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THE GIRL WITH THE FUR COAT

by

Cameron S. Steele

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Kwame S. Dawes

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THE GIRL WITH THE FUR COAT

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University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Kwame S. Dawes

THE GIRL WITH THE FUR COAT thesis is comprised of 40 poems and a five-page introduction that examine – with equal parts intimacy and distance – how interior and exterior violence threatens female subjecthood, as well as how girlhood is always – and will always be – transforming the female self. The thesis produces this intimate-yet-distancing effect through a close attention to the (primarily free-verse) forms of the individual poems and how those forms interact with the poems’ subjects, bodies, Surrealist moments and fabulist imagery. Also, the arrangement of the poems helps to create a sense of close, disturbing conversation between all of these elements in an effort to move the reader past a sense of desensitization on the one hand and shock-value entertainment on the other – what theorist Geoffrey Hartman calls the by-products of narratives that privilege the real, the testimonial, the straightforward confession. The poetry is informed by the nearly four years I spent as investigative reporter in the Deep South as well my own histories with domestic abuse and mental illness. As a result, I have often sought disruption with my poetry; it goes part and parcel with my own lived experiences and quest for critique, urgency and truthfulness in the poems I write. Situated next to an introduction that, quite straightforwardly, tells a short version of the story of my life as a reporter, a survivor of sexual assault, and suicide, the poems provide an intertextual look at trauma, confession, and womanhood.

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INTRODUCTION

On my eighth birthday, my father sat me down at the kitchen table one Sunday morning before church.

“Premarital sex is a sin against God. Just read the Bible,” he told me. “If your mother or I ever find out you’ve done it, we’ll kick you out.” Variations on this conversation occurred between us every year until I was 18-years-old and moved out of the house for college. He scared me, and I rarely spoke against him.

I had been masturbating for some time before this first talk ever occurred. I remember feeling guilty but determined to still make myself feel good – masturbation helped with my nightmares; it helped me fall asleep, as chronicled in the poem *Dad*, though truly I felt more trapped in a body I didn’t understand. I desired to become animal, I imagined it as a way to be free, all the while acknowledging the loss of my girlhood as something to fear:

Is it me and what I need:
good sleep, a stuffed bear from childhood,
the other dog at my feet like a stone,
my hands deep in cotton underwear, rubbing.

But then, at 10 years old, just before I was shipped off to a Center Based Gifted program 45 minutes away from my normal middle school, I read a Lois Lowry book before bed – one with an explicit rape scene. Something inside me flipped. I became convinced I was pregnant, convinced I was the second Virgin Mary. It took an entire summer of faking stomach pains and ultimately receiving (a completely normal) ultrasound to convince me that I was not, in fact, pregnant, that I would not

be disowned from my family. I turned my back on the Christian God at that point; something that still haunts my parents today.

What haunts me more: the two boys on the 45-minute bus ride to Manchester Middle School who, every day, raped me with pencils, rulers, protractors. Who whispered secrets in my ears about how my boobs were different sizes, how they knew I'd grow up to be a slut. I never told anyone about the abuse. But another girl on the bus did. I threw such a fit in the principal's office, however, that I convinced the administrators that more harm than good would come to me if they told my parents. My parents would blame me, I said. Years later, in rehab, when I admitted all of this to my mom and dad, I was proved right. They did blame me. They still do. And sometimes, I still blame myself, evident in the following lines from *Point of View*:

... if I were
a man, could I finally forget what it feels
like to spend the first of every season
pretending to be unafraid ...

I have always been a writer. Poetry has always been my genre of choice, but in college I was terrified of not being able to make money, of still being subjected to my parents' rules. So I majored in journalism, found out I was great at it, and landed a job as a crime and investigative reporter in Alabama just after graduation. It was more than I bargained for, as revealed in the first prose poem of the collection – prose replete with multiplicity, repetition, surrealist elements to highlight the need to reflect on the disempowerment of women, through the sagacity of the girl voice: “By day, the girls pinned down heavy things in small-town papers—arson, the

thirtieth homicide/how a woman cooked her baby in an oven.” Situated halfway between Birmingham, Alabama and Atlanta, Georgia, Anniston is a town of just 22,000 people. But in my first year on the crime beat, I covered 22 homicides, countless domestic abuse cases, corruption within the police department, and a tornado that left 12 people in my little county dead. (The night of the storm, I drove out into the dark, tree-strewn streets. When I stepped out of my car, my heel went through the forehead of a dead woman I had inadvertently parked next to). I was raped that night for the first time by the sports editor of the paper.

