

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

by

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ABSTRACT

ABIGAIL VINCENT. *Degrees of Separation*. (Under the direction of ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT, M.F.A.)

Degrees of Separation is a collection of fifty poems which explore overlapping concepts of womanhood and femininity through ecopoetry. The poems focus on a speaker reflecting on her girlhood and the complexities of emerging into womanhood. They also look at issues of regional natural landscape with a focus on the North Carolina Piedmont and Appalachia. The collection explores how the natural world and the feminine intertwine to allow passage from youth into adulthood.

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DEDICATION

To Charlie and all the poems he gave me.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Degrees of Separation: A Poetry Collection

As part of my Master of Arts in English, my creative thesis is a poetry collection consisting of fifty poems across sixty-four pages. The main themes of the collection include motherhood and daughterhood, the natural world, and ecological damage in relation to place. Particularly, the speaker finds solace and stillness in the natural features of the Piedmont and Appalachia, such as eastern redbuds and the Blue Ridge's flora, as well as peace in the comforts of the domestic sphere, such as tending a garden and tending to the body. Each poem engages with at least one of the main thematic threads, aiming to tie together the steps of feminine growth, including self-forgiveness and acceptance of one's own body, with the global crisis of climate change and natural disaster. As such, this collection also focuses on place, specifically the American South/Appalachia as well as a poem situated much farther away in Joshua Tree National Park. The main theme of place ties into the collection's ideas on environmentalism, dealing mostly with issues of drought in the North Carolina Piedmont as well as one poem featuring the climate of the California desert and the ever-growing linkage between the drying-up forest and the desert.

I have arrived at the title *Degrees of Separation* for my collection. I believe it speaks to multiple concerns in my work, such as familial relationships (i.e.: degrees of separation in relation), and the natural features of the ecosystem and how development impacts them (i.e.: climate change). I found my way to this project through outside readings and my own experiences as well as through the thematic concerns of my reading

materials for this thesis. I engage with other writerly voices to guide the collection toward an exploration of womanhood and self.

Thematic Concerns

Maternity and Womanhood

I have worked with many outside collections and excerpts to gain a broader understanding of the poetic canon, and many of those collections explore central themes which run parallel to my own explorations. One of the main issues my collection interrogates is the concept of maternity and how motherhood manifests for the speaker, both in her family and in nature. The primary poems which engage in these ideas are “maternity ward” and “guided by belief.” In my poem “maternity ward,” I explore the complications of birth and the moment of separation between mother and child. I look specifically at partial abruption, which is when the placenta partially detaches from the uterine wall. The poem meditates on how such a complication creates separation even before birth occurs. As such, the premature separation results in the speaker’s removal during c-section, with a “tiny fist curled around the snapped mangled maternal bone.” In another poem titled “guided by belief,” I explore how the separation between mother and daughter is continuously strained as the two grow ever more independent of each other. Other poems include iterations of motherhood in nature, like the mother cow and calf in “construction zone.” My poems build toward a sense of self as a result of mother/daughter separation.

The collection *Nervous System* by Rosalie Moffett considers issues of motherhood and daughterhood, memory loss, and illness through natural world imagery to explore the separation of mother and daughter and the uncrossable rift it creates. The collection

reflects a larger pattern of maternal inheritance, especially with issues like trauma and familial strife. In my own writing, I focus on the anxieties of motherhood and a strained relationship with one's own body as inherited from the mother. Ultimately, the overarching goal reaches toward interrogating a separation of mother and daughter and the struggle of reconciling that irreversible split. This collection offered a rich pool of imagery to inspire my own poems on motherhood, and Moffett's central image of a spider also appears in "spider family," one of my own poems.

Bodily Autonomy and Vulnerability

Another thematic concern is vulnerability and the bravery of engaging in it. I explore how this concept might manifest in a forgiveness of self, especially in the form of self-acceptance and a relinquishing of control. My poems focus on an honest depiction of childhood snapshots and a deliberate forgiveness for the missteps and misfortunes of youth. Some of the poems focused on these ideas are "Note to Younger Self" and "guided by belief." Moving from the speaker's childhood to the larger natural world around the collection, the issue of vulnerability recurs with the contemplation of autonomy and ownership over one's body. One poem which explores bravery and bodily presence is "Prometheus Folds His Laundry," which establishes early on the collection's trajectory toward a reclamation of autonomy. The poem discusses the mythical figure Prometheus and how he does daily tasks amid his eternal punishment, working toward the closing lines, "For the man made meal, / it is no exaggeration to believe / existing in your own body is radical bravery." Another example of bodily ownership and autonomy in the collection is "the summer we lost our autonomy," which copes with the loss of legal protections for reproductive justice. I also explore the mythos of an imagined figure that

protects women and their bodily autonomy in the poem “Madonna of the Parking Garage.” These poems explore focused and specific instances of autonomy before turning outward to contemplate larger issues of women’s agency and safety.

Kathryn Nuernberger’s collection *Rue* speaks to some of these issues and served as a place for inspiration during my writing process. It moves from witnessing and experiencing violation to reclaiming agency and autonomy. Nuernberger’s poems encapsulate the beginnings of my collection’s pursuit to prove that sometimes, the act of vulnerability and accepting outside help is the only way to fully achieve safety.

My thesis also illustrates the manifestations of autonomy and mistreatment in the natural world. My poem “Letter to the Blue Ridge Parkway” explores the topographical changes of the mountains as they are continuously paved over with highways and human activity: “I am climbing the mountains, / blue-ridged and blacktop-carved, / into the golden seams / of misty sunlight, your / obscured & open mouth.” Other poems that explore the destruction of the natural world and the reverberating consequences include “we’re killing the fireflies,” “notes on ‘what we melt into,’” and “construction zone.” While the destruction of nature and its impacts are important to my collection, I also focus on the still undeveloped features of the natural world, using natural imagery and green space as an anchoring element to many of my poems. Some of the poems which rely on natural imagery the most include “twins in the pines,” “Empty Nesting,” “Blue Cicadas,” “a love letter to mariana,” “in transit,” and “Joshua Tree Park, High Desert.” These poems create specific natural imagery to work toward larger themes of the collection’s setting and symbolic focus, like the ways the human mesh with the natural.

Another influence of my thesis readings came from McLarney's *Forage*, which served as an example for structure; the collection moves from one issue to another across poems to continuously build a more complex system of intertwined themes. I organized my own collection with consideration to that intertwining, braiding together different topics of autonomy, motherhood, self acceptance, and the significance of the natural world to achieve my own organic system of poetry.

