

College of the Holy Cross

## CrossWorks

---

English Honors Theses

English Department

---

5-12-2021

### Wish in One Hand

Amber John

College of the Holy Cross, [acjohn21@g.holycross.edu](mailto:acjohn21@g.holycross.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://crossworks.holycross.edu/engl\\_honor](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/engl_honor)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

John, Amber, "Wish in One Hand" (2021). *English Honors Theses*. 10.

[https://crossworks.holycross.edu/engl\\_honor/10](https://crossworks.holycross.edu/engl_honor/10)

This Departmental Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.

**Wish in One Hand**  
by Amber C. John

*“grab an end, pull hard,  
and make a wish.”  
-richard siken*

**I. The South**

pecan pie

i am a thousand miles away from myself,  
always,  
always—  
have you ever tasted blood like  
pecan pie? put your lips on my  
paper cuts, you'll find it there.

these hands are scarred from  
the sharp pull of coarse rope,  
streaking burning red across  
my palms,

my shoulders are covered in  
hooked white lines like twirling ribbons  
from days spent running  
through the mesquite  
across the creek,  
dirty water soaking into my  
orthotics

someone once told me they liked  
the way my hair matched my name  
and how I stayed quiet  
until lit up like gunpowder to the flame—

I didn't have the heart to tell her  
that a constant terror was, is,  
settled in my chest  
stifled only by the burst of my  
paradoxical narcissism,

yellow were the days of  
my adolescence, spent longing  
for the freedom of childhood, long  
before that familiar haunt had  
occupied my ribs,  
but I could never find it

### Plum

Teeth pushing past the redviolet skin, sinking quicksand into the flesh, orange and spilling out and down the mouth. The wet trembles down the chin.

When did I stop praying? I'd soothe the compulsions of my mind by chanting every night, *keep my family safe, happy, and healthy*, on a loop, fingers squeezed together.

Was it when I started turning on every light in the room before going to sleep: a show of LED, fluorescent, halogen.

I tried my first plum when I was about twelve years old, and became ravenous. Plum was my new favorite color. My new favorite after school sweet. I liked tearing into it, wild.

It's been years since I've tasted the fruit. Sometimes I think of it, and get the urge to go out and pluck the fruit from the little wooden bins at the grocery store. Something stops me every time.

father, forgive me

my knees sink into the  
old wood, scraped and  
swollen, my forehead hits  
the back of the pew

i can feel my heart beating  
in my ears, bombing my  
veins and pulsing, with  
every beat i can hear

*you don't belong here*  
*this place is not for you*  
i smell the myrrh mix  
with the damp hay

wafting through stained windows  
watch the incense rise  
to the nave, stare into the  
chalice at the dark, plum

blood, the blood that has  
rushed to my cheeks as it  
comes up to my lips  
i cannot breathe i cannot

breathe watch the incense  
stare into the chalice  
put the body on your tongue  
you do not deserve it, this

is not for you. see the evening  
sun pour through the glass  
see the dark, jewel colors  
dance along the floor

i can feel myself both dead and  
dying and this holy place is

not for me, i know it is not  
for me, but i cannot leave

forgive me, forgive me,  
i have killed the dove that  
fluttered inside of my pearl-  
coated ribcage and she

has gone away and the wildflower  
honey has been replaced by  
the lips of my lover and the  
lips of another, and that same mouth

touches the blood and the body  
and i can feel my feverish skin  
burning with the sin that i do  
not belong here

maybe i never did, maybe this  
southern cathedral of old money,  
old family, has never belonged  
to me, but i know i do not now



Schertz, Texas: My Twelve-Year-Old Elegy

I remember the cackling of the cicadas, how  
They would scream at night, lurking  
Right outside of my window, where  
The porch light of the house behind us would shine, and

I remember how I would lay in bed, wanting  
To die because of all the secrets that I kept, from  
My mother and my sister and, my family  
Never knew and the hot maple toddy burned, sitting  
On the wooden table amongst the wrought iron crosses, and  
My heart bursted and bombed and smoked in my chest, I  
Would strap on my red cowboy boots, and

We would walk down to the barn, smell  
the molasses and the oats as they churned, the  
Cows would bat their big brown eyes at me, and I  
Would just feel so terrified. My  
Inheritance sat just in the distance, staring  
Right at me with the big blue tin walls, telling me  
That I didn't belong- not when I had this secret, not

