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Before You Grow Fruit

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Before You Grow Fruit

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Stella Rose Schneeberg

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

for Jody, Jan, and David Susler
for Aaron and Daniel Blum

for Julie

Acknowledgements

There are so many people to thank for the completion of this project and everything that got me to this point, but first and foremost, I must thank my advisor, Michael Ives. Since my first semester of freshman year, you have seen the potential in my writing and continued to push me towards my most fruitful poetic capacity. So much of the way I have seen my poetry grow such an incredible amount over the last four years is thanks to your teaching, guidance, insight, and support. Thank you for never letting me settle for writing that is not as effective as you know mine can be. Thank you for always pushing me toward a richer texture of language, a fuller quality of each line, and further complexity in form. I have met few people in my life who have so often known exactly what I have been trying to say, but you have always made me feel like I make perfect sense, even when it isn't yet clear to me what I am truly invoking. Thank you for giving me the freedom to write about everything I've felt the need to write about, and for reminding me that I have permission to take those subjects to their extremes. I have learned so much from you and grown so much as your student and advisee, and I am so much better off because of it.

Thank you to the Written Arts and Literature faculty members who have taught incredible classes and contributed so much to their departments. Thank you to my peers for making workshops such wonderful and unique experiences. To Oriana Mack and Celia Buckley, thank you for your poems, your feedback, and your friendship. And the amazing intimacy we found in each other and in rooms of other writers. Thank you to my family and friends. I love you Mom. I love you Tia. I love you Simone. I love you Nell and Jordan. I love you Bobby King. Thank you.

I've been a poet for as long as I can remember, but over these last four years I pushed myself to truly and deeply revise, and to create poetry I feel more proud of than ever before.

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Preface

Julie Susler Blum, my maternal aunt, passed away on December 29th, 2017, in her bedroom in Fairfield, Iowa. She moved there to start a family in a community deeply invested in Transcendental Meditation.

This project is an exploration of being present for her death. I put myself into the physical room where she died, and I stare into the petals of the flowers covering her deathbed, each a portal. I ask the questions I have had about her death that I had not before now been able to put into words. I grieve in a way that was before now not accessible to me, by using ecstatic states of consciousness to navigate through her death, cremation, and the planting of her as an apple tree.

BEFORE YOU GROW FRUIT

Up on the deathbed

Come here you said my face turning to yours fingers still exploring a petal
come up on the deathbed your stone white face unmoving eyes lips closed
lungs not moving not doing their dance but still you spoke

Don't mind them you told me still as swamp water and you were right
I need not mind the flowers which parted as I climbed onto the queen sized deathbed
then closed again not around me but out from your face
the center of an endless circular symmetry

Sprawling out in all directions from your inflorescence stone grey sunflower head
bluish lips and purple eyelids withered disc florets long since developed their last seed
having absorbed enough excitement through lingering years emitted flowers around you
themselves fluorescing pixel patterns seen one by one through black lights of grief

If I ascended to meet you on the ceiling
of your bedroom you would show me with cold hands
turn my head down my world below mirrored in yours above
purposeful then was my gaining access to the bed
I need not mind those flowers whose pattern I was so integral to
my own memories reflected in your ceaseless petalled emissions

I waited but you did not speak again
still-water face tucked through a blanket of flowers
almost childlike endless mane of a costume lion
hair that was in life your gothic sunburst but really forever now
true horizon where train tracks meet

Pink roses to the left of me soft waxy petals

grasping with gentle urgency my fingers moving in search of a center

flowers within flowers until sand came pouring out

beige grains of beach emptying what had filled a sandal all over my dress

A faint seagull called as I moved to the next just a common daisy

when my thumb moved across its yellow middle it glowed

at first a night light but in seconds became the sun

so I set down the star nearly perfect hot sphere of plasma

Face of the red amaryllis revealed a still from the aughts
a boy in horn-rimmed glasses sparse adolescent beard and faded worn tee
your son full smile standing in the street smoke across the screen rising behind him
trail of it the smoke-tail of a train through boundless foreign hills

A ringing from the lily of the valley I held it up to my ear
each bell a telephone receiver
chiming til I moved to the orchid
its white petals become a wedding dress in my hands