Relationship to Craft and Revision

Poetic Guidance

As I wrote my poems, I leaned on the guidance of poetic craft writers to guide my drafting, editing, and revision. James Longenbach offers the advice: "the poem quickly reveals the complexity of even the simplest act of naming. We cannot rest comfortably with our knowledge of the literal because language is inevitably threatening to transform the literal into the figurative" (74). In the beginning of my writing process, I wanted desperately to represent life in a way that felt true yet novel; in my attempts to create an outreaching work, I sometimes over-explained my images, did not trust my instincts to pull back, and overloaded poems with unnecessary wordiness that cluttered the page. I used Longenbach's guidance in revision, and I was able to refine my poems to the moving parts that worked to build a thematic story. I pushed my poetry into a space that allowed for figurative interpretations of (attempted) literal representations of life; I allowed my images to do their dutiful work. One such poem that relied on this advice was "caged tomatoes," which initially included explanatory language that crushed the metaphor's power. In revision, I removed the unnecessary, expository language surrounding my central image of a tomato plant in garden wire.

In addition, Longenbach's guidance spoke to the writings of Marianne Boruch and her ideas on the intersections of poetry and human experience. Boruch writes, "Human experience is, of course, partial. [...] poetry too is partial, its ambition never to explain everything away and pretend a wholeness. Nor is it exactly to witness or to mirror" (42). Poetry, as with any form of literature, seeks to reveal or represent some truth of humanity. In this pursuit, it is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed at the task of encompassing the entire human condition. This task is daunting because it is impossible; as Boruch argues, human experience across the board is partial and segmented. Our poetry, too, is restricted by our human limitations. As we write, we can only represent our own corner of the universe and the poetic materials that corner holds. Rather than attempting to create a work that speaks to a universal audience (though, I will likely always have the quiet wish to do so), my revisions aimed to accurately and interestingly represent my own perspective and experience. This turn from the universal toward the more specific allowed me to craft a collection that invites a reader into the specific natural and feminine world of my writing.

An epistemological issue of nonfiction (and, by extension, poetry) seeks to tackle the intersection of universality and specificity. Authors Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola argue for the role of personal experience in writings, stating, "we take many things about ourselves for granted—and take for granted, too, their societal implications" (54). As writers, it can be difficult to identify what about our lives and social experiences is interesting to others. Thus, we must interrogate what parts of ourselves are most interesting to people and will serve as useful concentrations for our writing. Miller and Paola go on to explain that when writing on personal experiences, whether through

personal essay or poetry, the writer is working between “two poles—intimacy of voice and universality of significance” (104). We must balance the specifics of our own descriptions with the universal connections readers can make with our work. In both drafting and revision, these concepts helped to guide my imagery selection and informed the thematic threads I developed over this past year. Rather than focus on a sweeping statement about womanhood as a whole, I instead focused on uncovering the nuances of my own experiences emerging into womanhood. I looked at universal, natural imagery, like birds, plants, and the sky, and combined it with my own personal images from life, like my childhood home and my dog, Charlie. These two pools of images mixed together in my poetry to create a blend of both the universally significant and the personally specific.

Influence of Coursework

My own writing returns the call of my primary outside sources, resonating with the aesthetic choices of other naturalistic, ecopoetic writers. My collection stands in a position that untangles the tensions of self and the body as they relate to the world around us. Some of these readings were established during my thesis concentration work, but others came from other writing courses and workshops I took during my degree. An epistolary prose course and creative nonfiction workshop allowed me to push the boundaries of form with my poetry. I explored writing in the form of letters, which appears in my poetry collection. I also drew many approaches to imagery from my creative nonfiction course, such as documenting my own life and learning how to truthfully work within the confines of language and representation.

An aspect of my graduate experience which was unique was my position as a teaching assistant. This position allowed me to lead my own introductory creative writing course for undergraduate students, which informed my thesis work far more than I had anticipated. While working with my students, I gained new insight into how to workshop a piece and into the restrictions I had placed on myself. As I worked with beginner students, some of whom had never written a poem or story before, I was exposed to incredibly fresh and different approaches to writing and revision. Since this was the first experience some of them had, they did not come to class with many presumptions about writing and the creative process. As a result, they were able to come up with wonderfully surprising and exciting works. In my own process, I tried to implement this unrestricted perspective and approach my work from a distance. Such distance speaks back to Addonizio's ideas on necessary coldness and the importance of "capturing the complexity of emotion through imagery," and resisting the urge to explain (189).

I achieved a more precise, final draft of my collection through multiple avenues, but some of the most valuable feedback I received was through my meetings with my chair, Professor Hutchcraft. We were able to hold regular, collaborative meetings that were structured like a small, specific workshop. We would both come in with written ideas on how to improve the work, and we engaged in animated conversation to help find the sticking points of poems. I also benefited greatly from Professor Hutchcraft's line comments on my poetry, which allowed me to see specific reader feedback and make written changes on the physical page. While much work can be done on the computer, I found our written collaborations to be incredibly useful. We would both write on a copy of the poem our reactions, thoughts, and instincts, and seeing these specific points of

feedback on the same physical page helped to spatially organize my thoughts for each poem. Our collaborative revision schedule was invaluable to me and my thesis writing.

Personal Aesthetic

As I wrote, I found myself entranced by the eco-poetic form and its ability to amplify feminist themes through natural imagery. Eco-poetry leans into the already prevalent use of the natural world in literature, especially poetry, but it also allows for a connection between nature and womanhood. There are clear connections between women and nature, like creating and sustaining life, but eco-poetry has allowed me to draw more specific connections as well. In my poetry, I leaned into direct imagery, with one of the most immediate examples being “The Butterfly Woman,” which follows a female figure and her duty to tend to milkweed to sustain the monarch butterflies.

I also explored the development of self and the emergence of a woman from girlhood. This emergence could speak to a universal truth, but it is geared toward a specific, autobiographical exploration of growing up. A poem which exemplifies this goal is the title poem, “Degrees of Separation,” which showcases the speaker’s position looking back on childhood and examining what has flown away and what has remained. For me, “A young girl emerges, alone on the unwalled / floor, her newborn ghosts of the heart, / beneath a ceiling of open sky.” In order to emerge into womanhood, the girl must acknowledge her own youth and the shortcomings it brings, like in the poem “Note to Younger Self,” so that she might step into adulthood with all its uncertainties, as the speaker does in the final poem, “beyond my meadow’s edge.”

