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Violet is one letter off from violent

A Thesis Presented

AUDREY E. SPINA

DATE

DECEMBER 2020

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Violet is one letter off from violent

A Thesis Presented

By

AUDREY E. SPINA

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

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Bandit Fiction, “Stone Devils,” “Upon Entering the Museum”

The Graduate Review, “Quiet Moments,” “Vignettes of America”

North Dakota Quarterly, “Maiden Voyage”

They Call Us, “La Pietà,” “Aubade to Delicacy”

Sublunary Review, “Memento Mori”

Table of Contents

Critical Introduction.....	1
Gallery I: Gaze	21
Self Portrait as the Museum.....	21
Girl of Bones.....	23
Leave us in the dirt.....	24
Digging	25
Curator Aubade.....	27
Love & Other Useless Objects.....	29
I. Portrait of an Anatomical Corpse in the Theatre.....	31
II. Reflections of an Anatomical Corpse Post-Dissection.....	32
Upon Entering the Museum	33
Gaze	34
Prayer.....	35
Muse.....	36
Pomegranate Seeds	37
Violet is one letter off from violent	38
La Pietà	40
Man in the Cathedral.....	41
The Bakers	42
Gallery II: Violet/Violent	43
Aubade to Delicacy.....	43
[Dear brother]	45
I Dream of Winged Victory	47
Gallows	48
Ghost.....	50
Waiting.....	51
In Which You.....	52
Violet (Dear Amanda).....	53
Desert Queen.....	54
Japanese Maples	55
Young Womanhood in the Professional Workplace.....	56
Maiden Voyage.....	57

To Know the Broken.....	58
You Taught Yourself	60
The Body Leftover (Birth of Eve).....	62
Gallery III: In Memory	63
An Odyssey.....	63
In memory.....	64
Object Permanence	65
The Mother She Conserved	67
House of the Muses.....	68
What Happens To A Devastated Place	70
Wunderkammer	71
Memento Mori	72
The artist fucks the artist.....	74
Bowerbird	75
Stone Devils.....	76
Vignettes of America	78
Quiet Moments	79
Cathedral.....	80
After the Cathedral Has Mirrored You	81
Repatriation	82
Notes	83
Works Cited	84

Critical Introduction

The poems in this creative collection, *Violet is one letter off from violent*, aim to add to the critical conversation in contemporary poetry about violence, women's anger, patriarchal oppression, and physical and sexual assault, specifically drawing on analyses from the poetry of Rachel McKibbens, Tarfia Faizullah, Emily Skaja, Erika L. Sánchez, Tracy K. Smith, Safiya Sinclair, and Paisley Rekdal. My myriad speakers, who take both first and third person points of narrative view, reclaim and reproduce their own stories in ways that are complex, vulnerable, and angry as a result of living under and through traumatic experiences in domestic and public spheres. However, this reclamation of power written in poetic verse from marginalized people and survivors is not a new realization or discovery in contemporary poetry and literary studies, as the poets above have demonstrated in their works. Extending this discourse, my collection adds to the conversation by positioning the international museum—whose history I show is inherently violent—aiming to present how it is another vehicle, and historically White institution, through which aggression and violence shape and control female and BIPOC bodies, particularly women who have been pushed to the margins. As Gaby Porter posits in her essay, "Seeing through Solidarity: a feminist perspective on museums," the sheer act of classification and categorization stemming from the masculine tradition of rationale and order derivative of the Enlightenment era allows us to turn to a critical, feminist lens in museum display and collections to show how "these practices appear to construct and maintain the male order with woman at its margins" (112). The opening poem of my collection, "Self-Portrait as the Museum," then demonstrates the speaker's positionality as a metaphorical embodiment of the museum and its practice. Her

reclaiming comes in her ability to reproduce traumatic memories, “to circle / the shapes slowly like rosaries, mother [her] violet / body gone to bone.” In the end, both she and the museum are the result of “violent making,” but power resides in her ability to assert control over her memories and history. Acceptance lies in the unknown and the known, the ability to speak through years of silencing. This poem introduces the reader to the mirroring and blending of spaces and bodies, which cements this collection. To emphasize this connection, I have broken the book into three, main sections, or “Galleries” to structure the book as if one is walking through a museum’s exhibits.

My book, then, seeks to “redress the museum,” as coined by Heidi Stern Hein in “Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory,” or call attention to how “the museum acquires social authority by controlling ways of seeing,” (Casey 2) about women’s bodies, narratives, and experiences. Hein posits that the idea of “climate of ownership and entitlement in the characterization of the human subject relative to an object observed, desired, cultivated, possessed, feared, tamed, conquered, or even revered” reinforces the idea of “humans striving for mastery and control, whether material or intellectual, is a fundamental credo of most civilizations and shapes their language and culture. Feminist theory seeks radical revision of the very notions of subjectivity and otherness” (32). In this light, the female body, subject to being gazed at by visitors, controlled and collected by curators, and, in the case of bones or dead bodies on display, physically moved from intended resting places and the earth, is largely involuntarily, unless permission has been given, in an act for patriarchal power to remain status quo.

Through a psycho-feminist theoretical lens—combined with museum theory—I implore Laura Mulvey’s critical work on the gaze and visual pleasure, specifically the

“pleasure in looking/fascination with the Human Form” (59) while also situating Susan Bowers’s and bell hooks’s theories on oppositional gaze, and importantly, oppositional black female gaze, as “antidotes” (Bowers 218) to the debilitating white, male gaze. Similarly, I move to discuss Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, to examine how my speakers, like the speakers in the poetic texts I explore, resist reduction and classification, as they strive to find self fulfilment, expression, and autonomy, despite lived experiences of trauma, fear, and/or abandonment. My speakers explore what it means to have been “killed into art.” Ultimately, these myriad voices seek to tell their own intersectional and complex narratives that are mirrored through their bodies.

To complement the critical texts and theorists used to frame this collection, my craft reflects a combination of fragmentation and traditional poetic form. Fragmentation represents and symbolizes the split, halved, and dismembered body operating in violent or oppressive spaces. Lines and stanzas in poems such as “Portrait of an Anatomical Corpse in the Theatre,” “Portrait of an Anatomical Corpse Post-Dissection,” and “Aubade to Delicacy,” are chaotically spread across the entire page to cultivate a feeling of disorganization and disjointedness, as both poems center on the fragility of the body, represented by a dissected corpse and a fragile, near-broken vase.

Additionally, I use repeated phrases and words threaded throughout the collection, such as “fractured,” “split open,” “schism,” and “broken” to signal an image of a lack of wholeness, and draw on repeated bodily images—mouth, teeth, hands, feet, gut, the entire body—to suggest that violence has permeated its way into the body in a manner that is entirely invasive. Importantly, the fragmented stanzas, the resistance of traditional poetic

form, are a way of reclaiming when, how, and where language appears on the page. My use of fragmentation as form is two-fold; it represents chaos and the fragmented body, yet it is purposeful and strategically placed. However, not all poems appear in fragmented form. I have chosen a mix of fragmentation and more traditional poetic forms to demonstrate the push and pull of “stability” and “disjointedness,” the back and forth between the two, that aims to symbolize my toying between engrained “traditional” narratives and reclaiming those stories.

I have divided the book into three sections, or “galleries”: Gallery I: gaze; Gallery II: Violet/Violent; Gallery III: In. These broader themes of memory, violence, and gaze are uniquely intertwined and often a result and/or consequence of each other. I also emphasize the connection between these three sections with key symbols dispersed throughout the collection, such as ribbons, bones, violet(s) (as a flower and color), pomegranates, and pins. Importantly, my aim here is to suggest how women are continually controlled in spaces and places that are seemingly innocuous, spaces where families, colleagues, and friends converge, where we admire and praise creativity, progress, and ingenuity, but often fail to question *for whom*. I am making a case that the museum, and the complex issues it reinforces, reproduces, and houses, are inherently violent. That to decenter the museum is to bring forward women’s voices, and those who have been historically marginalized and pushed out of frame, quite literally. Positioning my female speakers to muse—as well as subvert the idea of a muse—on works of Western art such as *Winged Victory*, Michelangelo’s *La Pietà*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, a seventeenth century anatomical corpse, cathedrals, gargoyles, the body of Eve, Picasso’s

fragmented cubist women, Roman vases, and artists themselves demarcates and questions Western validity and authority.

My title, *Violet is one letter off from violent*, is highly intentionally, then. It is the name of one of the central pieces in this collection, which highlights the anxiety of the speaker's imagination of motherhood and the devastating potentiality of her imaginary daughter, whose body is both beautiful, strong, and enduring—violet—yet prone to fracturing and dismantling—violent; the oscillation between the two words is merely a separation by the letter n. However, read in an act of liberation, violets, traditionally symbolic of female passivity, delicacy, and fertility as envisioned in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, transform into the violent aggressor.