I became fixated on watching women – women stricken by grief, women about to go to prison, mostly black women from a neighborhood so unlike the one where I grew up. I stopped asking questions for a while after the mother of a murdered eight-year-old choke-held me against the side of the public housing complex where she lived. “You don’t know anything about us. Get out.” She was right – my pedantic, pitying questions, my assumption that just because I “voted for Obama,” as noted in the mid-collection poem *God*, I somehow knew what it was like to be black, poor, and segregated in this small, impossible town. As if my own history of trauma erased the difference between this woman and me. I was wrong. I returned to silence, but this time as a way to acknowledge rather than escape. I listened: “But, God, I am tired. This weekend, after I felt the last mother turn into a fish on the phone when I asked: How did you hear he was murdered?”

I also imagined myself as my girl self – the one who rarely spoke to anyone but weeping willow trees, listening to these women begin to open up to me, begin to

tell me their stories, trust me with their own traumas. This new kind of listening is perhaps most apparent in the poem *Back to Basics*, where the act of keeping quiet and tuning my ears to the moment runs through each verse:

I hungered to find a glass jar catch them
 poke holes through to my childhood
 a place I didn't know I knew
 until it was gone. The seconds
 before the sun pop of a bulb
 over a barn the mothy earth
 throbbing against its walls
 buzzing with the promise
 of lighting up just like magic
 just like a midsummer night's dream.

As a result, I began to understand my own privileges, that my history of trauma does not, in fact, erase those privileges. I begin to consider my whiteness as something that needed to be racialized and accounted for. Then – and only then – could I claim connections with these women whose lives stayed with me in dreams, during dinner, later when I was kneeling over the toilet to throw up my food, and at the end of my reporting career when I entered the psych ward after a suicide attempt and my body's slow decay, the bulimia eating me when I myself refused to:

the prairie is not a girl
 with scars on her wrist

the city is not the skin she
 tried to slash in the tub

and I've got to stop assuming
 my split ends and bad posture

mean I'm going crazy and lonely
 or going crazy with loneliness

although that's technically the truth.

These are the things my poetry must carry. Even now, as I reclaim parts of myself. Even now, as I lose others – an abortion this fall that cast me as neither hero nor whore but did break my grandmother’s crystal glass and put eight large stitches along my wrist again. Even now, as I answer Facebook messages from Rena in the middle of the night – the woman who first hated me and then befriended me after I reported on her brother’s death, his body parts torn apart and scattered across two counties. Even now, as I balance the silence and language that has always been with me, however imperfect. In effect, *The Girl With the Fur Coat* aims to critique trauma in the moment, to critique witness in the moment, and in the looking back upon, to critique the heritage of whiteness and racism. It does so through an attention to the agency of girlhood, slippages of subject and reality, and the fixation on the animal body.

ARTIFACTS OF A MAKE-BELIEVE GHOST

You trip the backyard swing, improbably, every night
on the witching hour exactly – fumble a breeze

with your invisible cloak, a black magnolia
scatters its leaves.

You must have carried inside a fistful
of blueberries and a dog-eared Kate Chopin:

Your thumbprints are like wet bruises
on The Awakening as it balances on the lip

of the claw-foot. I demur, claim the water
isn't warm enough, isn't deep enough though

I know I'll meet you in the kitchen. There,
the broiler burns red on the roof

of the machine's mouth, and although
desire begins here as heat and danger,

I throw hips and feet forward across
linoleum to twist the oven's knob only

to have it come off in my palm. Ghost, I feel
your retreat like the absence of a kiss on my

neck, the bones pushing against my skin
in want. Why do you leave, I ask,

but you're already in the yard though God
knows how. I only have the crack in the window

above the sink and the rasping of unmown
grass as artifacts of your movement, as hints

of intention. Why do you watch? you ask
in return. Improbably, the magnolia is burning.

ANATOMY OF A WHISPER

Because the ducks spread their wings and balanced
on webbed-feet like gargoyles, I saw a pond of ghosts,

all mirror and silver maple in the street light,
wind ruffling their waxy coats. Because the hum

of electricity past midnight meant this could be
Manhattan, though it was the 24-hour station
outside Omaha.

It's true that Plath saw her mother in the moon
then burned everything away. The kitchen tiles
blackened to freckles on the bottoms of her feet.

It's also true that planters from a distance crawl
as primary-colored bugs over the soybean fields.
Maybe true: the peeled onion is a devil trying to cry

and burn at once. What is untrue? The life before
birth that is all wax and water lasting into morning.
A baby that wants to stay in the daylight upon arrival.

By the pond: everything duck-eyed and dactyl,
something about to pop – a light bulb, a woman's

knuckle. The dawn still countries away, a Chinese
fan over tea, the anatomy of a whisper.