Conclusion

I meditate on my own experience growing up and what it means to transition from a child to an adult. Specifically, I focus on growing up with a strained mother-daughter relationship. The line between childhood and adulthood is blurry, and my speaker returns to her inner child as a young adult, trying to make her way through the world and re-mother herself as she mourns her youth. Another element of my own childhood experience is how my identity was, and still continuously is, constructed by my environment. In the case of this collection, that environment is the western half of North Carolina, which equipped me with the local flora and fauna of the Piedmont and Appalachia as well as specific climate crises based on location. For me, that means memories of drought in childhood and now, in adulthood. I want to interrogate the things that puzzle-piece themselves together to create the woman entering the world, such as re-parenting oneself and finding ways to practice self-compassion. I aim to openly stretch the tensions within myself, like the habit of self-critique meshing with the newly learned practice of self-acceptance; and in my own writing journey, I hope to produce works that might make others feel less alone. In exploring the familial, and particularly the maternal, patterns of my own family and the larger feminine rhythms of the earth and its cycles, I uncover the patterns of love and grief and the way we reconcile our own identities with those who came together to construct us. I demonstrate how maternal inheritance influences the lives of a matriarch's offspring. More broadly, this inheritance is set against a backdrop of Mother Earth and how individuals respect or damage it as stewards of the land. My poems aim to illustrate how stillness and connection with the earth can inspire self-compassion and gratitude as the ultimate path to healing and growth. My poetry serves as proof that we do not have to harden ourselves to the harsh world, but we

can learn how to accept ourselves, grow into the communities waiting for us, and return our hearts to the earth that sprouted and sustained us.

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PART 1

“Sometimes a very small god or a very small planet falls from the sky and makes a splash.”

—Kathryn Nuernberger, “You Get What You Get and You Don’t Throw a Fit”

Degrees of Separation

Somewhere the ghost of my childhood
home is trapped under renovations and new
children. Somewhere there are still parts
of my mother's body that aren't so far
removed from my own. We were
young and together, all of us, in that house
at the top of a hill, what would be a mountain
to me now if I were to return to its crest.

The first room to disappear
was the attic, the one I only saw
a few times in my life. It lived at the edges
of my brother's quiet upstairs
loft, and the two rooms departed
hand-in-hand. I remember it
was where he kept to himself and lived
among his scattered contact lenses.

The cramped attic corners burrowed
into the loft's outline, stewarding our remnants
of childhood, all packed tightly into storage bins
on shoe racks with our Christmas
wrapping paper and old sewing boxes.

The second to float off was my sister's
room, where we played blindfolded tag
and I cracked my arm across a polished
wooden dresser. Third to go, my mother's
room lifted with ease, leaving only the hardwood
path that didn't creak when you stepped on it.

Next was the kitchen and all its failed
succulents wilting in the windowsill.

Then the living room dredged onward and up,
dragging below it the old, bulky TV I used
to hide behind for hide and seek with my sister.
We knew each other's soft under-
belly, the pimpled skin bare before its covering
with tattoos and hollowed jewelry.
Far longer, the bathrooms stuck around
in my mind, reminders of sisterly
joy and sacrament. We were both
in-between worlds, between houses
and parents and always-packed weekend bags.
We would stay in the bathroom together
doing our makeup, plucking our
eyebrows, combing our hair.
My room was the last to disperse
beyond the edges of my grasp and the first
to become unwelcoming. It over-
ripened into the rubble of a memory
returned. A house in my head demolishes,
loses its fixtures and hinges, lights and doors
scooped out before destruction, now all
empty spaces young and new and ready
for the nearing debris. Perhaps this is how
it always is—a communion, then the unavoidable
separation, flung too many degrees apart.
My center is a door; there are parts
of the house unlocking themselves,
evaporating through the windows.
A young girl emerges, alone on the unwalled
floor, her newborn ghosts of the heart,
beneath a ceiling of open sky.

Prometheus Folds His Laundry

It is a delicate task. You see, the eagles
snapping vessels, spraying seawater
& hot air into his abdominal cavity—
it stains. Laundry is an endeavor
here, after the strain of washing
at arm's length, wringing cloth on the dried
spots of the rock, their eroded
brown plasma chipping with all the
beauty & stench of lead paint—
after such devotion to cleanliness,
the man with a muddled liver
must make a single crease at a time,
dodging his eagle at work.
Between corners of flesh ripped out,
spraying out across this small horizon,
that which he wishes to be death—for death
would be peace in the face of the steel-eyed
eagle's hydraulic beak—punctuates
his day, interrupting the banality
of laundry, of waking with the sun,
of frying an egg, of bathing, of learning
to live again. For the man made meal,
it is no exaggeration to believe
existing in your own body is radical bravery.

Stigmatized Property

Do you know why this house was so cheap?
 I'm sure you remember the previous owners, the frail
 bones of the mother. Yes, she was a mother.
 And he was a father. They had a little girl, whose name
 I never heard, and she had a beloved pet pufferfish.
 When the girl turned six, her parents bought
 another little pufferfish to go along with her
 love. Perhaps they hadn't heard, but you can't
 put two male pufferfish in the same tank.
 Needless to say, it's rotten luck the girl
 found her first love floating half-eaten, hanging
 eyeball from its ripped nerve. If that wasn't enough
 to startle her, the child refused to flush the puffer
 down the toilet, as she'd seen in her Sunday school
 that it's proper to bury a body if you want its soul
 to make it out. I don't know, something about
 the aerated soil? Take it up with your god. Well,
 the parents obliged, and they dressed up in black,
 lined a necklace box with a tissue, and got ready to bury
 her first loss. She'd had friends with pets beneath
 bedroom windows, keeping watch in the front yard.
 Perhaps she should've listened to the voice with a body
 a voice who can know death and what to do with it.
 Her father pressed the shovel into the soft earth
 and dug. And you know what he found?
 A corgi. Rotted out hollows of ribs and teeth. And the girl,
 who did not know a dog skeleton from her own,
 and who had also seen in Sunday school the teacher's
 criminal justice college homework, organic matter decay,

on dating remains, and thus assumed only humans
had bones, and that anything with bones that small must be
a child, saw her own interior before her, just after
her puffer, and stopped her own heart over that grave.

In the turnover of winter, the daffodils
sprout right over the bones still resting.

twins in the pines

at the thicketed edge of an unpaved path,
 cut up wire protrudes from the dirt,
 guarding anthills spilling out from their red & pulsing center
 busy with dots of fire upturning the earth, scurrying around
 clay mudpuddles preserving yesterday's deer tracks—
a set of lungs rests on the ground:
 two pinecones attached at the stem, twig splitting
 the pair into a butterfly under the spring sky,
 wings ready to catch wind and fill up
 with the clean air—
we find iterations of ourselves everywhere, little pockets
 of life between us and our world, the afterthought
 of our evolution bringing us to life, a beating antpile
 in our breast, a set of snapped-off pinecones beneath our ribs—

caged tomatoes

to keep out the rabbits
and allow the plant to fruit,
the gardener would be well
led to confine their tomato plant
to a wire cage
where it can grow freely
without threat of consumption
or destruction before it breaks
open the centers of its blooms.
within the metal netting
it can keep sprouting, keep
the fruit all to its wrapping self;
it will stay caged beneath a sun
it can feel, can see and can stretch
out to reach, vines curling around the wire mesh
and grasping for familiar heat and structure
as it grows heavier with abundance,
fruit bowing to the dirt
and returning its labor to its roots,
balled up and buried in isolated earth
as the fruit browns and softens, spitting
dying seeds back to the ground
as it spoils in the tightness of its shelter.

