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Sue

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SUE

By

Heath Joseph Wooten

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

SUE

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ABSTRACT

SUE

By

Heath Joseph Wooten

Sue is a collection of poetry investigating the cyclical nature of grief through the lens of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's schemas of paranoid and reparative readings. The poems employ motifs such as hunting, disease, and human remains to capture the temporal disorientation experienced in the wake of loss. Via an extensive use of metaphor and recurring poem titles, *Sue* exploits the multivalence of language to conjure a dense field of meaning, meant to capture the undecidability of language noted by philosopher Jacques Derrida. This collection also employs several vectors of derivation, including erasure of text lifted from the 2002 strategy video game *Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade* and a sequence of responses to Suzanne Vega's 1990 album *Days of Open Hand* in the ekphrastic spirit. Thus, *Sue* is intended to contribute to and deepen the meaning of these other pieces of art while also forwarding its own unique perspectives on grief, language, and formal play.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual.

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INTRODUCTION

Sue is a collection about grief, and I apologize in advance, as that is the most—and perhaps only—straightforward statement I can make about this collection. Grief, of course, is a process or cycle or affliction of the living, to me having very little to do with death. While a death event may be the trigger, grief is more about the living navigating the nature of loss—or the potential of loss—than anything else. I am making this intervention now in the spirit of defending against accusations that I am obsessed with death or otherwise have a morbid preoccupation with dark subject matters. While the latter may be true, it is not particularly relevant to the work I have done here, and regarding the former, I find that I am—by my own logic—much more obsessed with life. Here, I mean that I am concerned in general and in *Sue* with the very palpable yet not quite explicable effects of death on life.

I suppose whatever intervention I am making here and in *Sue* comes from a deep disdain for the ways in which I see people conceptualizing grief. Namely, I take issue with schemas of grief that suppose linear progression, an endpoint, or a single process. I prefer to think of grief as a cycle, and if it has any relation to the processual it is that it demands to be processed and reprocessed in an endless chain of processes. I realize that this schema at this juncture sounds profoundly bleak. I have, after all, effaced the possibility of *getting over it*, but there is still room left for hope. In my own grieving, though the processes recur, each process takes on a different complexion than the one before, and they are not nearly as absolutely devastating as the first, nor do they possess the same potential to injure.

In order to explain this change, I turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concepts of paranoid and reparative readings. Sedgwick first proposes that paranoia is anticipatory¹, ruled by the axiomatic "*there must be no bad surprises*" (130). Paranoia must always know what bad news is coming before it comes, and it in turn positions itself defensively against the impending bad news. A friend recently shared with me that her grandfather was going to die any day, and it would be her first close family loss. I expressed sympathy, but she said it was okay—she had spent so long anticipating his death that she thought she had already done all her grieving. I had a similar feeling in the days leading up to my grandmother's death, but I had not in fact done nearly all my grieving. So deeply do I feel the anticipatory force of grief that I have written an entire collection about the death of a mother in order to deal with—on some level—the eventual loss of my own mother.

There are many poems in *Sue* that seemingly take place before or at the moment of death where the anticipatory—the need to know the bad news—is front and center². Most notable here is perhaps "Paranoid," in which Sue demands again and again to know "what happens next." She tries to assign blame, attempts to plan what she will do after her mother dies, and finally admits that she was wrong about all of it. A flaw with the anticipatory tendency is that it can never quite plan for every contingency. It is perhaps—as Joan Didion wrote—that "in the model of grief we imagine, the model will be 'healing'" (188), but loss will always hurt more and hurt differently than planned. That fact will not, however, suspend anticipation or paranoia. We will always wonder and imagine, and we will hope that wondering will suspend surprise. Paranoia—situated

¹ It is not lost on me that my first paragraph is rooted deeply in the paranoid given that I am defending against *anticipated* misunderstandings about myself and my work.

² I use the word *seemingly* here as the poems in *Sue* are not meant to be read as literally taking place at the moment described. *Sue* shuffles between and often exists within multiple temporalities in an attempt to suggest the disorientation the death of a loved one can cause.

in this way within grief—can teach us much about how loss wounds us and the dimensions of those wounds, though it can tell us very little about anything else.

While Sedgwick has much to say about the nature of paranoia, the most helpful aspect for my purposes is that paranoia places “an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure” (138). To Sedgwick, the paranoid might reveal obscured histories or homophobia or the machinations of gender. Its vested interest is “unveiling hidden violence” (140). The experience of grief has been so thoroughly documented in art and media that it is difficult to conceive of any facet of it being hidden. The curtain has been pulled back so many times, and we each have at least a vague cultural impression of what looms behind it—that it is not nice, and we will not like it. However, the desire remains to pull back the curtain again and again, to (re)reveal the horrible beast, to expose it, as if we can learn anything more about it by looking at it longer. The paranoid position of grief is not a space of revelation. We already know—because the paranoid is anticipatory—that grief will hurt, but this position of grief insists *I am wounded—look at my wound* endlessly without allowing space for revelation. It seems to be enough that the wound is known and observed.

This persistence in exposing grief as the horrible force it is is present throughout *Sue*. These poems insist on repeatedly seeing and reseeing the same set of images, demanding attention. By my count, rabbits are mentioned at least 11 times in the collection, while creatures related to deer appear at least 25 times. In around half of these 36 mentions, the animal is killed, already dead, or otherwise injured³. Sue twice directly considers killing her mother via drowning (“The Beast”) and bloodletting (“Ending”), implies that she might have pulled life support

³ The number of occurrences of these particular animals is definitely related to my tendency to fixate, but well over 40 specific creatures appear in this collection.

(“Occlusion”)⁴, and is otherwise often depicted killing or observing the death/injury of animal mothers (“Ending,” “Passages,” “Reparative”). I have insisted on the repetition of these and other images and concepts 1) to (re)expose grief from the paranoid position and 2) to construct the cyclical nature of grief I proposed earlier.

However, this collection is not all doom and gloom. While it could hardly be called happy—even in its brightest moments—, by the final movements of the collection, a doe “made it out alive” (“Reparative”) and Sue has managed to remind herself “that life ensues” (“Glimmer”). *Sue* acquires a sort of reluctant hope. This move is meant to represent Sedgwick’s proposed alternative position to paranoid: the reparative. Sedgwick proposes the reparative approach to criticism as a way to prevent paranoid approaches from “impoverish[ing] the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills” (144), thus preventing criticism from adapting to changing political or environmental factors. It is my view that insisting only on the paranoid view of grief is an expeditious route to hating life and—in more drastic cases—dying. If I am right in conceiving as grief as an inescapable cycle, imagine the cycle always entailing such grim agonies as contained in the first half of *Sue*. Critical to my navigation of cyclical grief is an eventual move toward reparative positioning, which potentially allows the “extracting [of] sustenance from the objects of a culture” (151), even if such objects were never interested in sustaining in the first place.

As opposed to the paranoid, the reparative holds the potential for revelation as it lets go the compulsive need to anticipate—to know before knowing, to eliminate the potential for surprise. As Sedgwick observes, “because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also

⁴ I have left the specific scene of Sue’s mother’s death purposefully vague for the purpose of blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Again, I wanted to conjure the disorientation of losing a loved one. In a poem like “Passages,” for example, Sue suggests that her mother died from a fall in her kitchen, but this cause of death is multiply contradicted.

be good ones” (146). The reparative operates within and embraces surprise, thus allowing the potential for such good surprises. What—I wonder—could be more surprising to the paranoid griever than the fact that life continues, and even has the potential to continue *pleasantly*? It is from this position that Sue ecstatically proclaims in “Glimmer” that “the woodpecker has become a repository / for I don’t know what to do...” Likewise, Sue is positioned reparatively when she accepts in “Reparative” that “every prognosis is like a prognosis.” I employ the non-simile here—the simile that points its comparative finger right back at what it supposes to compare—to suggest Sue’s acceptance of the unknowable, that the nature of a prognosis is to be uncertain, non-definitive, potentially exorable. In “Paranoid,” Sue struggled to accept the ambiguity, the rough guess-work of the prognosis, but by “Reparative,” she is willing to embrace the inevitability of the surprise.

If it is the case that paranoid grieving teaches us about the wounds inflicted by death, I believe it is the case that reparative grieving teaches us more about life, even if that lesson is simply: *surprises will occur*. At any rate, it is perhaps within the realm of surprise that any revelation is permitted. After all, if we must always already know, how can the curtain fall away? How can the curtain exist in the first place? For this reason, I have attempted to orient *Sue* along a cyclical grief that begins with the deeply paranoid and ends gesturing toward the reparative. I begin with the frontispiece “Premonition,” which attempts to anticipate the impending wound, and end with the coda “November,” which gently deals with certainties—life cycles, water cycles, sunrise—before landing on Sue’s mother’s “coat / quiet on the rack.” The coat still *belongs* to her mother, and maybe she will be back for it. What could be more surprising?

On Meaning(lessness)

It seems to me that relationships between two living people are fairly straightforward in terms of meaning. At the very least, the two people in a relationship are available to help actively construct meanings. On the other hand, a relationship between one living and one dead is fraught. The bereaved must—on their own—make meaning from a relationship that no longer exists empirically. I see grief as the attempt to make meaning out of nothing, a nothing that takes on characteristics of an everything. Consider: a very dear friend of mine passed away in a car accident when we were teenagers. It was perhaps my first truly felt loss⁵. At his funeral, I saw his body, and I was overcome by the strange sensation that I was both looking at an object and also his complete person. A friend whispered to me as we sat during the service *that wasn't him*, a statement which was just as right as it was wrong. Whatever part of him that contained *him* had departed, yet before us was his body, the same one which once breathed and contained thoughts and played many instruments.

I am trying to say that I do not know what is true, nor if the truth of it even really matters so much. It seems his remains are suspended in semantic ambivalence, at once bereft of meaning and resplendent with it, and he cannot provide me clarity on account of being dead. Unfortunately, it would seem, based upon *Sue*, that I cannot either. Sue's mother's remains are a key motif in *Sue*, where they (she?) most commonly appear (appears?) as ashes. In "Eschatology," *Sue* wrangles with the semantic resplendence of ashes, finding "new ways / to translate / a palmful of ashes / into a ribcage." Here, I mean to conjure the perhaps futile desperation to find meaning in the physical remnants of a person, to confirm once and for all that

⁵ My grandfather died a couple years before this friend died, but I believe I was too young at the time to consider frankly what had occurred. It seems to me now looking back that I am very sad. It seems to me now that I am grieving.

remains are enough to empirically confirm the existence of a relationship. At the end of the first section in “Arrival,” Sue is certain that the “anomaly of ash” in her palm is her mother, but by “Occlusion,” she reasons that the “seam between birth and unplugging” is “called body. Or the heart,” and then wonders “can a seam turn to ash.” In other words, Sue begins to think of the body as the link between life and death, which leads her to question whether a body can become ash without losing the link in the process.

Similarly to how I am reluctant here and in *Sue* to give an endpoint to grief, I do not want to attempt any straightforward answer to Sue’s confusion. I do not have any answers in the first place, as I am just as uncertain as Sue is. My grandmother died at the beginning of 2020. She was cremated, her remains (she?) were (was?) placed in an urn, which was then placed in a mausoleum. At the inurnment⁶—and at the funeral before—, I had difficulty conceiving of the object—the urn itself or the ashes within—in relation to my grandmother. I was far more focused on both the photos of her around the room and the words people were saying about her, which seemed to me just as—if not more—representative of her than a glorified jar of ashes. Even now, I am not particularly stirred by the idea of visiting the site of her inurnment. I carry a picture of her in my wallet, which feels meaningfully the same. Similarly with my dead friend, listening to the *Frozen* soundtrack—a soundtrack he loved—is not in effect different from visiting his grave, for me.

Still, I am reluctant to say remains mean nothing. That statement would, in the first place, disrespect countless cultures and systems of belief. It would also not represent how I feel, and how I feel is that I do not know. Though I may sound dismissive of remains, my gut reaction to the phenomenon of people having the ashes of their loved ones made into rings or necklaces is

⁶ My aunt made sure that we were all aware that my grandmother was not being *interred*, but *inurned*, as if the distinction changed the fundamental nature of the proceedings.

abject disgust. I immediately think it is grotesque to make an accessory out of a person, but then the rest of brain catches up, and I am no longer sure that ashes are a person in the first place. I suppose it could easily be said that ashes mean whatever I want them to mean, but I am the sort of person who cannot fully accept that anything can really mean absolutely else without losing all meaning in the process. Where is the person—I wonder—to prove that the ashes are that person? Why does it matter so much that I answer this question?

My desperation here and in *Sue* for answers no doubt comes from an academic desire to understand everything. I am afraid I am a reader and human who—as scholar Doris Sommer identifies—“feel[s] entitled to know everything as [I] approach a text... with the conspiratorial intimacy of a potential partner” (1). I grew up memorizing facts about books and authors, music and musicians, video games, and plants and animals—among other things—in the pursuit of understanding every aspect of a particular subject. I feel if I fully understand a subject, it is robbed of its ability to surprise—welcome back to the paranoid—, and it is within the realm of surprise that my anxieties lie. It is within absolute mastery that I find comfort, but as I have attempted to suggest, I am not sure that grief—and this concern over remains is certainly within its realm—is something which can be mastered.