Gallery I: Gaze

Since the backbone of this collection centralizes the international museum—a place birthed from colonialist and systemic power, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, or the Met—first, I will stake a place in how the history of museums, and collecting for wealthy, white-males, exemplifies and reproduces the domineering, powerful gaze. Valerie Casey in “The Museum Effect: Gazing from Object to Performance in the Contemporary Cultural History Museum” maintains that “The museum acquires social authority by controlling ways of seeing, and the objects around which museal vision is directed gather meaning from their context within the museum” (2). The bodies instilled in writing, image, or in multidimensional structures are always operating within our gaze as visitors, and importantly, they are also always mediated, or curated by someone else's view. In this social control, in telling the viewer, how, when, and what to see, power is regulated and reproduced. Casey further posits that, “in

Foucauldian terms, the museum is an institute of discipline which indoctrinates appropriate behavior in the viewer.” (4) If we take Foucault’s model of power as self-producing and self-regulating within the museum space, its galleries are highly charged places in two ways: one, the social authority of the museum, as Casey maintains, is gazing at *us*, shaping our world view and understanding of knowledge and our assumptions; two, our gaze as viewers elicits a form of domineering power to the bodies on display. In this first gallery, then, I aim to break out of both structures of power in hope of dissolving the unmitigated replication of power, in Foucauldian terms, that runs ramped in the microcosm of the museum as institutional power.

In Gallery I, my poem “Gaze” is a direct confrontation at the site of male gaze. In the physical space of a gallery, my speaker focuses on images of painted women whom she notices are positioned as “locked / behind a gilded eye” to suggest that the gaze freezes or maintains the representation of woman one-dimensionally. The speaker then moves to imagine the “thrill of being remembered,” in concert with the male gaze; it is something that is, at first, seemingly pleasurable, to be remembered and connected deeply in another’s flesh. However, as the poem progresses, the speaker gains intensity and anger in her rhetoric at the thought of being trapped under a “gilded eye,” as she exclaims, “...I, like she, will forget / the need to be remembered by man / who can’t even imagine the dead / as dead and instead files them as numbers. / A whole equation on the brink...” Central to this poem, placed strategically in this first section, is overcoming the gaze through anger, as she calls out the historical, Western tradition of man unearthing women’s bodies to then place on display and catalogue in storage and/or archives. The “release” at the end of this piece is signaled by her desire to return to the earthen ground

that is now the speaker's source of pleasure, the annexation from the male gaze, a returning to a primordial womb. Importantly, this poem speaks to the earth and returning to it as a form of motherly love and comfort, which I illustrate as a reversal of birth. The rain pooling in a "belly of a timid leaf, / waiting for warm ground" suggests a widening, perhaps pregnant, stomach which will "birth" or release the speaker back into the ground as a source of warm stability, motherly power, and comfort away from patriarchal oppression.

Moreover, in its foundational history, museums functioned as places to preserve "curios, exotica, rare, and sanctified objects" (Weil, 1995, qtd on p. 4), stemming from private collections, titled *wunderkammer*, or cabinets of curiosity. Many international museums have obtained private collections through bequests or have partnerships with private collectors through loan agreements. That at its conception, international, Western museums displayed objects or images outside its construction of socio-normative parameters suggests that our gaze, then, is perhaps an act that reinforces the colonialist agenda of keeping power structures and hierarchies firmly in place. Simply, we should be critical observers when looking at objects/people who have been labeled as "curiosities," asking, again, for whom is it a curiosity and why? However, I do mean to make clear that it is primarily the hallmark, "universal" museum that lays this claim. National museums that tell stories of ancestry, heritage, and family function to insert voice and power into a narrative that has been shadowed by white supremacist ideologies, often by colonizers.

Gaze, then, functions as a primordial source of power, a sense of critical self-awareness and consciousness that bolsters intimate development of pleasure and ego. Examining scopophilia and the pleasure from looking, Laura Mulvey posits in "Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” specifically in her section titled “Pleasure in Looking/Fascination with the Human Form” that scopophilia, or the idea that one uses looking is “a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (59). While Mulvey’s aim here is primarily focused on cinema, her argument demonstrates scopophilia can be derived from any instance of pleasure “in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (60).

Referencing Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage, Harvey further explains how in this crucial stage of development, the child locates their sense of ego, or self-identification, through an identification of a refracted image in the mirror by looking or gazing: “curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition...the relationship between the human form and its surroundings” (60). I would further these two points by adding that, then, in heterosexual pleasure, the male gaze uses this pleasure derived from the female body as object to help construct his own ego and sense of self. To reinforce this connection, looking reproduces the male as dominant and feeds his ego, with the female body as his passive object, lessening her own sense of self if she does not confront the gaze right back. In Erika L. Sánchez’s book, *Lessons on Expulsion* (2017), the sexual male gaze is central in “Hija de la Chingada,” in which the speaker illustrates her sexualization from age 13 to adulthood: “The men whistle from their trucks / though you’re only 13 and your breasts / are still tucked / meekly inside you. / Every day after school, the factory men yell / *mamacita*, / make noises like sucking / mangoes. / Technically, you could be a little mother— / But what do you know of sex?” (1-11). By the end of Sánchez’s poem, her speaker

contemplates this moment as an adult, asking her current sexual partner, who “yanks [her] hair / the way [she] likes,” to pretend she is still human, yearning for agency.

If we understand the male gaze to be a source a power, to feed both male desire and ego development, the female becomes reduced under his look to a passive object; the female is then given no room for personal agency or autonomy, no desire for her own pleasure and self-awareness, unless she actively works to reverse it, reclaiming a sense of power through looking back. When, in an act of resistance, she takes up arms and employs a direct, oppositional gaze at the male by *herself*, she creates a deliberate form of freedom to move beyond the restrictions of patriarchal codes of conduct and self-awareness. As Susan Bowers argues in her essay, “Medusa and the Female Gaze,” the “antidote to the male gaze, and one avenue to women reclaiming their own sexuality, is the female gaze: learning to see clearly for themselves” (218). Reinstating authority over her body, I move to analyze poet Paisley Rekdal’s book *Nightingale* (2019), which seeks to rewrite myths from *Metamorphoses* and challenge Ovid’s use of violence, silencing, and fragmentation of women’s bodies and narratives.

In her poem “Nightingale: A Gloss,” Rekdal questions Ovid’s representation of Philomela, who is labeled as “mad” for directly heeding her own justice after being raped. Rekdal posits that if we continue to read Philomela’s demand for righteous justice as a source of “madness,” then “it focuses the reader’s gaze back upon her mutilated body, her tortured mind, turning our regard from one of empathy to spectacle” (46). If the female gaze is not employed, then she risks returning to object, a prime subject for viewership, dismemberment, and loss of her own liberty.

Continuing to explore her story, in “Philomela,” Rekdal repurposes it to include an ambiguous ending after the speaker decides to tuck away an antique sewing machine, gifted to her from her grandmother: “How much thread would that take / to make? She wondered. And considered it / a long while before packing up /...The place she kept some books, old clothes, and college papers, / where she told herself it could wait” ().

The power in her speaker’s gaze lies in her own retelling of the story after the rape as she meditates looking at an image of a man gazing and touching a woman’s idealized figure: “shapes emerged. / There / were a man’s hands gripping a slender figure / by the waist, the thin body writhing / frozen in his arms” (25-28). Here, the reader can conclude that the speaker imagines that man’s touch is almost predatory, signaled by the use of the word “writhing” and “frozen in his arms” which mirrors the speaker’s own conscious and memories of her bodily violation. Rekdal uses similar imagery to connect and reinforce this tone in her poem, “The Cry,” in which her speaker equates man controlling nature to her own pain: “the sound / of one animals pain setting off a chain / in so many others until each cry dissolves / into the next grown louder” (18-19) As she describes wild animals trapped and caged by man, she similarly parallels her own voice to be “frozen in the yard” (13). By the end of “Philomela,” the speaker concludes that she cannot use the sewing machine. By refusing to align herself with the women who came before her, who quilted for others, who “embroider[ed] figures of domestic life her grandmother ruefully noted she did not have: a house, child, a man” (p. 28), for whom would the quilt be? The speaker separates herself from this narrative and lineage through the refuting of creating or stitching together something entirely whole.

Building on creation by stitching and weaving, many of my poems employ the symbolic act of being stitched together and/or stitching together someone else in connection to reframing or rearranging the body post-violence, whether from physical or verbal assault. Ribbons symbolize my female speakers' bodies that are similarly fragmented, split, as one would cut ribbon or use it to make something whole, beautiful. For instance, my poem "Love & Other Useless Objects" seeks to call out the male gaze, the danger of using it to push early motherhood and gendered expectations onto a young woman, as the speaker recalls her father buying a bracelet for her, which "[caught] his eyes like a vision: daughter neatly / trimmed, properly stitched. Least crooked..." Her father's gaze keeps her in her place as the idealized fabrication of a daughter. Her power comes at the end of the poem, in the lines, "seaming? It is an exhaustive way to exist," and subsequently naming it as "horrific." My use of the word "seaming" is strategic in these final lines; it alludes to a seam of cloth as the speaker "stitches" or fabricates an idea of parenthood as she herself is parentified, yet it can be read the other way as "seeming," as in appearing or looking. Ultimately, ribbon imagery signals both function and aesthetic utility that is simultaneously wanted and unwanted.

Moreover, in her poem, "swell," from *Blud* (2017), Rachel McKibbens's speaker boldly fabricates the idea of her absent mother's existence, imagining her as a predatory killer: "Yes / let it be there, in that heat-ravaged / moment as she caught the pale bloom of herself / in the mirror & looking / back over her should / fell in love with the animal engine of her body / not for the daughter it could nurture / but for the girl it would kill" (14-21). Here, the focus of the mother is turned to her own powerful, "animal engine" body, rather than the needs of the child. The speaker's fabrication of her mother is one

that bluntly erases the symbol of traditional motherhood as selfless and nurturing. Similarly, in my poem “Pomegranate Seeds,” my speaker meditates on the intrusive act of flaying open a pomegranate, as she contemplates both marriage and motherhood, which seem restrictive and physically invasive to her own body. In this illuminated, intimate moment with her mother, the speaker turns to the Greek myth of Persephone, who was forced into marriage by eating pomegranate seeds, tying herself to Hades to reside in the underworld for one third of the year. Like Rekdal’s speaker, who ultimately decides she cannot create along a similar matriarchal path, and McKibben’s “animal” mother, my speaker wonders if traditional motherhood and marriage are in her future. Ultimately, I leave my reader with the phrase, “innards like jewels,” as a way to suggest that women’s creations—both material and bodily—are the result of destruction to the body and mind while society largely values our expectation to “give and scrap” our bodies for others, like prized jewels. Importantly, our physical and emotional expected self-sacrifice is the object of male gaze and consumption in heterosexual relationships.