When I would lie awake and listen to the cicadas, and  
Now, how I think everything is far too loud in silence, and  
I remember the red of my grandma's nails, and I  
remember the red of my own skin as I clawed, how  
It would feel feverish under my touch, and  
How much I cry for my twelve-year-old self, who  
Was in constant horror of who she was, lemon-

and-honey-cough-drop coated tongue, how  
No one would hear her when she would turn on the sink, and  
How she would hunch over the toilet and think, 'wow  
Look how beautiful' in the mirror and wipe her mouth, that  
Was when she would finally feel okay, the  
Air was thick with the smell of damp hay and cicada screams,  
And how I am so, so sorry  
For her.

taxidermy

watch, you tell yourself:  
they fashion new faux skin  
over new faux skeleton.  
tendrils of cedar dust  
thread themselves around  
a room bursting with halogen;  
you wanna be *perceived*?  
stood up, torpedied,  
to be *judged*?  
making sure the outside covers up  
all that stuffed cotton,  
void of the fat you prayed  
to shave off while alive.  
is this not what you *wanted*?

A thousand deaths, a thousand lives

I have become a sanctuary  
for almost-lives —  
a thousand different timelines  
buried inside of my body,  
the multiverse strung  
across my arteries,  
the infinite song clinging  
to my intestines.

How many lives have been  
dreamed out and dressed up  
on me? How many times  
have I been carried to bed,  
ankles aching,  
clutching onto the lights  
because I had have no capacity  
for the dark.

I am unknown to myself,  
a thousand leagues away from  
my soul      my mind      my heart,  
whose footsteps in the sand?  
I can't say they belong to me,  
or if I am simply stepping  
in shallows.

There is a graveyard that haunts  
my skin, a thousand dead persons  
who bear my name and my face  
but who I no longer know  
I wonder who weeps for which one  
if any.

The heavens on my shoulders,  
a radiation of golden, honeyed light,  
she rises, phoenix, songbird, something else  
entirely, she speaks as though her mouth  
was a match  
and her words  
were flammable.

### Confession #1

It is twilight outside. The sun is sweeping down over the hills, rapidly diving toward darkness.

I tell you: Here is something I never speak about.

When I was nine years old, I had been suffering from chronic, debilitating head pain for a long time. I'd black out, vomit, and sleep for twelve hours. When I was nine years old, I was taken to a neurologist and then a neurosurgeon. He very carefully told my parents that based on my MRI scans, it appears that I have a brain malformation. Everything stilled. He explained that the causes of the malformation are unknown, that it did not appear that I would need surgery imminently, but that it could be life threatening and must be monitored with frequent MRI scans.

I tell you: Here is something I never speak about.

Because of these frequent scans, the doctors discovered I had sphenoid sinusitis and were able to treat it before surgery was necessary or blindness occurred. The doctors also discovered that I had developed hydromyelia in a small part of my spinal cord near my neck. I was told that if the fluid were to burst, I could become paralyzed- but it didn't look like an imminent enough possibility to warrant surgery.

I tell you: Here is something I never speak about.

I lived through adolescence paranoid that I was about to die. You say, but anyone could die at any moment. I tell you, I was a pre-teen that was told I had a bomb inside of my head that would not be diffused because it was unlikely it would explode. I was never fixed. I was only ever monitored. It does something to a child. I tell you, I think it would've been better if I had gotten surgery; maybe I would've felt safe.

I tell you: Here is something I never speak about. I felt like I was constantly on the precipice of dying. Someone was holding a gun to my head and no one made them put it down because it was unlikely they would shoot. That's very different, I tell you, than the distant knowledge that anyone could shoot you whenever they felt like it.

I tell you: Here is something I never speak about. I tell this story in past tense like I've somehow healed, like the feelings have somehow gone away with time and medical reassurance.

