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Gardening Lessons

Auden Eagerton
auden.eagerton@bobcats.gcsu.edu

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Gardening Lessons

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Auden Eagerton

April 2023



Thesis/Dissertation Signature Request Form
Gardening Lessons

Submitted by Auden Eagerton in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA in Creative Writing.

Accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the Department of English - MFA and the College of Arts & Sciences by the Thesis Committee:

Name, Title	Signature	Date
1. <u>Kerry James Evans</u> Thesis Committee Chair	<i>Kerry James Evans</i>	4/18/2023 1:56 PM EDT
2. <u>Laura Newbern</u> Committee Member	<i>L Newbern</i>	4/18/2023 2:29 PM EDT
3. <u>Julian Knox</u> Committee Member	<i>Julian Knox</i>	4/18/2023 11:57 AM PDT
4. <u>Kerry Neville</u> Graduate Program Coordinator	<i>Kerry Neville</i>	4/18/2023 4:24 PM EDT
5. <u>Matthew Pangborn</u> Chair, Department of English	<i>Matthew Pangborn</i>	4/19/2023 9:03 AM EDT
6. <u>Eric Tenbus</u> Dean, College of Arts & Sciences	<i>Eric Tenbus</i>	4/19/2023 9:05 AM EDT
7. _____		
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Gardening Lessons

Auden Eagerton

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How Much of My Feet Should I Give You to Stand On?

You want a girl who knew himself from the beginning, a question already unspooled in your hands. It would be easier, if it had been worse. If I came as prologue, or index, translatable in seven languages but most of all, in cis. You just want me to tell you. You just want to understand. What could you know about my body? What could you know about a second birth, unscreaming and alone in a Savannah bathroom? Every holy thing is a wreck up close, at first. Someone understood this, once. They changed their name to the sea, knew what it was to be both the plaque on the wall and the body in the frame.

I.

I Will Always Tell You My Childhood Home is Made of Cedar

I can't look at the flowers
inked into my legs
without telling you about the garden.

My mother's wicker angels blooming white,
the harvest of wooden spoons for dinner.

The way we sliced the red knots my father grew,
how our first lesson in gardening
was raking the hornworms
across the deck by our sneakers.

I try to talk about the hydrangeas—
dead canaries spill out.

I wonder if my family sees them too,
these yellowed remnants of me,
what they do with them.
If they're afraid the jar of baby teeth packed away
will erupt into a mouth,
howl into the walls.

I don't know how to talk about her—
the girl in the pictures.
Or my relation to the identical face next to her.
I am too cut nerve to ever be her brother,
or my father's son.

The truth is, I can never answer where I came from,
what either the house
or me was really made of.
My twin and I would joke—she
split to make me
to spite the grave our mother made of us.

I wanted this excision,
but I want to know I left a mark
on my most inextricable place.
Palimpsest daughter who is not a daughter,
purple paint of my bedroom bruising

the ribcage of that house,
past the broken jawed doorframe,
down the spine of the staircase,
until the wicker angels are choked with it,
the tomatoes drop from the weight,
and it's all nightshade spilling down the hill.

Why My Father Tried to Kill Me

He wanted to make a suitcase from my body
to pack away everything his hands couldn't mend:
my mother's abysses; the dry runs of her suicides;
his daughters, canaries too often sent ahead of him
to draw up her toxins.

Maybe he thought I was the broken piece
and spackling me shut would fill the cracks
of our family with magnolias and honey.
Or I was a flower in his garden in need of pruning,
a blight on a false Eden.

I was a reflection begging to be atomized,
kaleidoscoped into a levee
to stem the flood between his fingers
as we eroded before him.

The bedsheet was something he could channel,
a thunderbolt to a god.
I was an open field miniscule beneath his sky.

Extraction is just another word for *family*.

In an alternate universe, he killed that little girl.
In another timeline, he pays for what he's done.
Here, I keep her nestled inside me, stillborn.
I grow around her.

When I Say I'm Afraid of Thunder

I mean you encase my head in your marble, wishing you could uncarve me back into you. I don't get the same maydays the birds do. By the time the canary is up, you are the cracking of eggshell against the dome of our asphyxiating house. You become your name. A burning tar-colored voice fills my eyes, my ears. Your aneurysm. My altar, barely courage-high, wedges itself between you and your striking. I tell her to run. I always tell her to run.

Ganymede

This morning I cratered
my face,

that dumb, mothering orb
bobbing in the glass,
the burning cities in need of salt,

throwing the stone of my fist
as if it would unearth something
like a man,

nothing emerging but my fingers.

I Wake Up Dripping Feathers

Today I don't see a man
I see my mother
and every full body shudder
is a ruffled bruise
only I can see in the dream
my chest was made of teeth
that were pulled and
there is more room for me now
but I am brought home to *her*
because my mother will always be
my end the first tomb
I ever knew she enshrined
me by my old name I don't
remember what happens next
but in the morning I am inky
remnant of the beast
that still prowls through my sleep
sometimes the only answer
is to pull myself from my body
by a fist of whiskey I
turn on *Howl's Moving Castle*
because when I am
a smother of feathers
clawing for ground I need
someone else to spill
a beating flame into their hands
and put it back

Truth Climbs Out of My Throat to Shame My Abusers

When she emerges, she is not a beautiful thing,
drenched in a vernix of saliva,
breathless, trembling.

It has taken years to knife herself up my esophagus,
blazing her name red into each rib passed.

A tempestuous, heaving mass birthed into cupped hands,
a reckoning, and did you know,

I placed her amidst the cedar of my childhood home,
let her catch.

And still not as simple as that.

Every time I speak I decide

whether to keep her loaded on my tongue or rage,
because part of her is that I still speak to my father.

Part of her is that my father never reads my poems,
or if he does, sweeps them into the compost

for the worms to read, with the tomato peelings
and blood and how my mother helped us

hide purple omens from his belt, called that love.