Empty Nesting

A bird's nest has dropped—
fallen from an evergreen,
dropped into my fenced yard.
There are no shell bits, no bent feathers
or rotting children
too meek to take flight along the foreign wind.
The beaks & pumping blood all flew away
with the hollow wind;
juvenile birds flocked beyond the reach
of the local gales. Without the weight
of its hatchlings, the nest kicked up
from its secret corner in the branches,
plummeted to the piney floor,
and rested itself in its new form of home.

puppy blanket

when a puppy comes home
she gets a blanket; it reminds her
of the home she knew, the birthplace
she left with her own kind,
their doggish language unfettered
by human whim. she could play
lavishly in this home, this point
of origin where her own scent will live
and die as she leaves, clinging faintly
to the square of cloth cut
to remind her of her litter, make her
less alone in a new territory
overseen by new creatures. she will spend
her first nights wailing
into her puppy blanket, sniffing at
the empty space. slowly, she quiets, whimpers
disappearing with the lifted scent of home
while she grows up in a human space
with the only family she'll remember.

double sijo to the earth

charlie runs circles around the yard
 & kicks up grass & mud,
he picks up stains—rain gifting
 darkened mats up to his knees;
sunlight skids green streaks through the gaps
 of fur in his paw pads—
that mud seems so heavy,
 so burdensome, though short-lived
but the grass lingers, green-patched
 litter of white fur—
at night he dreams of running; no mud,
 kicking still-green paws in his sleep

forgetting the cherries

the produce in the fridge is always turning
even when i buy it stiff from the store
it's all too early, too bitter, too sharp to be eaten
yet an hour later it's fuzzy rotten mush
like the creeping yellow tips of my plants
somedays wilting, in need of gentleness
of glassy water & dust-specked sunsplashes;
even witnessing, i still go to sleep without mothering
& i feel like i must truly be a terrible person
but i always get around to watering them,
repotting, restoring their stems,
lifting the weight of fatigue from their leaves,
their outstretched & open palms lightly rocking
under the stale air conditioning; i root myself
in these dying things, always waiting
for the ivy's fingertips to drop an inch, for my tongue
to roll a ripened blackberry around my mouth—
maybe i'm the fruit, maybe i'm the fridge,
maybe i'm just a person
tipping spoiled berries out a kitchen window

Andromeda Winks

Look—

you can't bleed it all out at once.

Let it go slow

summer lemondrop

icy haze of tobacco smoke

slipping through branches

toward its skyward mirror.

Give yourself over to the tall grasses,

the lenten roses wilting into May

crickets in the underbrush

& fungal networks cradling the earth.

Look; the sun rises its round face up for you

& it sleeps in mourning

so you might dance

among the lonely visible stars

spinning around the void

hurtling into the vacuum

always out of the moon's reach

yet dancing nonetheless in the past

in the future

for you.

Look, they stretch their palms

out, patiently waiting

to waltz.

a system of roots

i am growing sideways
beneath the soil in the porous dark
i am reading of temporality
& a wandering through circular time
when we resist the prescribed & respected
we grow sideways
never to break the earth
but rather to break the barrier
between neighboring plants
roots mingling unseen below
perhaps a violet or a lenten rose
facing straight up to the sun
like flowers are meant to do
dirt-shrouded tangling & swimming
in warm rains leaking
down through that porous dark
as though they share a taproot
a place of secret sameness

Blue Cicadas

hatch from their secret
places, sounding wings across wind,
vibrating in time with the movements
of the earth, beating an ode
to the gumtree who housed their rank-
and-file shells like a sweater thread
caught and unraveled. Every seventeen years,
when the cicadas return, their bodies
litter the soil and compost themselves
into a sheet, feeding their trees,
branding penny rings thicker than any other
age ring, leaving their fertile mark
on the hearts of their homes; their
carcasses replenish the soil with carbon,
enough so to draw loops in tree trunks
and puddle their blue bodies into houses
for the next generation.

PART 2

“How often can humans feel less than harmful to where we are?”

—Rose McLarney, *“Full Capacity”*

we're killing the fireflies

i think. they've started to burn out earlier,
skirt the roofs of oak branches later,

quicker—

as a child, i called them lightning bugs
and i was corrected enough times to change my mind,
replace their swallowed thunder with gobbled fire.
the more i see the eyes on the willow oaks
the less i see the firebugs

*go on, catch the lightning bugs,
they caught lightning first;
it's eye for an eye. it's punishment—
why poke holes in the lid of the jar?*

my lightningflies will never hurt me,
they cannot sting or bite
nor will they harm my fronds,
but pollinate the corners of the garden
closed up by daylight, the moonflowers and primroses
blooming out into the moonlight.

*fireflies produce 'cold light'
with the most efficient energy usage
in the world; they waste no energy at all
blinking lights back and forth to one another*

a lightning bug's flash is her 'call'
her stochastic cry for discovery,
opens her up to be found without ever getting to
decide who does the finding;
she calls to the growing eyes
of a boy with a canning jar;
she is swallowed up like a rumble of thunder

in the belly of a new home

'primary drivers of decline include

habitat loss and degradation,

light pollution, and climate change'

we've scooped out their landscapes,

broken off treelimbs, sunken the watertable,

clustered the earth in sparse piles—

we're inching closer to the faraway places

go on, chop up the sea,

it was a flat of oiled seabed first;

it's eye for an eye. it's punishment—

why poke holes in the lid of the jar?

the summer we lost our autonomy

after the 2022 overruling of roe v. wade (1973—2022)

all summer we sat in the sun as our bodies died

what do you think of false vacuum decay?

i picked the most enormous cucumbers i had ever seen from a single seedling
and plucked warm blackberries—all too-large blackened teeth bombs
that bite back—and stained my file-smoothed nails purple
i burned the soles of my feet raw on the cobblestones, the paved
garden floating over a dirt-filled moat beneath

have you heard? there's a leaked document of sentient AI.

