

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
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**Blood, Bone: Poems**

A THESIS

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

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**Blood, Bone: Poems**

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*For Jordan*

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## **Abstract of Thesis**

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A creative thesis of deep image and narrative medical poetry influenced by the photography of Eudora Welty, family, and personal experience. A collection exploring the human experience through the lens of medicine, specifically the roles and experiences of the caregiver and the patient, and the lens of photography, specifically the narrative inherent in the photo.



# ***Blood, Bone: Poems***

# Part I

## Empathy

I'm fourteen and stuck  
in coagulating heat  
July  
when it happens

she runs the red light  
crosses the center line  
slams into a tree

the weight of judgment  
like chunks of thick glass  
hits me fast

Mom nearly drives us by  
when I see her

lithe body convulsing  
neck bent like twisted pipe  
arms tense marble pillars

get the phone  
dial 911

my fingers quiver over keys  
my heart thrums hard in my  
throat when I answer:

she's in seizure  
someone's with her

grand mal, they say  
neurons misfiring, tangles  
betraying the body

I carry her with me

I won't forget her gray eyes  
or trembling hands

## Finding the Body

I almost wish a coyote had  
dragged the bag into awareness,  
ripping soft plastic on asphalt,  
splaying its unsavory contents:

Severed mass of tangled limbs,  
decaying features,  
entrails, bits of bone, pink Nikes  
and jumper, hair bow.

The neighborhood was new,  
brimming with wild children –  
no one noticed her missing.  
Some lawn company grabbed

the garbage bag, tree limbs,  
detritus, not expecting to find a  
girl of fourteen, not a pulverized  
person—

not her, not the unraveling  
fabric of her being, not the  
threads roughly cut, not  
the shoes still on her feet,  
floating free of her, not the  
bow still attached to an auburn  
tendrils—

Ode to Cadaver 206

when you gave your body to *science*,  
did you expect  
whirring blades of beastly bone saw  
to slice your spinal cord,  
flaying away muscle, weight of children,  
skin with pressure of lovers' fingers?  
veiled face and plastic covering,  
your hands stripped of muscle,  
fingernails detached,  
web of tendons— your forearms  
phenol-saturated by zealous  
near-physicians for further study.  
your inanimate frame is weak  
prone on sharp steel, table beneath you.  
I did not make the first cut,  
expose your cervical vertebrae,  
your ivory skull, scalpel on skin  
as if it were my own.  
your muscles, sinews, striations,  
like rubber bands stretched taut  
your nerves tangled, flossy, smooth,  
lilac-white, branching, buried deep in your cold body.  
cubes of bone in ankles and wrists,  
your spongy spine curled in scoliosis.  
I probe my toe into the pool of medicine,  
understanding your body  
better than my own:  
each delicate muscle, bone, nerve  
each vein, artery—  
  
I will never *know* you.

## Body Language

“It was fabulous, what the body told.”

*-Rafael Campo*

I am no physician, and therefore have only  
the medicine I make for myself, medicine  
spun from wafer-thin pages of texts, medicine  
plucked from the mouths of nurses I know.

I am addicted to the knowledge of cells  
and genes, functions and dysfunctions, tests  
and results, but the body is not so scientific—  
it simply is, and is not, in the frozen segment

of time we all share. Joints are either well-oiled  
or creaking, bones are either in-tact or broken,  
neurons are either firing or decaying. There is  
no moment but death when the miraculous

body halts entirely. But who reveres heartbeats  
until a heart attack, who ponders fast firing  
neurons until a stroke, who thinks about  
steel-strong femurs until one is broken?

It is no secret that the body speaks,  
but we do not always listen.

## Anatomizing

it is just us alone in the room    you  
pale graying body    me    holding  
the scalpel over your forearm    true  
love is giving you to students knowing

your coffin will be empty    you'll be  
nicknamed    your skin will be flayed  
from muscle & bone so we can see  
you:    nerves    veins    arteries braided

deep & dark    pressing scalpel to skin  
I can't make the cut—    your hand  
is palest where your wedding ring has been  
all your life    I imagine a simple band

encircling your finger    the moment it was placed  
there    those you'll leave without a trace

## Drawing the Bow

It is all taut bands & strands  
of sinew stretched,  
paused, or are they  
clenched tight in fear?

It is unclear from the painting  
whether he is arrogantly  
shooting or holding  
fast to his life or even holding  
a lover close to his chest  
& the artist is all wrong  
& thus, the art

but the bones are the best part:  
solid cubes of bone  
& chips of bone  
& lengthy agony of curved  
collarbone & hyoid bone  
poised sharply beneath  
the jaw—

it is the bone that provides  
the snap  
& zing, strength, power—

not the arrow, nor the bow,  
nor the beaux-arts  
architecture of muscle  
& tendon intricately  
interlaced

bones are laid next to bones,  
as soldiers in graves  
are laid with comrades,

gray-blue webs holding them together,  
gossamer strands



## Hippocrates' Art: On Radiographs

On moonsilver film, I hold a skull  
in my fingers, sculpted as if by hand.  
Examining cup-shaped orbits that hug  
soap-bubble eyes in their ossified grip,  
tracing lightning spikes of bone,  
I can feel deviated septum, displaced slice

of calcium bicarbonate that curves left  
against shark tooth maxillary. Tiny jewels  
of ethmoid sinuses between eyes the color of tar,  
deep pits without stars. Most intimate is probing  
sealed pockets of bone only God knows—

I am without a scalpel now, and so study films  
the color of smoke in dark, prodding  
into alluring layers, glistening tissue.  
I hold secrets, plucking them up, ruby  
wildflowers spitting fiery buds out  
of earth behind my house. I fasten

them to gentle curves—my brain anchors  
them with opalescent thread of neurons,  
wraps them in gray matter. I visit these secrets  
like graves, reverently, savoring every detail,  
feeling the marble of them, remembering.

## Letter to Liver

I should say I am sorry  
for putting you through  
my college experience—

dark fraternity hallways,  
experimental beverages made you  
fight against Friday, Saturday  
nights. I know.

I'm sorry for Spleen expanding  
to three times its size,  
pressing lewdly against you,  
mononucleosis over.

You balked then, too.

I should say that your lobes  
are incredible, filtering filth,  
only aching occasionally,  
when you grow weary of me.

I should say many more, but  
words fail me as you never do  
or haven't yet.

So: thank you, Liver,  
for the last twenty-two years,  
and cheers.

Mastering Biology  
*For all the earthworms and Dr. Amspoker*

I.

they arise from  
mesoderm  
ectoderm  
endoderm

evolved from blastula  
to you

developmental brethren,  
we share sororal bonds

though you smash  
their multiple hearts  
crush their minute brains  
grind their fleshy intestines

you do not differ  
as vastly as you fathom

II.