PRISON BARS DISSECT A MAN

You lie yourself down like a woman,
dark cheek against cold floor.
If I could, I'd recoil: your lips
parted and thick with drool,

its trail down chin and neck.
I imagine the air-conditioned
stutter of your life beating
up against unshaven skin

how it must tune itself
to the echo of me shutting
behind you this morning
and every morning, steel

on variegated steel. You
are not the first. Not even
close. Every man and meet
begins as fear, paces slow

circles around his cage.
Forgets his hands. Every
man protects a chaos,
a wanting to be free.

Sometimes they can wait for it,
straddling in their minds
the worlds and divide.
This one will not.

The fetus shape and lunatic
smile, the quicksilver mind
leaking like tears from his eyes.

WHEN I DIE I WANT TO BECOME A ROUND BALE OF HAY

my father says.
 It is unclear whether he means
 reincarnation or metaphor,
 or how to ask the insolent question,
 vole-eyed as I am in the pocket
 of this plain-spoken man.
 He accuses
 prayer of poetry God
 of trickery and me of burrowing
 in places I don't belong.

When I returned to the farm,
 scarred and loamy, body unsure
 how to hide itself,
 he cleared barn and basement
 of plastic and poison but left
 the rope, the knives,
 the nights of red eyes.

Mornings he'd find me
 making poems out of nylon and steel,
 flyaway hair and piebald cheeks,
 variations on my childhood body
 curled into farmyard corners
 he'd hoped to keep dark.

I could ask the question
 he never did, accuse
 him of torture by heartbeat,
 a childhood of declarative
 sentences and soybeans.
 I could speak in psalms without
 blinking, recite sonnets without
 thinking, but blessed are those
 who refuse the company
 of mockery or speak it
 themselves. I continue, instead,
 to girdle my new body against
 his ribs, stripping away each
 breath of bark, whittling him
 down into the kind of man
 who might leave the farm

buildings cluttered, who
might let me pick
my own poison,
who might, at long last,
be reborn
into a body made of straw.

TAKEN WITH MOUNTAINS

*after Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night"
for Katie Paterson*

I have been one taken with mountains.
I have measured meltwater – and remeasured meltwater.
I have listened to Lanjokull's fountains.

I have recorded earths' most obvious daughter.
I have brought ice pick and axe, my own
twitching calves, this unsteady slaughter.

I have walked spines and felt the sound of bone
echo beneath footsteps, the skin on my neck,
from an unseen ridge of glacial groans,

but not to bid me stop or say turn back.
And further above any earthly pronouncement,
a clock of whiter bone spins its slow track.

Death is every little thing melting by ounces.
I have been one taken with mountains.

GIRL AS BOTTICELLI

I keep asking myself:
How do I know I am real and not a robot.
How do I know I am human on Monday
mornings when my molars ache, my will
to unwind myself from my sheets dwindling
like the blinking battery life on my cell phone.
When did I start counting my waking in percents
and pixels?

Is it because I have opposable thumbs
and can text dumb things to my boyfriend
before bed like: "Where are you" and
"Do you think she's prettier than me/you liked
her Facebook status about Botticelli" and
I'll jab it all out in lowercase letters
with my furious thumbs and end it with a period.
That's how you communicate anger in love in days
like these.

Am I the only woman who twists the birth
of Venus into a shriveling thing, into a
statement on the male gaze, a statement
of the male gaze? Or have others like me
been programmed with secret yearning
for vitality masked as hashtags on a screen?

I keep wondering what I'll find outside of myself:
if it's really in the neuroses of someone else,
the earbuds against his skull like seashells,
like he could hear the waves against
the bend in his neck, his body by percents,
sucking him in and under the silent letters
rushing to meet him, beneath his sore and twitching thumbs.

HOW TO EDUCATE A SUMMER DAY

Throw a body into it –
teach it to turn humidity
into flower, sunburn or rain.
A cleaner person.
Let the ashes fall away.

Send it short-sleeved
into winter red
arms. Its tiny coat
watches from a window hook –
Multiply it into many
wheels spinning viciously
on the black top.

Clean spring's apron with it –
kitchen against
bare forearm –
the cashew bruise at her wrist.
Make it snap green beans.
Metal bowl it, staccato *pop*
post-twist it and all the dirty
dishes bruising the sink –

Call its spine a chimney
for a Connemara fall – it
can't stay strong for long.
Soot trails for prayers.
Pray for it.
Lay it neolithically
in the leaves.

LE SIGH. LE FIN.

I'll call it a day when I can get the mixed
metaphors out of my head

the prairie is not a girl
with scars on her wrist

the city is not the skin she
tried to slash in the tub

and I've got to stop assuming
my split ends and bad posture

mean I'm going crazy and lonely
or going crazy with loneliness

although that's technically
the truth. Le Sigh. Le Fin.