[the room gasps]

do you think roko's basilisk is now alive?

the summer i lost my body, i still laughed and played
and cried and baked cookies and smoked only from glass
i spent my consumerist dollars on plastic capital and bled
myself dry with the never-rot of microplastics
i braided my hair i cut it short and i had to pierce
two hollow needles through my body to wake it up

roe nearly turned 50, what a shame we killed her so young

she did it to herself

no, your poisons forced her insides septic; she never stood a chance

Young bird body

sits in the just-planted
grass, damp with yesterday's rain and the falling
dewdrops of the garden glories. Gray-bodied
and still free of rot, the carcass sits
in the year, eyes open to the rising sun,
beak clamped on a grass blade, feathers rustling
under the march of ants mapping her surface.
They draw their cadastral boundaries,
claiming her remains, refusing reverence.
They burrow into her topography, pulling
chunks from her cheeks and trekking back down
the slopes of a bird unable to flap her wings
or shake them off, too young still
to be identified, who can only watch the ranks
file across her valleys and canyons.

ode to the black snake

I.

dying snake
 mouth stuck open
 in death you became a baby bird
 spilling a gash of worms in the road

II.

later, your stomach sliced open
 all on its bloody own
 that's what the kid down the block says
 i saw your earth-
 worm afterbirth
 deposit feeder white-bellied
 black snake
 blue jaw still hinged open
 fangy smile

III.

your eye skittered out
 along the imprints of the gravel road
 you are imperfect but complete
 in your cross-section

IV.

i'm sorry, love
 the only way to know
 if you were vivisected
 is to tear you up more
 examine the lungs & stomach

for traces of clotted
blood-stones

V.

dead snake, i wail
for your sorrows
for your fieldmice uncaptured
burrows collapsed
moltings unshed

what we melt into

i want to leave

 time
apocalyptic

 novembers
still make flowers

how many does the fire
 burn on its way ?

 draw out orange
draw
 out

 something thick &
august a body

 sewn into

sticky
 blossomed
 youth

berries in season

anytime i leave a place
i always forget something behind
some part of me somewhere
a toothbrush holder
borrowed leggings
broken bones
keys still held in my mouth—

are you looking to heal?

the harbors inside me are drowning
lowering themselves to the warming sea

your emotions are like a peeled orange

braying with the swamped deer
crossing a beaver dam

it's wet warm & plentiful out there

my summer-sweet strawberry patch
pales across the stone from the creeping vines
ever-fruited sharpened shade from the sky
i ate the berries of the spring blackberry bushes
vining their fingers up to the moon
they were more sour than i could stand,
though they suited my friend just fine;
the decades-old blackberry bush—
far older than i—took an entire
harvest longer to fruit
into the sweetest berries i had ever tasted

house: sold

june began again
and the house was ours no longer—
my mother staged & sold it
to an older couple from out of state
who wanted to be closer
to their children.

now the house was theirs.
we had a month to gather our things
out of their home; a month before
we trespassed in the places we used to sleep.

beyond the walls belonging
to someone else's mother,
my own packed, drove to a faraway place
nowhere near her children.

i tried my best to save what remained
of my plants, wilting and browning
from their time in hiding, living inside
the shadowed eaves of the attic,
the furnace their unfortunate neighbor.
they did not belong in a staged house,
just as i no longer belonged to any.

in a matter of two weeks,
a third of them had crumpled in
on themselves, afraid of the attic's dark
or the rumble of the hot metal tower

looming beside them.

i gathered what still lived

and fled the staged limbo

where i had lived with my mother

for the final time.

guided by belief

entirely without meaning
to
she made me
aware of the things
i took
from her
her taste for peppers
and red meat
unpregnant body
she told me
at eight i turned
on her
that was also when
she stopped hugging me
reading to me
holding me or my gaze
and she never did
my hair again
once i learned how
to french braid
my own
sitting up at night
in my muted room
blindly combing sections
with new fingers
silent so as not
to get in trouble
for staying up at night
practicing my braids

each night forward
which is also how
i learned to spell
antidisestablishmentarianism
since she knew
how to spell it
from her father
and later
guided by belief
that this must be
the longest word
in english
i quietly found
a longer word
i kept
to myself
hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia
the fear of long words
a flashy jab
of irony
which shadows its phobic
lexical cousins
trichophobia
is the fear of hair
and tokophobia
fear of pregnancy
and childbirth
years later i would
learn all alone
there is no word
for fear of mother

and there is no word
for fear of daughter
only maternity

spider family

i found a spider's family of three
in the bathroom of an old roommate
 {this was a few weeks after my dog
 came back to me
 with a web, egg-dotted, stretched
 across his snout, muzzled,
 head crowned in august dew}
& my first instinct was to look around for more
out of fear there was an infestation
an invasion of a brief one of my homes

sorely, they lay still before my phone's flashlight
 lay still in their half-web
together in tonic immobility
proof that even insects need each other
& i thought of that poem
that man saw god & instinct said kill it
sometimes it feels as though we must
all lay still & tonic together
proof that even gods need each other
 even we need each other

to charlie

to feel the weight of his jaw in my hands
soft ears on my wrist and eyes shut into
an em dash—he knows he is my poem.
hand over throat, he sleeps peacefully,
dreams of rabbits, shoots a soft breeze
from his twitching nose

the american toad

anaxyrus americanus

i picked up the frog to be happy
 as i so often cannot be
 & later worried it left its poison on my palm
 & my dog's curious snout—
 i became engulfed in panic
 as i so often must be
 & so i researched the ecology of my county

i learned	it was an american toad	
		all toads are frogs
	it will not hurt me	
		not all frogs are toads
	it will not hurt my dog	
		we may have killed it by touching it

i always played with lizards & frogs as a child
 & i learned the smell of these dead things
 ripe & aging with rain-thinned gray flesh
 with an agony i never knew i could inflict

they are dying like frostbitten seeds, like acorns cracking on pavement
 just like the rest of us
 i never knew why
 they were dying

tonight i was scared	i may have killed my dog by letting him sniff it
	or by any other mistake miraging ahead
i learned	i probably killed that toad

false guilt brought me to my true transgressions

no, my dog will not fall nauseous & vomit

yes, that frog will probably ripen & peel with the new spring rains

skeletons in the trees

there are skeletons in the trees.
see? there, look—
as spring begins, the eastern redbud
is pulling itself out
of autumn's grip. how is it born
so old? so red? it breaks
its hearts into little leaves,
presents them to the cardinals
& cicadas killers. it ripens
into youth, hearts cooling
into yellow-greens with the swell
of heat, swells of summer.
its hearts shrink back,
regress with the passing
days, branches baring their columned
twigs stacked in rows, emptying
to bones in the bloom of summer,
revealing its spines,
its many ribcages. the branches
have atrophied before the eyes
of their summer-bearing
neighbors, shriveling up
to the pale skies. see?
the skeletons present themselves to you,
reach out for your sweaty palm
in the heat, boney fingers stretching
beyond their humid grave; look—
the outstretched arm of a spine,
ribcage with green hearts stuck

on the curved tips of each
bark-coated bone.

carrion sonnet

whose feast will my death become?
a pair of vultures on my roof sways like churchbells,
watches over the red shadow of a rabbit
corpse splayed off-center on the asphalt
offering itself as a grim to the chapel of my home,
our makeshift st. anthony—buried first
to ease in the new residents of the house.
the rabbit's ghost claws its way down
my throat, takes root up my spine;
our shared nervous system spreads
its branches, casts shade across my skull
so my memory betrays itself: above me,
hidden between branches and roof-tiles,
the pair of vultures perched, in wait.

notes on “what we melt into”

i could have said the earth is dying,
drying up & burning under disappeared
glacial sheets. the trees
burn faster now, a sickly
incense for those toppling into
extinction.

i could have said there are disasters
on all fronts rushing inward to shake
hands somewhere in indiana or
chefchaouen. death is thawing out,
riding the jet stream for warmer
quarters.

i could have said i'm scared. we are
the children of dead embers, far beyond
the point of revival. we are intubating
the soil, rigging metallic saline drips
for boiling oceans cooking their own
children alive.

i could have said i don't forgive you.