I am no longer among those who lugged  
the text for months, who spilled  
gram stain on wafer-thin pages, who took  
Girardia Tigrina from the lab as pets

I survived the course through sleepless  
nights, spent dreamless days poring  
over manuals, photographs, microscopes—

Memories are deep in dura mater now—

but I can't help but notice flailing  
earthworms helpless, stretched on sidewalk

I still cringe when I see opalescent segments  
and remember Dr. Amspoker hunched in evergreen  
shorts, no shoes, chalk falling from his pockets,

plucking sodden, slimy bodies from concrete  
lovingly placing them in grass,  
a father lifting a child from traffic-ridden street

## Hippocratic Oath I

holding the scalpel in your palm  
there is no right answer  
but many wrong ones      pulsing  
just beneath the surface  
layered      in sinews      in brittle  
bone      in silky organs      precious

remember the oath that guides  
the covenant anchors your feet  
to tile      proceed      flay away skin  
peel muscle like pith  
preserve nerve at all costs  
continue steadily      as those who  
came before you      persist  
this fragile second      you fully  
understand *primum non nocere*

continue

## Hippocratic Oath: II

Fulfill this covenant:

Respect those physicians in whose steps you walk,  
& share knowledge with those who follow.

Benefit the sick.

Remember the art of medicine.

Warmth, sympathy, & understanding  
outweigh knife or drug.

Respect patients' privacy:  
their problems are not for world to know.

Tread with care in matters of life and death.

Save a life.

It is within your power to take a life—  
do not play at God.

Remember, do not treat a fever chart,  
a cancerous growth,  
but a sick human being.

Care adequately for the sick.

Prevent disease—  
prevention is preferable to cure.

Remember obligations to human beings,  
sound of mind and body as well as infirm.

Do not violate this oath.

Enjoy life and art.

Preserve traditions of your calling  
& experience healing of those who seek your help.

## Misunderstanding

Perched over a leathery  
Bible, she answered  
her phone with:  
*Is there hope?*

Perhaps I was hopeful,  
on the forty-seventh  
anniversary of the first  
heart transplant,  
that the woman's phone call  
would be about hearts.

I pictured pulsing vessels  
and throbbing spasms  
of muscle the size  
of a baseball, fresh  
oxygenated blood  
seeping into organs,  
somber smile of the  
slowly awakening  
patient.

Containing my  
breath in rungs of my  
trachea, I hovered,  
hopeful like a child,  
as she began speaking  
with someone

about her car.

Emergency

ischemic                    blood blocked  
from    brain    simple    no fault  
but clot        sclerosed    hard blow  
scattered    neurons       seeking    O2  
life                            knowledge

hemorrhagic :: gray matter red  
:: blooming sulcus, gyrus :: will it  
graffiti wernicke's area, broca's? :: throbbing  
speech :: inert tongue :: pulsing  
language :: gum pink in laryngeal folds

                          maybe it is            slender  
                          hippocampus            whose            neck  
is broken            fragments            scattering            like  
quicksilver                    toxic                    fleeting

lover's mouth            dog fur            violets                                    Irish  
  
                          tea    child's touch  
  
                          fear    failed exam  
  
beer foam                                    stitches in knee                                    flushing first fish  
  
                          slipping    freed  
                          animal

f  
  
r  
m e m o r y  
e  
d

## Neuron

it is first you, and last you, neuron,  
nebulous fingers lacing, branching  
deep in gelatinous brain, knitting

gently out from the spinal cord,  
threading through the body, down  
into fingertips and toes.

the electricity of vitality  
thrums through your quiet  
highways, fast and faster,

messengers of the body  
signaling pain or pleasure,  
heat or cold, lover or enemy.

how much easier are things for you  
when you are young and new.  
dimming of your power, your

inevitable breakdown, your  
electrofrequency glitches are  
quietly devastating.

Through your eventual decay  
pieces of personhood dissolve,  
though not always in death—



## Kidney Failure

Seeing them now, my muscles  
curl taut, my nerves zing, my  
blood surges. They do  
look like shriveled beans  
attached to multicolored  
thread, knotted clumps of  
hard cheese, unformed  
clusters of listless, fleshy  
cells. What must it  
be like to be so close  
to death it flavors  
your tongue— the kidneys  
have given up, *failed*.

Such a strong word,  
so many implications—  
they've simply grown  
weary and halted, waiting  
to catch breath, waiting  
to sieve waste  
again as always, waiting,  
as we are, for something  
to change.

## Aftermath

Eating a sandwich at 11:32 a.m.,  
tiny ruby soldiers of platelets  
in rubbery vessels of your  
brain halted, suddenly stacking  
upon each other, sticking like  
slick sluice of icicles.

Pushing vessels with  
strength of gods, cheesecloth  
-thin tissue tore like a wet  
paper sack, or a dewy spider  
web in delicate spindly  
fingers of dawn.

Crimson blossomed across  
gray terrain of brain, slathering  
flossy nerves with erythrocytes,  
until you took a bite of your  
sandwich, or tried to, and the  
left half of your face was soft

unresponsive as wax. A  
nurse sucking down soup a  
few tables down scooped you  
up in her arms and delivered  
you like a child to a doctor whose  
name you now cannot pronounce.

The knot of vessels and platelets  
nestled firmly beneath your  
cerebellum is thick embroidery  
on MRIs, indelible cluster of pins  
in the pincushion of your brain—  
damage is inevitable, but you

have fought worse fights.

## Rheumatoid Arthritis

I was seventeen when her diagnosis was clear—swollen, erythematous wrists and ankles and knees and hands betrayed her body one by one. Walking the white sands in Florida beside my Grandmom was like pulling a cart of watermelons with square wheels.

Cemented joints and the painful unhinging of movement caused her disease to coruscate in the sun bright as Bahamian oceans. The tests came back negative and I questioned whether they were even performed. I knew she was a textbook case

and panicked, picturing the sculpted statue of my grandmother, unmoving. Then I remembered the .1% — the miniscule group for whom RA serum tests were negative no matter what. Inflammation persisted, grew to be a monster clawing at her independence,

her freedom fading grain by grain by grain. Her hands could no longer spread the delicate apricot nail polish she favored, could no longer shape her renowned tea cakes, could no longer turn the wafer-thin pages of her worn bible. I'm not sure she believes she's ill, even

though it's been years since she lived the way she used to, and she still resists her "poison" chemotherapy pills which allow her to continue ambulating. I paint her nails now, and roll out her teacakes, and help her wrestle through the pages of her bible, and I know she feels guilty—

## Macular Degeneration

When I look into his eyes, faded and gold-flecked, I hardly notice it. His movements do not change, he does not stumble or squint, there is no visible element of blindness. His compact frame does not sway during evening jaunts to find his hunting dog. I would forget about

the fact that his world is gently closing in, teardrop by teardrop, if not for needle day. Prone on the exam table, curled fists and taut muscles, he is unafraid. Numbing drops do not faze him quickly enough. His eye is opened up, peeled back like blistered skin,

and the hair-thin needle is driven in. The blossom of blood pooling against the gold curve of the retina is halted. No discussion, no hint of empathy. He doesn't complain, even as bloody bubbles appear the next morning, buds of needle's evidence blooming in his

tear duct, Dali-like. When I check on him, he smiles and loads me full of lies: he's not in pain, he's not worried, the injection didn't really hurt. In his endearing Choctaw way, he grumbles that the shots don't help him, but we

both know he would rather be in pain than in a life of darkness. He will never admit that being 82 is a terrifying tightrope trick without a safety net. He is like his ancestors, people who endured the Trail of Tears, facing death with his chest out and fist raised.