Gallery II: Violet/Violent

In concert with the theme of dismemberment and fragmentation of the female body, I turn to Gallery II to showcase the crux of this collection: the slippage of how and where violence operates. While few to none of the poems in this section refer directly to the museum, Gallery II primarily aims to show how the echo of power and institutional oppression that is firmly set in the museum ripples to other spaces, such as the domestic sphere and the workplace, where my speakers experience workplace harassment, sexual assault, and gendered expectations and assumptions. In her essay, “Seeing through Solidarity: a feminist perspective on museums” Porter further posits that “In museums,

and in this discourse, 'woman' becomes the background against which 'man' acts. These representations are formed around idealized and stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, which are rendered as 'real'" (109). Furthermore, she maintains that the "relatively passive, shallow" position of Westernized femininity combined with the aggressive, "highly developed and articulated, fully pronounced" (109) notions of masculinity, together, produce the narrative of history engrained within the museum's underwritten text of display and memory.

In Gallery II, I show how the Cartesian dualism of masculinity and femininity and its distinction between sex/gender is violent because it is restrictive, limiting, and oppressive. In "Aubade to Delicacy," my speaker recalls a memory in which her grandmother gifts her a fragile, blue vase, to symbol how women are deemed as delicate and fragile and also instinctively know how, quite literally, to hold onto these ideals. In reframing this perspective, the speaker counters by showing how her father and brothers, too, show emotional "fragility," which she argues also makes them delicate and vulnerable human beings. Building off this sexist double standard the speaker experiences, later poems in this section thematically make the case that powerlessness and gendered expectations are equally a form of violence; they occur everywhere, from the workplace, to the bedroom, to outside in the natural environment. Last, I interweave poems centered on history, such as "Gallows," and "Maiden Voyage," to thread together and mirror how violence inside our historical narratives still plays out today.

In her book, *Seam* (2014), Tarfia Faizullah's poems suggest that violence and loss is not necessarily spoken directly; rather, as readers, we are confronted with the past through women's experiences of loss, physical brutality, and rape through the

juxtaposition of poetic language that is both beautiful and haunting yet disturbing and abrupt. Like Porter's feminist perspective and reading of history through a women's lens, Faizullah reveals what has largely been omitted historically and culturally. For example, in "Interview's Notes: ii," the speaker writes in her journal the words for girls: "*bhalo-me, karap-me / chotto-shundoir / badgirl, goodgirl / littlebeauty*—in Bangla / there are words for every kind of woman / but a raped one" (4-10). One of her more direct poems, Faizullah toggles between her own experience taking notes while interviewing *Birangona*, or "war heroines"—the title awarded by the Government of Bangladesh to women raped in the Bangladesh Liberation war—and the stories she is recording. In this poem, Faizullah maintains that women are labeled as "good" or "bad,"—which again reinforces the bifurcation and classification of gender—while survivors of rape are unnamed, unacknowledged in their memories, stories, and pain. By giving voice, and naming it, we are forced to acknowledge the unwritten. In the following poem on the next page, titled "Interview with a Birangona," the interview asks a seemingly simple question, "Were there other women there? Did you get along with them?" That the speaker then describes the horrific scene in which she recalls witnessing another women's decapitation "from the rusted blade of the old / jute machine" (18 – 19) and then questions, "...they made us / made us made us made us made us?" (19 – 20) shows that women's bodies often do not belong to themselves, that they are "made," or dismantled at the hands of systemic oppression, highlighted throughout *Seam*.

To employ Susan Bowers's term "antidote" as a sort of remedy to the harshness of the gaze in section I, the "antidote" to one of my speaker's traumatic moments in Gallery II comes in the form of connection to other women. Community, love, and

empowerment are common narratives that arise throughout much of contemporary feminist poetry. In Emily Skaja's book *Brute* (2019), the entire middle section, subtitled "Girl Saints," captures the life sustaining veracity of the speaker's relationship to girlhood friends, whose narratives juxtapose the repeated imagery of the harsh, male brute. In "Dear Katie," Skaja's gaze firmly fixates on her speaker's friends Katie and Ruth, who are lyrically transformed into saints, their names repeated meditatively like prayers. She writes, "Lately, I hold your name in my mouth" (14), and "...Now that I can't unsmudge the lines for any reason, I am difficult. / He takes the high road; I take the thornhedge. / Katie, I can't find a way to talk about this / but it always happens: I have no standing with men in my life. / You are the only one who ever asks me *Are you eating?*" (7-10). By the end of the poem, when the speaker professes that she experiences a horrific dream after a drunken fight with a man, she wakes up calling for Katie, as if in instinct.

Building on the act/image of prayer as a form of healing, in my poem "Violet (Dear Amanda)," my speaker describes the experience of tearing her ACL at a high school volleyball game, when her friend takes on the role of caretaker: "Whether it was instinct of reason, you drove me / through the autumn night, bathed my naked body / in holy retreat. We slept side by side, nestled like wings. / I wanted this forever, violet girlhood / that silently heals..." Here, the phrases "bathed my naked body," "holy retreat" and "wings" play on the image of the girl saint in an act of religious devotion to preserving and protecting the female body, whereas "violet girlhood" emphasizes the enduring love between childhood friends.

Gallery III: In Memory

In my final section, “Gallery III: In Memory,” I close the collection with a meditation on memory, specifically how and what we remember because of trauma. As Porter demonstrates “Museums claim to show the past as it really was - to re-present history. In this simple claim, the medium of the museum and the process of making collections and displays are rendered invisible in a relationship of authenticity and truth” (108). In Gallery III, the reader returns to the site where violence is repeated and replicated, not only inside the museum, but in our physical bodies and brains. My speakers’ memories are sharpened in recollection, but time is stripped away and replaced with alternative methods when the act of remembering has become warped by violence. For instance, in “Wunderkammer,” my speaker meditates on the confusion between feeling love and/or anger after a dangerous encounter, in which she remembers driving home her intoxicated parent, despite not having a driver’s license: “The feeling like nothing I’d felt since, curious / if this were love or anger when they passed each other / in the dark. How much breath is involved in both. / A window shook itself to remind me. / And the thin yolk continued to spill.” Like a *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosity, emotional trauma transforms into and is collected as a “curious” object that is catalogued in the speaker’s body as a method of keeping time and remembering, of presenting the “truth” to her own history and voice. Like the museum or *wunderkammer*, her memories show a single focused perspective. But, importantly, this section illustrates my speakers’ wrath; there is no sentimentalism which glamorizes the way things used to be.

In fact, the absolute erasure of nostalgia is a broader confrontation shown in this collection that aims to show how our histories are ugly; they are laden with prejudice,

fear, and anxiety. In “Vignettes of America,” my speaker examines larger themes in American culture that have seeped into our contemporary conversations and homes: food insecurity, xenophobia, and the great wealth divide, and homelessness to name a few. Using the facade of comfortability within the domestic interior as a meditation on white American memory, I mean to illustrate the irony and dissolution between “truth” and memory when I write “These are the walls / they say keep us safe, / fear and delirium pumping / our blood, where black mold blooms / like cherry blossoms.” In the line “Our blood, where black mold blooms,” the speaker means to point out how prejudice and fear germinate and grow inside our bodies; “Our blood” similarly highlights how lineages and bloodlines, our histories, continue to allow racism to bloom, as fear shapes our imagined memories.

In “What Happens to a Devasted Place,” the speaker is content to remember innocuous moments of joy “in the moments before”: “skin gently scraped away by branches.../ your arms like overexposed veins, river / water kissing at your naked / feet, / the silent sky open and opal.” This connection between the speaker and her body revealed by nature shows that they are inextricably bound. In the branches scraping away her skin, “revealing red lines streaked across,” arms like veins, “river / water kissing at your naked...” nature has become her body; they have become mirror images of each other, one entity. I purposefully break line five with “river” while describing the speaker’s arms in order to emphasize the connection between blood-veins, arms, and rivers, and similarly in line seven, “feet, the silent sky open and opal,” to signal how the speaker’s feet, the body part that roots her to the earth, is as expansion and powerful as the sky.

Further, this poem heightens the speaker's vagueness about the event in "the before," as trauma has blurred, buried, and erased her ability to put "the before" into more detailed language. In this intimate moment, the speaker can, however, remember her body as an extension of nature, which is similarly beautiful and everlasting, yet suffers a shared dismantlement. In the end, there is comfort in the durability of places that have been devastated by force. In comparing her own existence to the cyclical reblooming of nearby orchards, she knows that she, too, can be hopeful of a fruitful metamorphosis.