Madonna of the Parking Garage

Have you heard of the new snatching scheme?
The men wait in the lots, in the decks
and they let the air out of a tire or steal
the alternator or pull out the catalytic converter
of a pretty woman's car. And they wait in the shadows
for the woman to come out and discover her fate.
He seems to appear out of nowhere, concerned
for your safety, an off-duty mechanic, offering to look
at the damage. When he determines it cannot be fixed,
he offers you a ride to the shop, the police station,
your home or his own; offers poisoned assistance.
And you'll get in the car because he seems kind,
and he offered to examine your car and he's a mechanic
after all and if he can just get his tools from his garage
he can help—
And the madonna, who sits atop the dim lightposts
in the corners of the parking deck at night,
throws her venomous darts at their arteries, destroys
the threat before it locks its doors with you inside.
The madonna waits, perched in a shamble
of keys and capsaicin, ready to end a bloodline.

PART 3

*“yellow all the way through like a ball of wool that, even behind a closet door, contains
the baby’s blanket wholly in its globe, and waits for our hands to begin.”*

—Kasey Jueds, “Stratus clouds form”

in transit

we walk through july,
wading through patches of clover
pale sundrops dotting the slate gray
cloudcover hanging in the grass;

it's still raining inside the forest
inside the gabled treeline,
leaves holding rain longer than the clouds.
beneath the trees, a clay path stretches,
ends at the base of a hilled fire ant nest
and sprawls into a field of ground-wasps
and wild carrot. in the field, the dandelions
are opening back up; the sky has zippered
itself shut, closed back into blue, sunshine
the only thing falling on the flats of grass.

is this what earth is meant to feel like?
taking cover under trees that only extend
the cold rainfall? perhaps we are not
women, but monarchs in transit
searching for milkweed thickets
to rest, to drink nectar and hide
our wings from the falling rain; sometimes,
tree shade is not safety
but a blindness to the parting clouds
making bright space—the clean sightline
of a field, out in the open and ready
for the taking, will not conceal us,
but unravel us to the softened sky.

in which stairs have grooves from generations of being walked on

this is the beautiful evidence of history;
 there were people here
 there were lives being lived here & now
 i'm here embedding my soles in them
 wearing the slabs down just a bit more
 perhaps in a few more centuries someone will stand here & think
 the same & wonder who else stood on these stones

maybe they'll feel the depth of human temporality
 or at least the ghost of a girl weeping on these steps
 for all those who stood here before her
 whose names & heartaches & soulmates she will never know
i walked on these steps.

i existed in this place.

it is religious to know someone else
 will stand here when these stones are even
 thinner & imagine a fantastical version of who i might have been
 maybe my favorite fruit was a raspberry
 or strawberry or maybe i didn't like fruit at all—
 will you listen? we are saying:

i was here.

please don't forget me.

Joshua Tree Park, High Desert

to June Vincent, 8/1/32—8/11/09

You're scattered there in the park
 where the Mojave and Sonoran shake hands
 even though it is strictly forbidden—
 but they loved you.

And so, as sons so often do,
 they broke the rules for their mother.

They walked you up mountains
 freckled with greens I didn't know
 could grow in the desert.

This place I've known as Death,
 it yields young fruit.

How cruel it is to be
 confronted with so much
 life in a dead place
 while gripping your mother's remains.

How do we compress ourselves
 into a carved wooden box?
 How many custody-driven cross-country trips,

tomato sandwiches,
 risperdal & oxygen tanks,
 oven-baked blonde heads,
 milk cartons,
 unmet dreams

did they scatter beneath that joshua tree?
 beneath an unblinking landmark
 of persistent life in the face of what should be
 its end—the arid drought of the California deserts.

Does the human stay with the biological—
do these things ash down with the bones
or burn up with the rest?

How many parts remain,
 feeding the roots of a tree born before us all,
 its young fruit ever-yielding,
 who will live to see us scatter—

How many blew away
 and found themselves at sea?

a love letter to mariana

yesterday was the last warm day in your waters
the sunlight & the bathyal repent
& sweep along the continental shelf,
winterize their ocean basin cradle
a sort of porous bedrock
dusting composite silt in tiny flakes like shell bits

or sunken pylon reefs abetting
a whale fall, sinking down into the trenches
the bloated carcass holding open one bulging darkened eye
stargazing & deciphering the surrounding constellations of marine snow

this keystone species descends
a sculpted display of edacity
in the hadal zone's frenzy
amphipods decompose this dying
organic matter; the ghost of a life
too weak to resurface for air
one upturned cloudy eye lolling,
still watching the silent snowfall

churchyard blues

we must hold our breath when we pass by, lest the dead snatch it from our lungs

perhaps the earth might
meet itself, decorate its
tenants with precious little—
a dying gumtree,
scattered eggshells,
a crown of mushrooms & daisies

—and i still
hold my breath
for the
churchyard
graves

the snake & the bird

a snake preserves the shape of life
in his pregnant dinnerbelly,
clamps jaws around polished teeth
swallows thick darkness
like de-branched lemons syruped
in the grass under high sun;
he maps the grooves, the firmness and greenery
of his bloodied hunter-world,
slips into his doorway under the earth
welcoming him in from the harsh surface—

a bird gives herself to the wind,
glides her round body past the sun
over grass-stained fences,
sidewalks and pools and sun-rooted
berry patches, all little shapes of life
on a lower plane, slowly more discernible
as she descends, wide wings
narrowing with her nearing target;
she gathers the snake by his neck,
nearly grazing the skull of the land, still above
the underearth snakehole, the foreign
darkness bursting out into the same
shapes as her dinner's home—

blood orange

do you shake in the grasp of a letter?—
searching for gaps in its deckled edges?

i read my mouth across summer,
across rocks & riverbanks;

i step into a warmth, into a dream,
the heart of a fig grove awakes
slides branches into leaves,
scatters its light & tunnels out,
where green is the first color to return;

how does the blood orange
nectar itself with patience;
with indirect light,
it ripens—shaded & humid?
a fruit known for piety,
when she kneels, she prays
hums her sweet religious devotion
in the swells & valleys of skirted rhythms;

i know its song:
that stick of summer fruit,
the thrum of pierced skin,
how it sours the tongue to itself—

i step into a summer haze,
southern tropics; wet heat,
macerate the sugared

surface.