## It is (Not) My Cancer

it's merely a mass, throbbing punch that pulses under  
the fissure of my frontal bone, only a heavy hand that  
clenches and releases, only ruthless and unyielding.

I do not need to know its name, its regal title, its pink  
gram-stained photo, glorified in neuropathophysiology  
texts, the blight of neurosurgeons' wary scalpels.

I do not sit still and wait for it to curl its flossy fingers  
into my sulci and gyri, brushing away like dust elements  
of my self, my memories, unnecessary and unwanted.

I do not want my husband to die alone, lingering at my  
grave after my body ceases fighting as it will. I do not  
want to leave him in the lover's lurch. if only it was for

two, this tumor, as poison and dagger for Romeo and Juliet.  
it's not my cancer, not mine, no precious possession  
no element of my being, no unexpected treasure

—but it is mine. Mine to carry, to endure, to fret about as  
only those with unmade beds and company can. I wonder  
in dreamless sleep whether it will die first, or if I will—

## NICU Lullaby

coiled tubes sprout from you  
like buds on potatoes,  
up, around, lacing over your chest  
beneath your nose  
around your silky ear

you are new,  
untarnished,  
merely days old,

but your cries are feeble  
your grip on my finger is slight  
you cannot breathe without aid

you are helpless

it doesn't look good  
they say  
these surgeons who tote you  
around from OR to OR

like you could shatter  
and you could shatter

every second it seems  
new seeds of tumor  
are planted

and the surgeons don't know  
how much you can take

and  
neither do you

and  
neither do I

and it is worse than death  
this not knowing  
this purgatory

it is worse than death

## Music

And then, as pink noses  
of tulips poke up  
through spring soil,

as rain slugs through  
veins of winter-rusted  
guttering,

as warm wind tugs  
away detritus and softens  
the soil again,

you will make it. You will  
shudder awake  
as in movies,

inhale and smile,  
spitting out bad  
memories of past

months like  
watermelon seeds.  
You will not

remember decaying  
nerves, plaque-filled  
arteries that smothered

you, heart that stopped  
beating three times and  
shocked back to life.

You will not  
remember  
all of us

clustered around  
your bed no matter  
what, holding fast

to each other  
like thin, feeble  
links of chain.

What you'll never  
forget is your music—  
fingers falling

on keys in slumber  
and when you're awake,  
Debussy and Bach

and Rachmaninoff,  
score after score  
nestled into gelatinous

lobes of your brain.  
You will not forget  
it because it is you—

your body can unlearn  
its own heartbeat,  
its breathing, its tongue,

but it won't  
forget the music,  
never the music.



## Patient Transport

When you see her, you're  
drawn to her teeth:  
fine misshapen slivers  
of calcium bicarbonate  
slanting in ruddy gums,  
incisors angled out  
like a viper, you think,  
but no, not quite.

More like a rabbit,  
small, blunt teeth  
the color of cream,  
smooth from chewing foliage.

But when you least expected it,  
there she was, up, suddenly shaken  
in her bed of itchy blue sheets,  
perturbed by your moving her.

OR 3, you think, or radiology?  
Oncology? Neuro?

You can't remember now  
where you're headed  
as the oxygen tank jars  
against your knee

the prick of sweat is on your palms  
you stumble over tacky linoleum,  
wheels screeching,  
patient writhing, and *snap*—

faint vein in her temple presses out  
her pale lips pucker  
teeth lock in her set jaw

your arm just centimeters from it—

## Medicine I

when it seeped away  
among microscope slides  
scalpel blades  
latex gloves  
there was relief

freedom from biology was decadent,  
an opulent gem I'd always wanted,  
free wind separating my eyelashes

elements of it dropped away like parts  
of decomposing body:

ear / espresso

finger / flashcards

toe / tests

I was neither lost nor found,  
pausing to savor purgatory

## Medicine II

Then:  
over the bridge,

falling

falling

falling

head split like blistered skin,  
thud against stone, blood  
congealing, spreading  
emergency against pitch cloak  
of night & only the stars knew  
only the stars knew & his sister  
flew in from Russia  
to sign away last  
pulses  
to end it—  
to end him—

### Medicine III

His memorial tree is fragile, bearing  
only three or four leaves, no fruit.

Passing it along the sidewalk no  
one pauses to admire  
its persistence to live.

Nobody mentions how his life poured out  
like sap as we stood by, waiting.

Words are limpets clinging to nothing.

*To Ruslan*

Perhaps I could have seen it coming  
the creek bed  
the blood

but I never thought it would be you—  
blond hair   slight frame   generic  
kindness   Russian accent like steel against  
soft Southern tongues of our college  
forgettable   mostly—

and yet  
you persist through the sunniness of my memory  
you grow through branches of your memorial  
tree   Bradford Pear – crimson against crisp  
autumn   steadfast through winter

when your fragile frame was found  
amidst frosted gray slabs of rocks  
glassy riverbeds   an unfurling braid  
of persistent weeds   it was 4:31 a.m.—

perhaps when your sister got the call from the States  
she suspected something  
but not this  
not you  
not respirators and hemodialysis  
not *no one left*  
not *we need a decision*

who could blame her—she never met you  
until you were tangled in a knot in the creek bed  
she never knew you existed until  
she decided  
you did not exist anymore

perhaps   then   this is for you  
an address to that handful of classes  
we spent together   to the smoke of you  
that lingers still   to your victories that  
remain in our throats   golden

unsung

Seeking Forgiveness - Sincerely, Stryker ABG II

It wasn't that I didn't have the best intentions,  
because I did. Tailored to your individual frame,

weak and aged though it was, I hugged the curve of  
your hip, nestling into your acetabulum, cup-shaped,

worn thin, brittle pink glass. I evened out the pain  
of polio that gripped you when you were just a child,

but you never noticed. Only the surgeon paid such  
close attention. Then the polyethylene cushion,

gummy and unwavering, your final hope of walking  
unassisted. (Save my assistance.) Next the

rounded femoral head, metal pressing quietly against the  
cushion, replacing elements of hip that have disintegrated

into fragments, bone grating bone. Finally, the irreversible  
femoral stem, the anchor of your gentle weight, cemented

into you as if it were the buttery marrow you were born with.  
I never meant to make you fragile, flaking bones or blood

mingled with metal. *Metallosis*, your lawyer explains,  
*destruction of soft tissue. Toxic.* How could I have known

I would not withstand your body's wear? I was revolutionary,  
invincible.