Surrounded with the fruits of your sister's flower garden

I stare in through the petals finger each stamen and pistil for memories

feed upon the last traces hovering above you smoke swirls of your incense

I stare in through the last unshuttered windows of an abandoned amusement park

the decaying rides where Dorothy and the Lion found the Tinman in Queens

the field of red poppies turned to neon night club in *The Wiz*

I stare into the burnt out home from *A Chair for My Mother*

the charcoal and ashes become shading on the floral upholstery

of the big chair brought home to their new apartment

Frothed milk in the metal cup spills over becomes hydrangea head

of smaller mornings filled with steam swirls up to the ceiling

catch early pink sun become cherry blossoms raining down over the floor

deepen into red wall-to-wall of the guest bedroom in Decatur

sweet smell of pumpkin pie of midwestern daylight endless fallow farm fields

crimson silos white cars driving parallel past our minivan

Honeysuckle nectar pulled through my teeth tastes of a salt breeze growing
round the bottom of a two-tone lighthouse jetty now spilled-over with sea
now gaping like dehydrated earth
such sweet blossoms politely intrude along the coast

Brilliant calendula grows to howling orange eye-level
across a highway or swamp the pot marigold sun sets
purple loosestrife up from wetland of near nighttime all out toward mountain
somewhere beyond dusk always vanishing horizon

Apple across white lily for a moment vermillion
stamen anther against the petalous blank
first flash in endless tundra
red for the first time questions a greyscale past
first flower ancestral not quite magnolia
Eve catches the fruit in her naked
hand and bites questions a shameless past

Kaleidoscopic rearrangements of droplets into petals on porcelain shower walls
I try grasping but only wipe them away
watch their petals slowly form again
like Tantalus I reach for what will evade me
watch again their reformation from rogue drops off the faucet stream
suggestion of a flower that is and isn't
like a photon collapses into particle or wave when I reach for it

Dicentras arched
 branch of bleeding
 hearts all opened like lockets

each inserted
 picture pairs
 of sisters you my mother

and her sister
 occasionally
 all three in the foyer

the front yard
 the smiling
 lot of you in someone's kitchen

my face most
 like my mother's as
 my hair grows out

now it curls
 into your ringlets
 jewelry I'll pass on

sea of morning
 glories shades of
 silver earrings

pinned on a fabric
 scroll hanging
 down your bedroom wall

gaps from those
 you'd given me form
 a collection of my own

inosculating with
 dangling hand-me-downs
 from your sisters

Lotus up from mud reblooms again with *sthatpatya veda* glowing navel

maharishi vastu my ceiling opens to the sun

my water east or north nothing obstructs

the first rays *brahmasthan* to establish wholeness

skylight floods central space silent core never walked on

nucleus of cell of atom my cupola my plinth defined

Pea plant flowering *lathyrus odoratus* growing in spirals

up the trellis of my forearms fruit forms in my palm

green tendrils wrap around my fingers

dirt under my nails becomes my skin

root system somewhere beneath my surface

grown unknowingly

I go back to the hydrangea

Each bush a collection of mop-headed racemes

composed of smaller buds on floret stems

meet larger stalks meet nodes

many leaves and buds branching off

mature flowers blush pink in acidic soil

but in alkaline earth run a vein-like blue

Brilliant sepals peeled back from their reproductive center

like stockings rolled down full hips

more gently than a belt unbuckling

The male: stamen filament anther

female: pistil stigma style ovary

their gametes fuse to produce the seeds

which bear the fruit

Hydrangea's racemes radiate abundance as much as bad luck
understanding in Japan as much as arrogance in Europe
its pink petals heartfelt as its blues are frigid
meaning shifting with its hue
its leaves when fresh traced with cyanide
when brewed to sweet tea possess a healing power

Hydrangea's wavering interpretation
not so static as predictable gladiola
always garnishing the funeral altar
not so sure as romantic rose
always red as the blush in the lover's cheeks

Yet every blossom alike spawns the next
contains that carnal center
pistil and stamen merging in miraculous *la petite mort*

After fertilization the flower loses its shine
as the ovule grows into a seed
and fruit from ovary forms

And did the petals in paradise lose their luster
as soon as the apple was bitten?
when man and woman tasted their bitter shame
man and the fated fruit of his own rib

And these lively flowers around your own body
will they too cease their shining?
follow your light till it's extinguished?

