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Before Daughters and Amplifying Ambiguous Loss in Poetry: How the Line Break Functions as an Effect

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Before Daughters

and

Amplifying Ambiguous Loss in Poetry:

How the Line Break Functions as an Effect

by Madison Smith

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

in partial fulfillment

of the

Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts in English

Belmont University

2022

Acknowledgments

My mentor and advisor, Dr. Gary McDowell, enthusiastically guided and encouraged me through each act of discovery during the writing process. He allowed me to be vulnerable, honest, humorous, and sincere in each of these poems - for which I cannot thank him enough.

And, of course, my darling Grandma Julie ensured I had the opportunity to receive the education I always dreamed of. She continues to live as the main inspiration in everything I write.

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Amplifying Ambiguous Loss in Poetry: How the Line Break Functions as an Effect

The poetic line has been analyzed, debated, broken down, built back up, used as a foundation, ditched in an act of rebellion, and experimented with throughout the history of language. It is almost impossible to explain what the line break does by itself and more tangible to discuss the effect that the line break has on poems. The line break does not necessarily have the same effect on a poem regardless of where it is placed; rather, it intensifies the existing effects of variables within the line. In a more technical sense, “the length, function, or shape of today’s line is a variable: $x(y) = a \text{ line of poetry}$, and x is the shape of the line, and y is all available linguistic resources...[T]he poetic line, having no inherent definition, achieves definition and energy in individual poems via its interaction with all definable aspects of language” (Mackowski 157). In other words, the poetic line itself lacks a specific purpose and instead works with the variables within each line to create meaning. Similarly, the line break by itself does not add meaning to a poem; rather, it works with the language and space in each individual poetic line to create a definable effect.

Dana Levin writes that “the line is a unit of experience” (151). The poetic line is not unlike a sentence in this way. Both the sentence and the line create an experience or a moment for the reader to take in information, imagery, or whatever different variables may be contained within the form. However, the line break specifically allows emotion to enter the poem, because within it, the reader has the opportunity to be shocked, delighted, appalled, moved, or a plethora of other emotions. The line break as an effect emphasizes, amplifies, or brings to light existing

emotions within a poem. It directs the reader to feel certain emotions, such as loss, grief, or contemplation, through the intentional combination of language and space. In *Before Daughters*, I use an intentional combination of language and space to amplify feelings that follow ambiguous loss and its aftermath.

When I began putting together poems to include as a collection, I knew I wanted to focus on the women who have influenced me the most: my grandmother, my mother, my sister, and of course – myself. While I assessed how the line functions within my poems, I also searched for a word to encompass the feeling I carry toward the theme of the collection. At a relatively early age, I experienced the metaphorical loss of my mother to addiction and subsequent brain damage and the physical loss of my grandmother, who had raised my sister and me. There are many studies and essays on coping with grief – the grief of losing a parent, complicated grief, absent grief, distorted grief - the list goes on. However, these articles all deal with the grief following the death of a parent. I am interested in the grieving process that happens when you lose someone who is still living, in circumstances such as divorce, estrangement, mental illness, or addiction. Dr. Pauline Boss coined the phrase “ambiguous loss,” which is “a loss that remains unclear and without resolution” (Boss & Yeats 63). More specifically, Boss and Yeats write that there is a psychological type of ambiguous loss, where “a loved one is physically present but psychologically absent” (64). Underneath a list of examples of ambiguous losses that present themselves as psychologically absent but physically present, they list brain injury, chronic mental illness, depression, and addiction. Before reading Dr. Boss’ words, I had no way to describe my grief. After reading them, it became clear to me how much the line break and ambiguous loss work together to emphasize a specific emotion within a poem.