## This is Dying

Holding my arm out for needles  
like leeches to draw my blood,  
puckering their nasty mouths over  
fading lavender veins, I am  
tucked neatly beneath itchy  
sheets and feeble quilts.

People in scrubs come in,  
sometimes quietly, asking my  
name, handing me tissue-thin  
cups of pills I don't recognize  
to swill down with tepid water.

Soap operas and news stations fuzzily  
fill the overhead TV screen, there  
is nothing to read, no music,  
no one to talk to.

In the blue silence and hum  
of fluorescent light, I pen mental  
notes to those I'll leave behind,  
those I hated more than anyone  
and a handful of those I still love.

So this is dying—  
pouring out my old blood in vials,  
swallowing pills to challenge  
pain I no longer feel, counting  
each tick of the clock, rationing  
out seconds until I have finally  
used them up.

I understand now why so  
many begged God to take  
them while they slept.

Six-Month Elegy  
*To Hershel*

When we first learned it had spread—  
the cancer— like butter on hot bread  
through you, to the very roots of your  
being, we knew.

When we asked how much time  
you had left, you said *six months*  
without batting an eye, calm,  
tying an old scarf around your neck.

Quiet strength, kind eyes the color  
of smoke, optimism darting through  
your veins— we believed you had  
enough to fight it off, enough

spit and grit to overcome it  
like so many before you, like  
those you knew well. So when  
the call came through,

a lazy November evening,  
unseasonably warm, when we  
were just starting to wash  
dinner plates with apple

soap, we knew. Bricks on our  
lungs knocked the oxygen  
right out, pins pulled from  
the seams of darkness,

heavy curtains of knowing  
dropping over us and under  
us and around our feet. From the  
beginning, we knew,

but it was too soon, as always—  
too few days left with your laughter,  
your stories, your lithe hunting  
dog, and your compassion—

we knew



## In Want of Grief

I was too young to remember much,  
but discovering glossy photographs  
of us knocks the dust off the memories

you, spine curled in old age,  
pink nail polish,  
eyes glassy with cataracts,

me, four and hovering over a big brown  
turtle we found together in your garden,

a gift, you told me, a chance to slow down

it's new to me now, teetering between  
this nostalgia and happiness, crystalline,  
fragmented

remember when we sorted your thousands  
of buttons  
red  
the size of a dime  
jeweled  
glass

you were invincible to me then  
in my youth  
in your youth

you were invincible

And After  
*To my grandmother*

There are still dark velvet days,  
moments of laughter punctuated  
by tears dropping into bathroom  
sinks, my hands holding together  
the pieces of me, stitching and  
re-stitching the fraying fibers  
that loosen in hot summers  
when I eat the ruby richness of  
watermelon and spit out a seed  
and there you are, spine curled  
against your age, standing there  
in a dress the color of jade, ever  
a lady, teaching me how to blow  
bubbles, or showing tenderness  
to a slow-passing turtle in your  
garden.

November always was the time  
of year you loved best – I remember you  
now in the little victories of an  
omelet, or in a mason jar  
of parti-colored buttons, or  
in a sheaf of blue sequined  
fabric, even in the hinges  
of a tiny gold safety pin  
in a little crystal dish.

## Hypochondriac in December

On nights when frost claws at windows  
stars blend with glass  
I am beneath a blanket,  
pushing my cooling blood  
through my veins

Daddy always says, simply,  
*if you're cold put on more clothes*

but tonight I am fleece  
and woolen boot socks

with freezing solitude  
I wonder idly whether my thyroid  
has given up

(Intolerance to cold  
is a symptom.)

I see the butterfly gland  
with silky iridescent body  
crushed  
sparkling

with cruel fingers of ice  
clutching frail anatomy  
I wonder  
whether it is some form of cancer  
that cools me  
whether it is eighty degrees or twenty

perhaps just poorly shaped erythrocytes  
with oxygen slipping away  
in muscled vessels

Symptoms nestle into neuron  
after neuron

until I am shivering  
with understanding

I am dying,  
tremors my final expenditure of energy

my body is giving up.  
and then the hope burns beneath  
my skin and I think,

I am healthy after all, just a little cold

## Wisdom Teeth I

I do not want to do it.

My brother went before me, shimmying with ease  
under the knife and out again. I'm not so sure

they have to *come out or my orthodontia will be for nothing*—  
Calcium bicarbonate, twisted-yarn-nerves, curled-wire-vessels—  
my wisdom teeth are probably exquisite. I'll never know.

When my name is called, my breath catches. I see stars.  
No, not stars – blood, the electrocautery tool, a horrific  
IV dripping slowly, water torture behind my head. The nurse

places the band of rubber on my arm and my pulse slugs slowly,  
thick Elmer's glue. Prodding fingers do not comfort me. *Breathe*,  
the nurse says, *No IV until your heart rate slows or you'll pass out*.

(please pass out)

then: mask, heavy as wet cement, falls like a hand over my mouth  
and nose, steaming with pale NO<sub>2</sub>, suffocating me. It isn't working.

The nurse jibes: just breathe. This is what drowning feels like. Nitrous  
oxide like wet fur prickles in my lungs, an itchy caterpillar curling up,  
my candle wax body pouring into leather beneath me. The nurse coaxes

veins to the surface, taps, testing before: *just a pinch*. The last thing  
I remember before sinking completely is:

I did everything I could.

## Wisdom Teeth II

Before me, my brute of a brother went under  
the knife and back, unfazed, teeth plucked in bloom—  
calcium bicarbonate bits and bone, asunder  
in some silver tray, some sterile room.  
My wisdom teeth are probably exquisite, plumes  
of nerves and vessels twisting deep—  
I'll never know. Now, I'm told, it's time for sleep

and I see stars –no, blood– torture under  
low gray ceilings, sticky chair. The nurse resumes,  
tourniquet around my arm, clinching the thunder  
in my veins, thick blood in halting flumes  
beneath pale skin. *Just a pinch* and I assume  
nitrous oxide's next, like prickling fur that creeps  
in my lungs. The last thing I remember: not a peep

will come out, but I did everything I could

## Feet

gentle curve of bone,  
cubes of calcium nestled  
against one another, long  
spindles of spongy hardness  
whose official names stick  
in the throat like paste:  
navicular, cuneiform, calcaneus—  
muscle and nerve threaded thickly  
through like yarn, like ribbon —  
thin layer of bubbling adipose,  
cushion from powdery gravel  
or packed snow or hot red dirt —  
all these pieces, all these bits of  
glass and lead, press together  
to form the stained-glass wonder  
of the feet that continue to tread,  
continue to bring you nearer to me.