Last, in her poem, "Ghazal," from *Wade in the Water* (2018), Tracey K. Smith similarly asks the reader to consider her history, "our fraught, fraught name" (14), in connection to stolen land, as her speaker compares history to a sailing ship: "history is a ship forever setting sail. / On either shore: mountains of men, / Oceans of bone, an engine whose teeth shred all that is not our name. / Can you imagine what we will sound from us, what we'll rend and claim / When we find ourselves alone with all we've ever sought: our name" (2-4). Here, in the repetition of the phrase "our name," Smith inserts black women's voices into a historical narrative, a rewriting and reclaiming of history, that has predominantly excluded black women's experiences. The power of these opening lines is clear; at first, the reader looks back on Smith's speaker's "shredded," or erased, history. The turn comes in her rhetorical question to the reader when she asks us to imagine the swelling, infinite power what she, and all people of color, have sought and fought for: their name. She asks us, "Can you imagine what will sound from us, what we'll rend and / claim / When we find ourselves alone with all we've ever sought: our / name?" (10-12).

In looking back and gazing at history as a vessel which has shredded her speaker's identity and name, erased by "mountains of men" and "oceans of bone"—

which alludes to the death of thousands of black bodies throughout history—Smith, like Faizullah, locates power by naming what has been omitted. In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks maintains that there is inherent “power in looking” (307). By claiming the right to look back through an oppositional black gaze by “naming what we see” (307), black women disrupt and deconstruct stereotypes and dehumanized representations upheld and disseminated by white supremacy. In her concluding argument, hooks posits, “Looking and looking back, black women involved ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future” (319). Smith’s use of “counter-memory” in Ghazal suggests that history is never finished, never finite. By posing the question to us as readers, we know the power of reclaiming name fuels the imagery and pushes us hear the “sound” that will either “thunder up” or “lie quiet as bedrock” (23).

Throughout the entirety of the collection, I position anger and confrontation as my own authorial gaze. By directly pointing out violence to female bodies, minds, and experiences, I align many of the poems with Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which the authors employ Virginia Woolf’s argument that calls for women writers to “kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (17) by the rendering of the nineteenth century representation of the “angel in the house” or the “monstrous,” rebellious madwoman. But female madness can be read as code for power, as an act of resistance in refusing to conform with women’s emotional expectations to be silent, passive, contained, and calm—the ideal half dead, half alive angel. In Victorian England, order and morality of the entire British Empire was supposed to rest on the calm, order, and sound morality of Britain’s women,

who were assumed to control their domestic spheres without overt displays frustration or wrath. To do so would jeopardize the foundation of Britain's imperial power, should they "allow" their sons and husbands to run untamed, wild, from lack of moral grooming from mamma.

I have demonstrated that my collection of poetry is living with agency and urgency in our current political moment, where bodies are continually policed, displayed, and stolen. It is my hope that this collection of poetry will speak loudly against the impulse to categorize, classify, and erase human stories and bodies, demonstrating how museums can be wider catalysts for change if we look deeper into the structures that forge their narratives. More importantly, my goal has been to illustrate the intersection between language and art that constructs our perceived realities. Through art, we may express the incommunicable, as language has its limit. But in turning over and reinterpreting the works of Western art presented in this body of work, I imagine a world for my readers where the slippage of language allows us to decenter power upheld by institutions, and importantly, that we might find empathy between our own bodies and bodies at which we are gazing. Finally, as a breathing and active collection of poetry, I will be continuing to send out these poems out for publication, as well as the entire collection to be published into a book.

Gallery I: Gaze

Self Portrait as the Museum

I might be what you remembered

as a young girl, or I might be

what you forgot: your moon speckled

belly, the skin leftover

of an orange rind, its juice

the color of rust collecting

in small rings inside

your mouth. Once

I was only a cabinet, a rib

cage soft with loot, living

as collector of memories: drunken mother,

our car spin on the sun slicked road,

arm instinctively flung outward, bracing

for impact, tightening near the shoulders

of my younger brother: age 4.

In my frontal cortex, someone says mother

can't lie face-planted on our kitchen table,

mid-day, as if stuck to a mirror. Nobody knew

what my father might've did, the answer hidden

in the bones inside my skin. Years later,

man told me I was beautiful too for keeping

all his secrets. What am I trying to do with memories,
reverse my eyes to some split picture
of myself to remember this pinpricked
girl? Jewels of blood bead the surface,
red periods. They were always there. Let it be
my victory to remember what happened, to circle
the shapes slowly like rosaries, mother my violet
body gone to bone. I know this name is
violent making.

Girl of Bones

I am creating a way to speak
to my family about my body—
my hands, how they trembled
like pounded earth—living
inside a drunken-down house,
when we were always hushed
like the silent sky. Nobody wanted
to acknowledge it; nobody craved
a sense of release. Even the trees
mocked us for our inability to switch
skins each season: broken bodies
are easier to inhabit when you don't know
any different. I was young once, dreaming
I'd drowned in my own tongue,
color of rust sparking something
in me, a reminder to wake
instead of forming a language I wanted
to scream. When you screamed at me
for years, words blurring like vision, I ate
myself to the bone: a whole museum's
starved anger collecting in my marrow.
Now, I am older. The dreams still come,
but I am learning to unstitch my bones,
unravel each joint one-by-one. I watch
the planes slide above my head, wondering
if they wished they were birds.

Leave us in the dirt

When a man puts his fists into earth, he pulls out
the body of a woman: see a shovel,
a pick, papered notes, a soft brush to search for secrets
hidden on our collarbones. The bones of the throat hoard
our histories: see a dowry, a war, a weaving, a voice trapped
in shards of ostraca near our feet. He's uncovered every
inch, a discovery for books—men who don't know
what we hold closest to dirt: see a knife, a jeweled beetle,
a pot of poison, a broken hand of a neighbor's child,
buried near that split voice. He writes *female: wide hips*
short bones: then examines the notes next to a celebratory fire,
smoke rising in small ovals like mouths or marriage rings
and continues unearthing. We become broken
and unbound in our embryonic dirt. Leave us here
to clasp hands around our own necks, watch
skies turn from blue to black.

Digging

In some desolate field,

 a man is breaking

the earth like glass, looking

 for the dreaming dead. How many

times have his teeth have fallen out

 in his dreams, dropping

like petals? Do his own bones fail

 him like a bullet flying through flesh?

Are they somewhere buried

 at the bottom of this dirt, hiding

 in one of these hundreds of piles,

earth coned like breasts?

 A man is pausing from digging,

his lips parting themselves

 like some sacred flood, salt

falling into his eyes, a reminder

 of his body and its weeping

when he finally finds the body of a woman

 and her child, their bones like milk and sticks

later for displaying. He swallows his own

 breath and becomes their father, a husband

 as he carefully collects them,

archeology brush, he thinks, a gasp

 of god: one swipe, a cleansing

of dirt; two swipes, wiping away the body
and its history; three swipes, the earth
disintegrating. Violence is brimming
on the silent horizon like a mirage.

Curator Aubade

In the velvet rip of morning

sun, I watch the dead reanimate

like a memory. I watch

the wooden boned, lacquered

beings catch at my throat,

the way a lie sits itching. I am

bound, swaddled in this cathedraled

place that knows only

the sound of a quiet cleaving

from its past like a stone plucked

from the rushing riverbed. But how

in a museum resurrected

with life, can cup so much

violence locked inside like a mouth

of the broken? I feel dawn shudder

around me, its light a holy space

for my beating body to become its own

breath, as day begins to tighten

its small fist around me

in devastation. What home

can I give them now

that they have become

unrooted from this earth?

A body isn't a body

after it is taken

from its quiet vexation.

Love & Other Useless Objects

Silver rope around my wrist
to remind the passing of time that I am
still a woman. Some call it a bracelet,

like I need to brace myself
from myself, shelter whatever shell
I have obsessively learned to create

out of necessity to keep this husk
of a body still beating. Yet, I turn
my hands over its edges religiously,

as if I can will myself into being
constructed into a similar concentric shape,
one hook desperately clinging the other

as if fearing depletion. I remember my father
found it at a Harlem shop, metal glint catching
his eyes like a vision: daughter neatly

trimmed, properly stitched. Least crooked
line in a sea of swapped screaming. Primrose
beacon in a house brimming with brother

when mother had shadowed to a low dim.
And then it was my turn for giving:
the food, the gifts, the schedules,

each reinforced with violets,
or something smelling like a bottle
of lace and dusked country. Tactics,

I mocked, but tried to sharpen the strategy
to its finest tip, militant militia
prayer in my ear, I might have called

the whole damn army out of spite:
flung my bones out back in the yard
for attention, sang a bloodied, raw hymn,

when instead I only ate, spitting
soup and water every other day,
to achieve an idea of *perfection*.

Did I deserve it, his peace
offerings for the shit I had seen,
for the mother I scared myself into

seaming? It is an exhaustive way to exist.
I am something he once said to me,
both beautiful and horrific.

I. Portrait of an Anatomical Corpse in the Theatre

Anatomical Theatre Palazzo del Bo was the world's first anatomical theatre built for studying human dissection and anatomy.

At first, one rough hand

that peels back my skin like flaying an orange, or a mango if you prefer
battered flesh that slips easily between fingers, not unlike a wedding ring.

Some think my soul has already risen, so it's safe to put their hands
inside:

but my soul sits here in the small dead cup of my mouth,
gasping like a swollen fish salted. Then, a stage on which more men arrive to feast,
the quick click of their quills on parchment,

the sound of no remorse. Seats in the house are full, waiting
for the actor to make a slow cut in my left arm, reveal a frozen blue vein: my heart
once made of milk and tiny riced petals wonders how
I'm the main attraction, some sad oyster split open like legs.
Then I remember our wombs retell the story of god.