Letter to the Blue Ridge Parkway

Today, the piedmont fell
 into drought. Webbed
 earth & brittle sandstone
 crack off cliffs and slope toward
 their cage, metal-gated fencing
 to hold off the torrent of rock
 from the roads, the mimics
 of dusty riverbeds.

I am climbing the mountains,
 blue-ridged & blacktop-carved,
 into the golden seams
 of misty sunlight, your
 obscured & open mouth.

I am searching the hills
 atop your cooling asphalt
 tongue for the blessings
 of the first leaves turned
 to young flames.

How can I uncover the runaway rains?

How might I water the bruised
 & purpled canopies shrinking
 their extremities inward from the dry cold?

It seems your snaking miles
 are the closest I've come to a twisting
 river in years. I've choked on 200-mile-old
 smoke burning branches up faster
 than any cold snap ever could.

The fires are shorter now, no longer
 metaphorical & entrancing, no longer
 burning a season-long wick from the limbs
 of trees to the blanketed Appalachian floor.

Now, fire is quick, real, infant, gobbling
 up centuries of roots, ashing down
 the skeletons of generational trees
 to tire-tracked dust on I-40
 in the time it takes the sun to set.

the smithsonian relaxes my jaw

“24 feet tall & three feet wide, these giant spires dotted the ancient landscape”

i believe the largest object of all is the network of fungi running over the entire surface of the planet, not a millimeter uncovered, just below the topsoil—sometime between four-hundred-twenty million and three-hundred-fifty million years ago, the world’s residents were giant mushrooms, dwarfing the infant trees; smithsonian magazine tells me, “giant spires of life poked from the earth” while land plants were just beginning to climb out of the earth’s crust—the land itself is still clawing its way up from the mantle, reaching outward in spirals to graze its fingertips over the stratosphere—i think we’ve hurt ourselves enough. i think we need to find fruit that warms our bellies, water that cools our feet, clouds that look like us, and a pair of hands that feel like home—let me rest easy; let me wrinkle & shrink & bake in the sun before i return to the earth, feeding the fungi that stewarded the carbon & stardust that built me, that will one day build the flora that might make someone smile, that will sink down into the earth’s core and finish their journey to the planet’s pulsing heart

so-and-so lands in a meadow

maybe i can concede
some of my dreams, some
darks nestled behind my teeth—
are there second chances offered,
deep from within the ether, for firsts that weren't
enough? what if i want to bite,
to split & core the earth?
swallow it piece by piece until

what is left is only the life
we promise ourselves? what if i
want a garden of dandelions, to watch
them open to the sun, close
to the moon in rest?

construction zone

cutting the treeline
 sloping downhill toward a farm,
 a mangled metal body
 threads itself into the branches;
 a ghostly cactus in the foothills—
 beside it a white rectangle
 just a few feet out of reach
 lying parallel to the double yellow lines,
 a nose points like a compass needle
 north to the cloudy troposphere;
 the metal body's cooling twin
 pokes out from under its cloak
 just past the methodist church's letterboard
 announcing the end of lent & proclaiming

FREE TRIP TO HEAVEN

DETAILS INSIDE

the bodies patiently wait to be processed
 documented and granted their tickets
 down the road from the church, from the farm
 where late-spring calves graze
 beneath the warmth of their mothers' bodies

glosa for the honey locust

after Mary Oliver

So it is

I find myself perched at my desk, bent at my writerly angles
foaming at the mouth with the words of other poets
so skilled at naming my empty shadows;
what does the sun do with a hollow thing?
Lately it's all too bright, sunrays reflect off everything
shooting out their heavy spindles gleaming in humidity
& early-blooming daffodils. Every walk, my dog stops
to sniff them, glossing his nose with late-morning dew
pooled in the darkened petal-bowl emerging from the center—

if the heart has devoted itself to love, there is
evidence in the posture; it's in his eyes, his snout, lifted to the wind
with its low-hanging song whirring beneath maple branches
once-empty & brittle, now warm & strong in their sturdy green
bracelets—on the branches I find cardinals
stuffing their beaks with the broken ends of twigs,
claws grasping clumps of fresh spring mulch
to replicate the winding maze of their hearts
in a nest for their children. On the back patio, I find
muddy pawprints & golden haloes. In the hollows of the sky there is

not a single inch of emptiness. Gladness gleams
its off-white teeth in the passing of shapeless clouds,
its lips stained purple with unripe berries blown
from their bush, vines snaking up a support beam
leaning into the breeze, into the softness of noon.
Look me in the eyes & tell me where my emptiness lies—

in the center of the sternum, lounging atop a kidney,
carrying me into the day by my feet, closing up
my eyes so that my face might warm with the sun.
I would lie on warmed slate & live as we were meant:

all the way to the grave, mapping the violet fields,
if not for my earthly duties. Pack your suitcases,
place your life's work in a box, shove it in a car.
Bring it with you to the street as your pillow,
as a table for you & your dog who will never
leave you like a mother, never loosen its grip on your arm,
wrist held in its jaw with gentle sharpness
wrapped around your bones. Watch as the heaviness
wrinkles your laundry, pulls your hair, never looks back,
& gives up your emptiness to the swell of the wind.

PART 4

“with heavier loads, she will break even her legs, so intent is she on reclaiming what’s hers.”

—Rosalie Moffett, “Nervous System”

maternity ward*i. sun quincunx mother in the 4th house*

my life begins with a mother
 who does not want me

young & angry
 to lose her body
 her freedom
 & her love of peppers

lately i've been waiting
 for the balloon to pop
 for the girl to shed
 from the ghost

do we deserve these wretched mirrors?
 these armored invigilators
 poking our bruised & tender spots—
 {we become our own
 false panopticons}
 a peach aging &
 raging with maggots
 fruitflies buzzed on ethyl nectar [

i have soured from the root up
]

ii. twenty-three years later, jupiter returns

the doctor sliced open the scar

that would later be used to operate on my mother's spine.
she was dying, & i was a month early.
the placenta separated from the top of the uterus—a partial abruption
that sent her blood pressure to saturn
& her kidneys halfway to the grave.
typically, the skeletal system accounts for ten percent of body weight.
at 5 lbs 14 oz, i must've snagged the edge of a rib, gripped
a slice of premature love, & been lifted
from the amniotic sludge spilling onto the metal table,
tiny fist curled around the snapped mangled maternal bone