“If a lion chases you to the bank of a river filled with crocodiles, you will leap into the water, convinced you have a chance to swim to the other side.”

*-Christiaan Barnard*

Forty-seven years ago, you leapt into water,  
dodging crocodiles until soft mud of riverbank  
squished beneath your fingers.

Blessing of a brain-dead woman provided  
the heart for your miracle, courage for your feet  
to leave the ledge. You did the unthinkable:

plucked a young heart from its ribcage,  
held it, paralyzed, before urging it to beat  
in another body, to sift other blood.

Now look at us. We are moving forward in the  
murky water, sliding past rough scales and yellow  
teeth, emerging victorious with mud in our hands.



## Part II

## Little Girl and Pig

Pig is pulling me along Alka-Seltzer gravel,  
poking his nose under chicken wire and

hunting for a snack. Why Pig led me through  
this tall dry grass, I don't know, but I follow.

We're partners, me and Pig. I stole him, the  
only one with a black nose, from the litter

before Daddy sold 'em all. Daddy was spittin'  
mad at me at first, but I convinced him Pig was

special, not fit for bacon after all. We're partners,  
me and Pig. We have the understanding that I'm

his favorite person and he's my favorite animal.  
I made his leash outta old saddle leather and twisted

wire, and it keeps us together no matter what  
Pig finds. Daddy always says someday we're gonna

have a lot of money or a great Easter ham outta Pig,  
but I hush him up. Pig's mine and I'm his, and

ain't nothin' gonna mess with that. Because maybe  
I'll die first, and save him a spot in Heaven.

Who knows.

We're partners, me and Pig.

## Why I Have Wildflowers

I placed colored bottles with open  
mouths upside down onto sapling branches  
of chinaberry trees when I was small.

Daddy lifted me in his strong arms,  
holding me with muscle—soft  
whiskers scraped my shoulder

callused hands placed me among  
distant evening stars. That was the  
only time I remember him sober.

Mama and Little Sister are all I have  
now—this falling-down house,  
the old bottle trees. Those bottles

mock when I pass, my father's prized  
possessions. He left us only empty bottles  
when he was living and they're all we have

now. We gather wildflowers, Little Sister  
and me, in sinking August sun, oily  
orange clouds, claustrophobic fields,

plucking the prettiest. Little Sister clutches  
them and I walk her down  
the imaginary aisle to the cemetery.

We gather wildflowers for our father's grave.  
I would rather leave his bottles there.

## Making a Date

*How about dinner?* you ask,  
Old South slipping from you  
drop by drop, like blood.

I worry in dirty, broken-down  
shoes, tattered, grease-splattered  
dress that Mama made to fit me

just-so. My hair is uncombed, my  
skin dewy with heavy heat, my nose  
itches as you saunter over to me.

I look down, think about other  
women you have asked to dinner.  
You just wait while I say nothing.

You are still in your work clothes,  
folded cap in your back pocket,  
grease beneath your flat fingernails.

Sleeves rolled up, you open  
your tired-out mouth and ask  
your same tired-out phrase:

*How about dinner?* You rest  
dark palm on jutting hip,  
holding yourself back,

wait. You don't sweat a drop  
in the Georgia heat. Don't  
worry about anything. You just wait.

## Free to Fly

I am small. Mama calls me “Baby  
Bluebird” and today, I have wings.

It took three Sundays for Mama to  
make my wings. She sewed from  
the first red licks of Southern sun in  
the morning to the first drops of silver  
stars in the evening. “They’re flimsy,  
now,” she warns. “Don’t you go  
jumpin’ offa things, thinkin’ you can  
fly, you understand?” I nod, but I  
don’t listen because it doesn’t matter.  
I am wearing my new dress, pin-tucked  
and pleated, washed and ironed—it  
smells like sunshine, soft as cotton  
candy clouds in the sky, and I know  
I am beautiful. Mama made me a hat,  
too, just like the butter-colored one she  
wears to church every Sunday. Hers is  
just a hat, but mine feels like a crown.  
Today, I am not just a bird, but a princess.

And today,  
I am free to fly.

## Brothers

We are both small young  
buds in soil not yet  
grown not yet weather

battered remember when  
Mama bought you that hat  
stupid green hat with the bow on front

and I laughed as we laugh now  
in heavy heat in greasy old linen shirts  
the same color as rain clouds

here we laugh and share  
some secret  
till we fall asleep

let's stay this close forever—  
not broken down  
not worn just laughing

## Window-Shopping

I'm passing the same sheet of glass  
again, the panes facing out to the street,  
streakless and pure, shielding an array  
of dresses I dream about:

the blue one that fits just so

the red silk one that holds my waist like hands

the celery-green one that dances over my knees like water

the black one, the one with sequins, beads, heavy as night and just as inky

how can I possibly choose which dress to dream about,  
which to wrap in tan paper and tie with string,  
which to unravel over the years at Christmas parties,  
which to slide into for nights out on the cobbled streets,  
which to spill champagne on,  
which to wear like armor,

which to wear when I finally leave you  
for good

## Mama Says

Hold this, mama says  
& I do; wads of lace  
with grass stains growing  
deep, dirty red-white anklets  
with holes at the heels,  
scuffed plastic white shoes.  
Soles worn out, mama says  
& I think of every Sunday  
all my life, all the shoes,  
all the time spent butt-in-pews—

Stay still, mama says  
& I don't; she tugs back  
curls from my face,  
wrapping them in a bow  
pure as detergent flakes,  
bass-belly-white, clean.  
Don't forget, mama says,  
looking for my parasol,  
clutching paw-paw's bible  
to her chest.

we walk the little dirt path  
down to church before the morning  
sun is even up & I wonder why  
the parasol, & why the white clothes  
in the dirt, & why we try so hard

why? I ask mama  
& mama settles on the pew  
with paw-paw's bible,  
silent



## Old Rooster

Watermelons, yellow-green with summer dust.  
An old rooster, slowly sauntering.  
Pots of clotted roots, decaying thyme  
and rosemary, fraying in July heat.

Curling sycamores with low-hanging boughs.  
Thin shelves hovering in slanting angles,  
tipping this jar and that. Rotting, vacant  
barrels that held who-knows-what who-knows-when.

Bleached, deep wood with gnarled edges polished  
by winter freeze and spring sprinkle and autumn gust  
and summer swelter. Gentle weeds tangling their roots  
in the flaky dirt as if planted on purpose, poking  
their noses up through Alka-Seltzer gravel. Soft

metal mosquito screens pulled from some porch  
door with tears like old denim knees. Plucked  
peaches covered in sticky fur and contusions  
the size of dimes.