When I hanged
at the gallows, my legs swaying like ribbons in air,

I craved the earth
to tuck away like ginger root, turn my hands over my own breasts,
away from a wider, curious wet mouth, unwanted. Now I watch one thousand

little eyes reap my body
slow: I watch my wrists fall apart like teeth of the dead.

Upon Entering the Museum

I watch two ancient hands
clasp as if they'll dissolve away
from each other like heated sugar;
a woman holds herself, rocking
a crying baby slung on her
chest like a gold medallion.
A glass door holds us together.
We slide in & out of its slits
like wind. I catch my breath folding
inward like a linen sheet, sucking
at a violent breeze, watching
visitors flicker quickly like dead
leaves. I am my own Virgil here.

Upon entering, a girl escapes her rapist
by transforming her fingers into spears,
the pearl of her breast bones cracking
to bark, strong as a warrior shield.
Apollo, his lips half parted like a lemon,
sours at the sight of her unexpected,
switching meat. A girl on fire
watches the way people exhibit her
history, ancestor's strung coral
beads displayed wrong, red and angular
like broken fingers. I see a petal of lilac
cloth pierced with a bullet hole, blood stain still
preserved. Upon entering, I wonder about grief
stilled in each gallery when are quick to look
for holes in each other, skin rips catching
eyes like glints of silver.

Gaze

Here, galleries are filled
with painted women locked
behind a gilded eye,

and I, like she, might have raised my hem
two finger lengths up too high
for the thrill of being remembered,

fervor of being pressed into another,
his memories and flesh longing for mine.
Aftertaste of citrus similarly lingers behind.

But I, like she, might have bit my tongue
until it bled, smeared the iron across
lips and cheeks, folded my soft gums away,

salted pretty whispers into the sea, wanting
to cull up some ugly & dirty fever that spits
out stitches to sew his lids shut with satin

ribbons, leaving his mouth propped open
with stolen bones. I, like she, will forget
the need to be remembered by man

who can't even imagine the dead
as dead and instead files them as numbers.
A whole equation on the brink

of breaking over like rain pooling
heavily in the belly of a timid leaf,
waiting for warm ground,

that loud gasp of release.

Prayer

Willem van Swanenburg. *Theatrum Anatomicum of Leiden University* in the early 17th century, copperplate. 1610.

Summer sweats its breath
all over me: my body sliced

by beads of hot tears,
the kind that have nowhere

else to hide, except on my skin
disintegrating like a whisper.

You'll find my body is missing
a gut, organs flickering like lanterns

mimicking moonlight, until hands
peel back a blanket ingesting me:

it lifts like a mother might
fold morning sheets

from her son who's dead
asleep. My sight, six rows

of wooden pews, circling
like open mouths, animal

skeletons dance on my grave
as I choke on the salt of god.

How many times do I have to die
for this body, my immaculate sins

starved clean, to cull up a prayer
only for my screams to be washed

out by white bones
of the living?

Muse

When he says, *hold your hands near your heart*,
he doesn't mean to flatter: he means to capture

perfect lighting for your breasts. A lemon
in the bowl near your foot, a cloth draped

thin so your skin bleeds through, a stuffed bird
with marbled eyes, watches your nakedness.

History tells you about his father, and his father
and his father's father. Their lineage lines your throat

like copper pennies. You swallow and taste
blood but wish it were moonlight like your origin

born on the backs of one hundred goddess sisters.
His history trapped them for a drop of their divine,

seized and stilled them in sculpture, stolen
from Roman heat, buried deep in cool sweat

of caverned mouths, gut of a gurling grotto,
their water hissing spits like spears,

so not even the birds will stay.

Pomegranate Seeds

My mother and I scrape edges
of a flayed pomegranate, searching
for its stars, and I think we're like Galileo
scanning the inked night sky:
our stars blood pink. We drop them
loose into a shallow bowl,
wetted, juice clinging to seeds,
widening like fabric releasing
from the body of a drowned girl.

I think of Persephone—will I be tied
in marriage like her? Will juice, blood
pink, widen from my body, expanding
from my hold for someone else,
a child? How we give and scrape,
widen in water to take up space:
flesh scored and knifed to reveal
our innards like jewels.

Violet is one letter off from violent

In the dark, I dream of my imaginary

daughter in fear

of what her body might be

turned into for someone else.

Daughter, the day I realized

my body is a split wing, I couldn't stop

circling it, running my hands over

places I had quickly berated,

longing for better mending.

Perhaps I practiced touching my body

to know I still can

remember the feeling of a palm, stroking

in protective forgiveness. Is it right to say

I'm already picturing your body

dead, bracing for the inevitable? Daughter, I say

your name out loud, catch its creeping

rhythm in my throat, *violet*,

your body fractured everywhere, like light

split on the incandescent air.

One letter off, *violent*,

your body fractured

everywhere, like light split

on the incandescent air.

La Pietà

Like all good mothers, she loved her son enough
to hold him at her breasts in death,

his bare flesh receding back into her own
womb, absorbing. I read there is solace here,

a perfect splitting of life echoed
in the divots of the mother,

the folds of her careful Carrera skin,
gorged like mouths that swallow her own

flesh back again. I notice her strained fingers,
a hand clutched on his back, splayed fat,

a tiger's paw pressing softly into the earth,
the other pointing southward, an invitation

for our eyes to feast on her child and his sunken ribs.
We are eager to eat a body dead, recycle a soul

into our blood, pluck bones to pick our own teeth.
I bet Mary yelled and cried and fumed and danced,

licked oil off her weather-beaten hands, curled
her tongue back behind the wall of her teeth

clenched like fists. Perhaps upon learning
of her fervent and swelling belly, she tipped

her head back and ripped open
the earth with a chagrin fist, pitying herself.

Man in the Cathedral

Consider the floor of a cathedral / gripping to earth. How does it hold / one true god / when this house speaks / in tongues and forgets the lips? / Consider the phrase *one true god*. / Look up. / Colored glass windows stretch like open mouths, filtering / pink light, staining skin like ink. / They say it helps you see / god. / Consider the man who lives / in the cathedral, humming / hymns of some holy father / who isn't really your father: / you've never even seen him. / Sigh so noise from your hot breath / floats to the ceiling / Consider how / the ceiling opens like windows: / its ribs skinned, hollowed and arched to make room / for steamed breath / so the Father can hear / better. / Now squint. / Consider if he's listening. / Consider if he's ever listened at all.

The Bakers

In this yeast that spits, we turn
our knuckles white and raw

like overripe peaches. In one thousand years,
I wonder if I'll remember how

you smelled: hickory and oaked like earth
growing under your careful hands.

Sometimes we sneak a taste
of our humble beginnings: you claim I cut

my knee peddling too fast downhill,
as you crack an egg and it turns to gold,

or when I threw a baseball indoors, smashing
my mother's window, as you peel barked lips

of a vanilla stick, scraping for its silver.
In one thousand years, I hope they find us

dead, open us like cocoa beans for secrets
of sweetness, embalm our limbs, jewel

our bare throats like queens. We'll speak
to our diggers in the ginger they found

near our feet. Our museum text will read:
no greater strength comes from two bodies

split to reveal how sugar is made
in their own mouths: a species learned

to harvest air and spin it to divine:
see the village bloom in their veins.

Gallery II: Violet/Violent

Aubade to Delicacy

The Baker gifts you a paper vase,

its bones brittle like starved dirt.

Cupped in your palm, the vase sits a soft blue lie,

light but lethal. She presents it to you

like some forgotten jewel or a feather fished from the fields

where her dead husband dissolves like wet tissue into the warm

& waiting ground. Its skin creamed like stolen alabaster, the hips

neatly tucked into perfected form. Your hand slips up its body

& pauses at the neck, waiting to be told

where it should clamp: gripped at the neck,

like grasping the dead rabbits you discovered behind your house,

or

clutched in your arms, sucked against your own breasts?

The Baker says, *we women know how to hold the most delicate & fragile things,*

as you struggle to restrain your own strength from breaking its neck,

another shattered throat later to be found, molding like plums.

But you know you've seen your brothers cry tears like stones, dropping heavy

into their thin hands, waxy & paper cups.

You wondered how the bottoms didn't burst

open & spill onto the floor. Yet you always waited for that sharp sound of marbles,

panic coming for their lungs slow like morning fog.

& behind closed doors you know your father has hanged his own breath

at night. These men have seen their mouths transform from fire

to singed fruit burned brilliantly over open flame: the flesh slips off.

Hold it up and see right through it.

[Dear brother]

Fields of abandoned houses, echoes of emptiness reverberate
off the backs of deer, grass succumbing to their mouths

when they spot us. Spotted bodies intersect at vicious angles,
lines extending then retracting like lungs. A stillness.

Then a quick jolt, their hooved heels noiseless,
avoidances overlapping in intricate spheres.

II

Brother, we step through the threshold
of one home—imagine the hands that once pulverized flesh

into bone here on the countertops, love bludgeoned and pearl-punched
like the moon. A bedroom door hangs itself with nothing

but metal pins. The roof gives up willingly into my hands, tiles dropping
unspeakable. The support beam aches for tomorrow to never come.

III

When I finally ask you how you felt
when mom almost died from drinking,

or how dad's misplaced anger broke the lawnmower,
I already knew the answer was in your shadow shifting

listlessly months earlier, the flash of your feet
pacing anxiously past the cracks of your bedroom door.