Not quite ready for it;
I still call the moon

my mother or a poet
I once loved or a bald man

with dirty teeth. Everything
depends on what time of night

you say your prayers
and insomniacs have their pick

of all the hours. First I learned
French then forgot it on purpose

now I'm scared I'll have La Belle
et Le Bad Boy stuck in my head

while I watch the new cows
turns to old women by the window.

THE LAST HOUR

& now the body shivers to signal sleep
or revelation & it doesn't want blanket,

dream, or gun, rather this present thicket,
a rock in its hand or perhaps a couple

million tons of dandelion stems
a minute will keep the fingers from

twitching against trigger until morning.
Give it something ticklish on the palm,

a billion tufts of now and petal,
of leaf & sacs pregnant with pollen.

If they explode, the eyes will close
to eat the bullet.

AFTER 8-HOUR MANHUNT, SHOOTER IS FOUND

Readers will trace the 8 in their furry mouths
 eternity sideways

overlook the dash between
 like a stitch in the breath

like the one that got erased
 between man and hunt

like who could bear it

simply connective

too adjacent

or intimate

like I is what's
 shot toward the thicket
 where You can be found

in animal skin
 the sutures
 already invisible.

DON'T BE SO MELODRAMATIC

Worse than falling out of love
is finding yourself stuck in it
on a Monday when he gets up
on the wrong side of the bed,
forgets to put the coffee on,
spends breakfast with the
emails on his iPhone, and
doesn't bother to tell you
that you've put your sweater on backwards.
Worse than ending a relationship
is wading through the traffic of it,
because the worst wrecks always
happen on Mondays when
you're running late and he's cursing
at the Subaru who cut you off,
those granola hippie assholes,
and you're cursing at him
because you've discovered the tag
of your sweater chaffing between
the seatbelt and your chin,
and neither of you have time
for Starbucks but he's stopping anyways.
Worse than breaking up
is breaking down in the
coffee shop parking lot,
not because you're sad,
not because he's angry,
only after you discover you left your
wallet at home on the kitchen counter,
beside the bills you haven't paid and
the empty percolator, clean and silver in the sun.

POINT OF VIEW

If I were braver or less sensitive
or more open, like one of the prairie pasques
in Spring, if I held my shoulders up
like dad asked, if I didn't bend like
switchgrass in the wind, if I were
a believer in fate or that good things
come in threes, and the third tragedy
will always be the last, if I could
wake up on April mornings without
wanting to cry, without needing to splash
my face with tepid water because the cold
has always been too much, if I were
to fall asleep without biting my tongue
or tracing the names of strangers in the dark
or spinning a diamond ring I didn't buy
myself around my too-skinny finger,
if I could dream of you instead
of the man who stripped me down
and watched me bleed, if I had been
strong enough to say no instead of
staring out the window of the guest bedroom,
watching prostrate knotweeds blow against
a chain-link fence, if I had met you
before him, or better yet, if I were
a man, could I finally forget what it feels
like to spend the first of every season
pretending to be unafraid, plotting
to dye my hair or cut it up to my chin
so it won't feel heavy on my shoulders,
so maybe, for a moment, I can straighten my back?

ACCORDING TO WOMEN, WHEN TO USE KNIVES

Women got to know when to use knives, when to slip metal through their common-law men, metal words will do, but knives work best sometimes when he comes home too late, too wet, those beggar eyes, yes, slippery lips, he speaking without words clutching house keys, glass bottle against thigh and groin, she in her tee-shirt, common and cold, and clutching at – what?

what newspapers leave out.

What I got? Always women want to know, words snicking down throats, snapped off by sore teeth , 3 a.m. cigarettes, cigars if he left them. If he did, when he comes home, he calsl her *baby – thief – bitch –* close them wolf eyes, men always do. Didn't he get worlds, life with a girl who smiles when she's told, when she ain't? She stays with him when bud's got him against walls and the law. *What I got but a man?* She knows. Left without words and his words without love and too late but that's

what newspapers leave out.

Woman in kitchen, man is dead.
Morning headlines a day or two, three later.
The official report, they say they got, and her mug shot: Wide, dog eyes, cigarette lips.
Woman of women who know what they got, words refuse to forget: On slippery nights they cure the common cold.

What newspapers leave out.

CIRCUS DREAMS

I forgot my old name,
traded pearls for funny collars,
got hooked on the hollers of boys with their girls,
girls with their dreams,
and the idea that a world could be contained in a ring,
shoved into a cannon,
and shot like a star into the summer night.

CASUALTIES OF NATURE

Dedicated to Bill and Linda Lipscomb

We lost them holding hands – their bodies dancing long hours in the yard
cool evenings on the porch quoting from favorite Western shows and *La Vie En
Rose*.