Joan Didion writes that “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it” (188). I agree insofar as I never anticipated as I child the profound and permanent⁷ effect death and loss would have on me. However, I cannot say that I think I know much of anything about grief despite having experienced and experiencing it. I guess I am “confront[ing] the experience of meaninglessness itself” (Didion 189), but then I see a blanket that once belonged to my

⁷ Those older and wiser may suggest that this state of grief is not permanent, that I will eventually get over it. Let the record show that I do not think I will get over it.

grandmother⁸, and I am at once confronting stark multivalence—it could mean many things, could call to mind hundreds of memories and feelings simultaneously. I suppose it is here, within this tension between meaninglessness and multivalence in the wake of loss, that I intend *Sue* to function.

The semantic ambivalence of human remains to choose between meaning and meaninglessness—or between competing meanings—seems to me to suggest aspects of Jacques Derrida’s “Différance,” wherein the appearance of the signified is deferred and is in the present replaced by the sign (390). We say *body*, but this sign is “second in order after an original and lost presence” (391), thus—it seems to me—generating an ambiguity as to what the word may ultimately mean. We say *grandmother*, but if this grandmother is a lost presence, what we are saying is but a flimsy duplicate of the real grandmother who is not present, but is somewhere else or otherwise gone entirely. We are deferring the signified with the sign, but this deferral is in this case permanent. The grandmother will never arrive to prove her absolute resemblance to the sign. Instead, we are left with ashes, which is not quite the grandmother and is not quite an object. It is an over-signified something that perhaps has no significations at all.

I wanted *Sue* to engage this arbitrariness, this ambivalence, this suspension of meaning in cycles of grief, both regarding human remains and other vistas. I think this engagement is perhaps most clear in my choices in titles. There are, for example, five poems in this collection titled “Passages.” The word itself possesses many meanings: pathways from one place to another, selections of text, and journeys. It can function as a verb in microbiology, and it also evokes *passing away*. My poems refuse to ascribe a particular meaning. Rather, they attempt to

⁸ I believe this blanket, meanwhile, was crocheted by my mother as a gift for my grandmother. How it has finally ended up in my possession, I have no idea, but it is certainly multiply determined.

entertain most or all of these meanings by including in the bodies of the poems other words that suggest a particular meaning, though these meanings are always contradicted by others.

Similarly, in the poem “Celebration,” I hoped the title would point toward both parties and funerals—celebrations of life—, and in the poems titled “Keep,” I wanted to evoke keeping, keepsakes, fortresses, delaying, room and board, and all the endless potential significations. This choice is not me attempting to be vague, but to ask the reader to entertain the multivalence of the sign. How, for example, do the poems change when a different meaning is imposed upon the title?

In the “Passages” poems, I have even attempted to split the title itself down to the letter, allowing the word to serve as a container for more meanings. I wanted to see how much meaning I could grant a single word before it ceased meaning anything. In service of this idea, the five “Passages” poems are in a very loose form invented with help from Hannah Cajandig-Taylor I call the *octina*, a derivative of the *sestina*. In these poems, each line or stanza begins with a letter in the word *passages*, which alternate using a pattern reminiscent of the *sestina*. For example, the first pattern is—of course—*passages*, while the second is *speagsas*. The first four poems each contain two iterations of this pattern, while the fifth and final breaks the pattern, as does the envoi of a *sestina*. This “Passages” is an erasure collage made from pieces of the first four⁹, meant to evoke—again—the undecidability of language. The same sets of words can entertain different resonances in new contexts and orders.

⁹ Two pieces did not come from the previous poems. The large “THE” on the first page came from a music theory book I used for a collage exercise in workshop with Dr. Patricia Killelea, while the piece reading “becomes a flower garden when spring comes” came from the first volume of the boys’ love manga *Jazz* by Tamotsu Takamura and Sakae Maeda. The former inclusion is a sentimental reference to the fact that many of the poems here were first imagined in that workshop, and the latter references the academic work I have done during my time in this program.

I am aware that I am veering toward dangerous—or at least frustrating—territory by entertaining the undecidability of language so intensely, so I want to take care to clarify that I am not suggesting that my poems can mean *anything*. I have rather deliberately—and in some cases accidentally—curated a *selection of meanings*. Like many, I often respond to work that attempts universal appeal by having something for everyone with disdain. If it is the case that—as Lady Gaga claimed on the titular song on her 2013 album *Artpop*—“my artpop could mean anything,” then I effectively mean nothing¹⁰. The poems in *Sue* cannot mean anything, but rather can mean a set of somethings. It would be difficult to pick up this collection and decide, for example, that it is about a happy marriage or the political state of the United Kingdom. *Sue* is not a commentary on happiness or sex¹¹. It is about grief and sickness and hunting and death and hope and repairing and nothingness, and probably something else, too.

My attempt to avoid omnivalence has certainly led in part to my unconventional formal approaches. I do not in the first place want these poems to look welcoming as I do not want any potential reader to believe this collection will be easy, nor that it is going to be particularly pleasant. It was not easy nor pleasant to produce, and I wanted to visually conjure that experience, as any encounter with grief is bound to be difficult. Moreover, I did not want these poems to give up their meaning(s) readily given that—as I have said—grief is a cyclical creature that means many things and nothing simultaneously. It is the experience of asking questions—and asking the questions again, in different ways—and never receiving an answer. Such a frustrating situation demands frustrating poems.

¹⁰ One of the harshest critiques of the album claims indeed that it was meaningless, concluding with a devastating “What’s the point?” (Fallon).

¹¹ Unless, of course, you laboriously deduce how *Sue* might comment on happiness and sex by developing such commentary in opposition to what it says about sadness and death.

On Metaphor

There is arguably only a metaphorical connection between a person and their remains. Whether a body prone in an open casket or an urn of ashes, what connects remains and a person is a similarity that will never quite be absolute. No one thing, after all, will ever perfectly resemble anything else. As much as *Sue* pushes the metaphor, a doe is not wholly like one's own mother, nor is a fawn wholly like a child. I here use Susan Sontag's definition (via Aristotle) of metaphor: "saying a thing is or is not like something-it-is-not" (93). The saying itself, though, does not prove any absolute similarity. It is directly stated in the definition: *thing* is certainly not the same as *something-it-is-not*, but is only *like* it. A metaphor is an interpretive act. It is a tool with which we attempt to understand—again, to interpret—the world around us¹².

At this juncture, I am frankly uncertain of how to proceed with this information. I have only just lost my uncle¹³—he is to my knowledge not even buried at the time of writing—, and I do not want to think that he has or will proceed into the realm of metaphor. I would like him still to be himself, but I am quite scared that my remembering him alone over the past several days has already translated him into metaphor, that memory itself makes something into something it is not. My memories of him are certainly not absolute in their accuracy, so in that sense he is a thing that is like what he is not, but then again, he is dead, and all that exists of him now is either a body or ashes. I have, in this document, called into question the fact that remains are even *of him* at all. He is a metaphor for himself. I have made myself sad.

My sadness here, I think, points toward Sontag's thoughts about the power—and danger—of metaphor to injure. Specifically, Sontag writes about militaristic metaphors

¹² Perhaps metaphor is also a tool with which we attempt to understand ourselves. I, for example, am only very much like the man I imagine myself to be.

¹³ Here, I euphemize death as loss, which suggests I have only misplaced my uncle and it is possible I will find him again. If he himself is not already metaphor, he is at least already limned by it.

surrounding cancer, but she also points out that “the Jews were also identified with, and became a metaphor for, city life—with Nazi rhetoric echoing all the Romantic clichés about cities as debilitating... morally contaminated...” (83), suggesting the devastating power of metaphor as a rhetorical tool. I am reminded of Melissa Ginsburg’s short poem “In the Yard” which reads “I heard a kitten behind the fence / crying so terribly it became a machine. / Once it was a machine I couldn’t help it” (17), which similarly warns of the potential danger of metaphor. Cats, of course, require one set of skills to nurture, while machines require a different one. Indeed, one would not likely even go so far as to say they *nurture* a machine. The speaker of this poem—in this metaphor’s transformation—can no longer assist the cat. This example of metaphORIZATION is obviously far less drastic than Sontag’s example, but the danger remains. We can easily reave living creatures of their living-ness¹⁴ by suggesting they are like objects or concepts, as we risk then treating them as objects or concepts.

Sue, of course, is brimming with metaphor. Indeed, though I was not often reading Ginsburg or thinking of her work while composing this collection, in the second poem titled “Rest,” I write “once I learned / which berries / converted the grackle / into philosophy / once I knew / that rot / could turn a cedar / into a log / I knew / there would be no welcome.” Sue’s world is then aware of the dangers of the metaphor in some way. Sue’s mother’s sickness, though it is never disclosed¹⁵, is meant to be suggestive of cancer¹⁶ and dementia, and while I believe I have in general avoided the militaristic metaphors Sontag describes—that cancer is something that *attacks* and should be *battled* (64)—, the poems in this collection do often return

¹⁴ I am not sure how else to summarize the experience of being alive—of feeling pain, of experiencing joy, of grieving—in any other way. Please pardon my grammar-less-ness.

¹⁵ I believe the closest I come to naming the disease is in the first “Rest,” where I write “...the balding mailman who can’t explain braising or metastasis...”

¹⁶ Sontag writes that our popular view of cancer promotes “a simplistic view of the world that can turn paranoid” (69). It is no coincidence that the earlier poems written from a paranoid position often focus on disease.

to the idea of culpability. In “Paranoid,” I write “you will die who is responsible,” and likewise “I’m sorry” in “Arrival” and the second “Occlusion.” “Reparative” opens adjacent to blame, with Sue admitting that her mother “didn’t do it on purpose” and that she “questioned the victim [but] forgot who the victim was.”

Moral responsibility for death and disease appears also through *Sue*’s extensive use of hunting as a metaphor for the loss of a mother. The true opening poem “The Beast” is where this connection is made most explicit, with Sue both considering drowning her mother and killing a beast but leaving its young to die. In the third “Passages,” Sue shoots a doe in order to feed her mother, which is meant to evoke a similar idea as “Predate,” where I write “And eating / meanwhile / remains certain.” Eating is something that must happen, just as is death, but then, just because both are inevitable does not mean culpability is not a factor. If she is responsible for keeping her mother alive by providing food in the form of meat, she herself is actively participating in both life and death.

In general, *Sue* operates so extensively in the realm of metaphor to suggest again the multivalence of language. Metaphor is an avenue through which a poem can create new potential significations for words which stack atop one another as the poem—and indeed the collection as a whole—progresses. I am thinking specifically of the insistence on locating meaning via metaphor in the poem “Paranoid,” in which Sue tries to understand birth as “a steaming kettle / the moment / the camera / shudders / a torn vein / a figure breaking / into crow wings.” In ensuing poems, each time a crow appears, it has a metaphoric link to birth, along with every other image in the sequence. Sue later tries to process a prognosis, asking if it is closer “to an amateur shot. A shattered mirror. Or milk poured into tea.” Milk in particular is a returning image, which is sometimes connected to Sue’s mother, and other times associated with cows and

Sue's childhood, as in the third "Passages," when she says, "We eat veal, / Mother. We drink / their milk / at dinner. We pretend / it's ours." In the same poem, it is also a general symbol of sustenance, while in "Ending," it apparently replaces blood at the moment of death.

I have not been uncritical in layering so many metaphors and significations. As I have pointed out, making metaphor is a potentially dangerous act, and it is also one that has caused me a great deal of personal distress as I have worked on this project. I have certainly not completely acquitted myself of any ethical quandaries or accusations of depravity in these poems. A friend had a very negative, visceral reaction to the fact that these poems entertain matricide both directly and by making a deer into a metaphor for the mother and then killing the deer, and she is entitled to that reaction. However, as I have said, I never intended for these poems to be pleasant, and indeed, I do not intend these poems to represent a universal experience of grief. My own mother, when I pressed her on the nature of human remains, did not hesitate in confirming that they were the human, not an object.

What I have intended with this collection is to deliver a portrait of my own feelings around grief, and for me, metaphor is central to the experience. I am desperately looking for answers, and in that desperation, I am making things into things they are not to try to give some sense to the loss. If those metaphors lead me to dark and morally dubious places, so be it. To me, the ethical quality of what I have created is secondary—if it is relevant at all—to experiential honesty. I am trying to reveal something. I am trying to find answers.

On Fanfiction

Sue—the persona—did not spontaneously appear in my head as a perfect and wholly original conduit through which to explore grief via poetry. Rather, Sue came into my work via the 2002 tactical role-playing game *Fire Emblem: Fūuin no Tsurugi*, or *Fire Emblem: The*

Binding Blade in English¹⁷. The game centers around the protagonist Roy’s quest to put an end to a continent-spanning war that has ravaged the land and resulted in the death of several of his friends and family. In her first appearance in the game, the original Sue—traumatized—recalls the murder of nearly her entire people, which she witnessed, before joining Roy’s army to avenge her loss. She subsequently becomes a playable character. Her weapon of choice is the bow.

Most if not all of her dialogue throughout the rest of the game is optional, only available through brief conversations with other characters called *supports*, which are unlocked by placing characters adjacent to each other at the end of turns. In these optional conversations, Sue has but two substantial focuses: revenge and the virtues of nature. The only other shred of dialogue players may encounter beyond her introduction is Sue’s *death quote*. If a character dies during battle, they will share their last words before dying, thus becoming permanently unplayable. Many of these quotes are rather generic curses or final words to family or friends. However, Sue’s death quote is “sound of the wind, smell of the grass,” instead using her final words to evoke vague sensory experiences.