The language in poems that embody ambiguous loss works with the pace of the line and the line break to amplify feelings such as confusion, grief, denial, and detachment. Carl Phillips says that “a sentence has any number of opportunities for grace, tension, seduction, force - the line is the poet’s opportunity to send an extra ripple through all of these” (187). The language included in a line combined with the line break itself separates poetry from prose; the line as a form creates meaning through the way that it is shaped and the way that it breaks. When writing through ambiguous loss, the line break allows for the exploration and expression of ambiguity through intentional lineation in a way that works with space differently than prose. While prose in poetry can still achieve the same effect through language, the line break allows the effect to be felt through the extended space between each line. The line break’s function as a time conductor allows each poem to control a sense of ambiguity, loss, grief, and closure without necessarily needing to state the presence of such feelings. My poem, “The Last Time Mom Was Mom,” explores this idea:

She took Sage and me back-to-school shopping
and we gave Dad a fashion show. We turned fold-out
mattresses into a runway. She was bleached hair
and hooped earrings, Clinique lipstick and pointed
toes. My dad waited at the end with his camera,
all-too-eager paparazzi. Sunbeams for eyes.

In love for the first and last time (1-7)

In this poem, the reader does not receive an explicit indicator of the emotion the speaker might feel at first glance, aside from the title, “The Last Time Mom Was Mom.” The title itself conveys a feeling of loss or finality but remains ambiguous throughout the poem. In this poem, the line

functions as a camera, panning out at each line break to show the reader more of the scene. The line breaks at “fold-out / mattresses” to reveal a makeshift runway to the reader and follows the speaker’s mother down the runway with “bleached hair / and hooped earrings.” As the line functions as a camera, following the speaker’s mother down the runway, it ends with an image of the speaker’s dad as an “all-too-eager-paparazzi. Sunbeams for eyes. / In love for the first and last time.” The end of the poem leaves the reader suspended in time with a wide-lensed view of one full scene. At no point in the poem does the speaker mention sadness, loss, or grief.

However, when the short lyric pairs with the title, the scene clearly conveys a feeling of loss. As the lines break to zoom out and reveal more of the scene, the reader becomes acutely aware of the feeling of finality that may happen when the speaker’s mom reaches the end of the runway. The reader never finds out explicitly what happens after this “last time,” but can feel the loss that inevitably follows the empty space at the end of the poem. The feeling of vague finality in the poem mirrors symptoms of ambiguous loss, as coined by Dr. Boss.

According to Dr. Boss, when someone experiences ambiguous loss, “the ambiguity freezes the grief process” and “closure is impossible...[F]amily members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence” (Boss 107). The paradox Boss speaks about can be represented through a lineated poem in a way that prose might not do justice. The line break, with tools such as enjambment, allows the reader to feel absence, grief, or a feeling of empty closure before moving to the next line. James Longenbach speaks to the power of enjambment in *The Art of the Poetic Line*, stating, “Enjambment provides both the stillness of a completed clause and the thrill of discovering that the syntax continues” (53). In a comparable way, enjambment offers a brief feeling of *loss* before allowing the reader to continue, mirroring the

emotions one might feel with ambiguous loss. Take these lines from Richard Siken's "Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out":

‘Every morning the maple leaves,

Every morning another chapter where the hero shifts

from one foot to the other. Every morning the same big...’ (1-3).

The content within the lines adds certain effects to the poem: the repetition of “every morning” creates a feeling of continuity, the white space shapes the speed at which the reader moves from line to line, and the use of “leaves” as both a noun and a verb presents both action and inaction. However, the line breaks in conversation with the white space and the content portrays a sense of loss in Siken’s poem. The choice to break the line at “maple leaves,” allows the reader to feel the absence before quite literally falling into the next line, as the next line’s indent starts directly below the middle of line one. The line break at “shifts” creates the expectation that something dramatic will happen, and the mundane payout that the hero is shifting their feet might feel even more shocking to the reader because it is not what they expect, yet it still portrays a feeling of ambiguity, of waiting for something but that thing is not stated explicitly. Siken uses both enjambment and white space to create a feeling of absence or that something is missing, and yet, language-wise, the feeling of absence is not entirely present. The line break, in this instance, brings an emotive quality to the poem that would not come across as clearly as a piece of prose.