My Grandma's House

ripe peaches, blackberries, strawberries  
clustered on roadside stands,  
juice sticky against chubby cheeks

miles of hay fields, pale yellow in  
the morning sun, early to rise and  
late to set; the brilliance of day

ice clinking in glasses of sweet tea  
the exaggeration of vowels and dropping  
of g's, ain't got nothin but time

## The Train

I would lay in the small hours between nighttime and morning, half-asleep, in a haze of meandering thoughts and wandering images. I was seven, or ten, or twelve. My eyes would flutter as the porchlight outside shined in through the blinds. Everything was the same: brown shag carpeting, the light switch saying 'brush your teeth' with a fading Rugrats sticker stuck to it, and slightly rough cream bedding covered in pale pink flowers and sage fauna. The train's sound would nudge me from my aimlessness of mind and in-betweenness of sleep. Not a mile away were the railroad tracks we would cross to arrive at 310 River Road. I don't know if the horn went off at 11, or midnight, or 1, but it would always sound. A long, deep noise. Not a jarring noise, just enough to make me remember where I was. I would drift off as it faded.

a cento for edna pontellier

*“they...esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels”*

-kate chopin, the awakening

the south possessed  
much of her  
hungry heart.

but a new self  
she wanted-  
to belong to.  
never again  
to belong  
to another

- what is home?  
outsider  
outsider  
outsider  
- to know yourself.

her beauty was delicious crimson fruit, idolized. but one would not have wanted her, she was designed for deadly cold. treacherous and insidious. she shook with atonement. but she could not escape. It never seemed like mine, anyway—like home. I sometimes thought: ‘She will never come.’ I sometimes thought: ‘She will never come.’ I sometimes thought: ‘She will never come.’ I sometimes thought: ‘She will never come.’ ‘She will never come.’” Shewillnevercome.Shewill nevercome.’

“There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.”

taxidermy

a celebration of curation  
she stands frozen,  
skin like morning fog.  
no one thinks about how  
her bones have been stripped,  
replaced with brutal wire.  
her eyes gleam faux hazel,  
swimming lakes made of  
spectacular resin.  
you notice, though, not really dead yet,  
a ghost in the sky.  
the hair isn't right, a little too ebony.  
but you can't say anything,  
not anymore.



nostalgia: longing or wistful

I.

let me tell you of a place where  
my dog runs across the porch,  
old wood sun-bleached and warm,  
dappled with spots of daylight.  
she is wild, crunching leaves  
beneath her paws-  
I am wild,  
seven, naked in the trees;  
toes dirty and digging  
into bowing branches.

II.

memory,  
reflection,  
the ruins of  
something  
that used to be strong.

III.

the stars are agonizing tonight,  
so bright and bulbous, begging  
to be seen-- I whisper,  
I see you, do you see me?  
for a moment,  
I am  
cradled in the arms of my mother,  
and I am falling fast asleep.

The House at 2617 Hidden Grove Lane

The headlights of passing cars beam  
through the one round window,  
illuminating the beige of the wood.  
The light warms the room,  
this happens every night,  
as soon as you close your eyes  
and remember.

Remember the green and red wrapping paper,  
white lace tablecloth stained  
from years of spaghetti brought out  
for Christmas is there, too.  
Your mother walks in to look for it,  
but forgets why she came in every time.

The laughter of your little sister and  
the memory of your mother biting  
into pink-icing filled cupcakes announcing  
her arrival clings to the walls,  
and you cling to them too.

wagon

how dark the wagon looks at night—  
tucked in the corner of the barn,  
the last touched by daylight

grain of the wood rotting  
family of mice sleeping sound,  
how dark the wagon looks at night—

molasses clings to the sides  
the sweet smell saturated in it,  
tucked in the corner of the barn,

she asks *can you carry me?*  
and he says *only in the dark, i'm*  
*the last touched by daylight*

The Devil's in the Details

the velvet ribbons of  
that time have been  
soaked in booze &  
singed around the  
edges. the smoke  
has stayed at the  
tip of my nose  
for a while.

Jim Beam colored  
my vision of him--  
it's like my childhood  
wears amber-colored  
glasses.

I am a person split  
in half,  
born to walk  
alone,  
the only one is this place.

Her voice,  
hoarse in the night,  
as it raged.

the house on the end of the cul-de-sac  
the one with browning, crunching leaves  
the address rubbed away

sometimes the devil would  
tuck me in at night  
and i didn't know better  
(but i wouldn't have believed it, anyway)

he always smelled like  
aftershave and  
rusted metal

home  
never really  
fits right in the

memory.

i find there is nothing else-  
my name and age  
tick marks on the wall,  
faded pencil

## **II. The North**

growing pains

To: the apricots left in the pantry,  
you are dried and forgotten,  
a testament of willpower.

I remember the way you sat,  
pale orange and clear-packaged,  
shriveled.