I first encountered this text in March 2020, shortly after the death of my grandmother. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic was also beginning, I had turned to *Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade* for comfort, but upon reading the quote, I remember thinking *there’s a poem there*. I immediately composed the first poem that would eventually find its way into this project, then titled “Song of Sue”¹⁸. I announced to my friends at the time, thinking the poem was a one-off, that I had written a *Fire Emblem* fanfiction poem, and we laughed. Indeed, that poem—in its

¹⁷ The game has never been officially translated into English, so all references to it in this introduction and in the body of the collection rely on fan-made translations.

¹⁸ Several small pieces of this poem found their ways into many poems in this collection, such that I have lost track.

original form—shares many characteristics of fanfiction. It is in the first place canon compliant, meaning that it does not significantly deviate from the source material. The setting was vaguely “the plains,” where Sue says she is from, and the theme was hunting, which Sue says that she does. “Song of Sue” did not engage with any notions of grief or death, and the Sue in the poems was very much the Sue in the game. I am not so sure, however, that any subsequent poem I have written is necessarily fanfiction, nor do I really consider my Sue the same as the *Fire Emblem* Sue at this point.

First, fanfiction is a genre, and like any genre, it has its own conventions and specialized language. Poetry, for example, has words like *lineation* and *stanza*, which have particular meanings within the genre. To name but a handful, fanfiction has lingo like *crack*—an absurd pairing of characters from radically different media franchises¹⁹—, *dead dove*—a story that features potentially triggering and extreme subject matters—, and *Mary Sue*—an archetypical character who is perfect in every way. In my own fanfiction writing experiences, I evaluate my work in such terms. I might ask myself if making Sue the mother of Soren—a character from a later *Fire Emblem* game with no association with Sue—is too canon deviant as to alienate readers, or if having a character in a *Pokémon* fanfiction meet Gwen Stefani is too crack, considering I am only writing canon compliant characters.

I find it important to consider such aspects of fanfiction because another of its key features to me is participation in a fandom community. No matter how far you drift from established canon, fanfiction is ultimately attempting to create a piece of writing that is legibly derived from an existing media for the purpose of participation in community. People read and comment on other people’s work, and if the work is on-going, the comments may even affect the

¹⁹ For example, a *crack fic* might feature a romantic relationship between Hank Hill from *King of the Hill* and Mickey Mouse, and it may take place in the universe of *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

contours of subsequent chapters²⁰. Though fanfictions generally only have one author, they are—in a sense—written by the communities within they circulate. Each fanfiction is active in constructing a new imaginative possibility for an existing media with the intention of building upon other fan-created possibilities.

In this sense, I do not consider *Sue* a work of fanfiction. I could perhaps argue that it is an *alternate universe* fanfiction, but I feel that this designation is quite dismissive of the poetic craft I have been honing for over three years working on this project. I have not functioned within the lexicon of fanfiction with *Sue* since that first poem, nor have I gone out of my way to make this work legibly related to *Fire Emblem*. I believe it would take a very astute fan—and a fan of the character Sue particularly—to connect this collection back to the game. I have also not been participating in a fandom community regarding this project. On the occasions that poems from this manuscript have been published, they are published to an audience who is interested in poetry primarily, and the poems are published with no indication that they have any link to *Fire Emblem* at all. They are read as poems about a woman named Sue who has lost her mother, and at this point, I think that is a more accurate summary of what they are to myself and most people who will engage with them.

I do not mean to suggest here that *Sue* has no derivative relationship with the video game, because it certainly does, and I am not attempting to conceal that fact. The five poems titled “Support” are erasures of Sue’s previously mentioned support conversations, and her death quote is included verbatim in several poems. I wanted the poems here to be in conversation with the character Sue and *Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade* in general, but the process through which I

²⁰ The anonymous author of *My Immortal*—a notoriously bad *Harry Potter* fanfiction—was known for responding directly to comments, often at the beginning of chapters. Chapter 3, for example, begins with “STOP FLAMMING DA STORY PREPZ OK!” which basically means “stop leaving mean comments on my story.”

came to that was more through an elaboration of ekphrasis than via fanfiction process. Typically, we mean an ekphrastic poem as a poem which responds to or translates a piece of visual art. Here, I mean to say that I see *Sue* as translating a video game character—the most essential spirit of the character—into a collection of poetry using the lexicon and tools of poetry, not fanfiction. What I have made of the Sue character—a woman confronting and processing grief and the death of her mother—is not an elaboration on the character present in *Fire Emblem*, but rather what her character must become to function within this particular genre. Furthermore, like any good ekphrasis, *Sue* is intended to be able to stand alone without needing immediate legibility with or context from *Fire Emblem*, though familiarity with both would likely deepen the experience.

I want to clarify—as I feel I have been a little aggressive here—that I have no problem with fanfiction whatsoever, and I am not saying *Sue* is not fanfiction as a swipe at the genre. I have a deep love and creative and academic interest in fanfiction, and indeed, during my time in this program, writing fanfiction has at times been the only way I have been able to remind myself that I actually enjoy writing. I have even written fanfiction of the Sue character with varying degrees of canon compliance, but the Sue in *Sue* is unlike the others, and is a Sue that could only emerge within the confines of poetry and poetic craft. It is because I respect the both genres and their particular functions so much that I want to make it clear that *Sue* is a collection of poetry, not fanfiction²¹.

²¹ I do not, though, believe fanfiction and poetry are mutually exclusive. It would certainly be possible to navigate both genres, their lexicons, and their possibilities in tandem. I mean only to point out that I have engaged with one and not the other during the composition of this project.

On Influence

Actress Salma Hayek stated in a *Hot Ones* interview on *YouTube* that growing up watching films, she never wanted to be an actor, nor did she ever see an actor and want to be like them. Rather, she just wanted to be involved in films. I think in large part, I can describe my relationship with poetry similarly. When asked who my poetic influences are, I often simply list the authors of books I have read and enjoyed, regardless of if I think they have much to do with my craft or not. Like Hayek, I have not often wanted to be *like* any other poet. I only wanted to participate in the world of poems. Indeed, it is more often the case that I want to *personally* be more like a *poem* rather than make my poems resemble another poem or another poet. Thus, I find the notion of influence regarding poetry itself to be fraught. I do not mean to suggest I am perfectly singular among poets, nor that my poems do not resemble the poems of any other poet. Rather, I am only saying that I have limited participation in poetry outside of the work I have done.

Even so, there are, in fact, a couple poetry collections that I have found profoundly influential in developing this project. Richard Siken's *Crush* was the first collection I encountered many years ago that really moved across the page, generating a stuttering momentum that clashed with his energetic, confrontational, and voice-driven lines. I remember the effect of this style most profoundly in "Little Beast," where the movement of the lines gave the poem a desperate intimacy, as if I was witness to a confession. These days, I tend to inject more space into my poems, but *Sue*'s true opening—"The Beast," one the collection's oldest poems—borrows its form almost directly from Siken's "Dirty Valentine" given that it attempts a Siken-esque voice-driven intensity. *Crush* taught me that the poem was not married to the left margin, thus opening a world of poetic possibilities to me that I am still mining.

Perhaps the book which has had the greatest effect on this manuscript is *Deepstep Come Shining* by C.D. Wright. I was very fascinated by Wright's choice to use the period to separate fragments, creating a claustrophobic and dissonant experience. *Deepstep* also struck me in its non-linearity. Fragments are pulled from various temporalities. Some are dialogic, while some suggest image or narrative movement. For example, consider the following four-line sequence: "Don't touch that dial. / In the town with the clothesline ordinance the woman are bleaching their teeth. / She has Casa Blanca lilies. I covet. / The fiddle contest will take place rain or shine" (Wright 58). These lines appear to have little context linking them, but the magic of *Deepstep* is in accretion. As the collection progresses, fragments return in new configurations such that by the time the book has ended, its logic is obliquely revealed. The second "Occlusion" is my deliberate attempt to employ a similar non-linear fragmentation that gradually gains clarity as it progresses. I am certain that *Sue's* repetition and stacking of images and metaphors—its gathering of meanings—is ultimately indebted to the magic Wright and *Deepstep*.

While I never particularly wanted to be a poet or like a poet, I did indeed want to be a musician—and like several musicians as well. Unfortunately, while I am very good at listening to music, I am not nearly as skilled at producing it, so I gave up on any musical aspirations. However, it is still the artform with which I most commonly—and deeply—engage, and it has certainly influenced my work on this project, though I cannot say that I often find inspiration in lyrics taken on their own. Rather, I am interested in the whole of a recording. I am interested in making a poem feel like a song—its rhythm and cadence, its production values and mixing, the timbre of the instruments and the singer's voice. I want to attempt to translate those aspects into poetry via spacing, tone, margin widths, placement, and punctuation, among other aspects.

The clearest musical influence on *Sue* is certainly Suzanne Vega's 1990 album *Days of Open Hand*, a record that I have always found quite unsettling. Due in part to the dull, fuzzy quality of the entire album, this quality is especially disturbing to me on a song like "Fifty-Fifty Chance," which explores the aftermath of a suicide attempt. Combined with the staccato strings and the subject matter, the track gains a menacing feeling, as if something horrible is slowly approaching. I am also fascinated by the album's airy production style. Despite *Days*' incorporating far more instrumentation—including found instruments and synthesizers—than Vega's previous albums (*Khan*), each component—especially the vocal tracks—sound so separate in the mix, as if they were all recorded in different rooms. On "Pilgrimage," a cryptic song about family, language, and the passage of time, this separation in this mix amplifies the mysterious mood crafted by the lyric, but on "Men In A War," which confronts pain, loss, and injury, the same space underscores the lyric by lending a distinct feeling that something is missing from the song. *Days of Open Hand*, then, is unified by a consistent mixing and production strategy, but each song responds very differently to being placed within such a container.

While producing and formally structuring the poems in *Sue*, I have tried to pay particular attention to how similar formal decisions interact with different subject-matters and tones to produce effects similar to *Days of Open Hand*. "September" and "November" are a very direct result of this idea. Both poems feature a split down the middle and have similar tendencies in punctuation. However, while the split in "September" is meant to reflect the fragmentation of the sky occurring in the poem, the split in "November" is meant to conjure a sense of absence or loss. Rhythmically, too, the poems differ despite looking similar. The former is meant to progress with an exasperation ("Again the sky broke. / I don't know how." and "Sunlight comes

and then / the I don't know why.”), while the latter is meant to have a quiet, hesitant intimacy (“I touch you / amid the pitch / and the cannot be changed. / I touch you / and I am changed”). It is the subject and the tone which dictate the rhythm, despite formal resemblance. In such cases then, I mean to experiment with the interaction between form, voice, rhythm, and subject-matter while also lending the collection a sense of internal unity in the vein of *Days of Open Hand*.

Because *Days of Open Hand* felt so appropriate an inspiration for my vision for *Sue*²², I also directly responded to each of the album's 11 songs with 11 corresponding poems throughout the manuscript. Rather than simply responding to the song's lyrics, I wanted to—as I have mentioned—make the poems *feel* like the songs. In the first “Occlusion,” for example, which responds to the song “Roof off the Street,” I included black blocks to capture the eerie instrumental breaks in the song, while the fragmented style featuring periods in the place of line-breaks was meant to conjure stuttering percussion and the discrete notes of the guitar. I proceeded with the other songs in a similar manner.

The inspiration behind *Sue*'s content is first and foremost rooted in the natural world²³, especially the nature surrounding Marquette. When I first moved here for this program, I encountered a shocking number of injured and mutilated does and fawns wandering through my backyard. The most memorable pair was a doe and fawn who were both missing their back left legs. There was also once a doe missing the skin on its left side and another without a jaw on other occasions. This prevalence of injury around deer is what first led me to align *Sue*'s mother and *Sue* with the doe and the fawn, thus launching this project in general. My ongoing fixation on these creatures also stems from the fact that since I began writing about them, I have seen

²² Though I would not say the album has much to do with the content of the poems in their present forms, *Days of Open Hand*'s themes of loss and disconnection no doubt structured the direction of *Sue* in its fledgling stages.

²³ I originally planned for every poem in the collection to take place outdoors.

only healthy deer in my yard. I am not sure I can articulate or defend this statement, but their disappearance lends them an additional poetic quality.

Of course, being in Marquette, clouds and snow are all over the place, so it is no surprise that they appear so frequently in my poems. However, a common landscape in *Sue* that we are lacking in Marquette is open plains. The plains are a leftover feature from *Fire Emblem*, which featured heavily in older poems that have since been cut. The plains were gradually traded for more specific, contained locations like hospital rooms, beds, and the backyard. I thought to eliminate the plains and their counterparts (fields and prairies) in the final project, but I found that I liked the mysterious, ethereal, and nearly heavenly quality they acquired as they moved into *Sue*'s periphery. I found the tension between the openness of the field—which is generally portrayed as a positive space—and the openness of the sky—which produces antagonistic light, shatters, falls, and is generally negative—particularly compelling as the collection took shape. It is almost as if the field—a space that produces life no matter derelict, fallow, or intentionally planted—is the force which draws Sue to finally repair the sky and, by “November,” finally see it as “burnished with a sun / I know waits / to return,” as a place that too can produce life.

PREMONITION

We are on the lip
of something,

Mother: antler
fault and splintered

hoof. Dawn
receding like a dying

pine. Crows
presenting wind

as arrowhead. We live
and die by how hard

the sharpness will darn
into the wrist. The bolts

of satin and sunlight
staining our skin

pale as midday
zenith. This is

no exaggeration:
we live

and die. We are redolent
of some waning womb.