And what is unwritten between us, that we are too afraid
to ask each other for what we need—*to speak, to speak, to speak.*

A door is a door is a door is a shield—

you respond in silence. What is a body
when it is devoid of what it needs to heal?

IV

And in this house, we strike ground together, dragging
our shoes through piles of undulated debris. You unearth

an antique blade from the mess, broken metallic edge—cold
blue grey. Our eyes twin in the glint of its severed skin,

and the tall dead grass gleams back, winnowing
uneasily in the open throat of the wind.

I Dream of Winged Victory

I can cry all night, imagining
what it feels like to be held
by a sober mother, wishing for her
touch. In the dark, I remember the picture
I found of her in youth, blue chiffon dress
wrapped her body like a scent. My flickering
memory pulling away like cotton stitching.

I learned to swallow images of stoned women
for their bones to hold up my own.

But even stone is prone to disintegrating
into whispers. Even I am quick to immortalize
perfect visions. At night, I dream of *Winged Victory*,
visitors swarming in circles, gasping
in shallow breaths at her tilted frame,
hands too fast to flash a synthetic
bright light: a woman on the edge
of emergent flight. I dream they only notice
her dress rippling, as if in a hurry to disappear,
imaginary wind spitting at her tired seam.

We quickly etch over the prowess in her
hawked shoulders spooling into themselves,
botched arms that once carried the blue
of men from broken-fought fields, her name
culled meditatively from their lips
like prayers. How we consider the body
reborn with no head, the absence of her
memory, a victory.

Upon waking, I am alarmed when I catch myself
frayed in the mirror, all neck and bone thinning
like lace, one ripped seam setting off a schism
in my own body like wrinkles, erasure
of memories, slowly receding.

Gallows

The body is condemned
to hang like a puppet, maybe

for cattle theft, maybe
for murder, maybe

for womanhood.
Your mouth has no resting place

here: There is fear
the wintered earth won't consume

your corpse slowly
as if on fire. The crowd

waits to watch your throat
engulfed in that silent circle,

careening back and forth
in the hot glim of frozen sun,

kind of light only caught
in glass windows bleeding

from blue to red
in the nearby church:

you realize blood
makes the ground holy,

stretching across like skin
of a pomegranate. What you fear

is the surgeon who'll slice
your neck like Christmas

meat, all oiled and glowing,
the last time you were a baby.

What transient being will you become:
a quick breath switched

between lungs of lovers,
their mouths gaping

open like your own?
Or will you become your own

language no one will speak?
Lying flat on the surgeon's table,

open body a proclamation,
no one will consider your eyes

human, only slits of the weeping.

Ghost

What haunts after violence
has rendered you lifeless

like some after-funeral lily,
titled and weeping, the body

that forgets you are still
a vessel and not

yet a ghost, silent maw
on raw skin? Who will love

and clean your wounds, but leave
them still sliced opened,

an impression leftover
like rings of dried dirt?

Once you thought only shadows
emerged at night. Now you know

in the field next over, you are the edging
of the woods too afraid to creep in

to open field, shadows that cling
to their timid leaves. You are the clover

disguising itself for yellow ragweed,
in hopes nobody will pick you. Who will

sow your mind full of the broken
bones like the earth? Now you hold

all the ghosts imaginable, their stories
and prisons, even if they aren't your own.

Waiting

Split girl: I was trained to keep my tongue
to myself. I didn't know which language
to speak when I heard you cry out *help*
in the darkness, the word as sharp as violent
light bursting the whiteness encasing
your ink-dropped eyes after the fight
with my father. Was it fear
or guilty pleasure that made me
unable to leap fiercely from bed,
as you had once done for me, one wail
sending you chasing into the thickness
of night like someone anxiously close
on your heels? I knew you had drunk everything
we had by furniture shifting angrily downstairs,
scraping like grunts; bottles in hiding
like memories deep in the whole of our house
unearthed themselves from the pores
of your flushed skin, reddening quickly
each minute I remained still. I knew
succumbing to an emotional scene would be tragic,
the way you reminded me frantically
in a crowd or cross-hatched store, lines
winding like red ribbon: *Don't make a scene*—
that somehow, in the ink of our melancholy
hall, if I held your body to mine, peeled your drunk
face away from the slickened
sheerness of vinyl floor, our breaths
neck to neck, would recognize the mirror
in each other, mutual inflictions one cause
for another, pain you ate from your husband's
accused lover would somehow teach my own hand
to fill itself with the shape of a smooth edge, amber
liquid waiting to be tasted in anticipation
like the skin of my husband's body.

In Which You

When I am half
asleep, half dead
tired, let me unsettle
in my never ending
dream, the one in which you
become obliterated like spilling
mist evicted by dawn
air, or the thread
I am trying to untie
of our memories
tethered together
like roots, unsuspending.
Even the heavens don't
envy this dreadful prayer,
even my tongue respools itself
at a body able to sever
another, as if it were nameless.
Once, I dreamed of the broken
blue teacups you smashed
in drunken terror:
they cried in my naked
palms for days. Once I dreamed
you unstitched me down
to a thin seam of unclothed
dirt, my mouth one sad lily
unable to untangle
its feet. Now, in the darkness,
I am the wind, splitting night
into the violet morning.
Let me unsettle in the fractured
stillness that has become my body,
wound with nothing but ribbon.

Violet (Dear Amanda)

I was perfectly destructed, my body
anticipating breakage, finally broke.

Ligaments in my knee hung loose,
like split ribbons at eighteen: one jump

too high. Court game my parents quickly missed
like words they were selective to forget. I crumpled

like it was my fault, legs forgetting themselves
under pressure. I am too much to hold.

I was crying; I was spilling phrases onto the gym floor *I need you.*

Come get me. Look at your daughter, look at her hands, holding
a million fucked up memories like I was panic drunk. I had learned the technique
from my mother. Someone shuffled me to the sidelines.

You cried, ate my anger with me so I had room
to digest: girls cut from imaginary cloth.

Whether it was instinct or reason, you drove me
through the autumn night, bathed my naked body

in holy retreat. We slept side by side nestled like wings.
I wanted this forever, violet girlhood

that silently heals; I wanted to return to the memory
of ourselves, reintroduce her bravado

on some seminal stage. I am asking you to remember
the feeling: think back before men spoke

over us in intervals as frequent as breathing.
My bones now reset on the edge of a pin.

Desert Queen

What do you do with a girl / who runs to the desert to escape / heat of sun? Seems wrong,
like the girl. / Are you alone? / Where is your husband, a friend? / It's just me, she says /
& these socks that sweat, / this left eye, / bruised from too many broken men, /
earthquakes more stable than them, / & a fist / full of pomegranate seeds, / taste like
broken teeth. / The girl watches the sun, / its skin sagging, / bleeding outstretched, shake
hands, / make a deal with the moon. / Even the skies are emerging, switching skins, / as
she shakes a new self alone. In darkness, / she watches desert cacti, / Queen of the Night /
blooming under pools / of sweet moon, milk / petals commanding like a missile to the
shore. / Buttered glow-yellow / at its center, a pulse quickening / at the site of scorpion
dragging / his bullet body across red-brain desert sand, / poisoned dagger aimed. / It
reminds her of home: / how his fists clenched / her soft petal curls, looming / threat of
violence always / dragging across her brain like desert sand. / How to bloom & rule like a
desert / Queen. The only fear being swallowed by sky.

Japanese Maples

She feels the red thread pull
at the back of her throat, a pin

prick of stress she swallows,
afraid a drawn breath will unravel

the stitching in her lungs. She imagines
her office, phosphorene cubicles, a mouth

and tongue on which she dissolves, forgetting
the fire of unwanted flesh. Last night's sheets

noosed around her ankles, her bed a hook
and chain, the small bruise forming

like a plum under her ribs: It sours
and ferments there, purpled wine spill

blooming. Outside her office window,
Japanese Maple leaves unstitch

themselves from branches, flutter to earth,
cover like red snow, bright as blood, open

wound. Its trunk burnt lacquer polish
on shoes. The curve of its branches

bronchial tubes, breathing and beating
each other for air: fueled ignition.

How she wonders if the leaves
might graze the sky's belly, burst

open and breathe fire, torch cotton
clouds blush-fire burning

from opened ground. How delicious to open,
to breathe like them on fire, to smolder heavens,

watching gods smelt to liquid, juiced
and cupped, red-ash seeping in her hands.

Young Womanhood in the Professional Workplace

is like sucking an orange slice
down to the peel

when everyone expects you

to do that thing
where you leave it in your mouth

and smile: the curve of the skin
playfully silencing your lips,

the vision of the rind
bright and sweet,

the meaty sour flesh clamped
solid between clenched teeth.

Maiden Voyage

Notice there are no women
 bucking and broiling
 like a bull. Men are inside
 and ferments. Smell of salt,
 boiling sun and rotting
 her masts like chimps
 crammed in holes, slide in
 and she herself ripped
 to them. She a vessel,
 the only comfort fish
 Though nearing ghostly
 an opened ocean,
 she'll summon waves
 at her hull. Reload,

on a maiden voyage,
 on rancid seas,
 her belly, her caves,
 cod, hardened bread,
 teeth. Too many men
 in trees. Too many balls
 slide out. This maiden
 opened. A body
 hollow bullet,
 who kiss her warm
 corpse, she tastes
 extending, forever
 in bloody twilight,
 repeat. Writers in pens:

except the ship herself
 ready to eject her riders
 soft spots where wine hides
 her decks slick with too much
 stroking her sails, climbing
 full to be fired, canons
 will carry men to death
 on fire isn't a body at all
 streaming through salt fields,
 and writhing skin, broken.
 a brined breath of freedom,
 like fog: when it lifts,
 to dock herself. They'll wait
notice there is one woman:

the only one who keeps giving.