We lost the smells of the house warm and woodsy
Bill hewing some fencepost in the shed
Linda smoking a pipe tapping her foot to hidden rhythms an Edith Piaf record.

And it was – on the porch in the house all over the yards – *La Vie En Rose*.
Life's gray shadows cast against our parents magic.

The storm came in April. Hold me close Linda said. Hold me fast.

The humming of the earth opening up. No one told them —
When heaven sighs, it yawns with teeth snapped limbs stinking debris
looped around the air.

We found them in the woods next to the yard.
Every bone in Bill's body broken – this rough-hewn man holding hands with the
woman who spoke French and smoked tobacco from pipes.
We lost the way every word every day turned into songs.

How easy they became art.
How easy they made falling in love with routine and dancing
next to a wooden, sagging front door.

GOD,

I am tired of writing about dead people and their mothers who are always praying to you, asking their sons, husbands, daughters, cousins not be dead but just gone somewhere for a little while – for barbecue in Birmingham or maybe to Atlanta for a key bump and a fist. Yes, these mothers are always praying, we can handle lies and disappointment and white lines but not death, never.

Once I could look at dead the way I was supposed to: as a headline, using verbs like "allege" and plenty of attribution from cops.

But, God, I am tired. This weekend, after I felt the last mother turn into a fish on the phone when I asked: How did you hear he was murdered? I realized I want Anthony's job in Faith or Nick in Sports or Lisa with her columns on the seasons. Do you ever feel this way, when mothers are gutted and splayed on a cleaning station before you, when they, even for a moment, stop praying?

MOURNING ROUTINE

My dad knows how to read horizons especially in windy hours when others are held back by warm sheets and sore bones.

You'll find him before sunrise when the air is a velvet curtain and the corn is cut and mom moans in a ball on the bed.

He's in the field with a thermos and molars aching with cold and of course there's a gun but lord knows he never uses it.

Morning, he tells me, is the best time to look out across flat, hard land and wait for birds to appear with the sun. Those are snow geese, he'll say, balling his hands

into fists against his heart. He knows what others don't: the birds aren't really white but gray and blue like mom's eyes over breakfast. Doctors can't fix her

and she disappears a little more each day. The geese went away for a while, too, Dad says before each sunrise. And now when they appear on the horizon they blanket

the whole damn sky. Sometimes he watches mom's face as if it were dawn. I wish I could tell him what he already knows: Snow geese have never been white.

DAD

I can't remember who I'm forgiving:
you for every morning you leave
before dawn, stealing away with
one of the dogs on coyote feet
to kill new geese in this old routine.

Is it me and what I need:
good sleep, a stuffed bear from childhood,
the other dog at my feet like a stone,
my hands deep in cotton underwear, rubbing.

I can feel a river rising
with the moon against the barn,
because I know you can too,
the currents in me ran first through you.
Drowning is easy, I know, I
IMAGINED you do it too many times
before me, either the ice wasn't
thick enough to hold you or the wind
carried the deceit of coyotes, laughing
pebbles down from the moonbed
while the dogs danced circles in
its fallen banks.

Do not feed the coyotes, you warned me,
do not kill the geese, I begged you
but I fell asleep first, pulled
under by the tides of my youth,
unable to wake until you were out
to sea. I can't take you where I'm
going, you said, but I can't remember
why I wanted to anyway.

WHOSE HANDWRITING IS THIS?

It's not feeling sad
or broken or wanting to cry
into a pillow. I've never
needed to scream at God
or spend a week as a ghost
in a hospital, wearing
lace-less shoes and a thin
gown. I don't have voices
in my head or fear caught
in my throat, and I am
not going to shuffle
down the self-help aisle
of the local library.
It's just an emptiness,
the way you feel when you're almost
well after the flu or a cold.
I forget to eat
and dream and pay
my bills. I won't do
laundry or feed the
dog, and I ignore every
call from my sisters.
Sometimes I'll stare at my
handwriting in an old
journal and not recognize
the dips and loops of
my letters.
Mostly I just huddle under dirty sheets,
numb and unafraid, ignoring the way my
own heart feels like a beating.

GIRLS TELL IT LIKE IT IS

"I don't dance," he mutters,
a napkin covering his sharp chin.

Under the thin table cloth,
both knees are bouncing.

KITCHEN MESS

The rice boiled over then black,
meaning: Set it aside until next week.
Instead of cleaning he wanted
to dig out the large-format polaroid.
But patterns, no matter how burned,
are finite, so he settled for the quick grab
of a graphite pencil, tipped its point to
my watermarked napkin, and traced
the ruins of another Friday night stuck
to the bottom of a pot I beat
like a syncopated drum as a child.