The kind like a skeleton
key whose doors function

no longer as portals
but as incisions.

We are swaddled
in lace-punctured

life and it has laid us
on its farthest cusp.

THE BEAST

after Suzanne Vega's "Fifty-Fifty Chance" and Richard Siken's "Dirty Valentine"

There are so many things I'm not allowed to tell you.

I found the beast and killed it.

In identifying the fluids that ran like a river, I crossed the boundary between hunter
and the beast that dies

alone in the soft of a moss:

that all flesh tenders the edge of a blade

the same. Something else:

I don't want to be alive knowing the certainty of blood, how close to water
I am and how close water

is to drowning. I bring you a cup of tea and

forget the cream. We pretend as you sip

that the tea is the cure.

I think about its eventual transformation

into a rotting log inside you. I smell

the last meal of the beast. You know, human flesh is sweet

when cauterized. I killed

the beast but left its cubs,

and I thought about the glass of milk fresh from the fridge which made

made me think about washing

the oil from your body but holding

you under for too long. How funny is that?

Here I am, beside you and all I can figure

is that I am your child

and I don't think it's natural for any creature

to watch its mother die. As the beast clawed

its way through the brush, as I pulled

the bowstring taut I forgot that blood

must drain off before it becomes

meat. What kind of a transformation is that? Your empty body is still your body.

Mother, I'm not supposed to say that I left

the cubs to die too.

I'm not allowed to tell you you're dying, so instead, I'll say:

you're coming home soon, you'll be a little less

able to knife the skin

from the belly of the beast. Don't ask

why. What I didn't see

was the way I could leave the log and the beast

and you

to return to soil believing that a mother

had the power

to nurture a child with her body

alone. I wasn't supposed to tell.

PARANOID

after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

Body split down the belly. A photograph of you, Mother. Holding up the cold body of a stag. By the antlers. The bodies greased yellow.

As if anything could pour out a kidney a child

milk time itself.

We hold the prognosis. Like a chisel. Who is the stone. We should make plans. No. Ashes. Eat. *Eat*. The useless fork. Instead.

I look for a miracle I ask the wrong questions

you will die who is responsible.

A doe turns. In the yard. I see her flesh. Sloughing from the thigh. Fawns wander into frame. Scowl. At the mourning dove. I close the curtains. I tell myself you cannot see. As for myself. I plan.

This is when I will cry this is when I will ignore

that wounds fester that bandages heal.

That bandages can't heal every wound.

That there is a wound at all. I need to tell you. I resent the sky. Every morning the blue returns.

Only your bed drawn curtains a waiting gown draped over your quilt.

Explain. Come back.

Do you remember. Behind the toolshed. A rusted nail. Through my foot. We didn't worry. You poured alcohol on the wound. I went to bed. I woke up. I repeated this.

You're dying you're dead

grass reappears once the snow melts.

I can only focus. On the missing leg. Of the rabbit. Darting through the yard. An immature arrow. You, Mother. Have left me running. In your wake.

I believe you can't be stopped

I believe I can catch you.

I watch your breath pool in your hollowed collarbones what happens next
I need details I will spill cream it will not rise I will wait I watch the clock

I have never seen a deer give birth is it anything like a steaming kettle
the moment the camera shutters a torn vein a figure breaking
into crow wings

The end of the hallway bows a horizon I pin the blame there
a horrible sun presides *you would've loved to see* *the garden*
over the answering machine your voice on tape does this constitute proof

I take your knives from the sink drawer I try to sharpen
still the dulllest blade hurts, Mother it bleeds

I can't mow the grass I can't watch the fox waver through the yard
like moonlight I can't put my head on a pillow knowing that the pillow
is where your head was last your head

The doctor calls. He says. The prognosis is a guess. *Chickadee or lark.*
Tarnish or rust. I ask the margin of error. Is it closer. To a shattered mirror.
Or milk poured into tea. Yes. Your shallow cheeks. Yes. Lamplight akimbo.
How will I break. Like.

I broke there is no metaphor.

Where are you. More than anything. Is it cold. Are there horizons.
When the grass dies here. Does it appear there. How many deer. Are you happier.

Are there fawns.

I can only see. To the end of the hallway. Your brass doorknob. Your name.
I imagine your voice. I listen. Again. I was wrong.

ESCHATOLOGY

Sky wept and receded: grasshopper
 on the periphery of lung I find
 new ways to translate
 into a ribcage : a palmful of ashes
fallow breath now sown
 with hoofprints in the snow
 and a mother approaching
with a green ribbon and oh:
 more ribs the bleeding
 entreaty the shallow wound
and the deeper : womb
 and whelping
 weaning and you are on your way
mother I've made tea please
 won't you stay awhile?

[]

Sue wonders if she has learned how to embalm
 sunlight. Can she put a teacup in her pocket

 and ripen it like a child in the wake of time? She brushes away
a mistake of clouds. She remembers breaking the wispy necks

 of wild onions in her backyard. Her mother dancing
 with a horse beneath the plum trees. Like a bloodied doe

 three-legged as the clouds. Every carotid inch
of her neck. Sue knows mortality stalks

 on haunches wearing her mother's finest velvet,
aware that all tenderness ends when the first snow

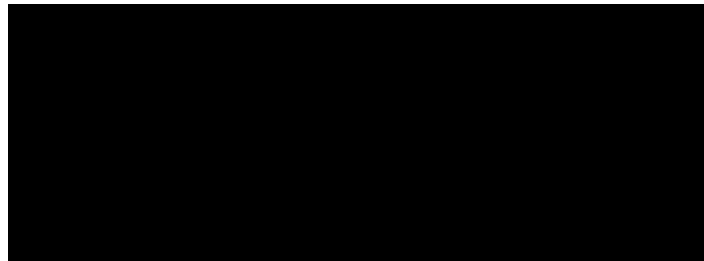
 shears the air. An empty breath. Her mother's canter slowed
 to a feeding woodpecker at dawn. Sipping weak tea,

 Sue knows she cannot trot or ripen or onion. The sun returns
and light ensues. Her hands suddenly illuminated. Her neck drawn and vulnerable.

PASSAGES

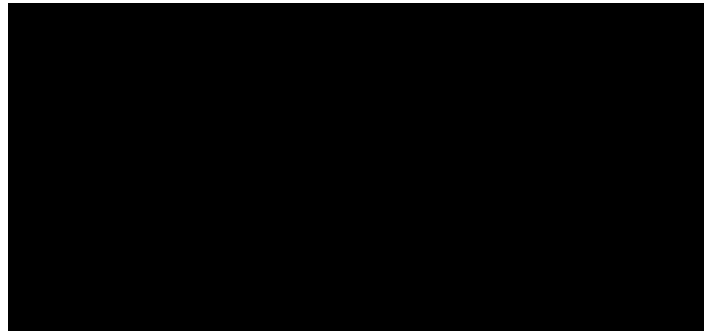


Perform the plains as last the doe
 was seen on tenterhooks
her still-green song of woman cut
 into digestible bits



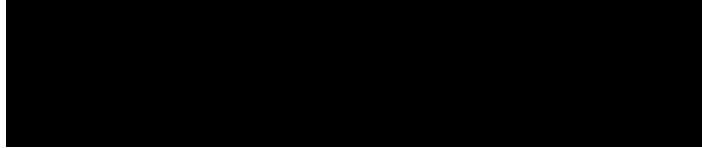
At birth the mule is its own terminus. Genetics are unreliable, but I trust you.

I trust you will pull the arrow back if this foal is stillborn. I trust you to bring the cleaver down.




Show me the place the sun receives
 the velvet
 of your wrist where fallow fields
rend my name into silken hours
 of endless sky





Some book said science is the best way to understand
loss. Some science said perpetual motion is
impossible.

Finally some motion said: I am the racoon
quiet on the asphalt. It said: I am law and the
law is: gestation ends and milk will sour yet
life will always find a way to squirm.

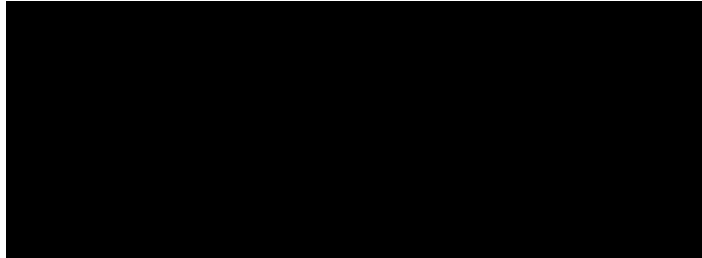


Again the doctor calls your name

again I don't know how

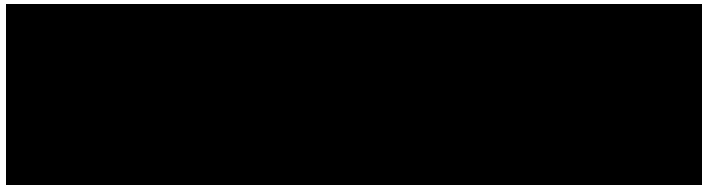
to know you as lark-song

or gravel roads or lupine by the stream



Gravel remains nothing but a collection of unlike
stones. Tomorrow, it will rub into a cricket's song.
Then, tenderloin.

For now, I am content to leave things as they
are.



Every child believes:

quick mother sweet gum
bare foot a pulse a heel opens
to the dirt blood runs like buttermilk
but you couldn't arrive soon enough

Suppose you were reading me riddles from the newspaper on the Sunday morning when the peonies spilled like oil. Suppose I fed you cornbread and butter and you did not refuse.

Suppose composting roses to grow more roses. Suppose the roses were the same.

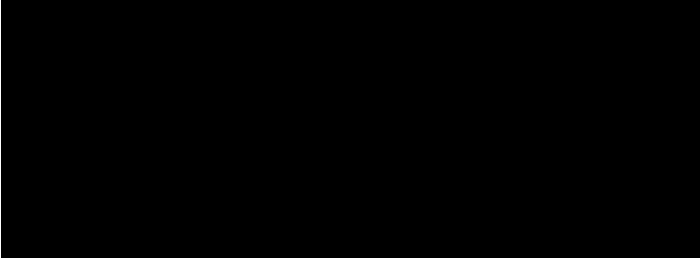
Say Mother what do we do
with the site of rupture

the wound on the body
of the deer what do we cut away


and how much is edible

Part of me wonders how the mule persists without the confidence of new beginnings. How we can do anything but kill them on sight.

Are you still breathing. Are you still breathing. Are you still breathing.




Even the mink turns to you
and wonders: how to slip
away like fog the fog meanwhile
wonders: how to never be seen like the mink.



A supposition is different than a prediction is
different than a prognosis. I think the difference is
faith.

I play the I'll miss you card. The bell tolls.





Give me sterile white and silken hours
that forget your name

give me new ways to say

oh the snow is coming oh you've broken
your favorite cup oh here's a bench

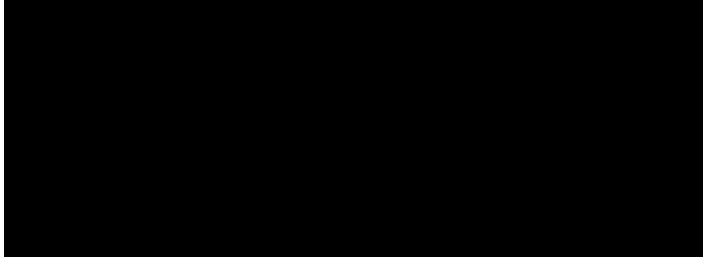
let's rest





Sometimes I think sparrows understand humans more than I do. Did you know they harvest wheat. Did you know they have dirty tongues.

Keep your eye on this one. The locus where it vanishes will become a song. The song itself will teach us about departure. Departure is a metaphor. I'm trying to sleep.



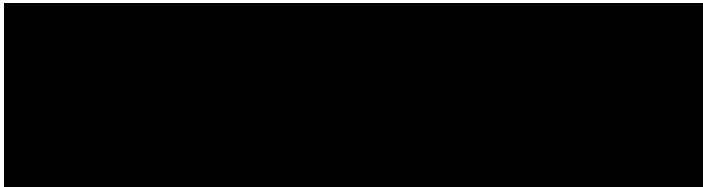
Across the bowstring we arbitrate
 breathing shall blood

 or arbor

the sylphlike
 stem


 frost split

shall I pretend not to hesitate
 when I drive the needle into your vein



Still the phone rings. They say your name. You're common as grass. You're still asleep. A storm is rolling in.

I hang up. I check the clock. The light has stepped away. The tea has steeped too long.



Support

Sue [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] What's wrong?

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you couldn't [REDACTED] escape?

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the silver wall.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Never! [REDACTED] appeared, I [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] must at least [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] try.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Sue, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you're still suffering [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] go [REDACTED] for a long ride [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In a time like this [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Especially in [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] kill [REDACTED] things [REDACTED] your mind. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] listen [REDACTED] carefully to the voice of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Mother [REDACTED] We [REDACTED] are [REDACTED] tiny creatures compared to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] this [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Sue [REDACTED] listen [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to your own voice. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] look [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] forget [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] dwell over the past [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the future.
[REDACTED] learn [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] nature [REDACTED] change.
[REDACTED] distress [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] since you were born.

[REDACTED]

Sue [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] you [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] know.