How a girl I was seeing hit me fifteen years later

and I remembered that first time, knew now

it was in my hands to make sure hers never touched me again.

What a nice thought,

that I can save my childhood self

with a better cape tied around my shoulders.

Traumabomb

I collect fragments, radio
dispatches on loop over the wires.
My memories are a reel of film
cut up,
wormholed,
projected through magnifying glass.
My trauma isn't repressed,
it's avant-garde.
I am TV static in a crystal ball
suspended in bullet time,
a connoisseur of blanks,
the shadow of hum
within a nuclear blast.
This is my tapestry
built against gods,
thunder, wooden spoons.
I am rubble, aftershock,
refugee of my own body.
Even my birth was a shattering—
I have always been escaping
womb after collapsing womb.

My Body Was a Crystal Ball My Mother Couldn't Help But See Herself In

My smallness
was the first thing
I ever knew
about myself—
born two pounds,
the weight
of a quart of water,
my head smaller
than my mother's
palm.

My first puberty:
the days
most of me
was too much
of a disappointment,
when I came home
bushy-haired
and sweat-
stained and
I love you
was replaced
by *I'm*
embarrassed,
my smallness
was the best
sorry
I could offer.

I couldn't be
pretty,
but I could be
a quart of water.

II.

Prayer to Medusa

I wish myself a river monster
so that when he peeled back my skin,
he'd see the too-yellow eyes,
the alcohol ignite on my forked tongue,
say, *There must be some mistake.*
There must, the curse won't budge.
Despite the abyss painted on my face
I am still too human for what was
done, its lingering.
I am sick of holding an ocean in bare hands,
of calling a world a marble.
I wish myself a river monster,
but the smell of chlorine makes me gag
and I wake, gasping, on top of the blood-
stained mattress that no amount of
banished sheets will make not mine.
If it were enough, if I were strong enough
to face this as myself—
instead I write elegies on my fingers,
hold funerals for my body as it was
before his touch.

Ode to Lizzie Borden

I can trace the tree rings in my palms
back to your sharp-toothed head.

When my mother blinked,
I saw you glinting back at me.

As a child, I took the resemblance
as creation myth, proof
of every axe-beat in my blood.

In the Fall River house,
there's a bed and breakfast now.
I could lie down in the roost
bedded with dead pigeon feathers
and feel right at home.

At my parents' house,
they make a museum of their own.

My father splits his eye over dinner
with a glass of wine
so he doesn't have to see the plumes
of feathers at his feet,
lulled by the snoring in the cask of his chest.

I wonder how long you watched
your father's snoring
before felling your own family tree.

My sisters burn their dresses
in the sink.

You'll find me spine-snapped,
metal mouth buried in clay and ash.

Rapunzel Cuts Her Hair Every Morning

In my dreams my mother is the skeleton
that never stops clawing from a living grave.

She holds me by my hair with a clenched fist,
drags me across the kitchen floor,
cries when I buzz it all off within three years.

It's as if I've taken the clippers to her own head,
and in a way I have.

We are a house of acquittals.

She pulls me under,
baptizes me again and again in holy watered excuses
until the reddest of scars grows a bouquet
of tulips on my mother's wrist,
which is my wrist,
her wrist,
her father's wrist.
I wave my hand and it looks like the fall of an axe.

Cuckoo

My mother tried to put us up for adoption once.
I don't remember; I think my body does.
Maybe that's why I'm always burning
through nests, confusing my father's birdhouses
for the real thing.
I wish our house was glass instead of cedar
the day a white van drove by,
when I begged anyone to hear.

My sister never forgave me
for leading bloodhounds to our door
after my father tried to stuff
a bedsheet down my throat,
and my mother wished her womb had opened
six feet, swallowed her whole.
You push people, she said.

I made a home in my last three lovers.
These days I'm all suitcase.

Caroline

I can do this trick
where I imitate your smile.

We're identical, it's not hard.

It's something to pull out at parties, a joke.
*If you don't look like you're signaling for help
with your eyes, I say, you're doing it wrong.*

Mostly I do it to understand.

I read somewhere that we are all
trying to return to our mother's bodies.
Our mother is an axe
swathed in barbed wire,
and really, you were my first home.

Isn't that what I'm doing
when I steal your face?
I dig into my cheeks—
I once gave you a compass
so you could always find your way back to me—
try to exhume the last time
I was your dead reckoning.

There's an ending where we both got out, once.
The sac collapsing,
it was the first time we would suffocate
under our mother's unending sky.
We were ripped into light.

The Egg Doesn't Know It's An Egg

From the passenger seat in the mouth of
the big blue whale of a Honda Odyssey
my sister will later name Bertha, I see
my mother cast barbed wire at my
buzzcut.

Do you want to be a boy?

She wants to know why I've done this to
her.

Earlier this week my sister kept me
downstairs while she tried to soften
the stone of my mother's shame, the
hardness still cratering itself into my
body when I heard her say, *What do I tell
people? They ask me why—*

My hair is a body all on its own, the
corpse of the daughter she ironed into
existence every morning, and now it is
forever beyond her, laid to rest in the
dumpster behind the SuperCuts. She
goes on drives in the afternoons, either
mourning or avoiding me, comes home
spitting brine. I start to answer her trial
by sea but Bertha opens her mouth and
we are foaming silent pools.

Kyle Maynard Courage Award Recipient, 2003

My mother tells the reporter for *The Gwinnett Daily Post*,
'*Can't*' *isn't* in our vocabulary.

I am being awarded for the courage to exist
in this body.

My body is not an excuse, is
repackaged as resiliency.

My body repackaged
in neon pink casts, I am awarded
with twin slits that bring my heels down
to the floor in electric shock,
which is not an excuse.

I run the mile in gym,
walk the length of the beach,
confuse the absence of *can't* for *courage*.

In the absence of *can't*,
my back locks on the floor in electric shock.
My mother tells the reporter
my body is not an excuse.

Concussion/Camellia

78 miles away from where my mother falls
and hits her head,

I feel her hand at the back of my own head.