To Know the Broken

The girl is an oracle, gazing

at the little boy, collecting bits of broken: sticks, split

leaves, sunlight twisting on his skin,

fracturing like glass. The Earth giving

each sliver of its incompleteness away

in hope of some miracle healing.

The way the boy tips back

his silent head, a smile stretched

across its surface like taunt laundry,

she thinks it might break open

and spill its red threads all over

the front yard, a horrific display

staining the dirt. She anxiously waits

for that violent sound of ripping.

Alone she practices her collecting

in preparation, her careful hands searching

for one cracked acorn at a time, bones

and shells of the forgotten

baby birds she knows lie dead

in the bushes, for lost petals set loose

from their pink pistils into the wind.

Years later, the boy becomes a piece

of his own type of split he no longer

wishes to collect: the body bullied,

the body under blue panic, language

the girl already has come to know
as her own quiet broken.

Every night, their sky bleeds hushed

and onyx. Each night, she culls up

a hectic prayer for him. Only stars weep back,

echoing the shared sound of catastrophe,

their exploding breaths eviscerated

far into galactical darkness.

You Taught Yourself

Blue washed carcass
of a fish, reminds me

I am a stranger
in this wet place:

city that lit the world.

Alone, I feast
on its shore, husks

of forgotten bodies
remind me of my own,

slick of summer
draws thin lines down

my back like blood marks,
an initiation. The sea expands

then recoils into nothing to signal
its own existence. Did I imagine

restarting here would be too much
time with my memories,

that in the crux of forging myself,
stone on bone, I'd long to cling

to something softer? Afternoon,
the woman who cuts

my hair lulls me with local love
myths; retired men in cobblestone

streets trace me backward
to a familiar image they remember in youth,

shape of a curved body rising from blue
water, glittering like cut glass in oceanid crest.

I exchange one longing breath for the next.

Look—

the skyline is burning at the shudder
of day, splitting into night.

I am familiar with these vestiges of comfort.

The Body Leftover (Birth of Eve)

Your body isn't cleaved from Adam,
but from his weight on top of you.

You remember it: his soured breath, escaping
towards your body as if it couldn't wait to release.
He ignored the throttle of your throat,
humming the way you've trained it
to signal a disaster. How do we
unstitch a moment in the brain that's already been
zipped? The moon flickered behind pale shadows
of four hands. You watched your own body
open like a prayer, fingers perched inside
your silence, waiting to break over

like waves. For centuries, we are battered
and battered only in ways the shore has
come to know, our heads eating the memories
sown up in each other's ribs, delicate we hold
like ribbons. How many times we've broke,
how many times we no longer wish to stitch ourselves
back together again, our embryonic girlhoods lost
in a gash, heads wanting to become
beacon, rusting to copper dust.

Gallery III: In Memory

An Odyssey

Speak –

My memory fails me

of the wily heroine,
the nomadic princess
raped off her course.

Because they exclude this part of the story.
This is an involuntary journey.

The kind drunk from tongues
of our elder men: They speak of her
in hushed corners of stained places,

fire hearths as witness. With hands
clenched, swords tightening, half rising,
banging mangled fists, bloodied beat

on beat, they pound the storied oak
table when they get to the climax
of the myth where her breasts bubbled

beneath the fingernails of Sirens.
“She enjoyed it,” they proclaim, spit
oozing from their wined mouths, pregnant.

“Lured in hypnotic trance,
no beeswax could press her to the mast,
weakness,” they proclaim. Naturally,

they misspeak as all good men do:
she sank into the floorboards of the bark
like a mopping rag until Sirens’ seductions

surpassed, hawk missing prey, jumped
overboard and joined them anyway.

In memory

There are few things I remember—rain
spilling like cloth in heaps
on my front yard; the sound a plum makes
when bitten too soon; the arched back
of the dawn sky—how many times
I etched over each moment, thinking
they were useless, weren't worth
my memory, time tipping forward
like overstuffed boxes.

And yet, I recite and write them
down to my daughter each night
in meditative prayer, as if tight flesh,
clouds crescendoing pressure,
the breaking open of the sky, will
remind her of me: my own hands
that split apart like paper each day
at my desk. In this dissolvment,

I hope she will learn to love herself
as we sweep through the museum
on Saturdays, our eager hands
entangled like ropes, like smoke
caught in the crest of a pit.

She points to a Picasso,
a lady cut by blue.

I hope her memory is of me,
my love one of the few.
Because here, we never learned
to love one another—bodies
on display like windows. I am watching
the way visitors only look through,
never wanting to know the people
in the house, scared when they see
a glimpse of life, drifting by
each painting, every sculpture,
quickly they might be clouds
alone in the forgotten sky,
feathering like tissue.

Object Permanence

Back when I was alone
in staff-only museum storage,
reading on power, rape,

the chipped Roman vase in my hand
signaled its history to me by shedding
bits of earth from its skin—the poison

charred dirt I suddenly craved
to eat—the violence that lulled me
closer, to press its own swollen

hips into shape, like milked marrow
pressing against closed bones, craving
division. Early twenties: I touched

a book bound in human skin,
realizing later the body is capable
of holding trauma the way I clung to men

and other broken things, the way I couldn't kill
the memory of myself
the night I slipped on thinning rain-drenched grass

running from home in fear, the sky bleeding
into bullets, cracks I could've reached
my hands up in to, healing my own splitting

with another similar kind of breaking,
twinning skins. A wound calls itself
a wound by how loud it screams.

And this is my inability to speak

No, I'm good, or No, thank you, or No, fuck you—to understand what it means

to suggest discomfort as protection, to turn down
relationships, work, sex—Someone said

feminism doesn't need all three.

and *agreeing to and with everyone is a product of trauma.*

And now here tonight, I feel my blood circle,
swelling pressure on my low-back,
the moon aiming poison

darts precisely into my cheek as if to access
the jawline locked in anxiety.
Open, he says—

I unclench my mouth
with my hands
at prayer.

The Mother She Conserved

The conservator's red garment
of silk frays loose in her

hand like a memory,
the kind she might have forged

as a child but now splits long
at the center. Her precision

is her mother's: the touch
of quick flick of a fingertip

plucking bits of balled linen
from a near-splitting dress,

the sharp voice
of a violent breath,

wishing for forgiveness,
the protective hand raking

firewood, roasting it to bloody ash.
She never wondered who blew

life into her. Now she isn't
asking, but knows in the silent

rhythm of her own clean hands,
weaving together someone

else's history, careful as a whisper,
her mother is the lattice work:

rip, pull, stitch, repeat.

House of the Muses

I. Literature

The practice reading folders laugh at me
when I mix up the names *Aidan* and *Adam*,

two boys in my class who are both white,
dark haired with swirling eyes

like marbled cake. My frothed memory
can't retain the plot of the story

where the little girl gets lost in the woods,
but I remember feeling scared, thinking of being

overexposed. Years later I know the worst
of the woods isn't the stretching sinew

of trees where he took me,
kissed me without warning.

II. Science

One day, I dissect a squid
and feel its ink sack in my palm

like a thread. I envy the ability to be
taciturn, to slip beneath a gloss

of black cloth, disappear. Nobody
even notices the F I got on the last test,

my parents are dissolving like steam
in the hills behind my house,

so I become my own
mother, flaying open

my mouth,
washing it clean.

III. Arts

My body is thin tape,
opaque, when I shift

my feet in discomfort
at the assignment: draw

your own image. Am I God,
or something more

expansive I want to believe in?
I want to believe I am

the throat left unpeeled,
the knife pressing to slice

the fibers beneath its pristine
edge. I draw a girl: belly up,

ripened for the cutting.

What Happens To A Devastated Place

Luckily, you can remember
your body in the moments before:
skin gently scraped away by branches,

revealing red lines streaked across
your arms like overexposed veins, river
water kissing at your naked

feet, the silent sky open and opal.
How you wished stillness could follow
you everywhere instead of this body.

Yet how terrible its simple comfort seems
now that you've grown
used to the sound of a place

on fire. Even the plum trees
light themselves up just to be
seen, their violet leaves blistering

reluctantly into fossilized ground.
But you know the orchards still
spring back year after year—you

know their fruits will gasp quietly
into the unclothed air. Wait
for the place, the one burned once

before, but flowers slowly
from its fervent devastation.

Wunderkammer

And the streets lights blurred me into the yolk
moonlight, shadows pulling themselves
into oblong shapes when your car swerved
up, nicking my leg. I was halfway up the high
school driveway, your head swinging like a lantern
in the nothingness of night. That night, I learned
sudden convulsions make a drunk person swing,
so it was the tautness of skin I soon yearned
for after I understood the palm calms all things,
like the way my grandmother moved
in all manners—her inlaid dent stroking
the top of my head, her quick mission trips
to the art supply store, the precision
of her clipped raspberry tips cooling
in a boiled jar; the rhythm of voices
staccato with laughter at her winning
another constellation mapping of stars.