In many ways, the line helps to construct the truth. The same is true of the realities lived by those who have experienced some form of ambiguous loss. Boss states, “Family members have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body” (106). When someone is physically or mentally absent, they obviously cannot express their truth effectively, which leaves it up to their loved ones. This is an immense amount of

responsibility for a single person, and each person's interpretation of the situation may be entirely different. However different they may be, the truth of the situation is authentic to the person constructing their own truth. Similarly, each poem written seeks to reveal some truth, whether it is universal or personal. The truth found within the lines of poetry is comparable to that of a person experiencing ambiguous loss in that, for the speaker, the lines within the poem reflect, at the least, their own subjective truth. The line break, as it amplifies the emotions felt by the reader, assists in the construction.

The use of enjambment in poetry about loss works to construct the writer's truth as it unfolds before them. Dana Levin writes that "enjambment enacts the drama, and pace, of *feeling or thinking through*. Because I am interested in drama, I am interested in how fast a line moves" (149). Although it can be argued (easily) that poems are constructed meticulously, the feeling of thinking through a poem should still be evident at the end of it all. In the same poem by Richard Siken, "Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out," the speaker is straightforward about their own construction of the truth. Because of the honest, yet unreliable narration, we can feel loss through the line break while also being acutely aware of the fact that the lines are carefully constructed:

‘You see, I take parts that I remember and stitch them back together

to make a creature that will do what I say

or love me back.

I'm not really sure why I do it, but in this version you are *not*

feeding yourself to a bad man

against a black prickled sky with small lights.

I take it back' (59-65).

By stating “I take parts that I remember and stitch them back together,” the speaker of the poem does not try to hide the fact that they are retelling the story as a version of their own truth. In doing so, the reader is acutely aware that the speaker may be unreliable. However, in this case the universal truth of the poem is not as important as the emotion the poem conveys. Siken uses enjambment between “a creature that will do what I say / or love me back,” which conveys a feeling of grief or exhaustion. It is already heartbreaking to envision the speaker creating a situation in which they must command someone to love them back; the enjambment of the two ideas separates them so that the empty space can hold a brief pause, a loss. While the white space at the beginning of the poem allows the reader to fall into the next lines, the white space here has the opposite effect; it slows down the pace of the poem and encourages the reader to take in each moment of the poem at a slower pace. The slowest pace occurs at the lines “I’m not really sure why I do it, but this time you are *not* / feeding yourself to a bad man / against a black prickled sky with small lights.” As a sentence, this might be easy to gloss over, but by using the line break and white space with the indentations, the reader must slowly take in each piece of the truth constructed by the speaker. Because the speaker notes that “this time” the story is different, the truth and the constructed truth become hard to distinguish. Because the author slows the pace down, the reader has time to feel discomfort, sadness, and likely confusion, in the space between each line, which adds another layer to the truth constructed by the speaker of the poem.

Similarly, the poems in my collection use the line break and enjambment to both construct the speaker’s truth and express feelings of grief, loss, and absence. This practice is best reflected through the lines in “Intensive Care Unit”:

‘I find myself in the hospital chapel praying
for an atheist miracle, for our plum mini-van

to unravel its body from the oak tree
and never leave the driveway again.

Mom sleeps for weeks while the Seals
kill Osama Bin Laden and I answer

an entire round of *Jeopardy* questions
with peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth' (7-14).

In this poem, the speaker narrates from their point of view, making the experience true from their perspective, though their truth may not be the universal truth. Enjambment works in this poem to create juxtaposition and express feelings of grief and restlessness that may not be evident in the language alone. The line breaks between “I find myself at the hospital chapel praying / for an atheist miracle” juxtaposes two different faiths. While the first line feels predictable, the shift from praying to a supposed god to the paradox of an atheist miracle adds an element of surprise to the enjambment, allowing the reader to be shocked and understand a feeling of desperation between the two lines. Enjambment works similarly between the last two stanzas: “the Seals / kill Osama Bin Laden and I answer / an entire round of *Jeopardy* questions” presents two images that are quite unlike each other, yet they happen almost simultaneously in the memory of the speaker. In this series of lines, the shocking thing happens first, and while the reader might anticipate that same level of violence in the next stanza, they instead receive an image that is quite mundane. While the language in these lines conveys the broad spectrum of events that the speaker’s mother missed while they were in the hospital, the space between each line allows the

reader to feel the literal and figurative absence that the speaker feels. Though it may feel ambiguous rather than specific, it pinpoints how ambiguous loss can present itself in reality.