A camellia of blood blooming late
at the bottom of the stairs.

The phantom of acrylic nails shoveling my scalp.

The flowering in her skull
blots her clean.

She forgets she was born in Neptune,
the town, and the blood they find on her brain
shatters into nebula.

I imagine she must not remember me,
would not know me if my father left me in yellow tufts

amongst the keepsakes he nests
on hospital sheets to rebuild the birdhouse
of her memory.

I am 11 and lying awake on my neighbors' floor,
my heartbeat mortar and pestled
between my ears and a gauze of carpet.

I am 13 and my mother says she will miss me the most
before she drives to a motel and calls the police
to tell them where to find her occupied room, emptied body.

I am 14, fireworks bleeding into the sky
too much like the stains she left.

At 26, I hold the stem of my motherlessness
and wait.

III.

Hammer

I am mothered by her locked bedroom door.
Sometimes I stare into the crack, trying to see through
my mother's week-long sleeps.

I imagine her hibernating,
the pall of the quilt smothering
her bogged face, or
snipping the tulips from her wrists
until one, two, all three of her children
are laid out dripping at her feet.
She emerges for silent table dinners
bristling with her shadows and unrecognizable,
says her friends *know not to call here anymore,*
says *this time I won't fuck it up.*

I stop counting the number of times
I become motherless,
start counting the seconds between
the rumblings of her breath while damming back my own.

I know there is a hammer in the garage
to dislodge the frame.

It is big and heavy in a child's hands.

We Were Miracles

My heart used to
stop. I used to forget to breathe,
and it used to be funny
that my parents had to decide
at the drop of the Holter
whether they still wanted
this, little yellow sputter of feather and ash.
I hear my mother say,
I wish I'd died,
a bruising of petals trailing the floor.
I didn't stitch the tulips into her arm,
but I can't help thinking of myself
as a seed.
We became omens.
My sister's nose and our mother's fist,
how it bled into the wicker.
My mother fed five years
to the mouth of her bed.
What was it all for?
The brain there after all,
stems of my legs trimmed,
the heart that beats
and beats and beats
and beats

My Mother's Garden

She planted three droplets in the carpet.
The birthdays blur—did they sprout in May,
or August, or on the Fourth of July?

They sprang from death, the prayer of it, shoveled
out and splayed like that on the floor, little “miracles.”
Axed heartbeats against living spatter.

The crop of it all blooming in front of her, swollen.
As if anything else could come of so much blood.

This is what it is to be open wound,
shaking white in the haunting left in the morning;
flushed from holding stung air in place;
inevitable dripping.

Scab. Blossom. Repeat.

Tilling the carpet, forgetting the roots, my mother
plays dress-up with the roses, pretends them into tulips.
The carpet has always been this way, baby-soft and muted.

Fourth of July

Later that night,
I sat with my sister on the driveway,
the neighbors having coaxed us out
to watch the fireworks.

They only wanted to know
about the ambulance.

The booms
formed sentences in my ears:

Where's your mother?

Out of town
out of town out of town

We grabbed each other's hands,
the running blots of color
in the sky reminding me
of the blood stains on the carpet.

I hadn't thought much of the locked door
until my father hammered the frame loose,
found my mother splitting
herself apart behind the wood.
Before he found her,
she heard me in the hall,
her voice hewing the whole house:
I love you I'm sorry.

5 x 7

In my old bedroom, I am hung above the headboard in a white frame. My sister's camera paints me gray, but I remember the blue and yellow dress, hair down to my shoulders damp with rain, bare feet dancing across the deck. I didn't eat that day. I tumble onto the bed, still making a heart with my hands. Another me wiggles out into the hallway on my stomach, seven or eight, purple bows in my hair. Downstairs, the living room is crawling with me: the four-year-old ballerina who hated all that makeup; the white tank top and jean skirt, gray again—a Matryoshka of my sisters. On the mantel next to a mother angel made of wicker and her trio of daughters, the most unrecognizable me blossoms as my feet touch the floor. Fifteen, my first prom. A shimmering, one-shoulder dress that, in shadow, is midnight blue, but becomes cobalt in the right light. I am a statue sculpted into place by my then-boyfriend's hands. I am, for one night, beautiful. I stopped being worthy of frames after I cut my hair. In my mother's room, there is a frame I never enter. Maybe it's white like the bush of baby's breath in my prom pictures, or maybe it's a black hearse waiting to entomb a long-dead whisper of me. No place for the son my mother will not have.

Scylla & Charybdis

They sing of our becoming.
Cradled in a graveyard of bones,
blasts born from blast itself.
We are warped metallic, a tin can
set of lungs melded by an ever-
fraying string flossed between us.
I become stone, let the ships crash
against an unforgiving mouth,
heave pulped skeletons at my feet.
And you, whirlpool, singing ropes
around my ankles, stretching to
clamp your fingers over my lips.
You house sea-drowned versions
of us in your depths, preserve them
in picture frames in salt so thick,
the fakes last years and years
before anyone finds the bodies.

A Sea of Bodies

Every morning I go down to the docks,
hoping to catch something alive.
I don't know what it is,
but when I stick my net in the water
I am always too late.
Later I realize they all have
my mother's eyes.

BLT Night

She looks to her angels, wardens taking watch on the shelf above the table, and my father looks to the TV where there is a news story on Warren Buffett. *My mama*, he says, his back to us now, *had to work her whole life, and this son of a bitch*—he gulps the sentence down in another drink, swirling his mama and Warren Buffett together in the glass. He slices a tomato down the middle and in the cross-section, a house of seeds dribbles out. The kitchen TV murmurs its half-prayers over us and we whirlpool in place, fixing our plates with the wooden spoon that my mother used to lick a fire over our bodies. We set the table with a corpse of rosemallows, a cutting from his mama's garden.

IV.

Etymology of Hands

I.