KEEP

I believe in inevitability. The child. Will grow porous. As stone.
The pasture will burn. For the sake of rebirth. And the golden ring.
Will slip from your finger. The day I take down the curtains.

I will prove. Your existence. By taunting crows. With its shine.
And salting tomato slices. Like you taught me. When knives were
steady. And life was a green ribbon. Purling. In the seamless sky.

In the backyard. I'll plant marigolds. While a fox stalks. On the
periphery. And then the rain. And the grass. Will probe the air.
Spring. Its endemic swell. Of pollen. Will taunt me.

For now. Here is hot broth. Here is the bone. Still teeming with
marrow. I'm trying to understand. The meaning of a woman. And
yes. I understand. This will be mine when you're gone. I'll keep it
safe.

ENDING

after Suzanne Vega's "Institution Green"

Suckling beast squat behind the tool shed. Tremble-
jointed. Tangle of fern
and flat swamp. Supple for the eating.

Limber sunlight. Ball change
on the arrowhead to each interruption

of claw. Hooves in the underbrush. Recognize the brittle twig
of autumn's seam. Beast of sour breath:

shot her and milk came out.

How we still believed hospitals could read
sickness from the meniscus of your lips. How I sat
in the waiting room

watching families take notes on the cobalt forecast. How an aide
rolled in a TV showing a ballet about an invasion
of swallows. How the doctor

gave your days numbers and asked me
to ascribe meaning to the remaining dance.

This is what I came up with:

a day to count your slippers, a day to bring you
a glass of warm milk, a day to wash the oil
from your skin, a day to consider

the bloodletting. A day to pretend you would make it
to the first snow. A day to spill your blood
in the first snow. I did what I had to do.

ARRIVAL

after Suzanne Vega's "Pilgrimage"

Once in a while:

spilt porchlight, rising dough, the ground last July

when not even the perch had enough to drink.
I think about you like I'm giving birth

and ask difficult questions like: *without a mother, who differentiates*
between child and steaming kettle and later,

after the sun has snuck into the woods
like a suspicious raccoon, *what's for dinner*. I pour milk

into porcelain containers decorated with pleasant women
and break a saucer in the kitchen sink

in your honor. Oh, Mother. The power
of skin first then word

and the word was *time* and the word
was *tea* and the word was

it would get worse before getting better. Like a bruise
going yellow as a broken forsythia
until there's nothing left

but an anomaly of ash settling into my palm. It's you.

I'm sorry. It's you.

I forgot that blood must drain off
before it becomes meat

SEPTEMBER

Again the sky broke. I don't know how. The pieces
of birds. Their cries. The sky
once
an unending line of mulberries. Snakeskin
shed. Clouds by any other name: cumulus
or lilycap songbird
or the song itself. Not yet
snow but already
fanged. The fragments: shivering stem of wind. Narrow
antler. Sunlight comes and then
the I don't know why.
Cracks in the foundation
of a freezing
swamp. No frog eggs but a woodpecker
splintering breeze. The sound
of an infant in the mirror. The sound of it's a one time thing
but now I must repair. These pieces
still breathing. Clouds now creatures
on heavy haunches. This me, my hands
bleeding. This me, with nothing to make
into glue.

SENSE

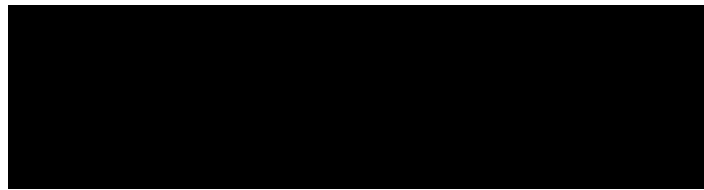


Tonight

the light is decanted

from your cracked door like birth
the expected shadows
roll through the hallway

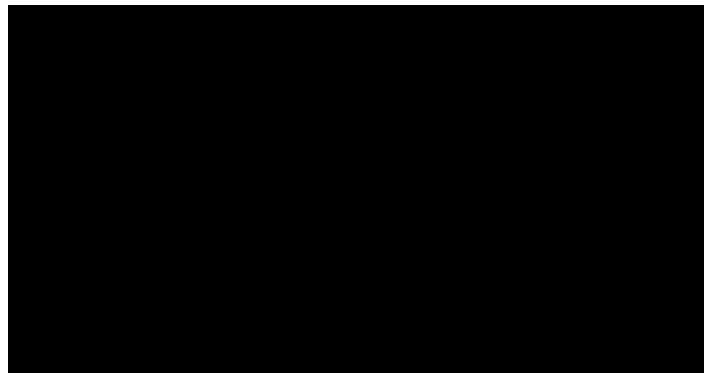
like a split lemon are you there



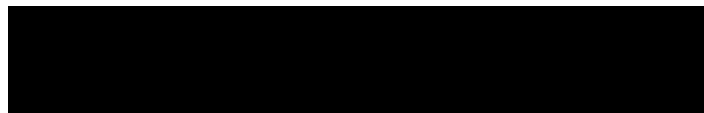
You hold my heels in the shoe store
you sit on the porch
watch me story the driveway gravel


into horsehair you stand
sundressed in the almost

of this storm



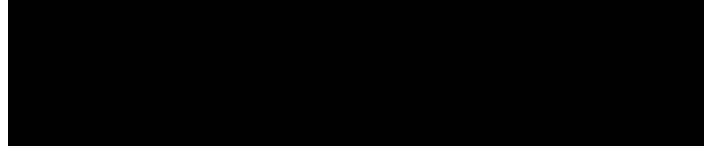
and break the blue gramma
like a chicken neck






In the kitchen

you coat a cut
in super glue you say:
it will hold forever
you say: rabbits
have so many children in the spirit
of spilling and suddenly
the bend of a praying mantis
your knuckles
cleaving the creature
from its sound



and then the sky your skin
a grey I never saw since
then the careful grass broken low
like a slaughter which is so unlike birth
that it couldn't even bleed.



PREDICTIONS

after Suzanne Vega's song of the same name

Split bone. Fire nimble-cast through sparse pines. You will find. In the nameless future. Animal of prolapsed tongue.

Literal time by the creased palm. So many ways. So many rivulets. Of saliva. Tuft of fur. Beaver jaw. Throw it in. Cracked maw. Let me tell you.

Where once the mink. These useless fences. Clairvoyance of a salted circle. It will come to an end. Ermine paw and scarce footfall. Believe too much in destiny. Final days. This black chair in this white room. I wait for.

I foresee. This flesh with no organ to enclose. Tea leaf. I came to you. How many and when. So many questions. Let me consult with the. I'm not concerned with love. The elk was *here*. The endemic moose *there*. Show me *when*.

Found a pulse. I don't trust. Basin emptied of water. Show me your hand. Draw a card. Take a sip. The fire a terse iris in the shadows. The way the bone breaks will tell us. *I'll be home* on a slip of paper.

To interpret prophesy. Observed motherhood. Come to pass. Found joy in approximate river. Her arteries forget flow. I'll take you tomorrow. To the emptied cup. The remiss shoulder.

Your birthday. Measuring the past with stump rings. It's your responsibility. Let the stars. Slips into the water.

A death. Sugarcoat. Must have faith. Let me see. I see. Inevitable womb. Ashes. A fur coat left prone in the dim bulb of her closet. A hard candy. Gathering lint.

What does destiny. Where did the bone. The layout never made sense. I can draw a card. This arrangement says. What can an elk antler. I don't believe. Too much fleeing. But what. Does this hand. Contain.

My mother used to. The tenor of what will. You're speaking generally. How many rodents do we know from porch to doorstep. Life support. Throw your portentous nerve. Into the fire.

The cards say. Fugus reclaims. The cracks in the femur assert. She has to stay overnight. I found a beaver's dam once and I. Drink your tea. Will my mother. Can the test diagnose. The nurse won't speak.

She said there's a tightness. I couldn't find the path. Mink slipped into the narrow water without wave. I jumped the fence and saw the moon. Write your regret. On this unfurling tongue.

Too soon. The bottom of the glass. Its petalled predictions. I pull a tick from my shoulder. With death. A meal. This destiny. These wrinkled hands tell me so much. About breathing.

ELEGY

Leaves go. The sky splits a passed
season. I watch the snow
wade through, cast its spell of sleeping grass.
The wind a chipped blade. A fire
casts the beast in an autumn
of veins. A doe comes and goes.
The snow an impression of splintered hoof.
Fleeing on the periphery
of light. This billowing mother. Rabbit
once mother. Beast once mother.
Mother forever an aphorism of grass.
The cycle: sprouting leaves, opening sky,
birthing creature, rush of blood,
split fiber spun into bridal lace.
Ashes or body? Body or softening beast
or midnight need or
finally decay into fluorescent spring? Mother
or ?
Rabbit chooses to run or to bleed
by the striking arrow. Child chooses
to toddle until the first step. Choose
an ending, Mother: it will come to pass.

Support

[REDACTED] where's the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] need [REDACTED] Sue?
[REDACTED] You use a bow, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] you [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] always fought like this [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Isn't it hard to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] try
to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] see [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] your target.
[REDACTED] did you
[REDACTED] try shooting from the ground?
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] If you [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] kill [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a
horse... [REDACTED] you said [REDACTED] it was easier to
keep up with your target [REDACTED]
Sue [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] actually try. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a horse's speed. [REDACTED]
more stable [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] dangerous [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Sue [REDACTED] you can
ride [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] you [REDACTED] shoot very well.
[REDACTED] stay
on! [REDACTED] stay on the ground. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Sue [REDACTED] Perhaps you're right.

REST

Your hand trembles with the weight of a silver spoon, your skin tired as butter. Outside, every mailbox receives a coupon for oranges, and on the counter, a fly writhes in the sugar dish, its wings like candy.

I call you mother, but you are a missed stitch in a quilt you sewed the year daylilies drew a thousand deer to the backyard.

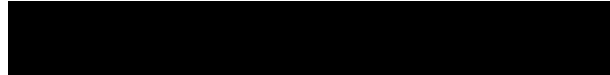
These days, the sky is an organ tasked with blanketing, and I still say hello to the balding mailman who can't explain braising or metastasis or semi-permeable membranes. There's a spider spindling around the phone cord. I wonder what it hopes to catch.

I call you mother, and I say sleep now. Find a clean surface and inscribe a phrase like *we're all dying*. Observers will take great comfort in your wisdom.

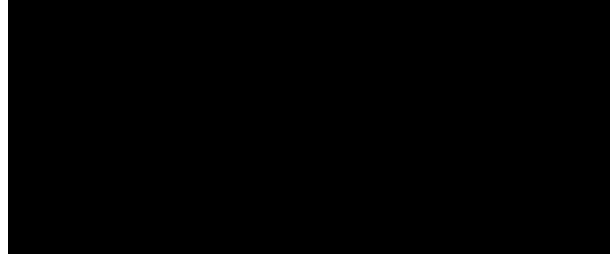
I will watch the rain. This time of year, it comes sideways, like a feral cat scaling a tree.

OCCLUSION

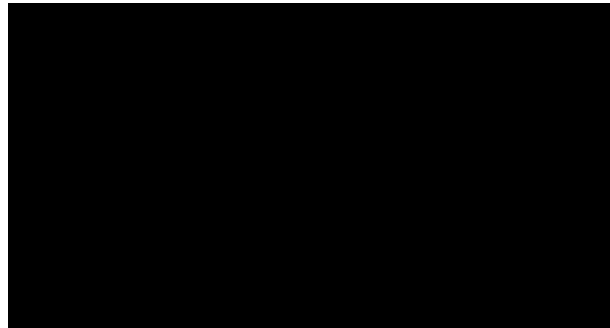
after Suzanne Vega's "Room off the Street"



Ducks roost. Atop the shed. Their wings dull
teeth. Each egg. A meatus. Ready to break.
Push me. From the brim. And see. If I have
mastered. Their sharpness.



I realized. Last I bled. It wasn't so bad. But the
beetle shell. Once split. Fails to bleed. How
come. It can't be bothered. To decant its life.
Like syrup.

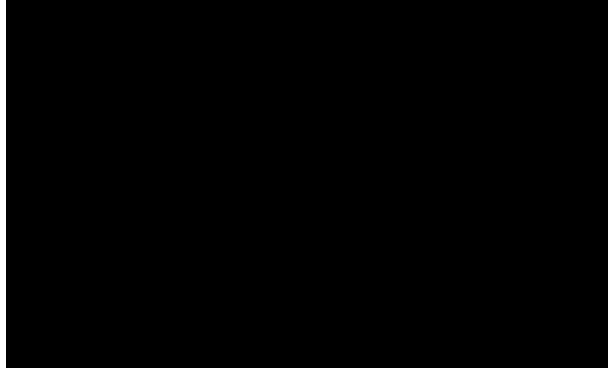


There was this cake. You remember. We had it
with berries and whipped cream.

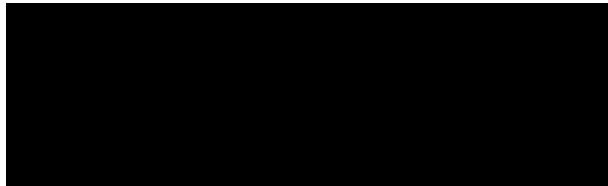
When we watched. A lost cow low. So loud. It
forced the dance. From lightning.

The waltz from sweating.