The lineation of poetry allows the freedom to explore ambiguity using space between lines and stanzas. James Longenbach states that “whatever shape it takes, this kind of movement is what makes a poem feel like an act of discovery rather than an act of recitation” (113). This goes hand-in-hand with the idea that though poems written about ambiguous loss likely construct a subjective truth, they should still show the act of thinking through an idea. In a similar sense, the momentum of a poem should allow the speaker to unearth the next line rather than simply recite it. The line break assists in presenting the “act of discovery” by amplifying the space between each line with emotion. For example, my poem “Unfinished” reads:

‘My grandma died in her sleep,
that’s how I choose to remember it.
Drifting in the night, symptomless,
like we never saw it coming.

Most mornings I check to see if Jon is still
breathing. I wake up in a panic, cold sweat
on steamed skin, and he lies so peacefully
that he cannot possibly be alive’ (1-8).

While this poem is a brief, two stanza lyric, at no point does it feel like the speaker is simply reciting words. There is an “act of discovery” between each line, and largely between the two stanzas. The first act of discovery occurs in the first line break: “My grandma died in her sleep, / that’s how I choose to remember it.” While the second line brings an element of ambiguity to the

poem as the reader might wonder how the death actually happened, the second line also feels as though it was an added thought at the last second, not a planned-out recitation, like the speaker came to the realization as they were working through the poem. Additionally, though the poem was meticulously planned out, written, and edited, the break between the first and second stanza makes the second stanza feel like an epiphany. The first stanza ends with “Drifting in the night, symptomless, / like we never saw it coming” and the second stanza begins, “Most mornings I check to see if Jon is still.” Writing through the parallel feels as though the reader and the speaker find themselves both discovering the similarities between the two scenes and can feel the anxiety that comes with the second stanza. By breaking up the two scenes into separate stanzas, the reader can use the space after the first stanza to feel the sense of specific grief that accompanies an untimely death. The space between each line, and between the two stanzas, also allows for feelings such as anxiety and fear to be amplified in a shocking way. Because the line break amplifies these emotions, it assists in helping the poem come across as an “act of discovery” rather than a recitation.

Sara Henning uses the line break as an effect in a comparable way, illuminating the act of discovery through reading and writing poetry in the line breaks of her poem, “Mom’s Eggs”:

‘She’s dead, and no one can teach me

to pierce the grief, to catch its trigger of salt.

It’s a feat I can’t master - the sweet pot pulsing hard,

then raw. Supple under a trick of silk,

her effigy bristles, burns. How she loved me’ (8-12).

In this poem, the speaker compares an image of her mother cooking eggs to the grief she feels after her mother's death. She marries the images of her mother making eggs to the grief she feels through the lines "It's a feat I can't master – the sweet pot pulsing hard, / then raw. Supple under a trick of silk." The space between "hard" and "raw" begs the reader to pause and feel the pain the speaker experiences. While the image presented mirrors the cooking of an egg, the emotion under the image amplifies feelings of loss. Because Henning's poem feels like a constant act of discovery, the emotions not only feel authentic, but fresh and consistent, which makes the poem feel as though it captures the emotions in real time. It keeps this momentum of fresh grief until the stanza breaks at "under a trick of silk / her effigy bristles, burns. How she loved me" and comes to a sudden halt. While the language and punctuation in the line encourages the reader to come to a halt linguistically, the space at the end of the line encourages the reader to sit with the words "how she loved me" for a moment. Whereas the line break in the previous lines prompts the reader to continue with momentum to be shocked by the consistent imagery, the line break after the first line of the last stanza prompts the reader to take a moment to reflect on the statement, as it seems the speaker does as well. It is these acts of discovery that keep the reader engaged in each poem, while the line break keeps the emotive authenticity of the language in each line energized.