To: my childhood self,  
who never spoke too loud,  
who never talked too much.

She sat slumped,  
a wisp of a girl, hoping  
she'd shrink until she'd disappear.

To: the black shiny boots,  
tucked away in the closet,  
chunky and faux patent leather.

They sat amongst  
white sneakers and brown flats-  
a bold instance of being seen and heard.

To: who I have always wanted to be,  
her, in the mirror, who cries in public,  
and stares too much, and doesn't mind.

I stand now,  
a little off balance,  
reaching and reaching, and

massachusetts

there are rolling hills and  
tall evergreen trees  
covered in snow.

all the other trees  
are scrawny,  
scraped clean.

there is no sun,  
there are no clouds,  
only unmarred expanses  
of pale light gray sky.



silence

it's quiet here.  
there are no train  
horns, loud in the night,  
there are no mice,  
scuttling about in  
the walls,  
there are no cicadas,  
demanding our  
attention.

it's quiet here.  
there are no wind  
chimes twinkling  
in the twilight,  
there are no creaks  
as a chair rocks  
back and forth,  
there are no waves  
of wheat,  
hushing you  
to sleep.

it's quiet here.  
there are no whistles  
of the creek as  
it slinks over  
the rocks,  
there are no chirps  
of finches outside  
the window,  
there are no soft  
fan blades, cutting  
through air.

september*"I am a collection of dismantled almos'ts"*

-Anne Sexton

wake up  
 catch the bird  
 cut her throat  
 fall asleep

wakeup  
 catchthebird  
 cutherthroat  
 fallasleep

wakeupcatchthebirdcutherthroatfallasleep

wake up

my name is september,  
 the bridge between summer  
 and autumn

my name is doorway,  
 are you in or  
 are you out

my name is midnight,  
 black as tar mix  
 of nightmorning

i am the grecian urn,  
 pieced and laced with the  
 art of the body,  
 the fountain filled  
 with blood tasting pennies,  
 the red ribbon  
 red ribbon

i exist  
 [     ]  
 only here

between the teeth,  
 i catch the mice  
 who taste of damp  
 hay-  
 i catch the white lie,  
 who trembles and  
 softens at my tongue;  
 i catch the dandelion  
 seed  
 and swallow it down.



### How to Deal with Mice in the Walls

At night I become the mouse,  
tracking up and down the walls.  
Underneath the plaster is a waterfall  
of ribbon, locks, and cotton.  
It makes it easier to dream, to cover  
my furry gray body in softness.  
In this place I am untouchable and I am  
protected.  
I paint the walls red,  
stealing away where no one can find me,  
but it's not enough.  
I am still the thief, the pest,  
and from that I can never escape.  
These are facts: God sent a plague  
of mice down to the Philostines.  
& the broken body of a mouse stays  
in a man's pocket, for him to stroke.  
I stay in the holes of the home,  
tap dancing in the dark.  
What do I offer?  
What can I from here?  
What do I owe?  
What happens when the house begins  
to burn, and I am still the mouse?  
Stuck in between the walls when  
the fire arrives and I am alone.  
All the soft things burn  
so much easier than the brick and mortar-  
and all I am,  
all this is,  
is a soft thing.  
It catches the flame  
and cradles it while I clutch  
desperately to the insides,

terrified of being swept away by the blaze.  
And when it's all gone  
I am left,  
brittle, trembling body  
between the beams.  
People shuffle through the ashes,  
boots blackened in the debris,  
and no one spots me.  
One lone mouse,  
hidden in the remnants of  
red-and-white fibers in the last standing  
structure.  
Am I the meek  
or the malignant?

angel

I watched her cry  
in the stairwell  
that night—

brown curls  
smattered, sweaty  
across her cheeks,

a water bottle  
squeezed in her hand,  
the vodka half gone

I watched her shoes  
scuff the shitty  
wood floor, beer-stained

music so loud  
it beat couplets  
across my own chest

she drank, tears  
slipping down, the wet  
clinging to her lips

how could she be so sad?  
a face fit for heaven,  
so far from home

taxidermy

suppose I know what it's like  
to feel only a shell of the self,  
all the substance scooped out  
so every white-hot memory  
seems only a slight press of heat  
in a mind filled with cotton

suppose I know that it's easier,  
it's smoother to make a  
marionette of yourself and who  
cares who's pulling the strings?

suppose I know what the jaguar feels like,  
guttled, with its insides dug out,  
stretched over a molded form in  
a state of perpetual paralysis

dreams

I dream, still,  
of the family of mice  
tucked into the old,  
faded brick wagon—

I can hear the small squeaks  
an awareness of barn cats or  
the sweetness of the oats  
that would drop from  
the mouths of the heifers.