AGAIN SOMEDAY

We make the best plans
flat on our backs,
cotton against flannel, dreaming
of the nights, so many without
moons, when we stole the Lotus Elan,
We needed joy-rides or something
to pray about later, the first backbone chassis
to steady our own inelegant souls,
if we ever believed in them, and the
way a dark city makes so many
broken promises feel like purity.

We sat hip-to-hip, my hand on your
knee and one of yours on that
grand wheel, and we never waved
the others in the wind because our own
bodies caught the air like echoing chambers.
It never mattered which roads we chose
or that we could have gotten caught,
only that we wanted to feel big and invisible
in a car neither of us would ever own,
in an age neither of us could ever forget.

Now on a threadbare bed we throw
our whispers against water-stained
walls. Our youth hangs like hooks
on the curves of our own sibilance,
already fading into an indiscriminate
string of empty evenings full
of looking back on what we were –
just bad kids with big dreams or
lovers who wanted to escape the
inscrutable squalor of stillness.
We're each waiting for what we
hope one of us will say again someday:

You find the keys, baby,
and I'll start the car.

UPSIDE DOWN

Because — does it matter if it's true?
the monstrous little bodies of hummingbirds
threading themselves like Zs through agastache
and giant hyssop and don't we all hope it is, crossing
our fingers against the crosswalks, angling our
bodies toward sunken gardens, tasting mint on
our tongues and pretending it's always been this way?

Because — at dusk who bears the suffering
of small bodies without calling it beauty?
Or we draw up magic from the asphalt
or from the child darker than our past
thicker in sweat leafing about the dotted yellow lines
and it's tempting to see ourselves in that battered tee.

Because my heart shuddered beneath its
foil ribs, because I never played in the middle
of a street and called it a garden no matter
how quiet — no matter how cul-de-sacked
at the end, no matter how far down I went.

Because now on my heels I feel the heat
of his blacktop, the little bones of his dancing
ankles, his belief in god's breath and fresh spiky
flowers. Because we are humming like birds, drumming out the body
of the poet, of what the poet said, we were born for the sun
but he got to ask why?

WIDOW FORECAST

I kept thinking the worst
would be when they came to
the door to tell me he ended
up in the cornfields
or in a trailer park in Volga
with a girl no older than our daughter.
I kept thinking:
"the storm is here" those mornings
I found the text messages in his phone
easier to trace than lipstick on white
collars, and no farmer around here
wears those anyway.

I could be lying when I say
I never saw this coming but
I don't think I am. I'll give
you this: I knew he'd die
sooner than later, I saw it
in the way his eyes never
met the mirror when he shaved
in the mornings, I saw it
coming every Thursday with
the trash truck, our black bags
clinking together with bottles
he thought he hid well. Yes,
I good as well knew he'd flip
the Camaro on our gravel road
break his neck among volunteer
corn in the soy fields, but I'm not
lying when I say I didn't know a damn
thing about fear:
The storm is nearly here.

THE ARSON

The brick house with the metal roof is no longer breathing.
The home bowed then folded in on itself this morning red then dead around five after ten years but really it started to die yesterday around nine before school when mom and dad spoke with lips that didn't really move at all what do you do with that? and now mom and dad are weeping in the winter yard because again, they ask bitter air, how do you explain something that breathes and breathes and breathes until one morning it is not alive just moving smoke? who took it from us, who grinned red and dead and our children were still dancing they ate cereal in that blackened spot just yesterday before even then they were still dreaming beneath that metal roof.

Chief, tell us where does the smoke go?
and the sun's rising in that steel sky
we are watching them run toward the open door and the black stairs
the foyer which buckled but never burned
until now or yesterday
and they are touching the soot of our family picture.

And this is what we see:
the brick house is so damn dead
but mom and dad they have arms
and legs and kissing mouths
red and sweaty in January.

SHELTER

Hunker down in the afternoon and pretend
the snow's still caught in the gutters
and the cows won't leave the barn
until the frost slides into the mud.
Put your head on her red sweater
even if you have to keep your eyes open,
even if you must stare at
the cross-hatch, distorted,
singular, cross-like,
as if it might save you. Even if
it won't, and even if it
hurts: the purpling stain
of tear drops on polyester,
every little thing melts.

The best shelter, mother once told you,
most summer mornings after the ice
had melted into the whiskey,
pill cap twisted off,
two or three red tablets rattling
in their canister like a toddler
toy clutched between acrylics,
the best shelter is the kind you have
to beg for. So beg for her or breathe,
all of it is the same anyway,
and dream about winter until
the clouds run west river
and the cows are ready for slaughter.