While many readers see poems as "dazzlingly elusive," the reality is that poems involve several strings of decisions that lead to the finished product. James Longenbach puts it best when he poses the question, "Can any good poem avoid the impression that its maker has organized its language in intricate ways, even if the maker's goal has been to disguise the imposition of pattern, making it seem natural?" (56). The answer lies within the reader. At its surface, each

poem might maintain its dazzling appearance, but once readers take the time to peel back the poem's layers, they can see how the poet worked meticulously to craft each line. Within this analysis, then, it is important for us to include the line break as something that is inflicted upon the reader as an effect that, though seemingly imperceptible, has been carefully placed by the poet to impose an emotional response. Longenbach describes lineated poetry as "the making of pattern along with the simultaneous disruption of pattern" (114). In many cases it is necessary to disrupt the predictable pattern of a poem in order to engage with the reader emotionally – the line break offers the perfect opportunity for this. When arranging language in a lineated poem, it is impossible not to consider where the line will break and how that will add to or change the meaning of the poem. The line break is often overlooked in this way, and much like the line break, ambiguous loss is largely overlooked in favor of the grief and mourning involved with the death of a loved one.

Dr. Pauline Boss categorizes ambiguous loss as being "frequently disenfranchised" (66). She notes that "the larger society simply does not know how to recognize and respond to non-death losses" and that the public needs assistance to become educated on the intricacies of ambiguous loss (66). In a similar way, the line break has also been disenfranchised. Instead of looking at how the line break adds meaning to a poem, readers turn to language to do the bulk of the work. Looking at how the line break functions in poems having to do with ambiguous loss accomplishes two things: it educates readers on the intricacies of loss and especially non-death losses, and it brings the line break to the forefront of the discussion by highlighting how the line break adds significance to poems about loss instead of solely relying on the language in the poem to convey meaning. The location of each line break, then, is a crucial decision that impacts

lined poems in an immense way as the poetic line works with all variables and language to amplify the emotions that accompany ambiguous loss.

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Before Daughters

Intensive Care Unit

Mom lies in a hospital suite
and the chemicals make my eyes melt.

Her feet stick out from the hospital sheets,
my tattooed name on the left is already turning green.

The raven nurse says Mom must love me very much;
she cannot confirm because of the tube in her throat.

I find myself in the hospital chapel praying
for an atheist miracle, for our plum mini-van

to unravel its body from the oak tree
and never leave the driveway again.

Mom sleeps for weeks while the Seals
kill Osama Bin Laden and I answer

an entire round of *Jeopardy* questions
with peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth.

When she opens her eyes she doesn't remember
my face, the alphabet, her own name,

but she squeezes my hand three times
and convinces me we have a language of our own.

The Kennedys Are Cursed

Joe left my grandma for a woman ten years her junior,
yet she kept their membership to the symphony
and drank for two at dinner parties.

Steadily breathing out water vapor, she spun

salads in the kitchen with homemade
ranch dressing and mumbled along to Norah Jones.
I never heard her sing, but her roots weave within me.
I imagine her voice would swaddle me with silk sheets.

Joe used to say grace before each meal and I would respond
Hallelujah! with sarcastic sap coating my tongue.
Needles flirt, heads bow, prayers flake
with restraint. Julie went to mass each Sunday,

an adult convert to the body of Christ
and still died alone in bed at sixty-eight.
I wear her heart around my neck in place of a cross.
We shed constantly, waiting for the regrowth.

Tattoo

Is it the moment,
or the moment after that?

Some people love the pain,
the permanent proclamation,

the way the ink turns green
like a penny.