And you: exhausted bones, weathered work shirt,  
and thick suspenders, resting and sweating  
on the shoddy porch your granddaddy made  
with his own two hands and nails he got by blood  
and tears. You, with your roadmap wrinkles that

tell the story of dismay and betray happiness. You,  
with your laughing eyes and their crinkled corners,  
your graying eyelashes and misty irises from years  
of work in midday Atlanta heat. You are youth  
and age at once, sitting here on your porch.

You are remembering and forgetting, layering and chipping away, weaving and ripping  
seams.

You are then and there, here and now, gray and easy, just sitting on your porch, melting  
in summertime Georgia, watching hot dusk set in.

## Lilies on Graves

It is not good soil,  
not rich, not fertile.  
Not fit for deceased  
to disintegrate into, turning  
bone to dust, marrow to worm.

And yet: there they are,  
white faces cheerful,  
green arms outstretched,  
thick clusters poking  
through salt-white pebbles.

I wonder whether they were  
planted there, gum-stick-leaves  
fading in shadows over  
dead, leaning against cold  
marble headstones.

Or maybe they grew from an  
abandoned flower of another grave,  
traveling by wind, sown by  
tears. Maybe no one knows,  
and this is the beauty.

## If It Rains

at least I'll be ready

wearing clothes I don't  
mind muddy      old

shoes      soft-  
soled      steady

fists clenched against  
wet      newspaper

crown perched over  
my curls      ready

if it rains

Eulogy  
*For Amiri Baraka*

You, man, with furrowed brow  
eyes sinking, lead, into  
souls of those you pass on the street—  
we'll miss you. Man, we'll miss your  
jaw jutting, spitting truth out,

medicine, boxing words as gifts  
for ears and eyes of the eager.  
We'll miss your zest, man, your  
outbursts of fervor for a people,  
a language, a history, an era.

Your words, man. Your words  
will pulse our synapses,  
haunt our idle memory,  
grab us, inspire us, color our  
very blood.

Rest, now. Rest, and live on, man.

## To the Pecan Pie

This is my great-great-granny's recipe,  
and I can see her tiny little almond nails  
poking the crust into a pan, ungreased  
in those gold days, pouring glassy syrup

and pecans split open, glistening,  
always a Southern splash of vanilla  
or bourbon, always a little too much  
butter. It's all there in the pan and the fine

thread of language, the gift from my grandmom  
to my dad, to me, our love of turning words  
over in our mouths like ribbon candy,  
chewing gum. There is no recipe etched

by hand into parchment paper, no typewriter's  
freckled ink on onion skin, but simply  
a little velvet bag of words, ingredients,  
instructions, mixed up with the wooden spoon

and served with a little whipped cream. Perhaps  
the indelible nature of this tradition— the curls  
of it through my grandmom's DNA— is the tragedy now,  
as the pie sticks firmly in the pan, pecan soldiers

anchored steadfastly in their crusty trenches. My  
grandmom's delicate hands pluck at the first  
terrible piece, the blackened pan mocking her,  
the sticky filling staring up at her and it is her first

defeat. My granddad still eats a piece, quietly chewing  
over the years of wonderful pies, prodding the  
charred crust with his spoon.

Unpublished Fragment

I.

I believe in  
neither  
common sense  
nor paradox

whether it was  
wind bends  
blade of grass  
or  
blade of grass  
bends wind

my plane has  
no grass  
no place  
it has  
no wind

moods without false  
tempests & uncertain colors

good God there is  
no happiness  
anywhere

II.

crab that stayed  
behind in the  
chowder  
made believe he  
was emperor

it was brave  
with brass  
music, pictures

existence  
of parallels?  
parallels

resuscitate  
wind

ruffled bird

eyebrow for  
dusk

beautiful music  
expiring

Glass Blowers  
*For Chihuly*

shaped by your small hands  
like dough, piercing purple lances  
ceiling, red blooms on walls, blue

spins in circles on floors. bowls,  
boats brimming with fragile orbs,  
blossoms, curls, up above clouds,

delicate watchmen hovering.  
with every gentle curve of woman,  
taut muscle of man, you stretch fire

onto glass, spreading gold heat,  
molding and shaping, burning crystal  
emblems. pieces bright as trees, strong

as ice, fine filaments, hair-thin, linger  
over you, meet your glazed gaze, bob  
in water beneath your feet, glittering—



## Mint-Green Balloon, Deflating

I found it with the gentle curve of my heel  
in carpet the color of red dirt, stepping over  
its body, unknowing. It wasn't bigger than

a kernel of corn, bitter dark green of mid-  
winter firs, petrified. Its pale sunken throat  
was a mint-green balloon forgotten at a

child's birthday party, air quietly easing out,  
flimsy body deflating. Thinking maybe it was  
a button, perhaps a stray bead of unpoped

corn, possibly a beloved bauble, I picked it up.  
It was curled inward, as though bracing for a  
tempest, tiny body folding in like the crisp

corners of oxford shirts. It was not long before  
my inner frog-hoarding child recognized its  
familiar frame and flung it away somewhere,

horrified. I am not sure which I regret more:  
my fleeting moment of irreverence for nature  
or having discovered it at all.

## Red Orchestra

Holding close the bow is just the start  
of it; the folding crimson tapestry  
of sound & note, piano cracked with  
chords flooding out, filled with teal crescendos  
& pale keys. The cello stretched in sinew—  
fine metallic strands jutting over spruce—  
is next to pierce the pit, depth of alto  
notes dripping down & budding up, glossy, dark.

Finally: music humming like flies, or stinging  
with peals & pitches, or bellowing to the girl  
with hands curled tight in the mezzanine, turning  
composers over on her tongue

*Bartók, Berlioz, Verdi, Vivaldi*

gold edges of the score unraveling, red velvet fraying—

Somonka For Lovers

*Come, be my q-tip  
sharer, swallow the sun with  
me at dusk. Challenge  
me to crave you as the owl  
craves the sky, stars, the moon.*

Freedom from you is  
bourbon in my veins, fiery  
tongue that sears my skin.  
Forget me or forget me  
not. It doesn't matter now.

## Native

They are not  
unfamiliar  
people in colorful  
textiles with dark  
beautiful skin

the drum that  
urges us on  
urges all  
we share  
syncopated

heartbeat of will  
clench  
in our  
teeth  
tradition

even dirt  
we stand on is  
the same—  
red dirt  
color of blood

## Acts of Love

how many heartbeats do  
we have left to share  
before it all stops

we both know it will

we're where neither of us  
thought to be

linking pulses

how many friends  
take up money  
losing bets on us

how many days has it been  
since we were unconvinced

how many seconds have  
passed since I kissed you  
and can I kiss you now

## Christmas Sleigh

Yesterday, my dog bumped the  
Christmas tree, shaking a bounty  
of skin-thin porcelain ornaments  
from flocked boughs. I didn't notice,

at first, faded plastic pieces scattered  
on carpet in front of the fireplace. But  
I stumbled over an antler, and my heart  
stuttered—

gilded green and red and yellow parcels  
had tumbled out of the sleigh,  
Santa was nowhere to be found. Only  
two white reindeer, missing antlers,

caught my attention. One was unscathed,  
one had a crushed face with unmistakable  
dent of canine incisor.  
Clutching injured deer in my fingers, I

recalled bouncing their spindly white  
legs against the fireplace bricks when  
I was little, how you'd always help  
me name them and decorate with them

each Christmas. You have been gone  
for many years now, and I do not  
forget you until I have to, like when  
your sausage ball recipe turns up

unexpectedly or a holiday fudge  
tin clatters to the floor in the pantry.  
Holding those deer, placing tiny  
parcels back in the sleigh and hoping

Mom wouldn't notice, I try to  
forget how much you loved these.  
I feel the weight of generations  
and the delicate prints of your fingers.