I always thought these were my mother's hands,
just without the acrylic claws—
hands she somehow softened in pictures
holding other people's children,
so different from the snare her fingers
set for me.
Before I left, I kept myself bitten down
into severed little half-moons.
Everything chewed out of reach.

II.

When the hair on my arms becomes ivy creeping
up my hands, I look to the backs of my father's.
No picture comes close enough for me to tell
the kind of man that will grow.
What strikes me are his palms
choked around some creature he'd found
in the garden, a baby king snake curled in his fist.
I imagine a bedsheet turned basilisk
ripped from my throat
constricting his wrist to stone.

My Father Likes Me Best In Corners

He doesn't know what to call me, if not *daughter*.
I want to tell him, *I say father when I want to say filicide*.
He slips on my new name when he's too tired
to bother remembering anymore.
Like everything else when I talk to my father,
it's not long before I let it drop
into the chasm beneath our feet.

We haven't seen each other in three years
because it's easier to buoy ourselves in air,
to pretend there was nothing before this.
He needs me pasted against the wall
of his skull even now, cobweb of a child
brushed away so many times
I start to disbelieve my fingers.
This is why I became severed cedar,
sisterless, motherless.
Fathered when convenient.

The new apartment is furnished with ghosts,
which really means it's full of his guilt.
What aren't new are the spectres from my parents' house.
The dresser from my childhood bedroom
looms tall as I remember,
and in its silvered knobs I can't escape
my father's eyes.
I watch his hands smooth down the sheets
of my new bed so carefully,
they make no hint towards my mouth
and still I feel them knot my throat.

A week after he tried to kill me,
he held his eyes straight ahead,
cut loose his apology to the parking lot.
I don't think he's looked at me fully since.

If She Could Speak

*When I died, she says, I didn't.
You smothered me on my bedroom floor,
and as I dissolved, I watched.
Watched as my mother gashed the bedsheet,
practicing on her wrists.
You took some tulips from the garden,
I saw you both stitch them over the wound.*

*Then you took my body,
shoveled me into the compost
to be eaten away into mulch.
I didn't disappear the way you wanted me to.
When I became earth,
my fingers dug into the dirt,
became roots. I grew
out instead of up,
snaked my way under the crawlspace
into the house,
curled myself around your bedposts.*

*You said I'd never speak again.
My mouth blossoms.*

This Body Has Never Been

I am forever chalk-outline.

My father taught us

the art of squashing:

tomato-killers;

ourselves against his palms;

beneath a barrage of wheels

five years wide in his stead.

This body has never been

mine, nothing but split, reject.

Springing from my sister,

denying you my belly-button.

My sputtering infancy.

I am cedar. I never settle.

You plant hydrangeas in empty

dresses, name them *daughter*.

Firecracker rose bursting from my

mouth stem hooking my neck I am

a fixed point, hung.

The warning, the lesson.

There is No End to This

I run parallel to a self I don't remember.

I do remember my lunchbox was pink, the sticker too worn
to tell what had been on the front.

Sometimes, I know myself best as a scratched down sticker on a face.

Once I found my grandparents' house on street view, lost three hours
to the sliver of pavement forking off the driveway towards the backyard.

The baby bird cupped in my grandmother's hands in the garden,
pink, broken bodies

of the baby parakeets in the nursing home where she died.

Too often my mother's words ripcord my mouth before I can catch them—
Are you mad at me? — the need to gnaw silence alive.

Only recently I've been able to handle a suicide in a movie
without the gunshot morphing into the tulips on my mother's wrist.

I eat numbers—dates/weeks/months/addresses/the day your mother died,
or will die/the days my mother tried to/as if proof of distance is proof of an ending,
or maybe I know myself as the last record.

In fifth grade, my mother hit my sister so hard that blood ran.

We were late to school that morning begging her not to call the police on herself.

There is a universe where we let her,

where my father said, *You don't deserve to grow up like this*, and meant it.

In the mirror, I expect my twin and find my beard.

I thought I could be fragment enough to be my own.

And still, the lunchbox,

climbing on my sister's back to reach the jar of cookies,
the shoe brush and Goldbond by my father's chair.

I dry my hair and think I will find myself

underneath my pale green towel on my parents' bed,
and I do not come from nothing.

I Wear My Grandmother's Necklace Two Days After I Call the Suicide
Crisis Line

I've never liked my neck much in it, but it doesn't matter.
I'd rather feel you beating against my throat when I walk
than my hands against the soundproof glass,
miming an *SOS* to the praying mantis on the other side.
The night I called from an empty classroom,
I dreamt my throat was stuffed with long yellow feathers.
I split my arms till they became wings,
did a *danse macabre* off the tallest building I could find.
Anything, anything to stop my headless shadow.
The next day the sun shone as if I wasn't
a crater with a body, hollowed out
by foreign palms searching my wounds.
They left the pulp on a conference room table
for me to scoop into a mason jar.
It's sat on my nightstand ever since,
muted buzzes coming from under the lid.
Today I revel in our shared names,
try to handle myself the way you held
the fledgling in the front yard,
make myself believe I deserve cupped hands, soft edges.
Above all, that even betrayed by my own scent,
you would have loved me anyway.

Recipe for my Grandmother's Cold Oven Pound Cake

There are things a severed branch knows not to ask for,
so I've never touched the recipe.

I can only make the batter from what was passed to me:
a hydrangea like the ones she grew inked
into the garden of my thigh, bloomed over 4 hours in an artist's chair;
the violet oval set into its silver pendant, folded in by the chain;
that September morning when I looked out a gym window,
saw her death brought to me by the lion sky of her name.

I crack our shared name into the bowl, maiden and middle
a binding agent and maybe I don't deserve these, either.

We never made the cake together while she was alive,
but I remember sharing a bed on Christmas Eve in Indiana,
me, Grandma, and Papa.

How they said all night I didn't move an inch.

How my body still craves the ghost of that nest of stillness.

I want the beater to pummel me whole,
want a Bundt pan wide enough to hold the mess of child
screaming to be held and shaped.