Even in my dreams, I know love
is only a memory like a back-lit drop cloth
where my body, only enveloped by thinness of air,
pulsates into view to brighten
the frame. And yet, upon waking I wonder why
the fight with my mother that night turned
into me taking the wheel, unlicensed, peeling
my eyes into thin horizons to see through
the driving rain, cutting the windshield to pieces.
The sound it made. The sharpness of the sky
sharing a common splitting, the haunting
peace that came after I landed safely in bed,
the soft whip from dropping my head quickly
into rested hands. The thin ribbon that still held
my heart up in its cavity seized then fell.
The feeling like nothing I'd felt since, curious
if this were love or anger when they passed each other
in the dark. How much breath is involved in both.
A window shook itself to remind me.
And the thin yolk continued to spill.

Memento Mori

The road sputters
with early salt.
Late October,
the leaves are
small museums
she is afraid
to walk in to.

A timid step –
the sound of crows
cracking branches
like silver bones,
their broken promise,
the crocking call
of expiration.

Somewhere,
the plums
are fast asleep.

An amber dream
he promises her despite
all this death. A stone
belly that swells, a house
made of sticks but steady
enough for screams
of a kettle pot, hot steam
caught in the bathroom
ceiling, or lying languid
like fog in the bed
fractured by two skins.

In time, she won't
remember. October
will appear like
a month with no
name, a church
when man finally
abandons his god,
that unsettled place
between smoke
and fire. She will
remember the clouds,
however, how they hung

so willingly that fall.
And the plums,
they knew the best
time to hide.

She will remember
their solidity, untethered
beings.

The artist fucks the artist

I am dreading
our encounter

when you always speak—*beautiful*
your body like morning

sighing its breath all over me.
Your legs are the rain

I run through—yet I recede and suck
my tongue across my teeth, wishing

I could spit them like darts
and swallow a lemon slice to blame

the shape when my mouth collapses
tragically inward like some catastrophic star.

I loathe the mention of your mother—
your hair braided like brioche,

kind my mother used to bake, yellow
yarned, twisting in my mouth—

because I am forced to remember
my own cleaving. How can he know

my own blood when its locked inside?
Does he know my blood carries yeast

and sugar that might later ferment
into wine like my mother's? My body

will one day twist into a liquid knot
and rejoin the earth: my bones becoming

leaves that are intricately thinning
outside my windows like lace.

What beauty do you see in that? What shape
will I take when you've gauged my form

in picture to hang on your naked,
aching walls like burnished jewels?

Bowerbird

There are one thousand ways to say what the bowerbird does

in his congregation, a gnarled nest of spooling forgotten

bits—a hair pin, a dint of slivered foil, torn edges

of note that might have said, *it's not you, it's me,*

like she was the one who was already splintered, half

dangling off the page, waiting to be

collected by someone who doesn't mind the schism

of things, the body fractured everywhere

like sound recoiling itself between the naked

amber night and the punched-pearl moon:

last known night between lovers, their air as quiet

as the bird's hushed wing. Like the bird, she displays her broken

memories spilling from her mouth to potential mate:

drunken blue bar that swallowed her

whole; portrait of motherless girl becoming a girl-

less mother; boy who begged for further touching, unwanted

body idling too close to her thoughts. *Ugly thing*, he might think,

she is collected noise split by the wind.

Stone Devils

In winter, I wash salt
from my hair to hold the ocean
in my palms once again.

and I remember July:
that crooked neck foe,
begging for me to bloom

my red and bloodied petals
into the gasping sun, naked”
star who remembers its own

breath is one moment away
from destruction, the month’s mouth
like mine: two flares cracking

together. I learned to speak
words only in its violent
echo, bright sound birthed somewhere

between anger and fear. In July,
I visit the museum on my own to see
if my metamorphosis is real

like devils stone carved
into the cloister columns,
holding up an entire cathedral,

their snarled mouths open
and screaming, yet silent,
like they forget the prayer.

I already know it:
one has his hands all over
a slivered throat,

another traipses a body
from hook and chain,
one will soon learn

to swallow its young. In time,
we all become our own
monsters: we retrieve again

and again the likeness of earth,
find solace in its amber breath,
only to forget its making.

Vignettes of America

I.

This is the honey-dusted fig on a blue jeweled plate,
white rice in a bowl, green peas and pistachio seeds smashed
in a jar to serve to our guests
on a news-night so sour it ferments.

II.

These are blankets tucked too tight for loose
feet and blankets tucked too hastily
so the bouncing quarter drops lazily
at the center. Our parents are kind.

III.

These are the roofs stolen clean
so the stars are eaten straight
from the bone. We wander without a home,
cold permanently painting our skin.

IV.

These are the walls
they say keep us safe,
fear and delirium pumping
our blood, where black mold blooms
like cherry blossoms.

V.

This is the empty, dusted plate, heavy
air in a bowl, spider silk and famished bugs smashed
by a jar to serve to no one
on a hungry-night so regular it becomes

our American homes.

Quiet Moments

I came to know you
in the quiet moments away

from the sounds of rushing
water. Still I could see you

from a bird's eye view up
high, up here, the wind tunnels

your ear vision. Away
from the noise of decay,

the rot of work, the toil
of a routine pressed

between Monday and Friday. I spy
the top of your head, hair

wispy and ochre,
painted clouds protective.

I came to know you in the bathroom
where I could hear you singing, steam

rising like hot breath
from a warmed mouth

spilling into a cup
of cold air. I realize

I came to know you
from add beans to the grocery list

and socks first
then underwear. Look,

you nested honey on the shelf,
later for melting on my tongue.

You know me so well.

Cathedral

I unsettle here in this quiet
carved out belly: its gut eats me

still. I sit on a bench too hard
for my flesh. This roof

above my head, a carcass that moves in
on my body, empty

pressure, a phantom
limb. Still, it's the first place

I dream of as if I remember
being inside another body, carved

mother, imagining beauty of an internal space.
In thin veins of light, my breath

exposes a film of dead
skin, blood vessels become

visible as sun filters through
my palm. I raise my hands up to see

someone. But I hear nothing,
except trees, swaying somewhere

outside, ivy racing, dust
kissing my feet in attempted forgiveness.

This holy place, this haphazard mess,
sears the ears shut:

only lids of coffins, sheltering their dead
children, know a seal this tight.

After the Cathedral Has Mirrored You

Now that I've stood
 under its arched ribs,
 I finally understand its echo:
 my chest makes a similar sound
 of catastrophe with someone else.
 At the concert on the brink between two
 lands, I watched myself ingest enough
 fermented liquids for the whole of my body,
 like I had once witnessed
 my friend perform at a bar at the edge
 of a cluster-fuck fever, bodies squirming
 shapelessly together to a beat I failed to tap into.
 She, composed, bright thing,
 even in the wake of a drinking binge,
 laughed us to a post-show club,
 our violet eyes half full.

I studied my hands
 to focus on something stable, live
 music, wine, things I seemingly controlled
 with my vision. When I lost both
 license, credit card, identifications, my lungs
 didn't know how to switch on, fear folding inward
 like a sheet, drink stuck dumb in the stream
 of my blood. What choice did I have
 when I cried out in panic,
 and she said—*You should learn to control
 yourself*—reaction like a pricked thing at the site
 of your pin of a girl? I had only learned
 one type of calm. There is no prayer.
 There is no wishing for a revision, blue
 body will do what she pleases
 under pressure. Watch as I try to climb
 backward into my mouth.

Repatriation

Understand that I am slowly piecemealing myself, / returning to a ghosted body: I am sick without girlhood, / without womanhood, I should say. Mother, / I remember burying my own hands / into wet dirt on your father's grave, forgotten funeral / flowers, wilting like slit bodies, I formed into / a careful heart on his casket, / when we were all huddled together at his head, / bowing toward the open earth, rain splitting us / to bent shapes like question marks. Mother, I am reciting the teacher / technique he taught me at eleven: *repeat phrases, names for better memory*. Mother, / in eulogy I remember the smell / of him: garden roots unearthing themselves / into his hands, thick with gingered scent; rusted / truck, the color of oceans opaled / by sun; plastic toy rockets we launched in a hurry; / my whole name repeated meditatively / from his tongue as if it were rosaries. / Mother, I cried enough for the both of us / that day, splintering my hairs in anxiety, staring at a husk of a body gone / to bone, wondering when it would happen to me. / Mother, now I know my body has wilted / all its skin; earth eager to eat / me. I haven't returned / myself to this body, not / yet.

Notes

“Portrait of an Anatomical Corpse”

This poem is written through the perspective of a medical, anatomical corpse who would have been studied at the Palazzo del Bo, one of Italy’s first anatomical “theatres.”

“Reflections of an Anatomical Corpse Post-Dissection”

This poem incorporates ideas from Katherine Park’s book, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (2010), in which she posits that women’s opened bodies became central to the history of anatomy. The line “the uterus, that dark inaccessible place” is a quote taken from her book on page 25.

“Upon Entering the Museum”

This poem alludes to the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, a story which historically has aimed to represent the battle between chastity and sexual lust. It also alludes to Virgil as a poet and his position as a guide in Dante’s *Inferno*.

“Prayer”

This poem’s speaker is the dissected corpse on display from Willem van Swanenburg’s print, *Theatrum Anatomicum of Leiden University* from 1610.

“La Pietà”

This poem is a meditation on Michelangelo’s sculpture, titled *La Pietà*, which is said to show the artist’s interpretation of Mary as beautiful, pure, and youthful as she cradles her dead son. In Italian, La pietà means to the piety.

“You Taught Yourself”

The line “city that lit the world” was the nickname of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

“An Odyssey”

This poem plays on the characters and plot of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

“Repatriation”

Repatriation is the act of returning someone or something to a country or culture of origin.

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