But oh what births in their wake!
what ripples out from the exhausted crux of you
in unending proliferation

Will it too grow apples
first fruit juicing with tartness of collapse
sweet as all that waits beyond the garden wall?

I was young in an apple orchard, in kindergarten or the first grade, surrounded by unlimited varieties. The leaves were all an undying green, the hallways between the rows of trees endless tunnels of orchard. We followed the signs posted at the end of each row, a self-guided picking tour. We learned to reach, twist, pull, then clean the apple on our tee shirts. We tasted every sort of the fruit.

There was thick-skinned Macoun, easy Golden Delicious, mealy Red. There was crisp Empire, rich McIntosh, sweet Gala, sweet Honeycrisp, sour Jonagold. Each beloved cultivar grown from jet black seeds within the fruit's tough core.

I learned amygdalin in apple seeds releases low levels of cyanide into the bloodstream. I learned that even in the first fruit there lies a suggestion of the power to kill.

Just as Arabian kings were felled when their water was laced with crushed diamond
a Turkish sultan assassinated when fed the powder in his food
violent red coughing of those final breaths
and the slow deaths of miners breathing toxic years of coal dust

Under high temperature and high pressure
carbon through depths of time becomes diamond
the only gem composed of a single element

Within a diamond the highest state of symmetry girdles perfectly on-the-round
culet centered opposite its table its aligned crowns and pavilions

Diamond was the first mandala
down to its cubic units of carbons
and outward in its endless three-dimensional prisms
of excellent-cut rounds
organic as the flowers spanning out
from your face so wonderfully unending

Sir Isaac Newton named his dog Diamond

at the sight of his burning manuscripts

called out, *O Diamond, Diamond,*

thou little knowest the mischief thou has done

though it was not the dog

only a candle overturned by an orchard wind

And though the apple didn't fall squarely on his head

still he made intelligible the mysterious pull of gravity

That genius below a bough of hanging fruit

fathered no direct descendants

but reared modern physics

birthed calculus

cut the gem of modern science

polished its abstract reasoning and quantitative thought

We followed the red lines of the new barn built by your long-time friends out in quiet Iowa. We gathered in the prairie at their farm, to take you out to pasture with the orchard wind. Driving toward it, I kept my hand on the box of what your sister said wasn't really you.

Your son drove the four-wheeler against the relentless wind from the tip of the slanted orchard, and I stood atop the wheel-well, holding the cold metal frame, your ashes in the dented bed.

Laborious was the mixing of you into the red bucket, full of hydrated coco coir soil the farmer said to use, and some dirt from the ground where a hole had been dug.

Up to the slanted orchard to the place where the wind began, we went like Gluscabi toward the great Wind Eagle, having ignored Grandmother Woodchuck's warning. The movement of his prodigious wings blew away our borrowed windbreakers and layers from the discount store. Blew the clothes from our bodies, the small hairs from our brows. So at last we met your shoveled-out resting place naked, our raw cores bared.

We packed the wet mixture of you round the roots of a sapling, lingered in the cold. Then stood under vastu brahmasthan, smelled spice boxes and told stories. We said what we remember, and what we are lost without. Said we could not wait for you to grow leaves and fruit.

Before you were a tree

you were a mother

before you birthed your sons you were a daughter

born to Wylmarose in mid-century Decatur, Illinois

Before there was a Midwest, USA

there were Illiniwek and Ho-Chunk

tribes displaced by French invasion

before Illinois was Illinois it was pre-Columbian Cahokia

ancient city of 1050 AD

Before you were a tree you'd had magnificent incarnations

you were killed kneeling for a drink in East Asia

when your enemy's arrow found a soft spot in your armor

and you grew into *malus domestica* apple blossom before his eyes

Wild prairie rose watches Iowa unfold from the edge of its field
cycle of wildlife ingests its rose hips spreads its seeds through shit
each spring sees wreckage of another winter across the Hawkeye State

Watches hunters and gatherers freeze to death in Pleistocene glacial landscape
Potawatomi and Winnebago join Sauk Meskwaki Ioway Omaha and Sioux
at Bad Axe River their bloody surrender to the French

Watches subsistence farming turn commodity
watches settlers get railroad fever get
steamboats in the waters build a war fort where Racoon River
meets the Des Moines
you were not the first
to die in Iowa

Prairie rose builds a network over neighboring plants and fences
capitalizes on borrowed support crawls across the state
centuries of death go by in an instant when the wildflower blinks