BREAKING FAST BEFORE DINNER

The ham's sliced and spread
out like a bruise on the cutting board
mom left clean beneath the sink
before she drove away and the fresh
green beans in a metal bowl need
snapping and although my fingers
are surely strong enough my heart
sure isn't because i know what it
will sound like when i take one between
my thumbs and twist the clean staccato
pop of a knuckle against her cheekbone
the softness afterward the waiting for
an echo real or imagined and accepting
the delay of a depressed beer tab
before he slugs his way back to the
front porch, steady enough and ready
to watch her go and leave the cooking
and the broken heart to me.

BACK TO BASICS

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." – Albert Einstein

I woke just before morning this morning
heavy eyes just barely open window the tiny
shuddering bodies of yellow-headed blackbirds
my swollen tongue they flickered
like fireflies stringing themselves
through dark pasture barn roof
dripping eaves tiny golden throats
opening in song tucking black against breast.
I hungered to find a glass jar catch them
poke holes through to my childhood
a place I didn't know I knew
until it was gone. The seconds
before the sun pop of a bulb
over a barn the mothy earth
throbbing against its walls
buzzing with the promise
of lighting up just like magic
just like a midsummer night's dream.

GIFT

What better augur than the aurora
a belt of blue and green to cinch
in the waist of some sky I couldn't
possibly capture all by myself.
I've never been that far North
but I know all the stories:

Old men read newspapers
in the darkest part of the world
without squinting because everything,
as they say, is illuminated, and what
else would a girl or a woman across
an ocean expect from the kind of energy
that can harness the name of a goddess?

It's terrifying, really, to think
of every girl I was between yesterday
and now, the week before I knew you
and everything that came after, every
second I spend counting and tonguing
my own dry lips until I can sigh, until
I can see your name light up the
black screen of my cell phone
as if your intentionality can charge
and change the mundane particles
that have always, in any time,
made up a cold and thoughtless night.

I am no goddess and who's to say
any woman ever was, but I don't
need a beaky man with his dirty bird
to tell me what is different about
this December.

I used to spend the hours,
after the gifts were unwrapped
and my sisters were drunk or at the
very least asleep, by myself, nursing
the old wound of my own reflection:
those round hips and full cheeks,
the brownness of my hair and
the way that even the best glass of

wine couldn't make my eyes shine
the way I wished they would.

It's funny because I've never
seen the Northern Lights, I'd never planned
to until you and we haven't even gazed
into each other's eyes or steadfastly pretended
we weren't trying to. It's funnier because
my mother says the Internet is a bad omen
or, at the very least, something to make
sure a girl like me will never be happy
unless she has someone like you,
some boy or man who tells
her to look up pictures of Iceland,
who knows she will stumble
across an image of the dawn
dancing in the middle of the night,
who knows she will fall in love and
forget she ever cared about
proving her mother wrong.

SOMETIMES I can't even remember my
mother's name or why she
or any other woman in the world
would hang her daughter's hopes
on the gestures of some grandfather
who thought he saw a sign in the sand.
On other Christmas nights, I'd be tucking
into bed, sure that I'd wake up richer in the
morning but no more happy.

Let's get poor, darling, and move to the North,
not to read newspapers or shadows on the ground,
not to shuffle our feet like our forefathers,
but to dance with the one who brung us,
torn between wrangling with the heat of the sky
or the gift of watching and touching the other,
planning to live forever or, at the very least,
until morning comes around.

RED

Nearly 30 before my blood
felt red not yet a third
decade not quite a virgin
not that it matters

Spent winter afternoons
tucked in coffee shop corners
curled against a church pew

but more like something
to steady me steady bleed.

The new season coiled through my spine
like a spring my ears sweatless palms
too hot to be wet to leave a mark

on the glass not enough
breath for that.

Which is to say
I couldn't breathe like a woman
my lungs my Lazarus jewel box.

Raise me from the dead
the red sea in my old dreams.
Hollow throat swallow swallow
swollen little corner like every little girl.

FREESTYLE

It's safer here quiet and shimmery. Couldn't you be a fish or whale or some underwater mammal that doesn't sweat cry or feel the pounding of some male hand the weight of that whole big solid world?

It hurts underwater, too. But you feel shiny strong and tendony the stretch of fingertips pelvis quick pulsing toes and thighs. Currents are more natural than air.

It's worse when you break concentration — force the head sideways under armpit and breathe. In those seconds you miss — the black T on the bottom silent unwavering, unbroken movement. Feel the heat of those eyes wretched whistling and the man you must please. That mammally skin the weight of nights unnatural dull, the hours of it.

Swim on, little fish. The race — isn't the sisters in lanes beside you.

They matter less than the dry dangerous place above where weakness is a virtue Sound a promise. Gravity the punishment of man.