## Tanka on the Blues

The day lady died  
is stuck—tripping raw record.  
Gnawing passionate  
phantasm on stage, biting  
strange fruit and spitting out seeds.

## Once

you were my ideal enigma.  
your sure-firing synapses never quit,  
never slackened. you drew me to you  
with your incredible mind  
and selfless soul—  
we were like metal to magnet then.

you should have been  
a surgeon  
or pianist  
or sculptor  
because your hands were perfect  
with tender touch and  
all the quiet strength  
of your father.  
(you are more like him than you will ever know.)

I never thanked you  
for holding my hand right  
(because we agreed there was a wrong way)  
I never thanked you  
for tucking my hair behind my ear  
gently, like a father  
I never thanked you  
for letting me dream  
with my ear to your heart  
night after night after night

you were steady and unyielding  
like the white heat of the July  
when I left you.

I am sorry that we were not  
invincible  
that I never ate the breakfast  
you made me  
that I clung to you  
in the teeth of the night  
until the first silver fingers of dawn



## Sea at Storm

curling crests  
unfurling  
eyelid-white caps  
salty, black waters  
pounding down  
sand  
ambition  
emotions  
zygote of sound  
splittingsplittingsplitting –  
body of salt  
sediment  
broken bottles  
bones and creatures  
flesh  
foam  
rape of sea-vessels  
their captains  
cold  
unfeeling  
relentless  
I am  
drowning

## At the Piano

You are young, tiny  
on weathered bench,  
curls askew,  
plaid jumper bunching  
as you kick your feet  
in time with  
smattering of notes

you pluck keys  
on your grandmother's piano

the cushion does not dip  
beneath your slight weight

you make great effort to pull  
notes from keys

you do not know the difference  
between major and minor

you do not know how  
to read notes

but feel pulsing rhythm  
emotion  
in music you play

your bare baby feet  
do not reach the pedals yet.

what you do know  
at your green-sapling-age  
is that your heart  
loves

music you make  
smooth ivory keys  
spindles of onyx  
that prick up to meet you  
shine of pedals  
under lamplight

Elegy in G#

it was a challenge at first  
lingering on glassy high notes  
longer than the fermatas  
allowed, air escaping my lungs  
over the sticky black-floored stage  
over the audience

it was indelible and delectable  
to devour notes one by one  
to feel the music instead of blood  
pulsing in time with the orchestra

a pulse captured in yellowing pages  
of *La Traviata* and *Carmen* and *Romeo and Juliet*  
a persistent thrum in the arteries  
over my collarbones, a spreading heat—

but the way I remember it  
the leather of it just wore away  
grain slipping down  
slick gold color of it  
fading on my hands  
collecting under my nails

the canary was out of the cage  
as my grandmother said  
and off it went with  
a faceless tenor  
and a dusty crushed velvet aria

## Perhaps This is Why the Shelves are Bowing

It happens easily, you understand:  
you thumb the pages of a familiar name,  
feeling for some title that prods you,  
searching for words unexpectedly  
strung together, knots of brilliance.

And you purchase a small collection in any number  
of jewel-tones and metallic letters,  
feeling bright as you slide the bills to the cashier.

You bring it home and get distracted  
with dishes and laundry and sex and TV.

Then you open it: bored and stuck in a snowstorm,  
in the aftermath of icy winter, frozen stillness  
wreaking havoc on your over stimulated self.

You open it,  
feeling the weight of the pages between your fingers,  
feeling the strength of the sharp ink against the creamy paper.

You read a couple of poems, disinterested in Iowa or quilting,  
or the author's grandmother, or whatever the subject.

Until:  
you don't suck the poem down quickly like an oyster,  
hoping not to truly taste it—  
you lick each word carefully,  
enjoying its grit on your tongue,  
savoring its power,  
relishing its honesty.

Maybe the poem isn't about anything but words  
but maybe it strikes you squarely in the cobwebbed  
deepness you avoid on a day-to-day basis, maybe  
it's not the author's grandmother who died but  
your own, and you feel that anguish like a sunburn,  
and your breath sticks in your lungs like cold  
cookie dough, and the tears are real and unending—

## Twenty-Four

December 22, 1989. One of the coldest days—  
no, certainly the coldest day— of the year.

Below-freezing, record-breaking, camera-  
lens-cracking cold. Looking through the

pearl-and-gold album, you'd never know  
that most of the wedding party was very sick.

You'd never know that most of their friends'  
marriages have now disintegrated like wet paper.

You'd never know that the majority of the  
people there have lost their lives or loved ones.

You would probably notice, though, how young  
they were, my parents. She was barely 23, a new

nurse, coruscating in my grandmother's lace wedding  
dress. He wasn't much older, an Air Force officer, knees

quivering in his Christmas-white tuxedo. You would  
notice how their eyes are brighter than stars, how willing

they are to commit to each other for eternity. You would  
see how damn happy they are and really believe in love.

## Ode to Dishwashing

An errant pea floating down  
to the drain is  
insignificant  
and powerful at once,  
proud, verdant,  
rolling with one indented  
side towards the black rubber teeth  
of the disposal,  
hastened by iridescent soap,  
water.

The smell of apple soap  
never grows old,  
steel basin of greasy dishes.  
Chipped, gold-rimmed china,  
mismatched plum mugs,  
a knife the color of Bahamian water,  
an oddly small teapot purportedly  
for tinctures, exotic teas,  
a gentle probing  
of fragrance as I pass.

Perhaps the familiar chap of splitting  
skin over my knuckles, pink, scarred,  
draws me back each day, or perhaps  
the slough of flimsy bristles  
against a saucepan beckons.

Perhaps a stack of vibrant  
sponges my husband bought  
tempts me to rub remnants  
of chicken soup out of a pot.

These things and the stooped  
shoulders of my grandmother,  
her emerald-green patio dress  
hanging loosely over her frame,  
her poised mouth upturned  
and prim platinum hair neatly  
fixed, her small hands curled  
in arthritis over her dishes  
—the same that fill my sink—  
anchor me to the same worn spot

on the gray rug, day after day.