I barely saw them, they  
were excellent at not being seen  
but we knew they were there  
from the squeaks, the  
nest of spare fabric and hay  
built up in one corner.

they'd make themselves scarce  
by the first summer moon,  
the heat a bit too unbearable—  
but when the air turned crisp,  
they'd return.

bundle and burrow themselves  
back into that little corner.

I don't know how many there were,  
and in my dreams, it changes:  
sometimes, there is only  
one mouse, sometimes there are  
three or five mice, but my favorite  
is when there are two,  
a baby tucked  
in the belly of one mouse.

the worst is when I dream of  
their broken bodies. It  
happened only once, before  
my family realized that death had  
unhinged the seams of my person,



that I spotted the dead mouse-  
undiscovered by someone who  
would dispose of it  
(no doubt the work of the cats).

I hate looking at dead things, because,  
it makes me aware that I too,  
will one day be a dead thing.

but I liked looking at the mice, before  
I saw the unmoving body,  
because they were proof that small,  
soft things,  
can survive.

it was unsettling to see that  
the universe does not favor the meek-  
it favors the sharp things, and  
mice are not  
sharp things.

I still dream of the injustice to the mouse.

the mouse  
is a passive thing:  
it is hidden by hay,  
it is fed by fallen oats;  
it is killed by cats.

and the world does not favor:  
the meek,  
the soft,  
the passive.

## Confession #2

When I first arrived to Massachusetts, I vomited every single night for two weeks straight. My roommate, bless her, probably thought I was some kind of nutcase. I hated it. Multiple times I had to ask my group leader if I could go back to my room to sleep instead of to lunch because I did not sleep more than a few hours a night.

I spent my nights pacing up and down the small corridor that led to my room, pausing only to bang my knees on the disgusting tile floor to lean over into the communal toilets and throw up. I begged my mother to let me come home. She'd tell me the same thing every night: just wait one more day, see if you can make it through another day. I'd agree, because she was my mother.

But I never doubted my survival. I'd survived much worse things than moving over a thousand miles away to go to a college where you know no one.

Eventually, I was able to sleep.

What I told no one, not even her, was that it was because I began packing up pieces of myself into a man doubling as a suitcase. The parts of me that wanted to feel close to someone, that wanted to trust someone, that wanted to be loved.

What I told everyone, was that I was devastated when he left. I tried to transfer to a school back in Texas. The only reason I didn't was because the administration was one day late in sending my transcript over and I had missed the deadline. I took this as divine intervention and declined appealing my case.

What I told no one, was that when he left, he took all of those parts of me with him. Perhaps this was my fault; I stowed them away in there without anyone looking, without even looking myself. He didn't know any better. But I should have.

I know, now, that I tried to make a home out of a person and failed. I had seen it happen to the women in my life and didn't realize I, too, was following in the family business of perpetual heartbreak.

What I have told no one, is that I've realized that I am more like my father than I thought.

Grit

sugar spun lips &  
frostbite eyes,  
i looked at you and  
just wanted something to see

you looked at me and saw warmth-  
i pretended the look in your eyes was  
more

it has been two years.  
no one understands why i  
still feel as though sand  
has been rubbed  
into childhood blood

and the scars sealed up before i could wash it away.  
with every move  
i feel the grittiness under my skin.

faith

she sinks into herself,  
white-hot, iron burn  
down the throat as she  
struggles to breathe-

all the air has left  
her lungs, she has  
hung herself on  
every word, every word

she is exhausted,  
threadbare cotton  
looped around her waist  
holding her together

her hair is raven-dark  
with water, it drips  
onto her knees and  
mixes with the salt

but she never looked back, no  
she walked determined,  
refusing temptation with  
one eye on life

and yet when she reached  
daylight, it was all  
still gone, an inch out  
of her grasp

was she being punished?  
the cold-starving ached  
in her empty belly- she  
was good, she fasted

she repented, she prayed  
she had faith, she trusted  
she never opened the box,  
but it all came down

anyway. hope is supposed

to remain, but all she feels  
is pain, and, her hands  
scour the bottom but

all she finds is  
the burnt ground

taxidermy

suppose I know that living here  
makes me feel as if I am simply  
a reanimated body but am deprived  
of even movement; there is only stillness.

suppose I know that this body feels  
like a skin suit, clinging  
to insides that are in a state of  
permanent intrusion;

suppose I know that each day  
after looking in the mirror, I  
am pantomime personified,  
mouthing words that aren't my own;

suppose I know I cannot go home-  
not like this.