Hand In Unlovable Hand

In the burning car you dream the loss of your feet.

The road is orange, crooked river.

I pull you by the torch of your wrist,
swallow our ashing bodies into my chest.

I can only hold so much current.

I scald the crook of my arm on the pan,
impress you by saving the sweet potatoes
before thrusting my arm into cool water,
river over river. My hand over yours
when you check the smoke of sugar
rising in your blood, your hand over mine
when you wrap the burn.

V.

For little Auden

You don't have to be a suitcase,
weren't made to carry the unmarked grave of your childhood.

I know in a garden you feel most like a compost heap,
always chewing up the tomatoes and tulips into new soil,

but listen—sometimes blood is blood.

You are not the reason
why your mother turned every locked door into a coffin,

despite the shame that sprouted under your tongue
when you were marked *murderer*.

I want to be a better home for you,
want to believe a severed branch can grow its own roots.

Telling the Bees

I keep the hive you left
as a makeshift ribcage,
feed it the roots of my blanks.

I open my palms—
scraps.

The rest is stomped ash in my hands
every grain smudged teeming
into the next. A smattering
gesture on an abacus.

I am chronic reenactment,
anthropologist, spooling into
honeycomb the ink blots of legends.

Plasma and smarting cedar.
A child, gashed.

Gender Revelations at a Campus Bus Stop

I've started studying men—
the way they sit with their legs apart,
and how far, unafraid to swallow space,
a flame curling between their teeth.

I had a dream that someone called me sir.
Ever since, I've become a potamologist of bodies,
their flow versus mine.
I am budding, it's true, my jawline
knifing my face these days.
I count each sprouting fuzz on my chin,
tally every mark of my becoming.

Still I see them fully blossomed, panging
with beard envy, longing
for a cavernous voice to fill
the gully of my throat.
I want to shake the broadness from their shoulders,
cocoon inside until I grow into my own.

The Most Beautiful Part of Your Body is Where It's Headed
after Ocean Vuong

I can love my chest
a little now
that it's on its way out
to live its days
on a nice patch of biowaste upstate.
So much room to run around.

And I,
I will be left, finally,
to feel my favorite shirts
without the brick wall
of a binder between us,
to feel the absence of
caged breath in my sleep,

to remember myself
each morning
in the overgrown grass
of hair that makes its way
up my legs,
over the flowers inked there,
over my belly,
slow ivy across my face.

And tank tops,
god,
tank tops.
My body no longer
its own betrayal.

I hope
the first time
my fiancé sees my chest,
his hands will make an altar
of my newest form,
plant irises along the beds
of each incision.

I'm Not Good at Love Poems

My mother always told me that if I ran away to another family, they'd only give me back. I've found this to be true. I once wrote, *I made a home in my last three lovers. These days, I'm all suitcase.* The first half of last year, so many threads were cut from my chest, I heard scissors in my sleep. We sat knotting ourselves together on my couch, your head in my lap. I thought if I looked too closely, your hair, the melted birthday candles, all of it, would turn to yarn in my hands. So I didn't look, didn't let myself want more than a whisper. I don't write about this.

Yet you find your way into my poems against my will. When it first happens, I apologize, thinking of the girl I wrote a poem for, who didn't want it or me. After she hit me, I wrote another. You have never denied me my echoes. When I am full of them, I can't stop repeating, *Thunder. Cedar. Handprint. Latch.* You draw me to the oak ship of your chest until all that is left is the murmur of salt and breath. I watch us burn amber. You've yet to return me to my empty bones. You call me handsome and mean it. We take our clothes off now. I put the suitcase down.

Dionysus at the Body Museum

After I burn my mother's
lilies from my ivy,

after my lovers have fed themselves
with wondering and refused
to meet my eyes,

and the Titans come to cut a hole in my belly,
annoyed that there is honey
and not shame, sweetness
and not ruin,

after the curator sweeps away the petals
and dejected ticket stubs, dusts and swabs
where fingers traced their mourning on my chest,

I will remember the child
sat by my feet

to try my name in their mouth
and instead of *stranger*, hear *home*
and ask, *I can be something else?*
Yes. Yes.

Notes

“Why My Father Tried to Kill Me” and “My Mother’s Garden” (under the title “Confederate Roses, Jersey Tulips”) were first published by *Across the Margin*

“When I Say I’m Afraid of Thunder” was first published by *The Bookends Review*

“Truth Climbs Out of My Throat to Shame My Abusers” and “I Wear My Grandmother’s Necklace Two Days After I Call the Suicide Crisis Line” was first published by *Swimming With Elephants*

“Traumabomb” was first published by *The Orchards Review*, and republished by *Ginosko*

“Prayer to Medusa” and “Cuckoo” were first published by *peculiar*

“Ode to Lizzie Borden” was first published by *trampset*

“Rapunzel Cuts Her Hair Every Morning” was first published by *FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art*

“Caroline” was first published by *Kissing Dynamite*

“The Egg Doesn’t Know It’s An Egg” was first published by *Sledgehammer*

“Concussion / Camellia” was listed as a finalist for *Boulevard’s* 2022 Contest for Emerging Poets

“Enmeshed” was first published by *Exhume Literary Journal*

“Scylla & Charybdis” was first published by *Landlocked*

“A Sea of Bodies” was first published by *Cypress Press*

“If She Could Speak” and “This Body Has Never Been” were first published by *Mineral Lit Mag*

“Hand In Unlovable Hand” takes its title from “No Children” by The Mountain Goats

“Telling the Bees” was first published by *Digging Press / Digging Through the Fat*

“I’m Not Good at Love Poems” was first published by *Whale Road Review*

Critical Essay

Caught Between a Lyric and a Narrative: Writing Through Trauma and Transition

This collection is called *Gardening Lessons* for a number of reasons. The first reason is the sheer amount of gardening imagery that is embedded throughout these poems. Though I am in general outdoors-averse, gardening is a significant part of my family's history. My paternal grandmother kept a flower garden at the house she shared with my grandfather, who kept a vegetable garden in the backyard, and my father has kept a very beautiful garden for as long as I can remember. In my poems, the external beauty of my father's garden has always been in juxtaposition with the violence of my childhood. This is compounded by the attempts of my family to erase the years of abuse in our collective history. Erasure is a common thread throughout the collection, especially when paired with imagery associated with gardening. Acts of violence are buried, tilled, composted—the landscape of trauma is being rewritten. These poems act as a counter to that erasure.