I love the scent of all my ex-boyfriends.
Dior, Irish Spring, Tom Ford.

I can pick them out in a crowd,
feel the jagged nails across my skin,

reach out for the worn denim,
inhale the mothballs.

Like Moths to a Flame

I found a lighter in the pocket of my mom's jacket,
only worn once in New York City
twelve years before I moved to the village
and five years before she lost herself entirely.

I picture the coat with her inside of it smoking
a Camel Light, charming as always
outside the bar, lipstick smudged
on the end of the cigarette,

the dimple on her right cheek doing the talking.
Her face holds the same indent now,
but her confidence is a charcoal-stained
mirror. A decade-old caricature

wants nothing more than to prove itself,
to stomp out the charred tobacco
in a city it will never return to, pivot
and order another round.

Matriarchy

When it came time to deliver, my sister prayed
to the ceiling tiles, her face a straight line.
I held my breath during every ten-second push,
transferring my energy to her through telepathy.
I offered phantom contractions, focusing until
a tuft of almond hair appeared between her legs
followed by a gelatinous body, the pit of a peach.
The baby's foreign spine and curled toes
begged for the flesh comfort of fruit.
My sister cried out for God
as she had at our grandma's funeral.
Tears obscured her face beneath the amber lights.
I watched for movement, for new life,
for pruned little hands and a frozen expression of terror.
When the doctor slapped a charged glove
against the baby's back, my elastic lungs burst.
As I exhaled, my niece opened her train-whistle
mouth and together we shaped a small, powerful wail.

Decade-Old Newspaper in the Back of a Half-Read Book

I pull it out and unfold the crisp square, expecting
notes, a receipt, or an unanswered prayer.

What I get is a poem from a Canadian about
ducks or an old couple, loneliness and companionship.

I think about a pair of leather hands, fingertips
scanning the lines, searching for anything

tender before they pause, try not to smudge the ink,
and tear the page like a sacrifice.

It's easy to overlook the past
even when it stares you in the face.

And how lucky am I to be the receiver
of the scrolls, the master of our own fate.

The Year They Opened the American Girl Doll Store

The first time I experienced New York City
I was eight years old. Thick bangs

and baby teeth, I saw *Wicked* on stage,
had frozen hot chocolate at Serendipity,

rode the carriage through the park
until my nose turned red. Real snow

fell, not the west coast polymers,
and my grandmother dressed

us like dolls in thick coats.
She loved New York and London,

sister cities of her birthright -
keeper of posh, poise, and prim,

she wore magnolias on her skin
year-round – they flirted with

pine needles, taunted the cherry
blossoms in Central Park.

She kept a row of rose bushes
lining the edge of her front lawn,

and the only yard work I watched
was her carefully trimming

stems and thorns, humming Frank
Sinatra, crafting a silky bouquet.

Empty Talisman

My father, born and baptized
Catholic, an altar boy alcoholic,
said Seth's not up there playing baseball.

He's just gone.

What happens when faith becomes ashes,
becomes a language we're forced
to speak but not understand. I keep dancing

with dinosaurs, cracking limbs
to make a sound, reaching
into the back of my closet.

I store a St. Christopher necklace
in my backpack, an archaic sign
of affection, safe travels

beyond the grave. At mass, I take
communion and make
a grocery list in the back pew.

I talk to Julie when I feel lost
but take no comfort in prayer. Burn
the insides, bury it, take it
out back with the rest of the offenders.

Eviction

We gutted the house tore wallpaper
splattered paint on the ceiling
all but set it on fire threw
chairs in the pool carved
initials learned obscenities
watched Dad have a manic episode
memorized where to find Santa
Cruz on a map lingered near the windows
uncomfortably left footprints
and photos for someone
intelligent to use as a mask
abandoned our birth certificates
and beanie babies unwilling
to stop for the webbed
words of blue jays and swallows

My Mother Was Married at City Hall

She was four months into it, motherhood,
depending on when you count the start.