Let Us Go Out to the Field

You're covered in ghosts, but your favorite is Cain. You understand him. God never gave him a chance- which came first, after all, God's scorn or Cain's anger? You understand Cain. You're just as restless, just as displaced. Were you ever offered a fair fight? No.

Which is why when a man asks you what you want, you bare your teeth.

You tell him: To be left alone.

He stills puts his hands on you, and your skin burns so much *you* tear it off.

You want something else. You want something more. But you never got a fair fight. Whether you were born incensed, or became incensed, you can no more blame yourself than you can the lion killing a lesser animal and picking its flesh from its bone. It's in its nature and it's in yours, too.

Which is why when a man asks you what you want, you bare your teeth.

You tell him: To beat them to the punch.

And you don't say who 'them' is, because who never mattered, only *you* did.

Maybe you feel bad for Abel. After all, he didn't ask to be meek or to be favored no more than you asked to be angry and disdained. You tell Cain this, but he doesn't understand. It was never about Abel. No, it was about Cain and God and a score to settle.

Which is why when a man asks you what you want, you bare your teeth.

You tell him: To be cruel.

Because it was never about the man, it was about what *you* wanted.

Swamp Yankee

tell me about how my body was pulled from the local lake,  
dripping, half-dressed.  
not even the most dead i've ever been.

my body was ripe and full with betrayal,  
the hurt hung from every crooked joint and  
every bloated limb.  
don't take your eyes off me now.

across my torso, my arms, my legs,  
it's all black. every stroke of your hand has left  
something rotting on me.  
decaying.

vomit in my hair.  
i puked up every time you lied to me,  
it smells like alcohol and evil.

my lips are dry and cracked,  
watch as they drag me through the mud on a tarp as dark  
as the stains you have left, as used.  
all the moisture has left my mouth.  
don't look away from me now this is your doing.  
watch my hand snag on some empty log,  
watch it twist back, the angle all wrong.

i am doing my best to not be dead.  
trying so hard to wrench life back into my body  
where you have taken it.  
i am trying to yell but the lake water is in my throat.

burn marks all over my hands and feet, my knees.  
every time i tried to crawl away and every time you  
dragged me back.  
the carpet burned every poor knuckle.



you have ruined me.

i beg god to let me  
forgive you.

tell me about how i finally  
let the water seep out,  
how i took my first breath in  
through rotting lungs.  
tell me about how i rose.

someone must have answered,  
but i don't know if it was god.

never so lucky

a spider crawls up a water spout,  
a snail burns as it feels salt,  
a bird sits in the clerestory

which one are you?

always one eye on the sky,  
waiting for the rain because  
you were never so lucky?

or are you in perpetual pain,  
a slow dissolve as the life  
is sucked out of you?

you are not the bird in the light,  
but maybe, maybe you could be,  
couldn't you?

but you were never that lucky.

you were born on the brink  
of death, weren't you?

one move away from  
an umbilical chord's knot  
becoming too tight to live

what chance did you ever stand,  
stitched together with spare parts?

at least the spider and the snail and the bird  
know what they are and

where they are-  
you were never so lucky.

were you?

death clung to you like  
a flea on a dog- but, no, you were the flea,  
weren't you? clinging on to death?

you were born with hands on you,  
and you felt the burn of palms all your life

didn't you?

a spider crawls up a water spout,  
a snail burns as it feels salt,  
a bird sits in the clerestory

do you get to choose?  
do they?

a ghost

I watch her sleep-  
she's nine, and the veins on her eyelids  
are more ink than not; easy to see  
in the brightness of the room. she  
is terrified of the dark, even now,  
I know, of the space behind her eyes  
where her mind wanders.

I watch her sleep-  
she's thirteen, and she is collapsed,  
into her bed and into herself; razed.  
spit strings have dried on her cheek, she  
forgot to wipe it as she left the bathroom.  
she dreams, I know, of the burn of  
the bright nylon ropes.