At the same time, there is another garden growing: my trans body as I pursue medical transition. As I become more comfortable in my body and it becomes a place of healing rather than a place where violence is enacted, I start to align parts of my physical self with gardening imagery. *Gardening Lessons* is as much about where and what I grew from as it is what—and who—I'm growing into.

A comment I've often received from other writers is that my writing is "caught between a lyric and a narrative," the implication being that choosing one or the other would make my poems more tangible or digestible—that these elements of poetic form don't mix normally. My hybrid form of writing wasn't purposeful at first. I've received feedback on poems that tell the story of my own trauma that suggested I try narrative writing and been left with a sense of confusion, thinking, *wasn't I writing a form of narrative?* When discussing the inspiration behind the poem "Deathscape Lullaby," Cynthia Cruz explains her intent "to convey the way in which memory, when it is intercepted by trauma (and shock), fractures" (Poets.Org). Cruz does this by assembling a list of images, fragmented memories from her own childhood:

The taste of cold metal

and the repetition of three AM
sirening ambulance rides.

Yellow cream, three-tiered
birthday cake. (lines 4-8)

The image of the cold metal and ambulance rides juxtaposed with the birthday cake creates a sense of unease in the reader, and, yes, discombobulates, because this is how these images present themselves to Cruz. The unsteady feel of the lines further lean into that discombobulation.

Though I have compiled this collection in a way that creates a more fleshed out narrative as a whole, I experience a similar fracturing to Cruz in memory that influences the way I present images in my poems. In “There is No End to This,” I say that I “run parallel to a self I don’t remember” (line 1), and despite an entire collection of poems that could point to the contrary, the fragmentation of my memory is what makes this statement true. Memories of my childhood come to me in snippets that allow me to build a mosaic of images, to connect the “characters” that appear in my poems to specific images or connect multiple characters through an image. Tulips and axes are very much connected to my mother; tomatoes and thunder are linked to my father; hydrangeas and rosemallows were grown in my grandmother’s garden, but they are connected to other members of my family, too, remnants of her passed down to us. Through the writing process, I came to realize that while my middle-ground of style might not have been intentional, it is inherent. As someone who has lived with complex trauma and as different genders, I am highly unboxable. It feels right that my poems would, form-wise, resist easy categorization as well.

A complex facet of writing this collection has been reconciling and recontextualizing my adult, post-transition self with the pre-transition child I once was. “I Will Always Tell You My Childhood Home is Made of Cedar” opens the first section of the collection with these two selves in mind, where I admit, “I

don't know how to talk about *her*— / the *girl* in the pictures. / Or my relation to the identical face next to *her*" (lines 18-20, emphasis added). My adult self is a man, but my child self is often depicted as the girl I considered myself to be at the time. In an interview for the Arizona LGBTQ+ Storytelling Project, genderqueer poet TC Tolbert said that his medical transition "allowed [him] to foreground another part of [him]self without erasing what came before" (00:01:16-00:01:32). I think the desire to preserve what came before is very true for me and has influenced the way I approach my former self. Some of these collected poems were first written by pre-transition me, and though I could retroactively edit my childhood self into a boy, or a son, it wouldn't feel authentic to either myself or the narrative I am telling.

The body itself—my body, specifically—plays a major role in my physical recontextualization. My body functions as the site of immense trauma and violence, but also becomes a site of healing as I document my experiences with medical transition. I explore the expectations my mother put on me regarding my femininity and outward appearance across several poems. In "My Body Was a Crystal Ball My Mother Couldn't Help But See Herself In," I explain, "My smallness / was the first thing / I ever knew / about myself" (lines 1-4). Even the body of the poem is restricted to match the emphasis put on my smallness, the lines never longer than five words at most. The metaphor of the crystal ball is

never directly addressed in this poem, but the implication behind it in the face of my mother's fixation on my underweight body and her shame and disgust when my appearance fails to be conventionally attractive is clear: she is afraid I will end up looking like her. That fear is passed on to me and presents itself as gender dysphoria in poems like "Ganymede" and "I Wake Up Dripping Feathers."

Other poems explore the physical and emotional trauma caused by my mother's expectations, most revolving around my physical appearance and gender presentation and her denial of autonomy over my own body. When my hair is long, it is an object for my mother to control me with, sometimes violently. In "Rapunzel Cuts Her Hair Every Morning," my mother "holds me by my hair with a clenched fist / drags me across the kitchen floor" (lines 3-4). "Rapunzel" and "The Egg Doesn't Know It's An Egg" deal with my mother's reactions in the days after I first cut my hair at 16, believing my assertion of my own bodily autonomy to be something I've done to intentionally hurt her.

While not rooted in a sense of ownership, my mother's expectations surrounding the disabilities and years-long chronic pain I experienced as a child influenced the way I performed in my daily life regardless of my body's physical state. The inspiration behind "Kyle Maynard Courage Award Recipient, 2003" comes from a resurfaced memory where my mother informed a local newspaper reporter—interviewing the award recipients and their families—of my parents'

motto for me: *Can't isn't in our vocabulary*. Meaning, I wasn't allowed to use my disability as an "excuse" not to do something. I realized several years later that this led me to push myself in ways my parents probably never intended (insisting on doing the mile run in PE despite wearing leg braces, or walking the entire length of the beach on vacation because my parents wanted to), and that I was often praised for ignoring my body and the pain I felt. The repeated phrases scattered throughout the poem, especially "my body is not an excuse," emphasize just how ingrained that messaging became.