Borers

Borers that eat mapped networks below bark made beautiful butterflies on you
like graceful lines from tattoo needles thin canals filled in with ink
some young nineteenth century Emma Deane from the silk mill
working the heavy gates of its locks

One might call you hollow now fungi ate your guts bark trunk everything
though you stream with light filtered through high ceilings of your worship place
wisps of old stone dust caught swirling in the beams

Spirals of your mantras
the echoing sound of those
meaningless weighted words
repeated until experience fades
settles on the bottom
with the quiet dust

Maharishi vastu my ceiling opens to the sun my water east or north nothing obstructs the first rays
 brahmasthan to establish wholeness skylight floods central space silent core never walked on nucleus of
 cell of atom my cupola my plinth defined maharishi vastu my ceiling opens to the sun my water east or
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When the burning began

When the Maharishi was sent down the Ganges on his burning pyre
did the sandalwood float make it out of eyeshot
or did they line up and down the banks the thousands
of his devotees all flocked to honor him from everywhere
to the confluence point of the Ganges and Yamuna *Triveni Sangam?*

Watching for dissolution of the physical manifestation of their guru
before he burnt to nothing but bits of bone far from shore
fragments of marrow sinking toward river belly
was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi caught along a bank did he
need to be freed with a long stick?

Before his body was surrounded by great logs set ablaze he rested
on a throne of flowers at his ashram where rivers meet
clear Ganges water spilling into green Yamuna
both meeting Saraswati's mythical waters transforming
into a third color beyond
the known rainbow beyond teal
of an ocean beyond sky's impossible blue

The *Rigveda* says, "those who bathe at the place
where two rivers flow together, rise up to heaven"

Thousands of his followers each grown from seed left petals
in their wake as they moved toward his deathbed a bouquet
rich and brilliant perfectly ordered flowerbed

Up and down the Ganges banks watched the pyre dissolve before them
were the flames extinguished before his body was incinerated completely
or only when thoroughly ash did he sink?
the fire only gone out as burning bone fragments were enveloped
did they stay to watch those pieces fall into darker depths of the river?
did sun rays catch those particles in their first stretch of descent
so that from perfect angles they might linger a moment longer?

Or was it over as soon as water swallowed them up?

Did ash fall through sandalwood slats before the platform itself sank down
river rippling out from that new center of impact in concentric circles
before melting slowly back to the familiar surface of a waterbody?

How long did his followers linger on the shores
after nothing could be seen from anywhere?
not a shred of Maharishi or pyre

Did a lone petal avoid the blaze float along the gentle current?
did a piece of float make it out unscathed a drifting fragment?
did any devotees remain where they stood watching
until there was truly nothing?
and did they try to grasp at the nothing?
to know the nothing?
did they stay still where they stood
gazing into the nothing?

The confluence point itself reaches river petals beyond India toward the mythical
its root system of tributaries of unending banks
confluence of his adherents all gathered at the holy *Triveni Sangam*
meeting place of three great streams
immersion site of ashes of many revered teachers
confluence of their bodies and their earthly souls with the ever-shifting composition of a river

Fire climbed up the enormous logs surrounding corpse
wood met flame met flesh
combustion confluence of hydrocarbons and oxygen gas
itself blooms out in all directions its petals of flame of destruction
power of elimination blossom of transformation its steam its carbon dioxide

The first spark on your mattress in your Iowa bedroom
your corpse quiet under all those flowers
as if your face was peeking out through bath water
your head resting on the bottom of a tub

I watch the first spark from my seat on your deathbed
where I explored the petals around me gazed in
searched within them for final morsels of you
sinking to the bottom of a river of memory

Though you are only just about to burn

I will go with you
to wherever it is the flame takes you
to the dark bottom of a riverbed where ashes come to rest

I will be swallowed up in conflagration with you
while you lie dead silent devoured in heat
while the petals surrender to unrelenting burn
whether the pain is as searing as expected
or as welcoming as it is to feel
my boundaries dissolving
on my back in some
midsummer lake

Whether I am prepared for my own cessation or excited
for a journey toward the next world with you
whether in the center of your blazing bedroom I anguish
or rejoice as petals become ashes in my palms over your mattress

I know with the first spark that I will go with you
brilliant as calendula grows to great orange flame
common daisy sun erupts
hot plasma sunflower itself
engulfed