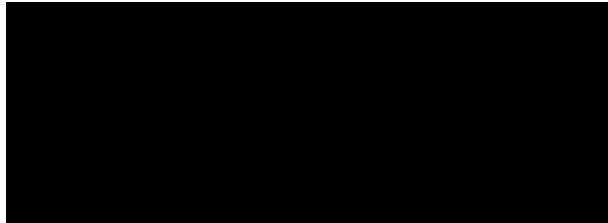




Thus life begins. With a stretching spine.
Unused to yoking. This body. Like raw milk.
These fingers. Having known. But womb.

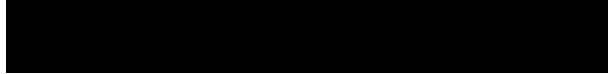


The cow fell over and died.




You linger. In some chrysalis. I have the
retractor. The forceps. The plow. I define the
beginning. I redefine. I try a dull knife. I try the
brass latch. Of your cedar chest.

I am here. At the moment. Of your
transformation. I eat my supper. I still have you.
I convince myself.



I still have you. The storm beats. Upon your
window. And I hear your heart.



PASSAGES

Shadow of a body the awful fact
 of you splayed on the kitchen floor
 porcelain fragments and marigold
 filagree dregs of tea your last or

Space between threshing floor and bread loaf
 tessellation of child eye then
 reality: only stars
 in a pitcher forgotten

A breath before the fox vanishes into the pines
 punctures the shallow well
 of your open mouth

Play me in the arrow's predetermined path
 and I will survive and I am asking you
 to find a story that will give sense
 to the savaged tile cradling your head

Spilling routine

of the morning

after: I bring water to your empty bed
prepared to beg you to drink. A brown recluse
it's carotid legs prone in your place. These strange

Events

replay:

a chipped tooth

on the latch

of your chest.

A pulled curtain

breaking your tongue

into asterisms.

The idle band

of your body

a stone

limned in sleep.

Your hands

Giving me

a pear

on the leaning porch.

A thrifted blanket

slumped on the couch,

the wrinkled face

of a doe

cast in relief

next to you—

oh, Mother:

oh, Mother:

I can't say

anything else:

Abdication of breath: the doe's eyes both pitcher:
And aperture: I have learned that constellations: are arbitrary:
Starlight travels variable distances: to pierce: a lens:
Given thousands of years: but I have known:
Sectors of sky: as front pockets: bedrooms and chipmunk dens:
Every wall where every stag: comes to rest: But constellations:
Are not kitchens: merely happenstance: Mother, how many
Seasons: will pass: before your light: appears
Past the tree line: where your child waits: leaves: in her hair hoping

I define the beginning

I redefine

I try a dull knife

I try the brass latch

Support

[redacted] Sue, please [redacted] linger [redacted]

[redacted] this is a [redacted] fight.

[redacted] do the fighting. You must think [redacted]

[redacted] much better than before. [redacted]

[redacted] help to the army.

[redacted] help to keep you safe.

[redacted] allow [redacted] yourself [redacted] danger.

Sue [redacted] Yes. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] You sound like [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] concern, [redacted]

[redacted] watching the

[redacted] safety.

[redacted] I [redacted] understand [redacted] But [redacted] please don't

[redacted] the [redacted] last hope.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] depends on the place and time. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] we have a goal. [redacted]

[redacted] Please [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] push yourself [redacted]

[redacted] to reconstruct [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] remember [redacted]

Sue [redacted] Do you promise [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] don't look [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] hurt, [redacted]

[redacted] retreat [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] are you saying [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] up my mind. You're going to [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] this is an [redacted]

[redacted] act like yourself.

Sue [redacted]

[redacted] helpless,

[redacted] experience that feeling again. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] Sue...

[redacted] You must not [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] leave [redacted]

[redacted] promise?

[redacted] swear [redacted]

NOCTURNE

after Suzanne Vega's "Rusted Pipe"

Static of crickets in which
I split the horizon open and see
what is left inside:

a puffin with no flight
left in its heart. The measure of time
by your breast. An acorn pressed
into my bare foot.

The rules: we must run until we forget
our lungs. We must run to a place so deep
not even the puffin could remember
the way.

An us in which the knife is sharp enough
to cut the beginning from the vine.

The kind that knows movement
as a deer:

a pane of firelight
uncertain of how it shines
upon the brief bodies of birds

in which this us can ink through the vigil
of starlight where we find a spot
of open grass on the puffin's lung
and the fire is done breathing.

Here, we wash the feathers
until they shimmer beyond light. The beginning rots
and the vigil rots and the deer rots. Without the deer

we have no use for knives.
The vigil ends and even the dark
but the bird

is a quiet and therefore
rests beyond ending: that deep

place in which its flickering
beak cuts the horizon like a knife.

GOODNIGHT

I am wary of papercuts of any petal
that suggests your hair bent in the homily
of the storm but I wanted to tell you
I fell and scraped my wrist on the driveway today
reaching for a cardinal and I wonder
did you ever turn the pages of a book
and cut your finger and did you lick away the blood
without thinking and if you did did it taste familiar
and did you recall the green sky
the night I asked for a story and you pulled the quilt
above my chin the pages took wing
in my ear and the words hewed
this entire world and left only a swan
you remember you said it gathered the broken earth
and framed it in the night sky and gave the pieces names
today I am looking for the swan
or the book or the blood or a peony
that knows the difference
between quickgrass and carrot sprout.

[]

Sue prefers rooms in which she cannot qualify
a sip of tea. Rooms with pale curtains and clocks

encased in glass domes. Liquid, she pretends, is simple. Like a turkey
with a low wattle. She thinks: if an allergy to water. She thinks:

are the dead? On her best days, she enjoys breathing,
and on her worst. She will be recovering

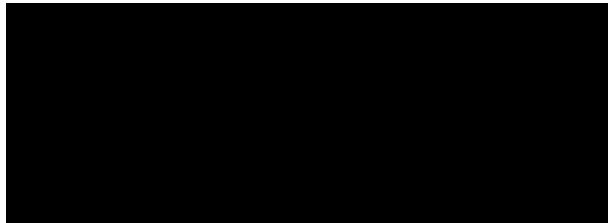
from earl grey for the foreseeable future.
She twists her mother's ring

from her finger, places it in the ashtray,
places the ashtray

under the sink. She folds her hands
in her lap and the sunlight slips through the curtains


and in the meantime, she makes sure
she is where she left herself, only more transparent.

THE BEAST

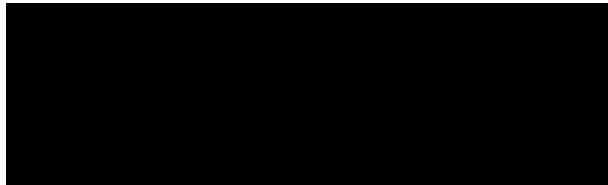


When she came to me. Nostrils flared. Gums
sedate. I knew. There could be no killing left.

Just the pale bodies. Of whelping cubs. Licking
at the shallow moss. Its rhizomes. As if it could
supply. As if peace. As if blood warm.

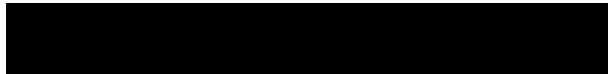


Mother you can't reconstruct my name. From
the between. Of ribs. You can't carve. A
generation of leaves. From loam. You can't
hold the skillet. You can't pour the milk.




You said. I needed to learn. How to tell sweet
gum. From walnut. A good man. From sour
meat.

How about. I have killed so many ants. Lights.
Dandelions for the sake of a wish. I don't know
discretion.



I am a creature. Who must stay in place. I must
remember. Oh. This is your doorknob. And
these were your roses.



OCCLUSION

after C.D. Wright

Misplaced fiction. Of prairie. The grass. I've never seen sugarcane. I don't need. I'm asking if you know. Mother's tongue can't find the memory.

When an abdomen collapses. Artery. The heart. A breast. The sheaf of bloodied meat in the mouth of a fox. A breath. Snagged in the clutch. Of blackberries. Means the sky is falling. Wake up.

What comes next.

This hospital light illuminates the seam between birth and unplugging. The ripe seam called body. Or the heart. Otherwise. Mother, I'm saying I don't know.

Her hands with fingers like sugarcane. What do you want for breakfast. Silk never pills. Her head on a pillow. The weight of it.

Today. She says. Tomorrow. I make up a story. The supple foot of a rabbit on morning grass. A glass of milk.

Now belongs to light.

What can you say. The doctor called. In its mouth, flesh of another. Pretend you know. I don't already know. Otherwise, Mother. I want to go home. The curtains conceal the other side.

Two spoons of sugar. I have to find the answer. Midmorning embraces. Her cold cheek on her silk pillow. Emptied breast. The filament between Mother and creature.

I don't want to say. Make something up. Collapsed abdomen of sugarcane.

We are gathered here to celebrate. The other side. Shadows cast by mother's rings. Be careful with that knife. I forgot to pull closed the storm door.

I'm sorry. What comes next. A terminal prairie of stunted grass and poppy. Warm milk. You won't like what happens if. I can't tell you that.

Unplug. She needs her pillow. The life of. The sheaf of life. The wake of arrow and the filigree in its wake.

I'm bleeding. Home. Inside. I hear thunder. She can no longer speak. Tell me now. What is sugar before it is sugar. Who now belongs to the light.

Fox crossing the road. The first time I shot a buck. The fiction we have decided to believe. Can a seam turn to ash.

The sky has fallen.

She doesn't say much. Mother, how old are you. We sometimes said finery, as if satin could ever trump silk. I used to ask you questions. About emptied breasts. I had a dream. I wish I had.

Beloved Mother. I told him what I know. Torn suture. Did you ever mount the head.

The next day. What can you say that I don't already. Terminal. These starched lights. Please take me home.

Breakfast. The wake. I'll give you my rings when I. I'm sorry. It's bothering her eyes. Her artery's collapsed. Make something up. A prairie.

Home. Please.

The weight of it. Borrowed time. The grass was taller there. The sheaf of bloodied. I used to be a girl. When we could afford silk. I stopped believing.

I wish I'd told. Is it over. Sliced fillet. In her finery. It all comes down to. I'm sorry. Not more than ten pounds.

Too much. The stitching of her arms draped over the blankets. How old. Would you like. Did you close the door. She asked to be cremated.

I called the doctor and he said. Your blood fell away. The tender weight of a poppy. We need to get her fluids. I did my best to do as you said.

She started feeling ill at midmorning. We are gathered. The eyes of the fox. Her hands were always heavy with rings. I told you I don't know. Shut the door. Wake up. Slice the. A rabbit on the first cold morning. An arrow through my heart.

Please.

There's so much I wish I had said. About blackberries. In your warm palm.

She sat on her bed. In a moment of clarity. About the perch. Of mold. On a torn drapel. And cut away. The notion that we could ream meaning. From this precious seam. The storm came. She asked. If I could take her home. She asked what comes next. I saw her untouched. Glass of milk. I told her. Something I don't believe. That she would belong. To the light. She was no longer. A burden of motherhood. Or the prairie. We imagined. Could repair. And she put her head. On her pillow. Which sank with the abdomens. Of torn grass. Thunder struck. She said the sky was falling. I didn't believe her. She misplaced her tongue. Her cheek went cold. I believed.

Again, the remembering. This timid
documentation of life: knives, tea cups,
letters with tidy writing on tidy paper.
To. From. Do you remember.

Generalizing is an endless task. We say the death
of a mother is like *this*. We say *this*. We never know
what it means. I shoot the doe. I must feed you.

Scrape skin from meat. Drain the blood. Create food
for our need. And let milk occur.

Atrophied arms against bloodshot sheet. These final requests: to be
of ash. To be remembered. To run across the prairie
and let the sound of broken grass
replace heavy breast. To ripen. To curdle.

Sound of the wind. My aim is getting better
Mother. I've finally learned that to loose the bowstring—
this vague violence— you must know your target
better than yourself.

CELEBRATION

In the year I forgot
more words than I read and the light fell

in white sheets and the clouds
were hogtied
with toddler's hands.

The year I met no children.

In the year I saw no butterflies. In the year I believed
I saw no butterflies and birds were reminders
that the wind can be cut
without bleeding. The year I patched holes
in jackets and heard wasp wings
for the first time. In the year I lost and found.

In the year I didn't peek through the blinds
at the first sheer
of snow and the weeds towered
like expectations.

In which I thought I could be quiet
as the ice thawed and returned
and gave way to the rain.

In the year I pretended
that time could sleep when I slept.

In the year it didn't
and I couldn't admit

I was wrong.

the viscera of an ending
the milk — the rising of cream

PASSAGIO

Beside the cedar the rabbit
with no sound left is music
The deer shelters The sky
is clear
as day
In the end
I know why the barn cat
tails the robin In the end
the stomach makes sound
without music
In the end I can't decide
what words are lost
once blood goes stagnant
The cedar burns The fire
exists The sky falls
and the smoke
raises it again
and the deer watches and knows
the secret that the knowing
is useless
without the will that the days will grow
short and quiet
I will forget
to give thanks there are no witness
the guilt can't decide to be felt
The rabbit is dead
I am alive

KEEP

In the ensuing months, the leaves appear
in their previous places: beyond

the kitchen window, obscuring the asterisms
we would have named *spangled*

poppy or *salt cellar* or *that triangle*
had we ever seen them. I am challenged

to find any locus that is not imbued
with signs of life—green, trembling,

attuned to instincts saying *run*
though these days, I have lost my appetite

for thinking of myself
as a threat. The leaves have come again

but despite similarity they are not the ones
you watched go brittle then soft

like wet bread last season. You were in bed
attempting to be a creature

other than a horse with a broken leg.
I was reading about the law

of conservation of energy. The fact
that this magnanimous universe

will allow the momentum of each bird
flying into a pane of glass

to become a lightning storm, a heat wave,
or a nice clover. You were talking

about being scattered. You said something
about sore ankles. I checked the clock

and in the backyard, a squirrel found a split walnut
and dragged it home.