I also explore my body, especially in the context of my transness, as being very often an object to be consumed by the cisgender world around me. In "How Much of My Feet Should I Give You to Stand On?" I explain it as being "both the plaque on the wall and the / body in the frame" (lines 9-10); to be both the object being observed and its ready-made explanation. There is undeniable beauty in my transness, in the art of growing into my body. The issue lies in the pressure to make the beauty of that experience as digestible as possible for a cisgender audience, and often that pressure is equated to a lack of clarity or context. In "Dionysus at the Body Museum" this is explored by turning myself into a literal statue in a museum that a variety of (mostly cisgender) people come to experience a one-sided interaction with. My mother mourns the "loss" of her daughter; my ex-lovers show up only to be disappointed with the body of someone they

claimed to love in a new form; TERFs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists) arrive disguised as Titans to rip me apart and unearth a brokenness they believe is inherent to my transness; even the curator performing the tasks to preserve the statue is indicative of a loss of agency. It's only when there is a flashback to the wonder of the child towards the end of the poem that I am seen and understood.

In "Sonnets Overheard at the High : : Triptych," trans poet Merick Alsobrooks too explores their body and transness in relation to art. As they walk through the museum, Alsobrooks compares and contrasts themselves with the different pieces they pass through multiple exhibits—finding likeness in the insects featured in Jan Brueghel's paintings of flowers rather than the flowers themselves, knowing that they cannot "fit in with [the] heavy dresses" (line 14) of the Lady in Black Velvet and Miss Bessie. Just as the hyper-feminine is a bad fit, so too is the hyper-masculine; the poet feels portraits of men by Wiley and Solomon "promising [them] a place in the booth, if only [they'd] take it, but no" (line 34). Like "Dionysus at the Body Museum," "Sonnet at the High" contends with one's place in the performance of gender and how the perception of that performance shifts based on who is doing the perceiving.

Like the body of "My Body Was A Crystal Ball..." is restricted to match the obsession with the smallness of my own body, the bodies of other poems are shaped to reflect either some aspect of my physical form, or the emotional

turbulence caused by the chaos and trauma around me. “5 x 7” plays with the idea of the different versions of me contained in picture frames around my parents’ house. Though the length and width of the poem don’t actually fit into a 5 x 7 frame, the poem being written as a prose poem mimics the shape of a frame. The last two lines falling short of completing the frame within the body of the poem resemble the “frame I [will] never enter” (line 16)—the frame present-day Auden will not occupy. “There is No End to This,” a poem with a much less restrained body, stretches across the page in much longer lines than I am generally drawn to in order to reflect the experience of memory flooding, eventually tapering off to a shorter line at the poem’s end, which, true to its title, feels more like a pause than a true resolution or ending.

My medical transition has played a large part in my ability to see my body as a site of healing instead of one of pain, despite cisgender-centric society pushing the narrative that transness involves an inherent misery. “The Most Beautiful Part of Your Body Is Where It’s Headed” was written two months before I had top surgery. The poem is after Ocean Vuong’s “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” which is an after poem of “Someday I’ll Love Roger Reeves” —an after poem of “Katy” by Frank O’Hara, which contains the line both Reeves’ and Vuong’s poems take their titles from: “Some day I’ll love Frank O’Hara” (“Katy,” line 6). At the time, I was inspired by the idea in Vuong’s poem of the beauty in trajectory,

especially in the time leading up to such a significant event in my medical transition. It wasn't until later that I realized the poem exists within a lineage of male poets who exist in varying degrees of otherness—O'Hara and Vuong both as queer men, Vuong and Reeves as men of color—reaching for self-love while still reveling in their present moment.

I refer to my transition and top surgery in particular as my “second birth,” (“How Much...?”) largely because otherwise any reference to my birth throughout this collection is overshadowed by death. In “Traumabomb,” I see myself as the “rubble (and) aftershock” (line 17) of my first birth, which I call “a shattering” (19). My twin sister and I were born 9 and ½ weeks early due to collapse of the amniotic sac and severe health risks for us as well as my mother, who often in my earlier childhood referred to our collective survival as a miracle. In the five years between my paternal grandparents' deaths and my mother's subsequent suicide attempts and eventual bipolar disorder diagnosis, the narrative of my birth shifted. I grapple with the cognitive dissonance of that shift in “We Were Miracles,” where my mother says “(she) wish(es) (she)'d died” (line 9) giving birth to us, dialogue lifted verbatim from multiple incidents of abuse.

Motherlessness—my mother's direct and indirect abandonment, my desire to deny my mother's part in my creation, and my estrangement from her—and the constant threat of her death looms across these poems, especially in the poems

addressing her multiple suicide attempts. In “Hammer,” I describe the feeling of being “mothered by her locked bedroom door” (line 1) when my mother’s depressive episodes led her to stay in bed for days to weeks at a time. The combination of a sense of responsibility for my mother’s life along with being blamed for her desire to die caused me to develop hypervigilance. Towards the end of the poem, I recount the way I would listen for her snores to ensure she was still alive, still breathing: “counting the seconds between / the rumblings of her breath while damming back my own” (lines 16-17). “Concussion / Camellia” explores the return of the hypervigilance of my childhood following my mother’s concussion, which was originally thought to be an aneurysm—the liminality between her life and the potential of her death, at least as far as my trauma response was concerned. The poem jumps back and forth across the page between my mother’s injury as it is happening and the flashbacks I experienced in the immediate aftermath.

My relationship to the concepts of birth and point of origin are further complicated by the presence (and absence) of my now-estranged twin. Within the collection, my sister has as much of, if not more than, a hand in my creation as our mother:

The truth is, I can never answer where I came from,
what either the house
or me was really made of.
My twin and I would joke—she

split to make me
to spite the grave our mother made of us.
("I Will Always Tell You..." lines 23-28)

The phrasing is only a half-joke, the truth of my uncertainty emphasized by the weight of that first line: "The truth is, I can never answer when I came from." Later on in the collection I tell my sister, "*you* were my first home" ("Caroline," line 12, emphasis added)—whereas I refer to my mother as "the first tomb / I ever knew" ("I Wake Up Dripping Feathers," lines 11-12). Transition and estrangement have led me to disentangle myself from the once truth of being a living mirror, but this process will never be fully complete. Despite years without speaking and years of living in a more masculine body, I can still be surprised by our stark differences, can still "expect my twin and find my beard" ("There Is No End to This," line 21).