I watch her sleep-  
she's seventeen, and she has not  
known peace since she was smaller than  
she can remember. the mirror is  
unbearable, she lives half-dead  
most days. eyes closed, I know,  
is the most alive she's able to be.

I watch her sleep-  
she's twenty-one, and I recognize  
that face, now. she's beside herself,  
out of mind, numb. it's how  
she survives, I know. the only  
difference between waking and  
sleep is the type of story she indulges.

Flight 387: Boston to Austin, 6:40am departure time.

I remember days that bleed warmth onto my skin, even now. Even now, I can feel the sweat dripping down my face. My face, twisted up something tormented as I remember. I remember the red swing-set in the backyard, and the porch light that would beam through the window behind me. Behind me, a trail of broken things: a paper-bag puppet that I ripped up because I thought I made her ugly, a mask my sister brought home from Italy for me, pencils, my own heart, bones on x-rays, the chain of a necklace my father gave my mother while they were still together, pieces of myself that are barely recognizable now. Now, all I can do is remember while I wait.

### **III. The Unknown**

you can't make a shelter out of subduction zones

here is what i know:

sometimes when you ignore faults,  
you forget about the earthquakes-

and then you're buried under the wreckage.

i used to think home was a person until the earthquake came. it was late into the night, unable to sleep, when it began. my phone lit that signature electronic blue and the walls began to shake. the ground swayed beneath my feet. my heart shattered in my chest. i couldn't breathe, or see, and rushed out of my room to find safety. i didn't.

when the earthquake stopped, and i was able to calm my heaving body, and still my twitching limbs, the aftershocks came. every step wracked my body with an unbalance, an uncertainty, that i had never known. the very foundation of everything was giving way. everything blurred and hummed. i couldn't trust anything around me. i still don't think i can.

the aftershocks haven't stopped.

i used to think home was a person until the earthquake came. but everything crumbled around me and i had nothing to hold onto. nothing.

taxidermy

when you think about it, you  
were a marvelous actor.

no one knew how  
you scooped yourself out  
and covered up every inch  
of skin you could see.

trying, with desperate fingers,  
to unmake yourself.

metallic tang disguised  
inside your mouth  
by your still, quiet face.

to be fair, you closed  
your eyes, so no one could  
watch the light inside fade.



### An Exercise of Enervation

Imagine this: you've been away for so long, your whole life. You've been tugging along that purple-and-pink roller suitcase behind you for decades, the wheel's been squeaking for years, and you've finally made it up past the hill. You've been staring at the cracks in that power-washed sidewalk for a long time and now you can finally see over it. You can see the big blue house with the white shutters and it is everything you've been dreaming about.

A place to belong.

Your feet are tired, bruised, bloodied at the ankle, but there is a place for you so none of it matters. When you cross the lush green grass to stop, for the first time in your entire life, and let go of the handle of that little suitcase so you can knock at the door, it is relief that floods your whole being.

You have somewhere to stop at.

You don't have to walk anymore.

The shade of the porch overhang is a respite from the heaviness of the sun which has pinked your skin. You catch a glimpse of your reflection in the window and you don't recognize yourself.

But that's okay, you didn't have time to keep personhood when you had places to be.

The same way some sharks die if they stop swimming, you could not stop walking.

So maybe you don't recognize yourself, but it doesn't matter.

You raise your hand to rapt your knuckles against the smooth, dark wood, and give a few loud knocks. You're beaming, radiant from the clear possibility that stands in front of you.

You wait.

You shift your weight from foot to foot, because if you're honest, you've broken bones in both your feet along the way and standing still hurts. Every blood cell in your body is screaming at you to move, but you wait for someone to come let you in.

Only, no one comes.

And the heat of the day turns into the chill of the night and you're standing there on the doormat, in the dark save for one small porch light that glows orange.

You start to doubt.

You've come all this way and you know you are supposed to be here.

You are so close. But the door doesn't open.

Soon, like the mako, you start to suffocate, standing there. And the misery blooms in your chest, taking over all the cavities that hope filled just as the night swept over the world when the sun set. You realize that no one is going to come to the door as long as you're standing on the porch. So you grip the handle of that purple-and-pink roller suitcase, step off the porch and back onto the sidewalk. You think you see a curtain move, a flash of a face in the window, so you pause.