Note to Younger Self

I hope you can forgive me; yours was the first love
I ever betrayed. I dropped your hand and did not guide you
across the street—I was confused at your youth,
your infancy. At ten, I left you standing there,
hot tears matting your hair into knots.
You stood small and lost on the other side of the road,
shrinking with each step. *Why shouldn't you do it
on your own? It's not like it's hard to be self-
sufficient.* Across the burning pavement, I faced back
to your young posture, saw the compressed density
in your childhood chest like a hypernova explosion closing in
on its own burning core. I watched you swallow your own light
and blast darkness outward, grasping at the nearest matter over and over
until you expand all the way to the black hole at the end of the crosswalk.

wasp poem

there are wasps in my ears
buzzing & gnawing
pinballs in my skull
they mean well, stinging courage
by that I mean the dead one
on its back dead-center on the sidewalk
was left there for me on purpose
like war water, darkwater,
like dreams of something curving
past my fingertips, dancing & buzzing
in a garden, the one with the mums
beside the dried up riverbed
silken moss on current-pounded slate
smooth & hiding quartz deposits
or composite sediments i might turn
in my fingers, my dog splashing
his young feet in a rockpool nearby
& my wife twisting daisy stems
with clay-covered fingertips
fresh from the pottery wheel
where she made the little pots
for our ivy clippings
jewelry dishes for our rings
jars for our secrets we fill, cork, & smash
into smooth little pieces of death
made for skipping on phantom waters
a remarkable glint of usefulness in damage
like that upturned wasp
like the secrets tangled in our hair

or the mourning we feel
for the things that sacrificed
themselves in order for us
to find each other amid
a river october put to death
walking up & down the empty basin

prayer to myself while i shower

i have everything i need

i have my soap / i wash my face
the taste of death is still in my mouth
i wash my ears / the earrings rinsed
i wash my neck and my chest / my collarbones and my breasts
i wash my stomach and my silver belly ring
i wash my dimples / i wash my vulva
throwing rivers into rivers / never rivers
i wash my feet and feel clean
then my armpits natural
my arms my back my thighs /
my calves my knees my legs / the front and back
collapse a loofa // peony rose sea salt // clean myself into myself
i have to live in my body sometimes
for a while sudsing up the loofa
then i anoint myself // with everything i need

In the prairie of my body, a lark begins to sing.

Deep in the pit of a prairie
stirs a gentle breeze
swirling the grasses
into the tangled daisies
pushing the lark into midday song
to fill the swelling void.
Feed your lark well—when the space
in your ribs is too tight to bear,
it will sing you to life
with the infant blooms.

The Butterfly Woman

It takes about 5 generations for the monarch butterflies to complete a single migration.

Her ghost is out with the cattle
hidden under golden fog and sunrise dew.
She ends her sorrows with a steady hand—
the butterfly woman tends the milkweed.

When the pods grow, they sprout stretching tendrils
from their furred skin, covering themselves in *coma*,
their silky innard fluff
designed to carry seeds across space.

She grabs an early starter, bud green with autumn
and smooth in the palm, and squeezes
until it pops, splits at its natural suture.
She examines the milkweed pearls,
for their color, their gloaming twilights
all too young and light for the harvest.

Further out from pasture,
the elder milkweed stalks
puff themselves out into maturity.
With patience, the pods open on their own,
explode their seeds out as they emerge
from a smothering darkness and propel away on their *coma*.
The woman pulls the bronze seeds from the pods,
collects them for replanting close by, replenishing
the monarchs' only source of life, enshrining her field
in the continental roadmap

for their torrential spray of lineage.

A Mother's Love

I never learned how to sew
until my dog came to me,
torn alligator in his mouth
trailing stuffing like breadcrumbs,
wagging his murderous tail,
and pleading for his mother
to stitch up his beloved.

I donned a needle,
knotted my thread loosely and naively,
praying the wound would stay
closed—his glass eyes trained
strictly on my fingers; my gray thread darkened
with each finger prick, but I was
steadfast in my work. *I will fix this for you.*

In the morning, the alligator will tear back open,
spilling itself to the late light and awaiting
the cycle of hurt and healing to commence.

But for that night, he curled his body around his own sewn love,
gripped its head in his jaws,
and fell asleep with his lips curled
around the neck, resting atop it like a pillow—
he slept, clinging to it
as though he would never destroy it again.

for the love of a strawberry

there is no part of a strawberry

that is inedible—

steadfastly, it tells me

i will not hurt you,

i refuse to!

i don't mind a little death,

but i've learned of this berry's nature

for docility, its softness,

reverence for fellow living things;

a strawberry cannot hurt my love,

from puppyhood, my dog has loved

strawberry slivers, carefully bitten

to a shaved pocket of spring

& he holds it lightly in his teeth, gentle

with his gift—he carries it around

on his tongue, slowly dissolving, until the berry sighs

with want for destruction or servitude; it tells him

eat me, i will not hurt you,

i cannot!

until he swallows it whole

refusing to hurt his treasure & smiling

at me, waiting for the next piece

of his ever-bearing springtime jewel

springtime song

to the bees weighing down soft petals
to the japanese maple seeds spinning down to the concrete
to the burrs caught in dog-eared knots
to the purple mushrooms sprouting through dark mulch
to the foals running on newly-sturdied knees
to the flakes of wood dust callousing my palms
to the earthworms tunneling the trees' vascular system
to the gentle breeze lifting dew through the air
to the spotted fawn and its inky eyes
to the woven basket for picnics or wildflowers
& everything easing my heart's disarmament
i love you i love you i love you

rooted in the earth

my roots are in
sandy loam & seaspray
root vegetables
snaking north
fractured heat
waterlogged
their hazy cotton
darkly tangle

overgrown citrus grove
stretch fingers
skeletal tendrils
to distant snowscapes
of exhaust pipes
deaf & dampened respiration
blue beginnings
forests of southern gold

beyond my meadow's edge

i am standing in a clearing surrounded
by an evergreen wall; this is the meadow
of my childhood, of single-digit age
when i spent a week each december
& another in july visiting my grandparents,
sparingly, in milton, vermont.

the breeze is lapping at my face,
resting its eyes at my chin & whispering
[you taste sad]

the grasses with their daisies creep & sway
at my hollow waist. i didn't know about
the ticks, the snakes, the grizzlies. i knew
i could hear a road beyond the brow of the treeline,
but i could only imagine it, never grew tall
enough to witness.

my lungs want to pull me back to this
idyllic purgatory, strap me down,
make me relive it all. i would rather drown
in a bowl of honey-sweet milk
& soured by the harsh sun than face
the cruelty of stolen infancy again.

what are we beyond this clearing?
what waits in the brambles
at my meadow's edge?
what does it taste like?