The lilies of the valley are burning

The pink roses are burning

the white lilies white orchids are burning

smoking red amaryllis sparking hydrangea head dicentras all burning to ash

the lotus is burning the honeysuckle

is burning Illinois is Iowa is burning

I am

Watching as up from the deathbed

an inferno engulfs those blossoms

engulfs your room your unmoving

body unresponsive to the burning

tchotchkes furniture refrigerator photos

turned to dust

Your dresser is burning your shirts and scarves and underwear
your necklaces your mirror your hairbrush is burning

Your bathroom is burning the toothbrush the towels toilet paper floss
become dust on the tile floor

Your boys are burning
toddlers running through the living room catch suddenly
in the sunbeams explode into floating particles
teenagers in upstairs rooms all ablaze in their bedsheets
every flash of your children through the house through the years
combusts at once into magnificent flame

Dispersal

When the new family moved into your Fairfield home
did they need to throw open windows and doors when they arrived
to air out the stale place?
how long before they moved in did the empty house sit
with just a fine layer of you
over everything?

And is that when you escaped?
out through doors
and windows swung wide?

From the first floor did you make your way into flower beds
birds and bees spreading your pollen across endless networks of blooms?
did you settle on pavement to be picked up by cars truck tires shoe soles even
tracking you across Iowa over state lines overseas?

From the second floor windows did you disperse into midwestern sky
spread out forever into flatlands and far beyond?
settle into each repeating plot of farmland and silo?
did cattle graze on you covering the grass blades
were you packaged with the meat sold at the grocery store?

In dreams you'd been sunsoaked in the arm chair
passing the potatoes at thanksgiving dinner
I'd been wearing your hand-me-downs
and talking with my mother

At some point you descended
your silver dust lining white clouds
drew closer

At last you reached New York
whether wind or truck tires carried you so far
whether wings or rain would spread you still
out from here

You hang on the ceiling so I stare at the white paint

you coat the red road sign

the flashy highway billboard I keep driving by

you wait in line for the bus

swim in my cereal bowl

come down with the rain

The whole thunderstorm

weighted blanket of grey clouds

puddles and the sound of you

hitting everywhere the roof the road the rocks

the cars rushing past on wet pavement

darkened tree trunks heavy leaves

Coming down over the whole town again

can't help but listen to you

Sunday evening with the windows wide

You were in the moonlit waterbody when I went in naked this summer
only surface glints betraying black water as other than sky
walked soundlessly toward you into the lake
our pale bodies glowing silent against cicada sirens
in past our ankles hips breasts I'd nearly reached you

When I didn't feel you through the water
thought we'd dissolved
become droplets become molecules unembodied creatures
of northeastern summer midwestern rivers
East Asian banks ceaseless coasts unending beaches

But you must have floated up when I went under

You were back to elsewhere before I surfaced
back to everywhere but before me
back to invisible dust coating everything
hanging in all the air

Left me full of nightlight and empty shore
to drip over my limp pile of clothes

So the lake spit me out
left you incorporeal ring
around a halfmoon
in the open sky

So I wasn't ever immaterial
or untethered
to this body

And you were in the school of minnows that next sunlit morning
hung around my ankles as if drawn by some wonderful force
how un-minnow how unlike dense rippling teal bay salt water darting minnows
schools pale baby blue teacup reaching scooping never catching small child hands
cupping missing *like water through your fingers* but water's less elusive
mucky shore old splintering wood ladder grayed by sun lowered into shallows
where mud bottom squished between our toes but in our water-shoes we would squat
to catch them barnacle-covered pilings horseshoe crabs jellyfish moon pancake

The minnows those awesome creatures those quick brown green lean and long shoals of them
all abrupt about-face precisely in unison
between the swiftness of human hands and lightspeed but there
in that northeastern morning
with each flick of my ankles they stayed
no chase at all just
fish that wanted me
drawn to me by a thread through the years

And there I am eleven years old
reaching across the table for the plate of blondies in my denim dress
on your couch at seventeen when you last knew me
on the brink of adulthood of a life
in which you were always crashing
against waterfall rocks your spill
becomes the spaces around them
and I never knew it

You are always cresting over shorelines and lapping
at the side of my bathtub
and I know it now

You will always follow from your perfectly
incomprehensible distance
like the moon through a car window