

## **Mourning My Only Daughter**

*To Elena, mother of Katherine*

I watched her grow up into her purple dance tutu  
and later to latex skirts and cropped shirts  
that exposed the back tattoo I desperately asked her not to get.

Now, I long for a fight with her,  
just one more stupid, loud, cuss-word-ridden fight.

To watch my daughter's nose turn up  
as she smells my bullshit from the other room.

To hear her *fucks* and *cunts*,  
to see her red puffed cheeks blazing.

I want to listen to her music *thump-thump* down the street,  
bothering the neighbors.

To nag her  
about six new piercings in one ear,  
her navel,  
the two spider bites,  
and the new tattoo on her lip that reads *cocks*,  
just in time for Thanksgiving.

To watch her red- pink- purple-  
hair shine under the late night porch lights as she whips her head side to side,  
raising her brows to challenge me with her quick tongue.

To see that obnoxious back tattoo scale up her back.  
To have her storm out of the room one last time,  
with both her middle fingers raised high.



## Still Sick

Walking out of the hospital  
I notice our plum colored car  
parked by a trashcan full of cigarettes  
and half-eaten sandwiches.  
I take in the summer air.  
The heat radiating off of my pale skin, I feel myself  
slow,  
start to sweat,  
pricks running down my neck.

I walk beside Cassie,  
taking a few quick steps to keep pace.  
*I haven't walked this much for a month*, I say.  
My eyes go black at the corners,  
my heart, suddenly racing, as I  
turn toward Cassie,  
sway forward, fall,  
my fingers still loosely tugging the hem of Cassie's dress.

Cassie's eyes go wide.  
She sits on the curb,  
cradling me in her lap.  
I see her lips quiver.  
I try to lift my arm to cup her cheek, but falter.  
I whisper,  
*I want to go home*.  
Cassie's breath is slow. I feel her  
evenly taking in air,  
holding it for a second before letting it out.

A child, nuzzled in her arms,  
I am the older sister. I think—  
should she take care of me this way?  
She needs to let go, I am selfish and small.  
I watch her eyes, tightly closed,  
and let her hold me a minute longer.

Now she lifts my frail body with ease,  
my billowing sweatshirt pressing into my slight frame.  
She flinches, feeling my bony body.  
Then sits me down in the car,  
tugs my seatbelt to strap me in.  
As she walks around the car,  
I turn on the radio.

On the dash, a crisp apple  
ripe with juices that could spill down my lips,  
and a bag of pretzels with some peanut butter to dip them in.  
My brain gets fuzzy. Calories, the doctor's words.  
I look in the passenger side mirror and see my cheeks  
growing fat,

I move the snacks to the backseat.  
Cassie gets in and turns towards me with pleading eyes.  
The hospital doors behind us, open and close.



**Athena**

Her computer blinks  
with zeroes and ones  
as she reshapes the universe.

Her slain dragon is brandished  
in the stars with men.  
Her armor glistens, clean.

She teaches women how to see all around,  
like owls. How to  
strategize for the game.

A professor of science,  
she has taught her children  
to be smarter than she.

An author, a maker of wisdom,  
she reads from the podium  
she carved herself.

The olive tree wood pedestal  
ripe with her glory, adorned with Medusa's  
writhing face.

She is found in every woman  
who makes a path from mayhem,  
inspiring voices to invent the new world.

Her foster daughters  
are mentors to the public  
write laws for doting kings.

## The Sun and Mars

I sit, cross legged,  
on the Planet Mars. The carpet's  
bright orange fibers  
leave a hot red rash on my thighs.

Aged 6, I am already  
circling  
around men,  
who revolve my whole universe.

Now you, a boy, stand up tall,  
lean closer.  
My sun, you toy  
with my gravity.

I want to sit  
by you. I notice  
you grab my hairband,  
run.

My brown hair falls over my face.  
My brows furrow, my eyes  
grow damp, a hot flush  
breaks over my cheeks.

No one reprimands you.

It's my turn to stand,  
holding my head higher than yours.  
I pinch the edges of my dress,  
like the princess I am told to be.

I lean toward you; my sun,  
your gap toothed smile  
taunting yellow. My hairband  
stretches in your hard grip.

You see me, finally,  
full-faced.  
My pink shoes and red cheeks,  
not the colors of weakness.

My dust floats freely.  
I tremble as  
our gravity  
pulls us together.

## Not Quite a Memory

I'm walking through the park in the sunlight,  
gentle and warming,  
in the foreign city I always said I'd grow old in.

I'm older, I think.  
But my hair is still a dark brown, my legs slim,  
and my neck is taut.

But I'm different. Gone, the ache in my bones.  
I feel lighter,  
I'm like a bird

soaring from flower pot filled balkon to a steady stream canal.  
My days are long and idyllic,  
I write often and speak less.

I eat croissants at noon,  
stroll the neighborhood with a dog at my side. After work,  
I come home to a kind gentleman.

He touches me  
carefully pushing my strap off my shoulder  
while the birds sing their evening tune.

## Notes

1. Page 10, Robot Girl: I was born with a complete heart block on my left side. When I was 6 days old, I had my first pacemaker surgery. By the age of 21, I have had 14 different surgeries for medical issues regarding my heart, spine, and ears.
2. Page 20, Fourth of July: Photograph of a whale carcass on Martha's Vineyard.
3. Page 22, Summer of 2006: "Curse of Curves" refers to the song of the same name by *Cute Is What We Aim For*.
4. Page 34, For Sale: Door Jamb with Child's Heights: Photograph of children's heights labeled on a door jamb.
5. Page 38, We All Touch: The "Six Degrees of Separation" is the idea where there are, at most, 6 social connections away from each person.
6. Page 39, Maryjane, Midge for Short: The blue lightning bolt foam cutout is a reference to a face garment Madison's grandmother made to support the Tampa Bay Lightning in the National Hockey League.
7. Page 42, Proposed Abortion Ban: In the state of Alabama, the Human Life Protection Act was introduced, and was set to impose a near-total ban on abortion starting in November 2019, but a legal challenge against the bill has delayed implementation. Under the Act, there are two key points: (1) abortions, including cases of rape and incest, would be banned in the state of Alabama, and (2) a doctor who performs a banned abortion in the state of Alabama would be guilty of a Class A felony and could be sentenced to life imprisonment.
8. Page 43, Mourning My Only Daughter: Dedicated to my late best friend Katherine and her mother, Elena. Photograph of Katherine at her Junior Prom.
9. Page 45, Still Sick: Dedicated to the survivors and the individuals who struggle with eating disorders. If you or someone else is struggling with an eating disorder, please contact the available helpline at 1-800-931-2237 or get information from [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)
10. Page 47, Athena: Athena is a Greek Goddess who represents wisdom, inspiration, and strategic warfare. She is often depicted with an owl and an olive branch.