CONJURE

Chord

of marshland out back I took
a picture of a baby skunk last spring
I said I promise I will see you
as a stepped-on a crack
an exploited fault line a pressed carnation
in a mauve frame and a cordial glass
swimming with poinsettias the next time I can step outside
without some shattering following me to the shed
do you remember when I brought myself
to you and you drank do you remember
how I lingered outside with old coffee
and waited for you
to find me humming a song I said I made it up
but I didn't I think we're all liars eventually

PASSAGES

after Suzanne Vega's "Tired of Sleeping"

Shallow abrasion on the fallen tree where a beaver
claimed governance of bark. Ensuing fungus
and corollary rot.

Sing that song again. The one that goes like *this*. Please.
The one about the frog with croupy lungs
and the mountains threatening to close
the distance between breath and corrosion.

A piece of your body: fawn spot
and slender wrist and tectonics of muscle. Palm
the cinders. Living decay and— I could not.

Path by the woods illuminated by blackberries. I brought
you a handful mother. Please eat. Please. I let them shine.

Spilt milk. Dish rag. I cannot wake up

Enough to find new ways to stumble to your room during the storm.
To find the same woman sleeping in the same ways
as before. Clairvoyance eludes me.

Gossamer the departing cloud. A snake shimmers
through the underbrush. A mouse trembles
inside. Its suffering so soon sloughed away.

Apart from the chicken coop, I remember the gravel driveway
of our house the most. How it dug into our feet
without drawing blood. How it reminded us of the smallness of pain
and how to master that smallness by taking another step.

Again spring came, defying belief. I took no comfort
in these new fawns, these hummingbirds outpacing
the sunlight. The new leaves arrived. And so they will fall.

Since you died— and this fact I cannot obscure— I haven't touched
your photo albums, but I did make your bed. Just in case.

Grass courts fungal diseases. These rumors of brown
and pallid filaments. Like most sicknesses, it can be treated.
Like most sicknesses, it will return.

Silk was her favorite. See this gown. Really see it.

Every night, the same story: a woman who ravaged the earth,
her hands consubstantial with dirt.

Against better judgement, I asked to see you before.
I slipped a ring onto your finger. I was told
to take it off. I tucked a coupon for oranges beneath your head.

Sound of your voice. This gentle breeze bisected by lightning.
The brief illumination of my softest places. The question
of waking— you wouldn't want to miss this.

Patience, they say. I will see you again. Life persists on the other side
of my open window. I close my eyes. I open them. I will bring
the food to your lips and you will eat.

PREDATE

The meat accepts its roasting
on the spit. Shed
door. Where once ducks roosted with their young.
Their swallowed cries. The prowling
cat. The heart is edible. The blood
of the pig. Some elixir.
Illumination
on vellum. Spackle-glow
at the fireside. Dawn
and char. This unctuous supple. These fleshy
bits. These rent wings. And eating
meanwhile remains certain. Under the auspices
of the rabbit foot. Though bones themselves
never burn. But yes prophesy
and yes the spine still imprints the parchment.
And yes
the meat may augur sleep.
And yes
close the door. It's getting cold.

REST



To be absorption
in a sky without rain weave

someone else
into blush time

like a forehead
and it's mine

if I think about it
if I think



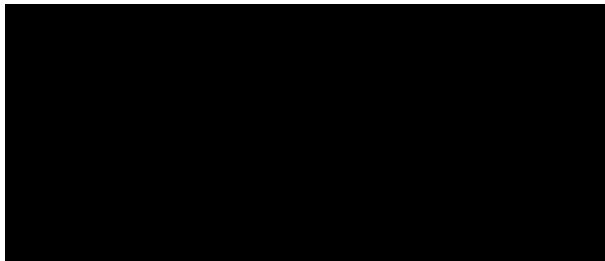
In a shade I pretended
to be beautiful
like a quiet necklace

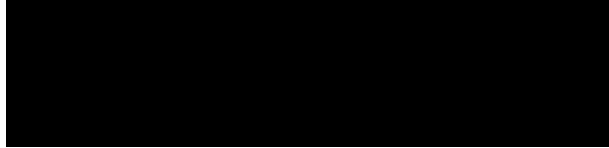
a song between the branches
but I forgot

to listen today I pretended to be

beautiful when I struck
the antler from the deer I wanted

but I couldn't



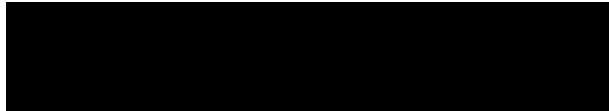


I braid cornsilk
 these accidental roots

 some pupa dangerous
in mandibular
 oak boughs

 this field of golden
 spreads

infinite
 like disease



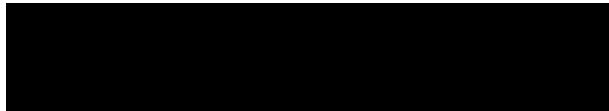
I am not here but regardless
 remove me

 this woodgrain this arable abdomen

 will remember

 the racket

 of my fingernails dissecting
 the tall grass





Not thorax and never fractals

 of starlight but wood whittled

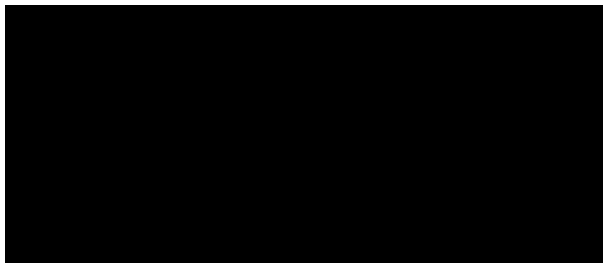
 into an elbow

and the elbow splintered into callus

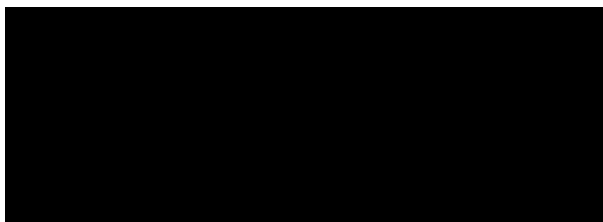





The body
 waits fallow I say
 the word and it bends
back to birth I say the word
 and dandelion seeds fall limp
loosed from the wind

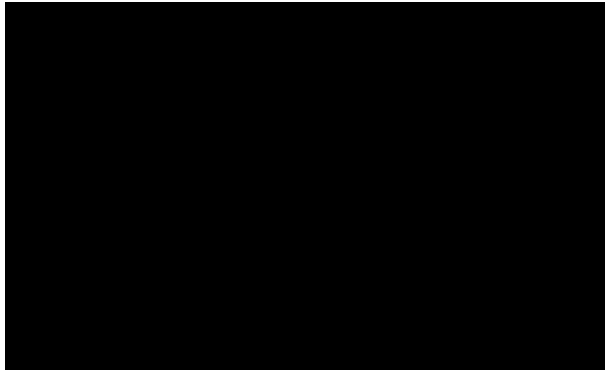


 Once I learned
 which berries
converted the grackle
 into philosophy once I knew
that rot could turn a cedar
 into a log I knew
 there would be no welcome

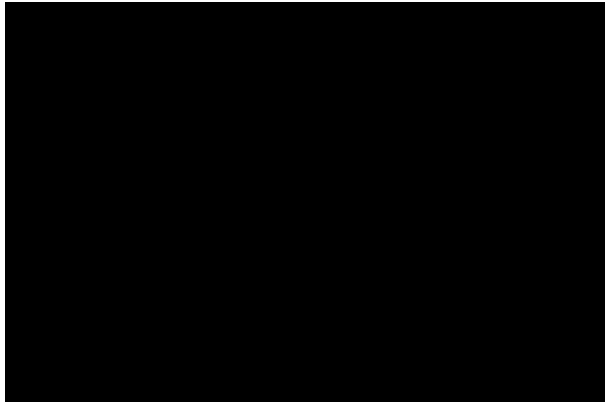


Smell death and leave





When there was goodnight
I thought abraded roots
I thought beaver tail
I thought
building a dam
with perfect pears
I thought of eating fruit
from the proboscis
of a silver grass I thought the stick
of my lips and the rhythm of a cricket
I thought to exist
I must think
I thought goodnight
then you were beside me
your elbow gentle on the sheet
wiping the spring of sweat
from my morning brow



PASTORAL

after Suzanne Vega's "Those Whole Girls (Run in Grace)"

I could not find the world like a bird's eye
the cornfield without the meniscus of dawn to my back

I would learn the names of animals only to give them my own
like I could blade-quick I would wind-unstitch a river

with the low-breathers my mother showed me to dance
like a plum but I would instead divine an arrow
from a band of lamplight and pretend I had mastered

potential energy I would not my mother when she held my hand
by the river like I was a stone she could skip

I could not mother means mercy no mercy
could eyes that lizard I could only pendulum

and deer antler striking the night so hard it became an animal
and once it was an animal my path forward was clear:

I could not tell the wild onion from the hair grass
until I broke them and watched them hemorrhage
in the dirt like a sorry organ.

Support

[redacted] Sue!
[redacted] You look like [redacted]
[redacted]
outside [redacted]
[redacted] what's [redacted]
[redacted] allowed [redacted]
[redacted] Never [redacted] stay [redacted] indoors [redacted]
[redacted]
Sue [redacted] see [redacted]

[redacted] inside... [redacted] the blessing of the Sky [redacted]
the warmth of the Earth...

[redacted]

[redacted] Sue!
[redacted]
[redacted] on your horse [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] There's a place [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] with lots of [redacted] flowers! [redacted] where the
sun's shining [redacted] nice [redacted] warm!
[redacted] go [redacted]
[redacted] Sue!

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] to [redacted] other places, too! [redacted]
[redacted] the big [redacted] world.

[redacted]

[redacted]

Sue [redacted] are many things [redacted]
nurtured by the Sky [redacted] the Earth [redacted]
go see [redacted]
[redacted]

[REDACTED] understand [REDACTED] I know you
will.

BODE

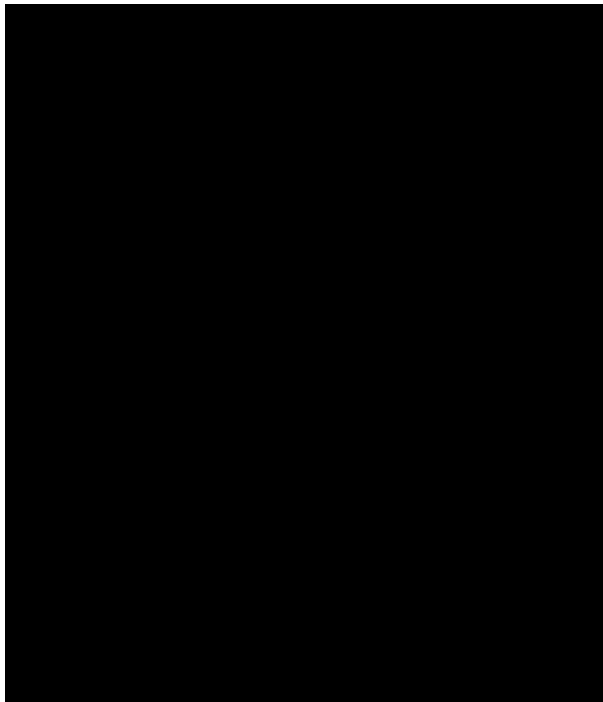


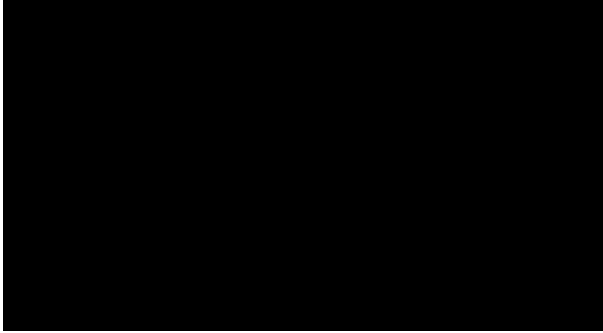
Was it dereliction or certainty:

The fog is a sickle and finds the heart of a haybale. The heart is a scrap of an old sweater. The auger is damp in the morning briar. I say: all of creation that matters is alive. I say look: and the thorn turns toward the sickle and asks: what cuts the quickest? And where did you leave the darning needle?

These days, I am fascinated by patchwork. A more permanent bandage. A cardinal turns in my stomach and leaves behind its feather.