Wore a cream dress, changed

into a T-shirt and jeans for the reception.

In the photos, dad looks drunk. A Catholic
sinner, he grasped for something nuclear

within the cataclysm, a two-lane highway
proposal, cars flooding both lanes.

They forgot to buy rings,

but remembered the cake
and the anniversary, April
Fool's Day, 1994.

Eureka

My sister and I were born 22 months apart
but when she feels sick, I wake up with a sore throat,

and when she lies awake with each teething daughter,
I toss and turn. We haven't slept decently in three years.

They say twins share telepathic intuition -
leftovers from a shared womb, and we are no different.

At night, we sleepwalk. Phantoms make tea
and discuss tragedies. We dream

of snowboarding in Big Bear, strangers invading
Grandma's house, losing our dogs

or babies, we wake soaking with dread,
anticipating white noise or a bomb squad

and instead are greeted with piercing
silence and the feeling of not being alone.

Extended Stay America

The empty parking lot stared back at me like a slack-jawed toddler waiting for a mouthful of peas or a thumb.

Mom checked in on a Tuesday afternoon, and I drove past daily, imagining the lonely hotel room with cobweb clusters in the corners

and a Bible suffocating in the drawer. She made it her own personal Bellagio, where she could toast to her new liver with gin and lithium cocktails and smoke without leaving her bed.

I called the front desk and asked if a straw-haired ghost had emerged from any of the rooms. I worried they would find her

with blue lips like a pufferfish, three days too late. Instead, she lumbered down the hall naked, a bowling ball against its bumpers.

I picked her up in my rusty-wheeled Buick at half-past one. She stood on the curb outside, holding a trash bag filled with treasure,

damp paper slippers on her feet, a tumbleweed matted in her hair, and a cigarette jutting out of her mouth like a weapon.

Underneath the charcoal stains of smeared mascara and her ashy, swollen face, she wore the serene smile of a woman leaving a day spa.

Unfinished

My grandma died in her sleep,
that's how I choose to remember it.
Drifting in the night, symptomless,
like we never saw it coming.

Most mornings I check to see if Jon is still
breathing. I wake up in a panic, cold sweat
on steamed skin, and he lies so peacefully
that he cannot possibly be alive.

Sleeping on the Beach on the Island of Crete

I can't escape the cicadas - they're native
to Greece, but they scream just the same

in the trees on Fifth Avenue, guarding
brick houses and baby strollers.

On Preveli I dream of the street,
of your hand collecting mine through the white

noise, reaching the corner house,
stopping, and turning into the drive.

I wonder how long it took for Jack
and Linda to reach their breaking point,

to shatter the illusion that great love
might suffice, and love each other after all.

Laguna Beach

I did not want to go in the water.
I sat on the rocks closest
to the cliffs, read Nancy Drew.
Julie stayed with me,

a velvet cascade in a toucan
hat, wrapped with a white
ribbon - tied into a bow at its back.
She let me try black coffee

then spit it out, corrected my manners.
Our hands were two ends of a necklace
clasped together, treasure on a thread,
and when I was ready, she guided me

down the rocks, across the sand
castles and ferries. Dipped
our toes in and that was enough.
The epitome of grace, she drew

cursive, kept hats in boxes,
thank you notes in her purse,
cookies and tea on a tray
with the morning paper.

When she died, she left
a journal in her bookcase from 1998.
A time capsule: depression,
menopause, and sincerity. She pulled back

the curtain to reveal unintentional
prayers, desperation.
Let me remember, each day
offers its own gifts.

They Stuck Out from Under the Hospital Sheets

She did it drunk,
bled our grocery money,
and when they healed,

called them her perfect
gifts. One name on each
foot, loose cursive,

sloppy and rusted,
an ode to my sister and me
felt more like a chain

linking our ankles together
than a proclamation of love.
She took them back,

what she once gave to us,
pierced the soil with a flag
so no one could forget

the origin, the tie
that we've been desperate
to cut through with our teeth.