I said at the beginning of this essay that the beauty of the garden of my childhood home always felt highly discordant with the violence and abuse that went on inside the house. That dissonance has greatly contributed to the way nature is warped in my writing. I attempt to merge the two spheres in "I Will Always Tell You..." by bringing items associated with my mother — "[her] wicker angels blooming white / the harvest of wooden spoons" — (lines 4-5) into my father's garden. In "My Mother's Garden," the blood stains from my mother's suicide attempts bloom into Confederate roses, and the tulips from the tattoo she

would later cover her scars with show up across several poems. “If She Could Speak” envisions the postmortem little girl and the “alternate universe” alluded to in “Why My Father Tried to Kill Me.” Though her body decomposes, she doesn’t “*disappear the way [her father] wanted [her] to*” (line 11). Instead, I imagine that she becomes a kind of poltergeist, haunting the garden where she is buried and eventually merging with it to become a kind of spectral plant entity (truly I can’t find a better descriptor) and enact vengeance upon her father. The very literal erasure of violence by burying the girl in the garden is turned on its head when her own death is not enough to silence her.

In highlighting the dissonance between the exterior of the garden and the interior of my family’s dysfunction, I also highlight my own tendency towards compartmentalization even as I attempt to fight it. Even when my poems feature multiple members of my family, there is a kind of distance between the “character” I’m mainly focusing on and everyone else. In poems featuring my parents, one parent is either not mentioned at all or does not interact much with the other. It feels, to me, that they rarely act in tandem on the page, and only do so briefly. The same could be said of poems featuring either or both of my parents and my twin sister:

My sister never forgave me
for leading bloodhounds to our door
after my father tried to stuff
a bedsheet down my throat,

and my mother wished her womb had opened
six feet, swallowed her whole. ("Cuckoo," lines 9-14)

Just as I am left with snippets of memories from my childhood, the actions and emotions of my family members become compressed into snippets that add to the mosaic of images I've built over the course of the collection.

This could be considered a weakness in the way I portray my "characters," but is reflective of how I talk and think about my family in real life as well as the fracturing caused by trauma and estrangement. "Etymology of Hands" is split into two sections in part to speak to this compartmentalization, as well as to mark the shift in the dominant hormone in my body due to medical transition. Because my father is the only immediate family member I still maintain some direct level of contact with, I tend to talk about him separately from my mother, and have often had to clarify in conversations when it becomes relevant that my parents are still married and living together. I somewhat mirror Ocean Vuong's line, "Your father is only your father / until one of you forgets" ("Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," lines 4-5) in the lines, "(S)isterless, motherless. / Fathered when convenient" ("My Father Likes Me Best In Corners," lines 16-17).

Throughout these poems, I envision myself as many things, many images: a "little yellow sputter of feather and ash" ("We Were Miracles," line 7); a river monster; a sticker on a lunchbox worn down beyond recognition. The image that

undergoes the most evolution, the one I consider to best represent my personal arc over the course of this collection, is the suitcase. The recurring image of the suitcase and its importance to the collection overall was at first not apparent to me; after all, there are several repeating images in my poems, and while they all have their significance, it never felt like any one of them could qualify as the overarching symbol of the collection. Nor is the suitcase the most frequently used image. It was only after tracing its function across the four poems it appears in that I came to recognize just how much the suitcase as an image speaks to the concept of finding home both within my own body and through my chosen family.

Like my relationship to my body, the suitcase begins as an image associated with violence, not insignificantly one of the most violent acts depicted in the collection. In “Why My Father Tried to Kill Me,” its first appearance, the suitcase is my body as scapegoat, an object for my father to place the blame and emotional anguish of the instability my family was experiencing. Compare that first appearance of the suitcase with its last in “I’m Not Good at Love Poems.” This poem, like “Cuckoo” before it in the sequence, recalls my fear of abandonment, even echoing the ending couplet: “I once wrote, *I made a / home of my last three lovers. These days, I’m all suitcase.*” (lines 3-4) Specifically, the poem explores my fears of being unworthy of love as they are challenged by love itself, chronicling

my relationship with my now fiancé as we were falling in love. The suitcase, in its final form, embodies everything that came before in its previous iterations: my complex trauma, feelings of shame, feeling as though I would never feel safe or at home anywhere. Then, a relinquishing, a sharing, of all the experiences and feelings that have stayed with me through my life. There is a feeling of homecoming to the ending line, "I put the suitcase down."

I will not pretend to claim that I am, or ever will be, fully healed from trauma. That reality was, for a very long time, a large obstacle in viewing my individual poems in the larger context of a full collection. I have been living alongside some of these poems for the past five or six years, on top of having lived with and through the trauma itself for the past nineteen years, and the lack of resolution or an end for me personally made me feel as though it would be difficult to ever find a satisfying stopping point for a reader. What I can say on my end as the writer is that working through this collection has given me a way to distinguish my present self from my childhood self, a way to provide myself with proof that I have gained some level of distance from it, even though that distance is not always a constant. Being able to somewhat separate my past and present selves has also allowed me to see myself *through* myself and come to a greater understanding of how my relationship to my body and gender were affected during my childhood, when I have often struggled to reconcile my experiences

with that of the more stereotypical transmasculine narrative. I don't know if my poems will ever help someone more than they hurt, or if I'll ever read them without feeling like I'm inflicting something on an audience. What I do know is that, at the very least, this collection has helped me gain a sense of who I am and who I have been, and who I am still becoming. And, maybe, that's enough.

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