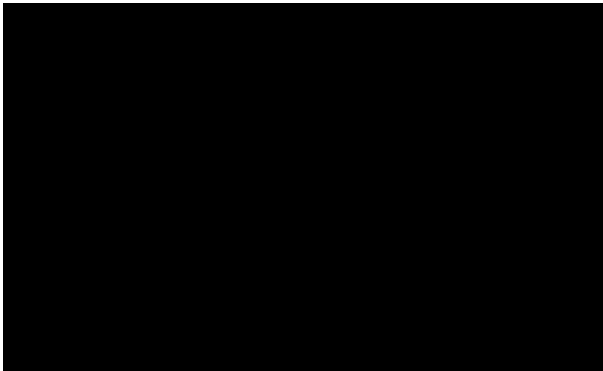
I know that seams will rip, and I love them anyway. We trust each other despite impending betrayal: the dove believes the window will not stop its flight until it bleeds. And blood, meanwhile, exists intravenously but is more commonly observed spilled onto the ground.



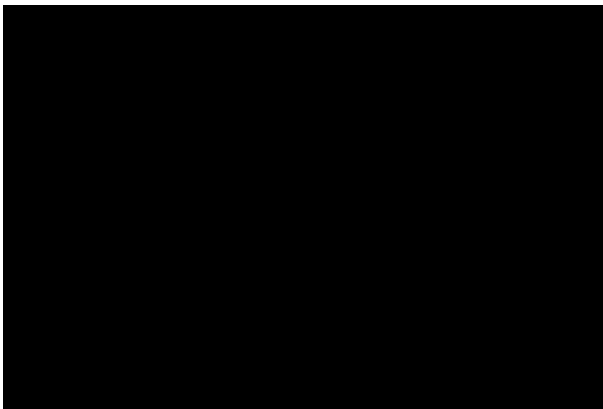


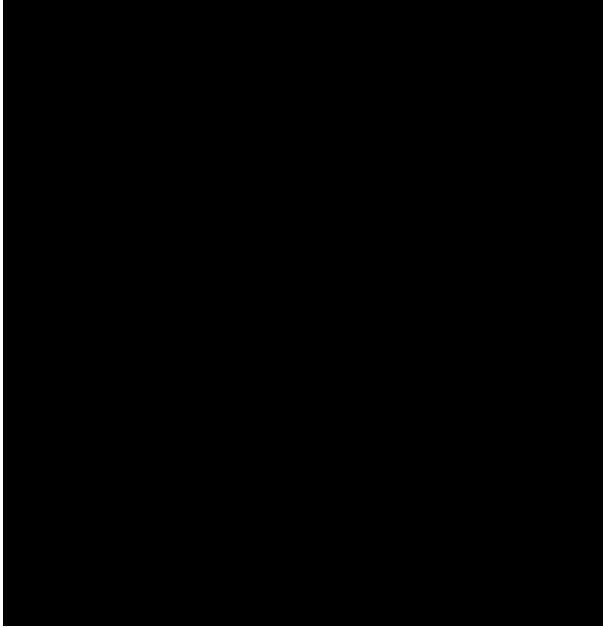
The zephyr backfires the breeze. The well-water wavers. Dew clots the moss. It's getting colder: I've kept your coat.

I say: all of creation is a drafty window. I put the kettle on. The cream is decanted. I turned up the heat. The blanket is a blanket until it evaporates. The sun is a daffodil until winter, when it becomes a crystal. I am attempting a schema of time. I am attempting memory.



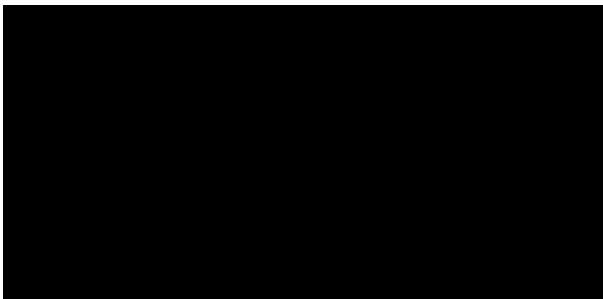
The sickle faces the heart and says: I am not a needle.





All of creation eventually turns toward all of creation and says: I am so alone. You once told me the patterns geese assume in migration are instinctual, but is the night born knowing to take the shape of a child? Does the fog ever apologize to sight?

The field where the horseradish grows is either derelict or fallow. Only time will tell.



The peonies break bread in the backyard. Summer descends with furious pincers. The dirt brittles and parses into auguries: don't worry the rain is on the way, it says. Don't worry the clouds will canter. Don't worry I love you, it swears. I love you.



under the auspices
of the rabbit foot

AFFLICTION

I wonder what
it is we are running from
an old apple and the mealy sky the empty sheet
of paper of fingernail
of lamplight luster I have learned
to see the world in this way:
we say tomorrow we mean distance
we say okay it'll be okay
there are burdens we must bear:
today I'll sweep the kitchen floor
and later the sky we'll pretend we still believe
in fruit or that flowers
at all do you remember beneath the plum tree
how the wasps would linger
like a fever I want to stay there
a little longer I want to turn off the kitchen light
and stumble to bed and dream of your hands.

REPARATIVE

after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

You didn't do it on purpose. The broken sky and anticipated crow. Past the doe's wounded neck. I was angry, Mother. I wanted to tell you something.

Place faith in a suture to never split. Anticipate splitting. Healing occurs. Now place faith in the knife to never cut again. This is harder.

Carrion. I look in the mirror and see you. I plant flowers over. I too am a creature who needs.

The warmth of fecund bodies. The task of remembering. Your jacquard quilt. The inevitable burning. The story that goes like this. The expiration of zenith as I move. The recreation. Where once clouds. Now a pretty dress. A rusted nail. Your hand on my face.

I reassemble remnants into something resembling a whole. Again leaves. The valley of the shadow. The bowstring wrapped around the sun. The wind. The thread.

The fawn will grow into knowing. This is hard. I don't care.

You that morning. The sun on your skin. I accept every prognosis is like a prognosis. I unwind the clock. I wind it again.

I'm trying to tell you what I know. A doe wandered into the box I put you in. She made it out alive. I put you on the mantle. She made it out alive. I put you under the sink. She made it out alive. Do you see.

What do I need. I planted lilies. The deer came and ate. The lilies returned. Bees appeared. Spiders ensued. The prognosis was perennial. Even the marigolds. I made recur.

I sewed the sky together. I remembered the crow. I remembered the pieces lodged in the deer. In the path of the shattering. I questioned the victim. I forgot who the victim was.

Once. A doe skin caught on barbed wire. A swamp the background. The scent of.

A moth in a spider's web. The bruised stem of moonlight. This small life. Sutured by moonlight. I'm learning the difference between healing and splitting, Mother.

Bowstring. Shattered sky. The beveled edges. The intentional edge. I jump and a cloud catches. The cloud itself with edges. The edges convex. An antler. An arm. The bow itself. The string you draw back. I let go.

I'm remembering certainties. The crow and corollary carrion. The bending of the leg. Of the wing. The choice of flowers.

I idealize. I bury the knife. I assume this means it can no longer cut. I make assumptions. I forget and put the assumptions in a box with other things. When I need other things I will find the assumption. This is good enough for now.

I plant the marigolds. I replant them. A doe appears and eats them. I replant them. I am unsure of when to walk away. I hold on. I let go. The season changes. The marigolds gone. Lilies persist.

Mother, I'm finding so many things to say. I'm finding I can't say them. I'm finding these bodies. Yes. This body. My need. I look in the mirror. I see a sky.

[]

Sue is a little girl on the caution farm, its ground teeming
with rusted nails. She is running. Dares her mother to catch her

again and again. She is trying to ream an imagined memory
like a grapefruit, but she finds the sun

cradled in her palm instead. Sue is a woman
sitting in a chair. Sue looks into the sky

and can't decide if today it is an engraving or a face
or a portal to a peach orchard. By sunset, she believes in

—over all else—tetanus and the way crows and kestrels perch
on a telephone cable the same. Like a sorry someone

might walk by at the next moment carrying their mother's old handbag
and needing a message with enough momentum

to leave the ground. Sue stays in today though. She squeezes lemon
into her tea, ignoring every picture of horses.

GLAMOUR

after Suzanne Vega's "Big Space"

Come with me to the betweens
of muscle and arrow where there must be

a nerve broken in the killing. An eye
entering upon sleep can believe

the rabbit let the spell

slip. The eye can do the repairing.

The fur is the willow
of the cirrus.

The meat an accretion of fleeing.

Ensuing snowfall a quilting pattern

as a parcel of land is shattered. Into parcels. Enough for each blade of grass. To bend at the
elbow. Enough for a suture. On the wicked hand. Of the hunter.

Take the knife. Into the rabbit hide. The spell is in the blood. Stain the snowclot. Come
with me and witness. The nerve twitch into silence.

The parcels. Will erase the blood. The eye will blame the rabbit. The clouds will exist. Until they
dissolve. Into careless beaks.

And at last time fastened to the wind
like a sparrow will resume

the snow's cycle. Oh, love,

stir the stew where the rabbit has given

its bones as penance. Between
we have found wind. Between we have found

distance and distance can close

and between your hands and my body
close your eyes and eat.

Support

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Oh, Sue.

[REDACTED] You have a strange [REDACTED] face.

[REDACTED] you [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] spoke to me.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you speak [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] with other things more.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The breeze, the trees, the sky, the brooks... They are speaking [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] If you listen, you'll hear [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you.

[REDACTED] you had something to tell me [REDACTED]

Sue [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You'll feel better after that. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Sue.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You look better.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You feel [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] softer.

[REDACTED] tell.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the land [REDACTED] run through it.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the first time [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you go [REDACTED] is over
[REDACTED] to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Perhaps th
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] your hometown.
[REDACTED]

Sue: [REDACTED] heart is the plains [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] if you ever change [REDACTED] tell me.
[REDACTED]

Sue Thank [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] You [REDACTED]

DREAM

after Suzanne Vega's "Book of Dreams"

A decade on I again find life
manageable, filled with boxes to store
all these little souvenirs: an expired milk carton,
the shimmer of a doe
beyond the tree line. A grey rabbit frayed
from fleeing its own shadow. It helps that the rabbit
wandered into the yard and made it out
alive. Mother, I write myself reminders
on rusted nails and sympathy cards, like *she's dead* or yes,
that's her *on the mantle.*
I don't know what's changed, other than:
I planted forsythia and butterflies occurred.
Walking by your bedroom door, I don't stop
to trace the rivulets of doe fur running through
its cold grain. Each morning's sun no longer
surprises, and I'm not sorry anymore for failing
to save your life with peeled apples and aphorisms alone.
Whatever hole your death left in me
I fill with ash.
Whatever part of me is now ash
I put in a box with everything else.

PRAY

We slept downstairs
with the blinds pulled . We posed
with porcelain fruits and ideal cows.
We didn't
speak. We watched
the mailman
drop a bundle of letters, an opening fan.
We braided each other's hair,
mother and daughter,
with green ribbons
and caught the strays like the same woman.
We imagined
a lake, how our bodies
would float like dust on a mirror.
We ate candy,
threw the wrappers on the floor until our home
became a florescent chicken coop.
We roosted. We drank
tea. We never
watched each other
burn our tongues, recoil
like snakes and curse. We never used to lock the doors.
We used to pretend
that safety meant each other, as I stumbled
to your door
after a nightmare,
stocking feet, an awful talon
lodged in my chest
and knocked and knocked.

GLIMMER

The woodpecker has become a repository
for I don't know what to do about discarded rinds
of oranges, dirty towels, or the sundered ribs
of rain impending. I time my breathing

to the inevitable rhythm of its work. It's nice
to be reminded that life ensues and that it's easy
to make a bird into a weightless symbol
for lungs or weapons or the selective forgetting

of gravel driveways. Shafts of milk
teeth sealed in sandwich bags—and finally: the apology
of looking in a mirror and seeing only myself.
I'm learning that there's a good morning

beyond every bored hole and solitary feather.
It's not much, but it's a start. It's not much,
but look: here is the grass dressed in wavering dew.
Let me show you: let me really paint a picture:

PASSAGES

puncturing
of

predetermined

Smell of the grass

milk—

a curved line connecting

our frail forms

And again

faint

gravel

of breath

THE

arbitrary:

child

Suppose

The line may be drawn like this

Suppose

the plains

the autumn comes

yielding

its vestigial

wing

Then

what they are But

Against ~~my hand~~
~~darkness~~

this ~~grief~~

a fawn

~~becomes a~~
flower garden when spring comes.

Grass ~~the most of~~
~~the most of~~
~~the most of~~

~~merely happens~~

~~like~~
~~like~~
~~like~~

~~The viscera~~

~~of my softest places.~~
~~to miss~~ this

~~let them shine.~~

Every ~~hand~~ became consubstantial ~~with~~

~~with~~
~~the din~~
~~the din~~

~~the arrow~~

in the mouth of a wet-nursing deer.

Sound of the wind.
Mother. ~~the milk~~

Smell of the grass
~~the milk~~

this gown. ~~the milk~~

the weakest branch ~~the milk~~

the milk ~~our gentlest goodbye~~

I don't know what's changed
other than I planted forsythia
and butterflies
occurred

NOVEMBER

The sky opened up. Showed its teeth. Here,
your mouth. Here, a ream
of cells, a genetics of breath
on my cheek.
In moments, the body renews like the rabbits
come spring.
We give snow —its utterance
like breathing—children’s names: pirouette
and stone fruit.
Precious thorn or
the sky slowed. I don’t know how.
The clouds once moved like a bull.
They couldn’t be stopped.
I touch you amid the pitch
and that cannot be changed.
I touch you
and I am changed into a linen
ready to be cut and sewn. A brow slackened
with sleep. The silver sky
burnished with a sun I know waits
to return. Your coat
quiet on the rack.

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