Love's

Somewhere in the middle of Arkansas
we let the huskies out of the car to run

between a gas station and a Holiday Inn.
They circle each other, savoring the apprehension,

and we watch them from afar, your arm snaked
around my shoulder, my head nestled into your sweaty neck.

We haven't taken a photo together
but this one would be in shades of yellow,

freckles settling on your nose, the itchy
stubble of your cheek on my unwashed hair.

You whistle to keep the dogs from straying
too far and the vibrations in your throat hit my temple.

This is how it feels
for two mountains to face each other.

It's Not About Missing the Weddings

I avoid white wine but crave
wind chimes and Chardonnay.
I smell magnolias everywhere.

It follows me to the symphony
and on the car ride back,
wells up like a lemon.

Market

We work well with our hands
clasped, fingers intertwined

in the butcher's section. Thighs
or breasts for dinner?

We're good like this: flirting
with domesticity, joint

bank accounts and gold bands.
It's real if we play

pretend long enough:
the stability, mowed lawns

and kitchen islands. Tiny hands
to hold on to, sticky like honey

glazed ribs, matching
freckles on their wrist,

waiting to cross the street
as we taught them.

Self-Defense

Dad claimed to see ghosts – at night
he sleepwalked and spoke to mirrors,
insisted we shouldn't worry, asked

where Mom was. They separated
a year before, after she threw
an ashtray at his head - a hand

painted souvenir I brought back
from San Fransisco. He braced
for an impact that never came.

Dad went to therapy, chain
smoked in his recliner, watched
comfort movies until the morning

he lost his memory - a blank
slate, PTSD defense. No names,
no notes, cars and phones

were galactic, the ocean
as it was 500 years ago. I found
him one night downtown,

circling a Westinghouse fountain.
He said all his wishes were gone,
grasped for pennies in the shallow water.

I Had to Bury Molly with My Grandmother

I carried her to the funeral,
kneeled with her at mass and let her ride
shotgun during the procession.

The box that became her home,
made of the same casket mahogany,
locked at the front, as if anyone might

open her up and spill out her organs.
Grandma shared a glass of Chardonnay
with her each night, couch cushion

and mantle, year after year.
After Joe left and we grew
much too wise for the playroom,

and her house creaked with
yearning, Molly stayed.
At Fairhaven, next

to the Segerstrom mausoleum,
lovers of the arts, symphony
of infinite violins, they lie

anonymous, like two
swans drifting endlessly
across a golden pond.

Before I Have a Daughter

Before I have a daughter
I want to scrape my insides out
until the flesh is so raw
she will bear no resemblance,
no arched eyebrows or webbed
toes. Trauma tangos through
generations, saturates the womb,
predestined to fracture.

Before I have a daughter
I want to map out each unanswered
prayer, iron out the intricacies
so we can weave
together like a basket
of apples, break the generational
curse, emerge as poppies
both lovely and lethal.

Before I have a daughter
I want to go back to the grave,
the one I misplaced,
whose headstone I've never seen
and mark it with a pin,
leave a half-filled glass
and never visit again.

Before I have a daughter
I want to read every book
on the shelf: Olds, Carson,
Gregg, Plath, Nelson, Rich,
soak in the lines and the between
where the pain is felt
like an abandoned car seat.

Before I have a daughter
I want to reach into the back
of the closet, past the mothballs
and stockings, and pull out
the dress I wore to Julie's funeral,
take the chiffon between
my fingers and snap.

Before I have a daughter
I want to nurture the wound,
gloss and moisturize and project
our best features, crooked
teeth and stature. Remind her
that each generation learns
at its own pace. Cherish
how the magnolias grow.

The Last Time Mom Was Mom

She took Sage and me back-to-school shopping
and we gave Dad a fashion show. We turned fold-out
mattresses into a runway. She was bleached hair
and hooped earrings, Clinique lipstick and pointed
toes. My dad waited at the end with his camera,
all-too-eager paparazzi. Sunbeams for eyes.
In love for the first and last time.