I hear her voice in the water  
splashing down over the pans,  
her rolling, awesome laughter,  
and I'm reminded of a certain  
chocolate milk frenzy six-year-olds  
are prone to. She guided me  
then in cleaning Hershey's syrup  
from the tile floor, the blue-lidded  
plastic cup with bendy straw,  
and finally, a small circular stain from  
a prized shirt—

Drying the last glass takes me right back  
into her kitchen, right back to six  
and chocolate milk. And now I am  
the tiny pea, rolling along with dented side,  
toward the black rubber teeth of evening.

## Reasoning

There is a fly nestled into the white wooden sill in our living room, cozying up nearest the fire, its minute iridescent body gleaming occasionally as it moves, which has not been more than twice in an hour.

Part of me— the part that loves science and hypotheses and electron microscopes—is fascinated by the tiny fly, *musca domestica*, its smoke-colored wings and emerald-black head.

Another part of me— the daughter-in-law ever afraid of the white-glove test— wishes it had never come in (where did it come in?) to land on the windowsill and no doubt spread its germs in our once-clean home. It can spread cholera, salmonella, and dysentery (and others, if my memory serves).

The final part of me— the wife, the dreamer— wonders why it chose our house to settle into, why not our two young neighbors with the perfect boxwood hedges, or the neighbors across the street with the creamy saffron stucco? And why the living room and not the comfortable guest suite or den, or the breakfast nook?

Perhaps it is finally a home after all, boxes unpacked, pillows fluffed, candles burning aimlessly into the indigo hours of the evening— All we needed was our first fly.



## On Chicken

It has never been easy to pluck a Styrofoam tray—  
sick, hospital-tile-blue—  
full of pink chicken breasts from the endless  
rows of meats at the supermarket and place it  
in my cart like many wives and husbands  
and children do, unthinking, silent.  
The recipes alone are not enough to tempt me:  
sour cream chicken enchiladas,  
chicken Kiev, chicken Parmesan  
with fettuccine noodles.

All it takes is the shifting of pink liquid  
in the tray or the glimpse of a vein  
running through one of the breasts  
and I'm back in my 9<sup>th</sup> grade anatomy  
class, viewing tendons and muscle  
tissue beneath a microscope. Even there  
the forceps saved me from touching  
its limp, lifeless form while boys  
with smooth hair and tight shirts flopped  
it easily onto the cutting tray, flaying  
carelessly with scalpels and bare hands,  
laughing.

Now, having wielded both scalpels  
and chicken in my twenty-four years,  
I would much prefer the work  
that accompanies the scalpel,  
the tedium of blade-changes  
and slippery handles to the slimy  
roundness of chicken heaped  
up in a pan, awaiting its final  
roost over a bed of linguine,  
freshly-grated cheese slowly  
growing room temperature.

## After

Gather up your life in coffee tins  
and butter tubs. Your mother made you  
hold fast to the world she penned,

urged you never venture far from kin  
or your tradition. You refused to  
gather up your life in coffee tins,

but rather asked questions of thin  
stars above in midnight blue—  
they hold fast to the world she penned

precisely as she wanted. Now your skin  
will barely hold you together; let the glue  
dry and gather up your life in coffee tins.

You wonder which of the sins  
it was that separated her from you,  
severing fast the world she penned.

Far from now, like her, you'll begin  
to paint old memories with new hues,  
gather up your life in coffee tins,  
hold fast to the world she penned.

## 18: a guide

Go back to Columbia, Missouri,  
fall 2009, nine hours from home  
and amble down the cobblestone  
streets. Pass the record shop on the left  
with smoky dark interior, pass the  
yogurt shop with effervescent color,  
pass the Irish-style pub teeming  
with eager fraternity men. Walk–  
jaywalk– in front of a black Jeep,  
let the driver honk, smack the hood  
once for good measure, continue.

Check your watch once: 9:13 p.m.  
Amble past the bookstore with the faded  
pink sign. Inhale the colder-than-Oklahoma  
frost and hold it in your lungs until  
alveoli prickle. You're almost there.

Approach the neat façade next to the jazz  
and blues bar where some smoky voice  
is drunkenly cutting through the audience,  
don't pause for a moment, walk in. Check  
out the books of tattoos arranged by specific  
artists – leave the one signed by Spike  
on the counter, pick up a maroon leather  
book that could be an old ornithology text.

Flip through the pages of hearts, past the  
flames licking up a bicep, over  
the hundreds of "love" inscriptions  
on wrists and necks and nestled  
in the dip of hipbones. Look up  
at the man you called earlier  
and swallow quietly. Follow him  
to the room in the back and sit up  
on the gray leather. Lean back.

Feel the tip of the felt pen on your nostril–  
not there, but almost–  
take the mirror and mark it yourself.  
He respects that.

Lean back again and feel the steel

tube against the curve of flesh,  
hold your breath, don't look at the  
seven-inch needle hovering over your cheek  
right now, but don't close your eyes.

A lot of people didn't think you could  
do it. That you'd freak out.  
See, you're not freaking out.

Hear the drop of blood fall against  
the leather next to your knee, then  
another, then *wow, you're a bleeder*  
then the ripping of hermetic packaging,  
then rough gauze.

Admire the ring in the left nostril  
just once –you'll look again later–  
and follow him back out of the room.  
Sign your check and almost pass out–

don't worry, he will stop you from  
hitting the prized guitars in the case  
behind you and settle you onto the couch  
where you explored the tattoo books.  
He will bring you orange juice and wait.

You will be grateful when you share this  
story with your rebellious 18-year-old  
someday.

As it approaches faster than a sailfish  
twenty-five is not the champagne-popping  
explosion of a birthday I have always  
anticipated.

In middle school, my twenty-five-year-old  
self was going to be incredible: a soprano  
with a worldly sound, live at the Met,  
lavishly living in New York City,  
scuffing expensive shoes on crowded streets.

In high school, my twenty-five-year-old  
self was going to be beautiful and bright,  
free from further hindrance of orthodontia,  
an almost physician (surgical residency to follow),  
rushing into and out of the hospital,  
pager ever attached to sky blue scrubs.

In college, my twenty-five-year-old  
self was not going to be a writer,  
not for one moment, but a leader,  
a master of science who held her  
love of Pablo Neruda close, in the  
stitching of her coat, to be enjoyed  
in the quiet stretch of evening.

Now, as it is only months away,  
twenty-five is marriage, a diversified portfolio,  
life insurance policies and retirement,  
social security seminars and car insurance,  
the thrill of an organized pantry or a ten  
minute bubble bath. It is, as my middle school  
self always fretted, predictable and  
wonderful, night after night placing  
the same white dishes in the same cupboard,  
smiling every time a piece of mail comes to me  
with my married name happily written on it.

A note on the next twenty-five years:  
the poems will remain, steadfastly  
insulating hands from the cold, circling  
the chipped edges of lavender china.

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