But no one comes to the door.

So you start walking. Only, now you have no idea where you are headed, because the one place you belonged to didn't belong back to you. Every step you take kills you just a little bit more because now it's not for anything. You don't even have the time to grieve because you need to focus on the cracks in the sidewalk.

Imagine, this is your whole life.

Confession #3

My family told me to come home. So I did. The north has not been unkind to me anymore than the sky can- there are some things that simply *are*. But up there, I'd never felt more alone. The people, more often than not, reflected the weather around them: usually frigid with occasional warm days.

I was a June baby born in peak Texas heat- I'm not built to be touch-starved, sun-starved, truth-starved.

When I ventured back home, my family told me it looked as though I was wasting away. I had lost over fifteen pounds. My skin was almost blue it was so pale. I had lost my mind and scrambled desperately to find it again. It was no one's fault- there are some things that simply *are*.

I dismantled myself. It was something I had been doing since I was prepubescent, but for the first time, I did it with the intention of building someone I could recognize and therefore love. I am of the opinion you cannot love something if you do not *know* it, after all.

My whole body burns as I stay still, the insatiable itching only subsides when I *move*. Two visions dance behind my eyes:

the mouse warm in the pocket, the flower pressed into the page, the dog underneath the trees, the cupcakes smushed into the table, Abel, bruised skin

or the lion with his mouth bloody, the hand in a fist, the house being sold, splinters, bared teeth, Cain, stone

I am standing, alone, and I can tell no one. But I see others, in the distance. Shadows section off my face from where the mesquite trees reach above me, the parts uncovered warmed by the sun. Melted wax covers one of the trees, dripping down the trunk, but dried down before it could reach the forest floor. It smells of hubris- something I lost long ago.

Let me tell you this: we all have a choice. I have decided to make mine.

taxidermy

I was a mind, no body,  
or maybe all body no mind,  
something gruesome  
split right down the middle.  
remember how in every film,  
if there's a room with animals,  
stuffed, hanging on the walls-  
*this* is a sign. the predator still  
walks the halls, looking for  
new prey. But I saw *this* sign  
looking back at me in the mirror,  
acrylic heart beat, and I turned  
around. I stripped the styrofoam  
insides, felt the blood pulse back in.

yellow house

there is a yellow house built out of straw,  
I gesture broadly, tell him,

“I made this place for us.”

he closes his eyes.

he smiles at me, shakes his head-  
he walks away.

I should have known,  
the moment his mouth went silent  
that he would not stay.

“we could have been happy,” I tell no one.

what I don't say is this:  
this is a story I have repeated  
too many times to be surprised by the ending.

so I blow down the house with one  
big belly breath—  
I can never not be the wolf,  
I should have known.

where I go from here:  
I will build a place that I can stand  
before I let anyone else inside. a place  
where everything will begin, again.

i am my own home

there is a mosaic,  
it is filled with  
butter  
and cherries,  
stained glass windows,  
the smell of dew  
in early morning  
before the sun peaks out.

it is filled with hairbrushes,  
clotted with knots of  
brown-gold hair,  
scars,  
mascara tracks on the  
linoleum of bathtubs,  
the burn of too much  
moscato in the gut.

it is glitter  
smeared down cheeks,  
the sound of your mother's voice  
as she fixes supper  
in the kitchen,  
bare feet in  
twisted trees,  
a silver locket.

it is  
every part of my bones,  
clinging to the ligaments  
of this body  
now and forever.

i let it soak in,  
there is no struggle,  
no thrashing,  
no searing,  
just the ease of memory  
drenching the being.

### Wish in One Hand

*“Wish in one hand, spit in the other, see which one fills up faster,”* I hear her say, slower now after the stroke, but with same accented cadence that colors my own words at times. She’s smiling, kind and clever, at me.

I’ve always been on the precipice of *something*. I’ve got one empty palm, stretched out in front of me, and the other is wrapped around a ripe plum, weighty in my hand.

Every kid liked to collect something, at some point. Bugs, stamps, rocks, dolls, arrowheads. I collect wishes: dandelions, birthday candles, fountain pennies, eyelashes, 11:11’s, shooting stars, wishbones, prayers.

But I still ended up, here, with one barren hand. Straddling a choice like a horse between my legs. So I reach the plum to my mouth, and I bite, spit stringing all around the June fruit.

Turns out, the spit does fill up faster.