OUTPATIENT

They don't ask me,
Ready to go home or
are you feeling better and
will you sleep through the night?
Dad slings my suitcase
into the truck, Mom clears
her throat from the cab,
and I shrink against the back seat
the way I learned to years ago.
If I look up into the rearview
mirror I will catch her eye
and see worry snagged there.

Instead I stare at my wrists
and pretend to find an
answer to a question
they won't ask:
I don't know.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Don't look for me in mirrors
or hold your breath by the window
hoping to catch a small rub of a
brown eye by the willow in the back.
I'm not reflected there or in
the copper bottom pots you
hang over the stove, cleaning
them every August in fresh
tomato juice, the more acidic
the better, until they gleam
in the kitchen like omens of easier days.

Stop searching for me
in photographs from those days,
you'll get nothing for bending over
their silver frames except a sore back
and nostalgia for a woman
who once grew backyard romas next
to the small weeping willow, brought them
to you every summer, ripened and red
and ready to squeeze.

The garden grew over long before
you started buying cleaner
from the grocery, rubbing your
pots in half the time so you can sit
in your chair before sun-down, crossing
your fingers and your eyes ever so slightly,
praying that by squeezing them shut
you'll catch a glimpse of the gritty self
you tried so hard to rub away.

SOMETIMES A HOUSE

Sometimes a house – sometimes
one with wallpaper he'll want
to strip, basement walls that
need cranking and lots of bleach,
fluorescent lights, but they'll hardly
white-wash their dreams.

Sometimes a glass of wine
from Walmart for a dinner
of pilfered ribeyes – sometimes
four glasses or two bottles.
He gets it: They will fight
in the tall grass because it's easy
to be afraid when comfort comes
with every morning.

She'll wake up in his arms,
and their skin will glow
because the AC doesn't work
and their bodies together are
fitted sheets, sweaty with apologies
and the wash of remembering
their own little house, room enough
for two.

APRIL ELEGY

It snowed the day after our parents paid taxes.
The water bowl froze and the puppy
whined by the door in the dark until
dad or maybe mom in dad's boots
clomped down the back stairs to break the ice.
We all knew spring would come again,
maybe the next day or in time for the weekend,
along with the Easter bunny and Jesus,
their chocolate doppelgangers tucked in
between marsh-mellow peeps and green synthetic
grass.

New sundresses hung in eager pastels
in our closets, ready for stomachaches
and lemonade, knee-scrapes and band-aids,
stains to come out later in the wash.
But we pulled on old sweatshirts instead
and didn't open our mouths for grace
or even coffee at breakfast. I'm so tired, dad said,
or maybe it was mom in dad's broken voice,
and my sisters and I, we knew better than to cry
or even ask what was going on.

GIRL SPRING

It's easy to say been down this road before,
walked beneath willows knowing the way winged gods can take from you
lips legs life as trees in flight, in love.

What did I lose? Not conviction or pretty baubles or vines.

Never sanity ever the loops of it drowse in some seedy April pond.

You left poppies in my ears – catkins rawing my throat.

I have lost this:

How to speak without bark. A

nd when I run fingers across some man's forearm, this:

that green wind rifling between thighs slaking what thirst.

It's easy to see this old road, the way without branches in wind.

MORNING

I find your
eyes first so we can
say it all.

GIRL IN LINCOLN

Air never seemed quite right
the whole time — that was
the beauty of it. Drove to the
top of a Haymarket parking
deck, looked out across
the concrete, squinted
a little to catch the last of
the sun on iron in the distance,
a railway bridge to the romantic
nailed down somewhere inside of me.

Spent years on those tracks,
afraid to move, afraid to feel
a certain slant of light on my wrist.
Got a scar there now but
that's the way of it — living
never seemed quite right
until I pushed myself
to the edge of one city and woke up
in the middle of another,
marveling at the weight of the view,
a midwest sunset muted by clouds,
the way not-quite-right somehow felt
just like home.

SANCTUARY

Not a moment or twenty of them,
not a single room or one of the heavy
old buildings sloping against the sky
and gulls.

I could measure out the feeling,
in the minutes before my first cup

but precision can cut stillness.
I can't lose it,

and the rest still sleep.

Coffee and chimera waft up
the stairs and loop like lights
around my rafters.

My little room,
and the largeness
of small moments.

Hearts always break for the big ones,
how they're always found wanting.

Graduation at the Cistern, a dance
on a boat in the bay, grand kisses

behind the flower-boxes,
but my lips are always dry.

I want nothing but small sips
I'll pantomime all day.

Not difficult to know which I prefer:
the beauty of morning and mug,
routine over residue.

Never just a moment, or a place.
Only a small, reaching calm
that could be joy.

